

*Advent Devotions 2009*



PEACHTREE  
BAPTIST CHURCH

Peachtree Baptist Church, Atlanta, Georgia

Thanks to all those who shared an advent devotional and a special thanks to Anna for her editorial assistance. As I read through this year's devotions I was reminded of what a blessing it is to share this wonderful season with a family of faith that is intentional about seeking and serving God.

It is my hope during this advent season that we may all be filled with amazement like the first hearers of the shepherds' message and that we might in-turn follow the shepherds' lead in glorifying and praising God for what we have heard and seen. (Luke 2:18-20)

Peace,  
Clayton

*Advent Devotions 2009*  
*Peachtree Baptist Church*

Peachtree Baptist Church, 2108 Briarcliff Rd. N.E., Atlanta, Georgia 30329

## Sunday, November 29<sup>th</sup>, First Sunday of Advent

### Psalm 25:1-10

Oh, to have been with the Wise Men as they followed the Star to Bethlehem! I can only imagine the excitement of those men as they made their way towards Jesus. The wait was over, and their King had finally come.

In Psalm 25, the prayer of David is coming from a time of conflict. David is alone, pursued by Saul, yet his prayer is full of hope. He pleads for God to give him the wisdom to face his problems (“Show me your ways, O Lord, teach me your paths; guide me in your truth and teach me” vs. 4-5). I imagine that the prayer of the Wise Men was a similar one. They were singing praises to God and asking God to guide them in His truth. And they would soon ask for deliverance when they learned of Herod’s evil scheme (“In you I trust, O my God. Do not let me be put to shame, nor let my enemies triumph over me.” vs. 2).

When faced with adversity, how do we look to God? Does the praise we have for God carry over from times when everything is going well? Does our hope, like David’s, stay steadfast in God when things don’t go as planned?

Let this scripture be a reminder that God will always love and take care of us. Even when our situation is less than favorable, we are to put our hope in God, and to trust that He is watching over us. This Christmas season, may we honor God as David did, singing his praises and looking to him for mercy and love.

Mark and Megan Mashburn

Monday, November 30<sup>th</sup>  
Amos 2:6-16

6Thus says the Lord: for three transgressions of Israel, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment; because they sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals—

7 they who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth, and push the afflicted out of the way; father and son go in to the same girl, so that my holy name is profaned;

8they lay themselves down beside every alter on garments taken in pledges; and in the house of their God they drink wine brought with fines they imposed.

9Yet I destroyed the Amorite before them, whose height was like the height of cedars, and who was as strong as oaks; I destroyed his fruit above, and his roots beneath.

10Also I brought you up out of the land of Egypt, and led you forty years in the wilderness, to possess the land of the Amorite.

11And I raised up some of your children to be prophets and some of your youth to be nazirites. Is it not indeed so, O people of Israel? Says the Lord.

12But you made the nazirites drink wine, and commanded the prophets, saying, “You shall not prophesy.”

13So, I will press you down in your place, just as a cart presses down when it is full of sheaves.

14Flight shall perish from the swift, and the strong shall not retain their strength, nor shall the mighty save their lives;

15those who handle the bow shall not stand, and those who are swift of foot shall not save themselves, nor shall those who ride horses save their lives;

16and those who are stout of heart among the mighty shall flee away naked in that day, says the Lord.

--NRSV

## Tuesday, December 1<sup>st</sup>

### Psalm 33

The psalmist here captures the greatness of God - especially in verses 6 and 9. Yet, even as I read how the psalmist extols God as the Creator, I am also drawn to two verses where Jesus himself is described as the Creator and Sustainer (Colossians 1:15-20 and Hebrews 1:1-3).

#### Colossians 1:15-20

<sup>15</sup>He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. <sup>16</sup>For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities--all things have been created through Him and for Him. <sup>17</sup>He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together. <sup>18</sup>He is also head of the body, the church; and He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything. <sup>19</sup>For it was the Father's good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him, <sup>20</sup>and through Him to reconcile all things to Himself, having made peace through the blood of His cross; through Him, I say, whether things on earth or things in heaven.

#### Hebrews 1:1-3

<sup>1</sup>God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, <sup>2</sup>in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world. <sup>3</sup>And He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature, and upholds all things by the word of His power

Psalm 33 is another passage of scripture which, so poignantly, sets out one of the greatest mysteries of our faith. Jesus, the Creator and Sustainer of all things, utterly humbled himself - not as a self-sufficient man, but as a baby who was dependent upon man for His needs. This one, who "sustains all things by His powerful word," gave up all the glories of Heaven and chose to come into this world as a child. He took upon the form of a servant and became obedient to God to the point of death, even death on a cross. And why? "For God so loved the world that he sent his only Son, so that whoever believes in Him will not perish but have everlasting life (John 3:16)." This is God's plan for our salvation. He did this for YOU and ME.

We can thank God daily that this great God of ours, the Creator of all things, came to our world as one of us. He paid the reconciliation price that we cannot pay.

Max Leo (Steve Leo's father, visiting from Australia for Christmas)

## Wednesday, December 2<sup>nd</sup>

### Matthew 21:23-32

Expectations are a funny thing. We have the ability to perceive the exact same outcome of a situation, either desirable or undesirable, based on how we expected that situation to turn out. If I expect to get a new car for Christmas and instead got a new computer, I may feel a little disappointed. If I was expecting a \$20 gift card and got a new computer, I will probably be pretty excited.

It seems to me that the religious leaders of Jesus' time did not get what they were expecting. For whatever reason, their perception of the One who had come did not match up with what they were waiting for. They had expectations that Jesus did not meet.

I am left to ponder this question for myself. What am I expecting to find this Christmas season? Who is it that I am waiting for as we approach the Savior's birth? It seems to me that we are awaiting the Son who will challenge our expectations. He may cause us to think twice about how we perceive not only Him, but those around us. For Jesus gives hope to the harlot and tax collector. He gives love to the Jew and the Gentile, and it would appear that we are to do the same. So, expect peace, expect justice, and expect that Jesus will exceed our expectations.

Jono Broadhead

## Thursday, December 3<sup>rd</sup>

### Matthew 21:33-46

The parable of the vineyard in Matthew 21: 33-46 is a relatively simple passage. At the core of the story a group of farmers are angry about doing all of the work only to surrender the fruits of their labor at the end of the season. Devotionally speaking, the owner of the vineyard is God, and he has sent a number of servants to collect from us, his only Son among them. We know that the farmers in the story, as well as the people that we were, killed and rejected anyone who came after what was cultivated. The story ends when the farmers learn that the Master is on his way to get retribution for the fallen and hand over His vineyard to those more willing to share the fruits of their labors.

The holiday season is chock full of servants and sons who want the fruits that have been cultivated all year. Big Box retailers want our dollars, Salvation Army Santas want our cents and most everybody else wants just a little of your time for this or that. It is very easy to feel overprotective of the fruits both literal and metaphorical that we have grown while in His vineyard. It is reasonable to feel that Grandma deserves a good smack for suggesting you throw out your existing holiday plans to travel home for Christmas. But in this season of giving, if we all share our fruits with the sons, servants and each other, there would be no shortage anywhere. Even supposing there was, when the Master came calling we could look forward to the heavenly reward we are promised to receive for being such good farmers.

Justin Broderway

## Friday, December 4<sup>th</sup> 1 Thessalonians 4:1-12

When I read these verses, I am convicted with the importance of living in a way that is pleasing to God. As a Christian, I am charged with the challenge of being a living embodiment of Christ in the world. As a human being living in this world, there are a lot of temptations to direct my attention away from Christ's spirit into the world's frivolities. Especially during the hustle and bustle of the holidays, the real reason for the holiday season had a tendency to slide surreptitiously into the background.

In this passage from 1 Thessalonians, Paul is reminding the church to take holiness seriously. God is a God of holiness not impurity whether that impurity is sexual, spiritual, or relational. During the holiday season, we can remember Paul's words as we are striving to be pure in our intentions of celebrating the coming of our Christ who serves as the ultimate example for maintaining holiness in a world of unholy distractions.

As a community, we can continue to lift each other up in love and fellowship. We can also encourage and love one another through shared struggle and shared joy. As individuals, each of us can experience advents of holiness in our personal lives as we seek after the heart of God through the advent of Christ.

Noelle Spears

## Saturday, December 5<sup>th</sup>

### Psalm 20

Though some interpretations of the 20<sup>th</sup> Psalm suggest that it is generally a call for divine help, others interpret it as a hymn/prayer sung at the beginning of a military expedition. With this understanding, the "you's" at the beginning of the psalm, then, would not be a worshipper who comes to the temple for a blessing, but a soldier, or more likely, the king himself, who comes to the temple seeking divine support for his military endeavors. The "petitions" and "desires" mentioned in the psalm would be the requests that the king has made--victory over the Ammonites or Moabites, for example--and the 'victory' celebrated would be a military triumph. In v. 6, there is an affirmation of confidence where the petitioner is assured that the Lord will indeed grant victory. Note that the "anointed" is another name commonly used for the king of Israel (see Psalm 2).

With this in mind, consider two things.

1. What does it mean to place your confidence "...in the name of the Lord..."?  
What keeps you from relying whole-heartedly on God?
2. Does the image of God as a warrior align with your understanding of the Lord?  
What other passages in the Bible rely on images of battle or victory when describing God? Does this description of God help you place your confidence in the Lord?

Lindsay and Doug Watson

## Sunday, December 6<sup>th</sup>, Second Sunday of Advent Luke 1:68-79

Early in the Gospel of Luke we read of Zechariah's encounter with the angel Gabriel. After being told his wife would have a son, he began to question saying, "How can I be sure of this?" He was silenced for nine months until the birth of his son, John. His son became the one who prepared the people of Israel for the Lord. After being unable to speak for nine months, Zechariah expresses his words of praise through what we read as *The Song of Zechariah*. This song is one of gratitude and praise toward God for the fulfillment of the promise made.

During this season of Advent we may find ourselves saying the same things as Zechariah. We praise God as we wait for the long expected birth of Jesus. We sing songs of hope and joy. There may be times of doubt where we find ourselves saying, "How can I be sure of this?" But every year we are reminded of God's promise to redeem the earth. As we approach Christmas let us sing songs and praise God with hope as we wait for the birth of Jesus.

Courtney Gibson

## Monday, December 7<sup>th</sup>

### 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

For me, I think that this passage is important because it reminds us all to encourage one another. Paul talks about faith, love and hope and how these three things are essential in the lives of Christians. These three elements are spoken of throughout the New Testament as characteristics that every Christian should possess. Paul then adds to this encouragement. Oftentimes we get preoccupied thinking about the things that we need to do to become better Christians and neglect the ways in which we can help others in our community of faith. We focus on developing our own faith, our own plans for loving one another, and our own hope for our own lives in the face of adversity. We devote little time to simply encouraging one another in whatever task we may be working on at the time.

When I was a preschool teacher verse 11 became the motto for my classroom. We had a CD in our classroom with a song on it that was based around this verse and the children absolutely loved it. Every day during music time they requested to play the “Build Each Other Up” song. I incorporated this song into our classroom management as well. Anytime that one of the children said a hurtful word or acted in a way that upset one of the other children, I would remind them of our song- to be encouraging to one another. Soon the dynamics of the classroom changed dramatically, the children were kinder and more patient with one another. They took turns with the toys and made sure not to exclude anyone from free time play and they were all around more positive. I was amazed to see how these 4 and 5 year olds took the meaning of this song to heart and applied it to their lives so easily. It really touched me and made me realize that it was something that I needed to focus on in my own life. I think that this is a message that we all need to consider. If we all take a little time to encourage one another and build each other up, then we can radically change our community and maybe even the world.

Megan Lester

## Tuesday, December 8<sup>th</sup>

### Psalm 28

As are many of David's psalms, this one is a prayer told with passion and beautiful imagery. In the voice of David we hear a longing for God's closeness and a deep need for His strength and support.

The psalm begins with a cry, a request, beseeching God's attention, and the fear of His silence. We don't know what David's specific needs are other than just a desperate desire to be heard. This cry is so very personal we can imagine having this conversation with a dear friend: "do not turn a deaf ear to me." And yet we are reminded of His great majesty with the image of David lifting his hands toward the "Most Holy Place." How wonderful to be on such intimate terms with the King of Kings!

David then goes on to recognize God's authority over evil and His great power to "tear down and never build up."

But the next verses are the answer to David's prayer for support, and he basks in the joy of knowing God's love for him—this is truly a mutual relationship between God and man. David trusts that God will respond and is rewarded with His attention and care. But God's love extends to all His people, not just David: the same close and protective relationship is offered to all. These words bring to mind an old familiar church camp song: "He holds the whole world in His hands." The psalm ends in another beautiful image, with a plea for God to "be their shepherd and carry them forever."

A relationship with God is always a long-term one; we can chose "never" or "forever" to be close to Him. As we prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus, we can know that His son came to offer us "forever."

Tanja Jovanovic

## Wednesday, December 9<sup>th</sup>

### John 7:53-8:11

John 7:53-8:11 is a well known story. It is the story of the woman caught in adultery. The Pharisees brought her to Jesus asking for judgment upon this woman. In a surprising response, Jesus does not say anything. Instead he bends down in the sand and writes something. We don't know what it is that he writes. He then went on to tell the Pharisees that any of them that is without sin should throw the first stone. Of course, none of them casts a stone, but instead they drop their stones and walk away. Of course, we all know what came next. Jesus turned to the woman, refusing to cast judgment, and told her to leave her life of sin.

We have all been accused of something that we are ashamed to admit. It might be something we truly are guilty of doing or it might be something we did not do. No matter the circumstances, being the accused one is never a pleasant position to be in. It's embarrassing, humiliating and disheartening. However, the good news is this: we are loved by someone who wants to protect us and to stand between us and our accusers. Who is it that accuses you today? Perhaps it is a parent who does not approve of the lifestyle you have chosen or the choices you have made. Perhaps it is a child who doesn't agree with the way you are parenting. Perhaps it is a friend whose feelings have been hurt by you. Perhaps it is you because you have not lived up to be the person you had once hoped to be. Perhaps it is a church that does not accept you for you are. No matter the accuser, hear these words. You are loved! You matter! You are valued and appreciated. Rest in the presence of a God who created you to be exactly who you are. During this season of Advent when we focus on the coming of Jesus into the world, be reminded that he was born into this world for all the people of the world, and that includes you. Perhaps one day we will all be able to live together without passing judgment on others and without being the accused or the accuser. Let it be so!

Brittany Mackey

## Thursday, December 10<sup>th</sup>

### Luke 22:1-13

Christmas has always been a really exciting time for me. I love everything about Christmas: traveling to see family, decorating the Christmas tree, and listening to Christmas music on the radio. Seeing Christmas decorations everywhere, feeling the chill in the air, and smelling the Christmas feast seems to create a Christmas energy for me that is almost palpable.

I also love the way Christmas makes us feel as Christians. We envision joyous scenes of a precious Child wrapped in a manger, travelers from afar bearing gifts, and Angels singing glorious heralds of the birth of our Savior. It is because of these feelings that I had such a difficult time reading Luke 22: 1-13. I was so enveloped in the ‘feel good’ feelings of Christmas that I didn’t want to face the sadness of the betrayal that led to Jesus’ death.

After spending time attempting to tie this passage back to those ‘feel good’ feelings, I realized that I had missed the point. Luke 22 wasn’t meant to make us feel “warm and fuzzy” inside, but was meant to remind us of the true meaning of Christmas. Yes, we celebrate the miracle of Jesus being born, the Immaculate Conception, God’s gift of a teacher and healer to His people. Yet the true miracle of Jesus was not in His birth, but in His death. Christmas is about celebrating the birth of the One who would die to save us all from our sins.

As we embrace the excitement of Christmas, let us not forget the “reason for the season.” The joy of Christmas should be both a celebration of Jesus’ birth and a reminder of the sacrifice He made for us. This Christmas, lift up your praises to God that we rejoice in the birth of a King, and the death and resurrection of a Savior.

Mark Mashburn

## Friday, December 11<sup>th</sup> Isaiah 7:10-25

### Immanuel: A Child Brings Hope

In Isaiah, names are significant. Names carry divine messages. Isaiah's sons bear the names *Maher-shalal-hash-baz* (the spoil speeds, the seed hastens) and *Shear-jashub* (a remnant will return). Even Isaiah's name carries a divine message – “the Lord will save us.” Along with Isaiah and his named sons, the Prophet promises King Ahaz a special sign. This divine sign will be found in the birth of a child named *Immanuel* (God is with us).

In its narrative context, this promised son carries hope in the midst of increasing anxiety. All of Judah trembles in fear in the face of an impending Assyrian invasion. God's prophet ventures to meet his own king with promising news. Israel will survive. God will save a remnant and by the time that Immanuel is old enough to make moral judgments, prosperity will return to the land of Israel (7:15). The child, Immanuel is a sign of hope. Later, the Gospel of Matthew picks up this theme and identifies Jesus as the child of hope (Mt 1:22-23). During Advent, we prepare ourselves once more for the hope we find in Christ.

Could children today also serve to be signs of hope to us? We have celebrated several new births in our community over the past year. Granted, it is easy to look to financial reports, struggling ministry partners, and other changes within our society with great anxiety. Yet, when we look into the eyes of our children, there is hope. The future may not be as bleak as it seems. Just imagine where Peachtree Baptist Church can be by the time our newest arrivals are old enough to make moral judgments.

Chris Purser

## Saturday, December 12<sup>th</sup>

### 2 Thessalonians 3:6-18

As a latch key son of a single mother I can remember getting calls from my mother after school to check on me. The words “Idle hands are the devil’s workshop” still linger fresh in my mind even today. My mother was not a fool and she knew the tendencies of, as well as the projected outcomes of, situations when a young boy is left to his own devices. My mother like many mothers knew not only that without focus I usually would not make the best decisions, but that I would also not be doing those things that she needed me to accomplish for her.

Paul’s letter to the Thessalonians seems to mirror the intent that my mother’s words had. Paul is telling them that it is important for them to stay busy. Paul, like my Mom, knew that by being distracted and idle, they probably would not make the best choices. Paul also knew that by being idle there was work for The Kingdom of God that was not being accomplished.

At this time of year it is easy to become idle. For most of us the excitement of some much needed time off of work and school make us think of the best ways to be just good old fashioned lazy. Now I’m not trying to say that we don’t need to take a break or catch up on some much needed rest, but I think that like my mother, Paul is warning us not to fall into a pattern of idleness. We as a church and as individuals with some focus can accomplish much for The Kingdom.

Nick Sakas

Sunday, December 13<sup>th</sup>, Third Sunday of Advent  
Philippians 4:4-7

4Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. 5Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. 6Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. 7And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

NRSV

## Monday, December 14<sup>th</sup>

### Isaiah 8:16-9:1

Waiting is never easy. As a child I can remember waiting in long, long lines at amusement parks to ride for 30 seconds. I can also remember waiting for the last few days of school to go, or the last few miles of a long trip to go by. But perhaps the longest wait for me was waiting for Christmas. As decorations went up everywhere and advertisements and music reminded me of the coming of Christmas, I can remember how long it seemed to take for those four weeks between thanksgiving and Christmas to go by.

My waiting was completely incomparable to that of Israel, who had been waiting from time immemorial, for a messiah. They had been led by patriarchs, priests, prophets, judges, and kings. They had sought salvation in foreign lands and through pagan gods. They had endured famines, floods, plagues, pestilence, wars, and corruption. Yet the one thing they longed for, and desperately needed, the LORD, had not come to them as a personal savior.

So after waiting, with no results the people looked elsewhere for assurance, faith, confidence. They consulted with mediums and spiritists. People do the same today. People from Hollywood stars, to former fist ladies, to European royalty consult with the same sort of spiritualizing hucksters and charlatans today. When the days are long, when the nights are dark, when it seems that we cannot wait another day for an answer. Let the words of Isaiah ring loud in your heart and in your mind: “wait for the LORD.” For all other sources lead to darkness and desperation.

Wait. Wait. Wait. For the LORD.

Robert Walker

## Tuesday, December 15<sup>th</sup>

### Psalm 47

Music, I think, has been associated with Christmas since the very beginning. Singing is recorded several times in the story of the birth and early life of Jesus. Maybe the first Christmas hymn is sung by Mary when she received word that she had been chosen from among all the women in the world to be the mother of Jesus. What she sang has come to be known as *The Magnificat*.

It seems to me that we humans were meant to worship God through music. Evidence of that is presented in the text for today, Psalm 47. In this short psalm, we hear who God is, how God relates to others and how God is to be worshiped.

There is call to joy and a noisy enthusiasm in this psalm that is appropriate for the people of God. I think about the secular tradition of the Christmas parade when I read this Psalm. There seems to be a holiday parade atmosphere demonstrated here that occurs when we realize that God is "a great king over all the earth." The psalmist repeatedly insists that God is the God of all people. The affirmation of the inclusiveness of God is a further reason for all people to "clap your hands."

It seems like every year, Christmas gets busier and busier. Visiting with family and friends, preparing meals, shopping, decorating; there is so much to do and the stress level goes higher and higher. We talk about eliminating some aspects of the season to help control the strain and stress. One thing we need to keep, however, is the music.

Psalm 47 helps us to remember why we need to celebrate, to express our faith, and to worship. The text helps us to remember to keep singing the Christmas song with the psalmist, with Mary, with Zechariah, with Simeon, with the angels. Let us sing not only out loud but also with our lives and our actions. Let us celebrate God's promises fulfilled! Let us express to the world the good news of great joy!

Eugene Peterson expresses it well in *The Message* in his contemporary paraphrasing of Psalm 47:

Applause, everyone. Bravo, bravissimo!  
Shout God-songs at the top of your lungs!  
God most high is stunning

Grady Strom

## Wednesday, December 16<sup>th</sup>

### Mark 1:1-8

I always have a running list in my heart. Some prematurely call it a “to-do” list, but that does not grasp what it entails. You see, a “to-do” list not only incorrectly dichotomizes doing and being, it more importantly downplays the spiritual discipline that composes my list. The list I am speaking of is crafted and held together by waiting. It is a list for things whose time has not yet come to past.

Waiting is an integral part of life. I am currently waiting for the joy of fellowship with family over the holidays. Last year, I recall waiting to get out of school. Before that, I waited to get in. As a boy, I remember waiting for my birthday, for Christmas, for the end of the school year, and for the reuniting of friends at another school year’s beginning. I even remember the feeling of waiting with my grandfather during the last part of his life. As far back as I can remember a portion of my life has been spent in waiting. Sometimes the wait is more difficult than others, but it is pretty much always there.

During this season of advent, we are reminded that a large part of our identity in Christ is also located in waiting. We await the coming of a new Kingdom of God. The fulfillment of which is found in the perfect expression of justice, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. We wait in light of evident contradictions to the reality of this new peaceable era.

Looking to our text, one can never know what the Markan community thought or even felt. However, the pastoral concerns in this passage lead me to believe that the community’s character was also marked by waiting. Having waited at least thirty-years after Christ’s ascension, they began facing resistance and rejection in Rome. While suffering much persecution following the great Roman fires, Mark ministered to a community that was waiting in a wilderness. A wilderness that shaped and played an integral part of their identity ever since the Children of Israel roamed in the desert with Moses.

And yet in light of this, John’s prophetic proclamation serves as an inauguration of the joy and good news of Jesus. This herald, who hailed from the wilderness, spoke to the very heart of the Markan community. He called for everyone to prepare and repent because the time had come. Their wait would soon be over. A new era would come with the reign of Christ. This was not any Christ, but it was a Christ who was coming after John, a Christ who was coming out of the wilderness so to speak.

As such, our Christian identity entrusts us with both an identity shaped and held together by waiting and a faith in the proclamation of John the Baptist. We have to wait, but it is not an idle or empty wait. It is a wait equipped with the theological virtues of faith, hope and love. We are to “prepare the way” through an active love gifted to us through Christ. We are called to love our neighbors actively and tirelessly. In so doing, we begin to rest and live in the reality that God opens up the gates of Jesus’ Kingdom in and through each of us.

Saul Burleson

## Thursday, December 17<sup>th</sup>

### Matthew 3:1-12

“Prepare the Way For the Lord”

My neighborhood Kroger is undergoing a major facelift & renovation. The outside is beautiful – it’s now layered with stacks of sandstone & the parking lot has a new, repaved surface. But inside, it’s a mess. I used to make my grocery lists in the order things would appear in the store – not anymore. The Kosher food is where the popcorn used to be, I can’t find the bread for all the canned goods now in their place, & the wine & frozen goods have totally switched places (plus or minus an extra aisle). I’ve been faithful to Kroger, though. And I’ve been told that all order will be restored to my once-familiar grocery haven in January 2010.

Last week, I received a collection of Kroger coupons in the mail. An accompanying letter (with an insert-name-of-Kroger-shopper salutation) read this:

“Dear Allison, We are almost done! Thank you for your patience while we remodel your Lavista Road Kroger. Stop by soon & see all of the changes we are making for you. Please enjoy these coupons, which were selected especially for YOU. Thank You for being a great Kroger Customer!”

It’s message – simple. It’s purpose – to prepare me for the best of what’s ever been at my local Kroger store. Its goal – achieved.

As I prepare my heart for this Advent season & reflect on this story of John the Baptist, I seem to think he serves the same purpose to a believer’s realization of the coming of Christ as my Kroger coupons serve to its committed customers: preparedness. Even without the Kroger coupons or mailout, I know what’s coming. The construction will be done in a month, I can relearn how to write my grocery lists in order of appearance, & grocery shopping will become, yet again, a mundane, weekly task. My hope for my encounter with John the Baptist begs more. Sure – I know what’s coming. I’ve read the stories, sung the carols, placed the Christ child in the nativity scene each year. But my hope is that this year, I’ll live it – not relive it – and experience it as if I heard the words of John the Baptist for the first time: “Prepare the way for the Lord, & make straight paths for him.” I want to be prepared for this Christmas season & not just expect it to come. And by the words of John the Baptist, I can be. His message – simple. His purpose – to prepare me for the best of what’s ever been this Advent season. His goal – achieved.

Allison Arant

## Friday, December 18<sup>th</sup>

### Psalm 40

Psalm 40 holds words of gratitude and praise to God for Divine help and deliverance from difficulty and despair. The Psalmist in this case is one who placed his trust in God and is overjoyed that God accomplished “wondrous deeds” on his behalf. This individual offers sincere thanksgiving for God’s faithfulness and steadfast love. It seems that the Psalmist has been beset not only with difficult circumstances because of other people (vs. 14-15), but also his own shortcomings (vv. 11-12), and the guilt which accompanies them. In the face of all these things, the Psalmist puts his trust in God, waiting patiently for God’s deliverance.

It is a good word of encouragement to us -- to know that in all manner of circumstances, God’s grace is enough to see us through, if we can but be patient. For most of us, waiting for better times, clearer direction, for relief from guilt or from challenging days is as hard as the circumstances themselves. We are not conditioned to wait patiently. Instead we are inclined to take rash action, or to place blame or vent frustration on those around us. Within the words of Psalm 40 is a hint of how to avoid these things which are hurtful to others and do little to help us. Psalm 40 with its words of thanksgiving and gratitude is also a psalm of testimony. The Psalmist shares his experience with others in the context of worship and community, and in that sharing finds encouragement for himself and for those to whom he speaks. “Many will see and fear and put their trust in the Lord,” he writes in verse 3. “I have not concealed your steadfast love and your faithfulness from the great congregation (v. 10).”

The people of God, all of us waiting for something in our lives, find great encouragement in knowing we are not alone. This is one of the reasons we walk through the Advent season together again each year. We need to be reminded that many, many others have waited for God as well. Advent is only four weeks; we know precisely when it ends. There is hope in that, and in the turning of the season itself. For as we share in the journey of waiting, we hold one another up in prayer and remind each other of God’s faithfulness, confident that God will deliver even as God has always done.

Alicia Walker

## Saturday, December 19<sup>th</sup>

### Matthew 25:31-46

Then the King will say to those on his right hand, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me."

Jesus is very specific in his conditions for preparing ourselves to being among the sheep. Have you ever wondered what it would be like to be able to accomplish this responsibility? In our lives we are afforded many such opportunities to be ministers but often do not take advantage of that maybe once in a lifetime experience.

The last week of May a group of us from Peachtree went on a mission trip to North Charleston, S.C. to work in the Metanoia Community. We found that we had several areas from which to select how best to use our talents. Most of the men chose to do construction work in renovations of an old home to be used by interns who came to work in the community.

The group I was a part of did several mission activities including working at Low Country Orphan Relief to sort clothing by size and then place on shelving so that it could be easily found when a social worker called with specific needs. We also worked two afternoons in the Tricounty Food Bank. This was a huge warehouse with thousands of cans which had been donated. They had been placed in large cardboard boxes and our job was to separate and box meat, vegetables and fruit in small boxes to be delivered to those in need. We visited with the residents at a Nursing Home where we made room visits and they shared about their lives.

The ministry center that truly amazed me was the Tri-County Family Ministries. This is staffed by volunteers who cook the food, serve it, and distribute groceries which include fresh meat and vegetables along with canned goods and bread. We had the privilege on two occasions to assist with this ministry. The part that amazed me was that as long as there was food available an individual could keep coming back for more food.

These are the type of services to our fellow man that Jesus had in mind when he was talking to his disciples and followers.

I want to be more diligent in seeking opportunities to be Christ in our community. I trust that not only during this time of year when we think of those in need but we will covenant to some activity all through the year. When our life here on earth is done, what a joy it would be to hear Jesus say, "Well done my faithful servant."

Agnes C. Church

## Sunday, December 20<sup>th</sup>, Fourth Sunday of Advent Luke 1:26-38

We probably have never experienced God's holy voice through an angel but how would we react? Would we expect praise and adoration or a parental scolding? God's special messenger greets Mary with a wonderful ballad of praise. How beautiful she is – inside and out. She is beautiful with God's Beauty. What a special and intimate welcome from God in advance of Mary's instructions.

How often do we consider God's perspective of us? God created us in God's image and loves us as God's self. We often times feel God would be disappointed in our decisions or failures, but God loves us as God's own and provides us with surprising opportunities to serve in God's kingdom.

Mary was an ordinary person living an ordinary life. God chose her for an extraordinary task. God desires to use all of us – ordinary, beautiful folks, for amazing opportunities.

May Gabriel's message to Mary be an inspiration for us to see God's beauty in everyone around us this Advent season and throughout the year.

Anna Davis

## Monday, December 21<sup>st</sup>

### Isaiah 11:1-9

Have you ever been surprised? I think that is what the people of Israel felt when they heard this passage. You see, they were feeling hopeless. Another nation was ruling them and they were not free to live as they desired. They wanted to rule themselves. This situation must have been confusing for them. They knew they were God's chosen people. Why would God not allow them to be the powerful nation that ruled over others? Then Isaiah, a prophet, came to them. I can almost see the excitement building as they anticipated Isaiah's announcement. A man whispering to his neighbor, "now we will have a king of our own, one who understands us." A woman explaining to her children "God is going to send a mighty warrior to rescue us. He will come with power and take over the land." But when Isaiah spoke to them, this was not his message. Instead he said "a shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit." Then Isaiah went on to talk about this descendent of Jesse coming in peace and mercy and righteousness. This was certainly a surprise...or maybe even a let down. This is not what the people were hoping for or expecting. They wanted someone to come in and take over politically, not spiritually. They were not looking for someone to reveal God's future kingdom of peace and mercy, but someone to deliver them right then. But look at what they got instead...God in the form of a human. God willing to come to earth and walk among them. God willing to experience what they experienced. God willing to be tempted, to be sad, to cry. God willing to laugh and to feast. And God willing to show them what being a righteous people really means.

Today we may experience the same feelings. We may have an idea of how we want our relationships, our careers, our lives, or even our holidays to turn out. But this may not be what God has in store for us. And sure, it is quite possible that when things do not go our way, it will feel like a disappointment. But during this season of hope, love, joy, and peace, let us be open to surprises. Let us be open to things happening in mysterious ways. And when God sends us a baby in a manger instead of a powerful king, let us try to trust that the baby may be a much better surprise than we could have imagined.

Jill Zimmer

## Tuesday, December 22<sup>nd</sup>

### Luke 1:39-45

At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished!"

45 Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished! This is a recurring theme in the Bible that depicts the manifestation of faith and hope and the consequent faithfulness of God. Here, Luke's Gospel portrays for me how God's goodness and favor move in our lives in wonderful ways and shows how we are called to share that wondrous love, hope, and joy.

To go a step further with that idea, I can't help but think of the flip side of that, when we face circumstances that are difficult and burdensome. But the message remains the same, we are to persevere with the hope and faith that others who have gone before us have demonstrated and that we know carried them through to be victorious. I think sometimes we feel that what we face may be impossible or too much to handle. But our God is there in that time and in that place with each of us. Some of you have heard me express my feelings of being overwhelmed this semester as I juggle school, work, marriage, a practicum, a work committee, and being an involved member at Peachtree. And I know many of you are trying to balance busy schedules and commitments, caring for an elderly or sick individual, suffering in your own body, adjusting to the new additions of your family, or facing difficult financial decisions. And though we find ourselves in these places of exhaustion, frustration, or confusion I know we are not alone, nor are we forgotten. Just as Mary and Elizabeth were surprised and excited about the blessings in their lives, we too are benefactors of the gifts of God so long as we faithfully seek and believe.

Certainly more than once this year, God has lifted me up and delivered good news and reassurance of his love and faithfulness. When I have been stressed out and worn out, my husband, family, friends, and church family have been encouraging and supportive. When I have gone into work just needing a smooth night when I could just focus on taking care of patients and not have to deal with staff conflicts, that was the way the shift unfolded. When I felt the heaviness of a fast paced culture and overcrowded schedule, a sunny spot on a bench was waiting for me to pause, reflect, and refocus. When the refugee clinic started to gain unexpected momentum, the right people presented themselves as willing and interested partners. I know I easily get caught up in what I am doing, but I have to remind myself to look at what God has done and is doing, because it is often right there in front of me, if only I will look.

Molly Burleson

## Wednesday, December 23<sup>rd</sup>

### John 1:1-18

There are many active and valid images of Christ in our world today. We embrace the blonde, blue-eyed, handsome Caucasian man we've all come to recognize. There is the Eastern depiction of Christ Pantocrator—the “all ruling” Christ—who is a powerful Lord. We have a Western portrait of Christ in Majesty, which is often found on the aspe of churches or above the door of a cathedral. We recognize Christ as the Good Shepherd who consistently and faithfully keeps watch over his sheep.

What image of Christ do *you* adopt? How does your view of Christ inform the way you live your life? For example, if I believe Christ to be the all-ruling, powerful, and authoritative leader, I may have a tendency to become passive and reluctant to act as a result of this obvious disproportionate power. I may see my life as a silent submission to God's will, in which there is no room for active, sometimes radical, involvement. What is your preferred image of the Christ?

John says Jesus is the *Word*. God took the initiative to communicate and to intimately connect with people, and Christ was his means of doing so. If I adopt John's portrait of Christ as the Word, I view Christ as being God's way of communicating love, grace, peace, and reconciliation. Implicit in this image is the reality that there is a way I am to live. May my life respond to God's desire for relationship. May it communicate God's traits of *love, acceptance, and grace* that Jesus' life and ministry desperately sought to illuminate.

*Almighty God, who hast poured upon us the new light of  
thine incarnate Word: Grant that the same light, enkindled in  
our hearts, may shine forth in our lives; through the same  
Jesus Christ our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with thee, in  
the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.  
Amen.*

*[Book of Common Prayer]*

Megan W. Broadhead

Thursday, December 24<sup>th</sup>, Christmas Eve  
Micah 4:1-5; 5:2-4

In a time when war, violence, tragedy, illness, and death are hourly occurrences in the news and even in our own community, what are we to think of these words?

*...they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more... and no one shall make them afraid... And they shall live secure.*

I visited the National World War II Museum in New Orleans just before Thanksgiving. It was both informative and moving. One of the most heartbreaking stories I read related the events of one Christmas night during the war in Europe. The display told of bombs dropping, bullets flying, and young lives lost—quite a contrast from the “Christmas truce” of World War I and a far cry from the vision we read in Micah.

In Micah, not only is there an end to all war, but the very weapons of war will be transformed into tools for creating and sustaining life. Even the knowledge of warcraft itself will be forgotten. Fear will be cast out and all will live secure.

On this night, this holy night, we welcome the one who will end all wars, calm all fears, and dry all tears. We give thanks that in God we will find rest and security. This is the good news, this is what brings great joy, *this* is what we celebrate!

Michelle B. Garber

## Friday, December 25<sup>th</sup>, Christmas Matthew 1:18-25

Over this past year, a friend of mine has finally completed the adoption process and now has a beautiful daughter that she will no doubt love as her own. Despite this child not being her biological offspring, it is evident through her words and actions that Laurie has formed a bond with Hannah that inspires her to offer unconditional love and care for her.

I am not sure that I would be capable of such love. I'm not sure that like the Joseph described in the gospel of Matthew, I would have the capacity to set aside my doubts and fears and to offer the love of a parent to a child, particularly to a child that had already turned my life upside down. So, the question for me becomes, what motivated Joseph to make this choice? We can be pretty certain it was not religious tradition, for religious tradition would have given Joseph permission to quietly dismiss Mary. It was not personal gain, for we know that Joseph could lose not only his reputation, but the normalcy of the life he had planned with Mary. It surely could not have been practicality, comfort or certainty of what the future would bring. No, there must have been something greater that gave Joseph the willingness to participate in bringing Christ into the world.

Matthew tells us that it was “just when he [Joseph] had resolved to do this [dismiss Mary quietly], an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream” (1:20). After Joseph had already made up his mind, an angel speaking words of peace and guidance broke into Joseph's already shaken up world and gave him an alternative to religious tradition and personal agenda. ““She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins”“ (1:21). With these words, a new future was envisioned for Joseph, one that would be enlarged as the Christ child came into the world bringing good news of God's kingdom on earth. When Joseph had this surprising encounter with the divine in the midst of his everyday life, he was confronted with a new way of living. Instead of doing what seemed rational, practical or religious, Joseph was called to live faithfully, to hear and respond to God's guidance.

When I first heard that Laurie was adopting Hannah, I wondered what in the world she was thinking – what was a single mom with a career doing adopting a child from half way around the world? Perhaps like the story of Joseph, she was open to the stirrings of God that present our lives with an alternative. As we celebrate the birth of the Christ child on this day, let us remember to celebrate the God who takes the most unlikely of circumstances and uses them to transform us and to offer joy, hope and peace to all people. Merry Christmas!

Susan Rogers

# Saturday, December 26<sup>th</sup>

## Luke 2:22-38

### Christmas Strangers

Can you imagine the difficulty of travel for Mary and Joseph? Having to make the journey to Bethlehem during the final days of Mary's pregnancy seems quite daunting. I usually get stressed and frustrated just trying to load up the car with presents, luggage, my wife, and the two dogs so that we can make the five hour drive home. Mary and Joseph, though, I imagine probably spent much of their trip feeling the pressure of being new parents away from their home. Then after the frustration and difficulty finding adequate accommodations for their stay in Bethlehem, Mary goes into labor, in a barn. Then out of nowhere shepherds show up. I know that we celebrate the Nativity as a peaceful and joyous celebration, but really? Shepherds are dirty and the lowly of society, and well, they are strangers! Is Mary really okay with all this? Does she really know what all this means?

When Mary and Joseph went to the Temple to make their customary sacrifice, imagine their surprise when a stranger grabs their son, lifts him up and praises God. Then this stranger continues and makes a prophecy about the life of Jesus and about the heartache in store for Mary. Can't you imagine Mary at this point saying something like, "Joseph, let's hurry up and get this over with and get home, I'm tired of strangers." Then, another stranger begins to tell everyone in the Temple about Jesus. I can imagine Mary probably growing very tired of all of the attention. But I also can't help but think, maybe, just maybe, all these strangers were helping to give Mary a greater understanding of how special this child of hers really was.

Too often we think we know what this Jesus and Christmas is all about. Do we really know? Maybe we should experience Christmas through the testimony of strangers this year just like Mary and Joseph did that first Christmas.

After the hustle and bustle of this Christmas season, before you tear down the decorations, the tree, and all those lights, stop and reflect on the real miracle of Christmas. The miracle announced and experienced by the strangers and the outcasts nearly two thousand years ago. You see, the real miracle of Jesus, comes after Christmas.

"The Work of Christmas"  
by Howard Thurman

When the star in the sky is gone,  
When the kings and princes are home,  
When the shepherds are back with their flocks,  
The work of Christmas begins.

To find the lost,  
To heal the broken,  
To feed the hungry,  
To release the prisoner,  
To teach the nations,  
To bring Christ to all...

Drew Zimmer