

A stylized illustration of a nativity scene. A bright star at the top left casts a wide, light blue beam of light down onto a manger. The manger is a simple wooden structure with a thatched roof, containing a baby in a manger and a woman kneeling beside it. Two palm trees stand to the right of the manger. The background is a dark blue sky filled with small white stars. The foreground consists of dark blue, wavy hills.

2011 ADVENT DEVOTIONS

FRESNO PACIFIC UNIVERSITY
BIBLICAL SEMINARY

*Jesus said to Martha, "I am the resurrection and the life. . . .
Do you believe this?"*

*Martha said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the
Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."
(John 11:25-27)*

Greetings in the name of Jesus, the one who came to give the world resurrection life! Thank you for your generous and prayerful participation in the ministry of the Gospel that we share. This booklet is an expression of gratitude for your partnership with us.

We are delighted to have you follow this devotional guide for the Advent and Christmas seasons. As faculty, students and alumni we offer you these meditations as an invitation to join our walk with Jesus. We have written these devotional meditations to encourage you to put your full confidence in him. And because so many of our students were eager to participate in preparing devotionals, we have extended the meditations through the Christmas season into Epiphany.

Fresno Pacific University and its seminary are founded on Christ. Our aim is to help people hear God's call on their lives and to prepare them for a life of ministry. Our purpose is empowering leaders and transforming lives. We believe the only way we can be successful in this mission is through the power of Jesus who is the resurrection and the life.

Please pray for our faculty and students as you read our thoughts. Pray that as we study we will grow in faith in Jesus, will sense God's call ever more clearly and will increase in our capacity to serve and lead in the church and in the world.

May you experience the joy and peace of this season as you grow in believing in Jesus, our Savior and Lord, the Messiah and Son of God, who came into the world and is coming again.

*Lynn Jost, Ph.D., Vice President and Dean, Professor of Old Testament,
FPU Biblical Seminary*

Come Save Us from Ourselves

"Oh that you would tear open the heavens and come down." -Isaiah 64:1a

Read Isaiah 64:1-9

When 20-year-old Max Fleck dialed 9-1-1, all he wanted was for the police to find and arrest the three men who had entered his apartment, assaulted him and his friend, and robbed him. Why it didn't occur to him that he might be the one leaving in handcuffs should be no surprise at all. By the account in the *Chicago Tribune* (July 14, 2011) it appears his focus on bringing to justice the thieves who stole two pounds of marijuana from him overrode any thought that the cops he called to save him might also see "in plain view" all the other illegal drugs still in his apartment!

In Isaiah 64:1-5a the people of God call for him to come and take their enemies by the ankles, upend and shake them. When they realized that stuff would fall from their own pockets (64:5b-7), they became afraid of God and quit calling for him to come. Isaiah's reminder that God cared for them as a merciful father (64:8-9) brought a more humble perspective and a renewed desire among them for God to come. When Jesus arrived, he saved the repentant from their sin, not the self-righteous from their enemies.

The worse the world gets, it seems, the more loudly we Christians call for the Lord to return and put a stop to those who do evil. Max Fleck and Isaiah are good reminders this Advent season that our time is better spent humbly letting God shape our hearts to match his desire for all to be saved before that day comes.

As a potter softens clay, Lord, soften my self-righteous inclinations, that I might love others as you love me. So may I be found sharing your love when you come again.

Mark D. Isaac, M. Div., Director of FPU Biblical Seminary Advancement

Let Everyone Proclaim the Good News

"In these last days God has spoken to us by the Son." -Hebrews 1:2

Read Hebrews 1:1-4

Exhausted, I boarded my plane at the Addis Ababa international airport and sank into my seat. I had just spent two difficult weeks working in refugee camps in famine-ravaged Ethiopia and was returning to Nairobi (Kenya) where my family and I lived. I suddenly realized that a much-loved Christmas carol was playing over the speaker of the Ethiopian Airlines 767.

Ethiopia's Marxist government had closed churches, imprisoned pastors and persecuted Christians. Huge signs on the airport road displayed pictures of Marx and Lenin. Ironically, the Marxist government, owner of the airline, was proclaiming Jesus' birth with a message of hope to everyone on the flight—including a weary relief worker.

The angels announced Good News to the shepherds. The star in the east pointed the magi to Bethlehem. King Herod killed the young boys to eliminate what he saw as a potential threat, but even his very oppressive regime could not stop the Good News from spreading.

As Hebrews 1 says, in the past God spoke to humankind through the prophets, but with the birth of his son he began speaking through the presence of Jesus. Neither the oppressive regimes of the past nor those of the present can stop the proclamation of the Good News. We have salvation through Jesus who now sits at the right hand of the majesty in heaven. He is not only greater than the angels, but more powerful than the political despots or human governments that sometimes unwittingly help proclaim the Good News of this Advent season.

God, as we again celebrate the birth of your Son, thank you for the gift of eternal life.

D. Merrill Ewert, Ph.D., Fresno Pacific University President

When the Promises Are Fulfilled, We Will See and Understand

"About that day or hour no one knows." -Mark 13:32

Read Mark 13:24-37

When Jesus was born of a virgin in the town of Bethlehem as a descendent of David, numerous Old Testament prophecies were fulfilled. Many more were fulfilled when Jesus taught about God's kingdom, healed the sick, suffered unjustly, died on a cross, rose from the dead and ascended into heaven. Yet many prophetic words in the Old Testament were really only recognized as that, were really only understood, *when they were fulfilled*, in fact sometimes only when Jesus himself pointed out that he had fulfilled them (see Luke 24:27).

We should think of Jesus' second coming in similar ways. Christ will return to bring God's plans to fulfillment. Despite numerous prophecies we cannot know in detail how and when that will occur, *until the prophecies are fulfilled*. Some biblical interpreters think that "signs" are designed to help us know exactly what will happen and even when. I disagree. Mark 13:32 makes clear that God intends for us *not* to know when Jesus will return, nor (I think) many details about how. In fact I don't think God intends for us to know whether Christ's return is more likely to be tomorrow or 2000 years from now.

During Advent we prepare to celebrate once again Christ's first coming, even as we continue to await his second. Let's prepare to be surprised. Many details of this season are carefully planned and (we think) predictable. But let's keep our eyes and hearts open for surprises. Perhaps Jesus will "show up" at times and in ways we never anticipated.

God, just as you came in Jesus and will fulfill your purposes when he returns, so come again and again into our lives and our communities this Advent season.

Tim Geddert, Ph.D., Professor of New Testament, FPU Biblical Seminary

Restore Our Fortunes, O Lord

"The LORD has done great things for us, and we rejoiced." -Psalm 126:3

Read Psalm 126

My husband and I joined the little country church in Columbia, Maryland, in 2008. Much to our surprise we had chosen to sit on a church pew next to an older member who happened to be my husband's paternal grandmother's cousin. His grandmother raised him and had died in 2006. We rejoiced.

Last Thanksgiving this "new" cousin was ill so my husband took her the dinner he had prepared. She informed me how good it was, especially the greens. She meticulously described how she fixed the perfect cup of coffee to go with the meal that he provided. Every visit, every encounter, every hello and hug has been a joy to remember. We have rejoiced.

As I am writing this, she has been hospitalized once again. Her health is failing. Yesterday when my husband went to see her, she did not recognize him until late in the visit. She did not realize that her precious cousin, who always comes to check on her, had come as she knew he would.

During a season of special hope and anticipation, we think of many who have sown in tears. God brought laughter and joy to an older woman and a younger man, who could truly share in the realization that "the Lord has done great things for us, and we rejoiced." As she concluded the visit with mature certainty of her future, he assured her that there was more joy to come and together they would experience it.

Lord, prepare us to receive your joy, peace, and salvation as we remember the joy and laughter of the past through the tears and the weeping of the day.

Easter Renay Hawkins, M.A., New Testament student, Columbia, MD

The Greatest Gift Is Love

"You are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ." -1 Corinthians 1:7

Read 1 Corinthians 1:3-9

Our extended family reached a major milestone a few years ago when we decided to change the traditional way we exchanged gifts. Gifts that had meaning and use were becoming more difficult to find. Still, we wanted to show love and thoughtfulness for one another. What were ways that might unite us rather than become an issue that created irritation or strife?

God lavished gifts upon the Corinthians through Christ. They lacked no gift, yet the letter reveals that they lacked love for one another. They individually desired specific gifts that made them look good in society, even at the expense of others. The gifts from God became not only useless, but also harmful. Was this God's intention for giving these gifts? Could these riches lovingly given by God be used to help the Corinthians be the family God intended? The greatest gift from God, the gift of love, would make the difference.

The gifts that I have come to cherish most are those that can be used to help others. God has given us these gifts for all of us to use together. They are for our common good. We encourage, discern, exhort, serve, bring healing—just as Christ did for us. We are enriched with the gifts of God when we seek the greatest gift, his love lavished upon us in Christ and flowing through us to others.

Father, help us to receive anew your greatest gift of love—Christ whom you gave to the world. As we give his love to others, may we your family become one with you.

*Greg A. Camp, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Biblical and Religious Studies,
Fresno Pacific University*

How Is This Possible?

The Spirit and the Power of God

“The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. For nothing will be impossible with God.” -Luke 1:35, 37

Read Luke 1:26-38

Today’s text presents an extremely puzzled young woman. The Gospel of Luke tells us Mary is perplexed by Gabriel’s words to her: “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.” Perplexity turns to consternation as the angel announces that Mary will bear a son: “You will conceive and bear a son. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. He will reign forever. His kingdom will have no end.” “How can this be?” Mary asks.

The surprise of today’s text is not that Mary has questions. After all, who can blame her for asking questions? What’s intriguing is what she asks and what she doesn’t ask. Mary wonders about the meaning of the angel’s address (“favored one”), not about the miraculous fact that an angel is speaking to her. She wonders at the mechanics of bearing a child (“How can this be, since I am a virgin?”), not the world-changing things this son will do. Mary’s questions are more practical than theological, more personal than global.

Mary wants to know about what is being asked of her: “How can I bear a son?” The Good News is that this miracle is about the power of God, not the things that Mary is doing. The spirit will come with the power. The most high will overshadow Mary’s activity. God is the one with whom nothing is impossible.

With this assurance Mary doesn’t hesitate. “Let it be,” she says. “Let it be with me according to your word.”

God, in this season of waiting in preparation, help us to see the things made possible by your Spirit and power. May we be willing to say with Mary, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord.”

*Laura Schmidt Roberts, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Biblical & Religious Studies,
Fresno Pacific University*

Now and Then; Then Now

“Since this is what you have to look forward to, do your very best to be found living at your best, in purity and peace.” -2 Peter 3:14, The Message

Read 2 Peter 3:8-15

It's 9 a.m. on my last day of work before vacation. I have until 5 p.m. to finish up my files, pass on any pending tasks to my coworker and report my progress to the boss. The stack of files on my desk seems to reach the ceiling. For every one I get through, three more appear. I can't wait to leave, but I can't leave without dealing with the tasks at hand.

In this season we seek to recreate the wondrous expectation of the coming Savior. While we reflect on the first coming of Christ, we cannot help but consider his eventual return. 2 Peter 3 reminds us that, though the day of the Lord will be filled with destruction and judgment (3:11-12), it will usher in the fulfillment of God's promise of new heavens and new earth where righteousness is at home (3:13).

We eagerly anticipate a joy to come, but we must not forsake the task before us. We, the people of God, have been charged with living now as if the kingdom were already here. We imagine a world better than the one around us. We work toward bringing it into existence (Brueggemann, *Texts Under Negotiation*). We love God as if he were visible before us. We love our neighbors, friends or enemies, as if they were brothers or sisters. In doing so, we aim to be found living at our best, in purity and at peace with those among us and with the earth around us.

Thank you, Jesus, for bringing salvation to all who hope in you. Give us a vision for your kingdom; help us to live in expectation with obedience.

*Clayton Gladish, M.A. New Testament student, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan,
Canada*

No Guarantees, Except One

“He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.” -Isaiah 40:11

Read Isaiah 40:1-11

In spring 2009 my wife and I adopted our first child from China. After bringing our little girl home, I ended up getting a string of odd illnesses, culminating in pneumonia. Believing I was just tired from caring for a young child, I initially ignored the sicknesses. Pneumonia changed that.

In summer 2010 an immunologist diagnosed me with an uncommon condition that, without regular treatments, leaves me vulnerable to serious infection. At diagnosis I asked that difficult question: “What is my long-term prognosis?” He answered that without treatment, five years or less; with treatment, maybe another thirty or forty years. Then the doctor, a Christian man, reminded me, “Of course, none of us is guaranteed anything, are we?” The bubble of invincibility was burst.

In the context of our passage, the Hebrews had lived for centuries under the pretense that they were untouchable because of God’s temple. Then the Babylonians invaded, ravaged and razed Jerusalem. The illusion of immunity from such attack was obliterated.

Into this moment God speaks tender comfort to Jerusalem. The diagnosis doesn’t initially sound comforting: “All people are grass, and their constancy is like the flower. The grass withers, the flower fades” (6-7). The bubble of invincibility is burst. But with the diagnosis comes the treatment, a prescription standing forever to alleviate our fears (8-9). God tells us that he is our treatment, a strong, loving shepherd, carrying us in difficult times (10-11).

No one is guaranteed an easy life. At Advent we are reminded that our strong and loving shepherd cares for us. Guaranteed.

Jesus, care for us and help us to rest in your guaranteed presence in the midst of life’s concerns. Remind us at Advent that you are our loving Shepherd.

Quentin P. Kinnison, Ph.D., Assistant Professor of Christian Ministries,
Fresno Pacific University

Expecting God in the Most Unexpected Places

"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on his servant." -Luke 1: 46-48

Read Luke 1:46-55

One of the oddest and most fulfilling things I've ever done is to sing karaoke with 200 homeless people! Each year I take college students to visit the only church on Skid Row in Los Angeles. Every Wednesday people gather for music and coffee. They all have one thing in common -- they're homeless.

Through my visits I've learned that we don't have to bring God to this impoverished community. He is already there. Though many of these people face hardships and tragedies, this church is full of life and the spirit. I'll never forget asking a homeless woman who was singing her heart out how she was doing. "Too blessed to be stressed!" was her response.

At this time of year I'm thinking about another woman who also found herself in a lowly place and yet sang of a great blessing. The Magnificat, found in Luke 1:46-55, is Mary's song of praise for the humble privilege of carrying God's son. Mary seems aware of the oddness of her situation. This young unwed mother-to-be lived in a lowly town nestled in an irreligious country of Gentiles. Wouldn't a palace in Jerusalem be a better place for the Savior's birth?

Today, God continues to visit the humble, dignify the lowly, and show up in the most forsaken places. I wonder what we'd see if we learned to expect him in unexpected places. Maybe we'd find him singing karaoke with the homeless. Maybe we, too, would sing the song of Mary!

God, thank you for visiting your humble servant, Mary. Help us be humble enough to notice when you visit. Open our eyes to find you in the places we least expect.

*Tim Neufeld, D. Min., Associate Professor of Contemporary Christian Ministries,
Fresno Pacific University*

Through Us God Is Revealed

“Surely his salvation is at hand for those who fear him.” -Psalm 85:9

Read Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13

Reflecting upon the miracles of Christmas, we often wish that God would reveal himself clearly in our day.

The psalmist reflected upon God’s faithfulness to previous generations (1-2). God had poured out favor upon his people, showing mercy in distress and forgiveness in the face of unfaithfulness. The psalmist cried out for the present generation: “Let *me* hear what God the Lord will speak” (8). The poet longed for God to reveal himself again.

The psalmists longed to see God work in their lifetime so “that God’s glory might dwell in our land” (9). Glory is God’s revealing presence—God’s glory is love, faithfulness, righteousness lived out. The poet desired that God be known and revered once again—not just in the past but in the present generation. Confident, the psalmist wrote, “Surely his salvation is at hand for those who fear him, that his glory may dwell in our land” (9). After Christ’s coming John wrote, “And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and *we have seen his glory*” (John 1:14). The Word, fulfilling the psalmist’s cry for God to restore his people, lived among us and revealed God’s glory, grace and truth. Christ was the answer to the cry for God to transform his people.

In our generation—Christ reveals God, demonstrating God’s faithfulness. As our lives reflect his life, we reveal God’s glory in *our* generation. We seek to live in faithfulness to Christ. Christ is seen not just through ancient history, but through our lives.

May your glory, God, be revealed in us and shown through us as we faithfully reflect Christ’s life to those around us.

Steven W. Prieb, M. Div., Assistant Director of Seminary Advancement, Topeka, KS

Clearing the Path

“Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.” -Mark 1:3b

Read Mark 1:1-8

I think the game of curling looks like fun. Of course, about the only time I see a match is during coverage of the Winter Olympic Games. Then, usually at some odd hour of the day or night, the TV broadcast will devote a little time to this unique sport.

If you have ever caught one of those segments you will have seen a team of people on the ice concentrating fiercely on a large, polished granite stone. After it is sent sliding down a sheet of ice, “sweepers” use curling brooms to shape a path that will help direct the rock to its target. They work furiously, smoothing the ice to maintain speed, roughing it up to slow the rock, or otherwise shaping a path that will get it as close as possible to the circular target. They are entirely focused on preparing the way.

Today’s text gives us another picture of someone preparing a way. Using words from Isaiah, Mark identifies John the Baptist as the one who came to announce the Good News of Jesus. John was entirely focused on preparing the way for Jesus, calling people to repentance and announcing the forgiveness of sin. He was like the sweeper, clearing a path so that people would be able to settle on the target -- Jesus.

Our world still needs to see and hear Jesus. Sometimes the way seems desperately cluttered. We need sweepers who will clear the path so that people can welcome our Lord!

God, help us to join in the work of making straight the path so that nothing will hinder the Good News of Jesus.

Valerie G. Rempel, Ph.D., Associate Dean, Associate Professor, J.B. Toews Chair of History and Theology, FPU Biblical Seminary

All Paths Lead to God?

“Now to God who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ . . . made known to all the Gentiles. . . . to bring about the obedience of faith.” -Romans 16:25-26

Read Romans 16:25-27

Religions are not the same, but in this age of tolerance many people say, “All paths lead to God.” The phrase acknowledges there are various paths, or religions, and they differ. Yet it also communicates that the differences do not really matter. They all lead to a common destiny. But do they?

Advent reminds us that the Christian faith is a radically different path. It actually heads the opposite direction of the other religious paths. God took the initiative through Jesus and came to us. Other religious paths guide people to act and obey with the promise that their actions may garner a positive response from God or the gods. Paul proclaims the exact opposite. God has acted in ways that lead us to trust and obedience. We do not move God to action. God moves us to action.

I too easily get turned around and walk the Christian path as if it were like other religious paths; I treat my actions as central to my standing with God and others. Advent offers us the opportunity to assess the direction of our path and also to restore Christ, not our actions, to the center. Human actions are part of the Christian path, but as obedience in response to what God has graciously done. As we move in the right direction on the path, Advent provides an invitation to reflect on the actions to which God is calling us.

Thank you, God, for unconditionally coming to us. May your spirit show me ways I mistakenly seek to earn what has already been given and make clear to me how I can obediently respond to the love received.

*Mark D. Baker, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Mission and Theology,
FPU Biblical Seminary*

Joining the Global Celebration

*“Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous works among all the peoples.”
-Psalm 96:3*

Psalm 96

Each Sunday one can find churches in Fresno worshipping Jesus in Armenian, English, Hmong, Japanese, Russian, Spanish and a host of other languages. Such diversity provides a rich foretaste of “the glory and the honor of the nations” that will one day flavor life in the New Jerusalem (Revelation 21:26).

Psalm 96 foreshadows this future. The psalm calls for the Lord’s supremacy to be declared among all nations. It summons all peoples to join in worship. By coming as our Savior Jesus has made this psalm’s fulfillment possible. Near the beginning of the New Testament men from a pagan land bow down before Jesus (Matthew 2:11). Toward its conclusion a great crowd “from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages” assumes a similar posture before him (Revelation 7:9-11). Between these two images Scripture presents a compelling account of Christ’s unfolding purpose of salvation among the nations.

The exciting vision of Psalm 96 is being realized throughout the world today. During this Advent season, let us pray for God’s work among the peoples of the earth. Let us look for opportunities to support those who have followed Christ’s call to “Say among the nations, ‘The LORD is king!’” (10). Let us explore ways of becoming more personally engaged in Christ’s global purpose. Let us recognize this as a time to relish our Lord’s “marvelous works among all the peoples” (3) and join in the rich global celebration of our Savior.

Lord, I worship you as the Savior of the nations; please guide me in finding my place within the work that you are doing among the peoples of the earth.

*Cory L. Seibel, Ph.D., Assistant Professor of Pastoral Ministries,
FPU Biblical Seminary*

Heirs of Grace

“But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us ... through Jesus Christ our Savior.” -Titus 3:4-6

Read Titus 3:4-7

Titus 3:4-7 declares that the spirit poured out richly justifies us by the grace of Jesus and gives us hope.

Forty-five years ago during the Advent season my sister sent a letter to us in Nigeria with difficult news. A missionary friend counseled me to “spread the letter before the Lord” like King Hezekiah did in 1 Kings 19:14. Her goodness and loving kindness in my hour of loneliness, pain and discouragement gave me hope that first Advent in Africa. In those days before email and Facebook, there was no way I could personally comfort my sister other than writing a letter and waiting the long weeks until she would receive it and reply. God’s goodness, loving kindness and mercy came to me through my colleague. I remember that time as a time of grace and hope, where I learned new ways to experience and share God’s providing, saving power.

The hymn from the Iona Community in Scotland says it well:

Jesus calls us to confess him Word of life and Lord of all;
 Sharer of our flesh and frailness, saving all who fail or fall.
 Tell his holy human story; tell his tales that all may hear.
 Tell the world that Christ in glory came to earth to meet us here.
(Iona Abbey Worship Book, Wild Goose Publications, Glasgow)

How might you share the goodness, loving kindness and mercy of Jesus with others today? When have you been an heir of grace?

Praise to Christ who feeds the hungry, frees the captive, finds the lost, heals the sick, upsets religion, fearless both of fate and cost. -Iona Community

*Delores Friesen, Ph.D., Professor Emeritus in Pastoral Care and Counseling,
 FPU Biblical Seminary*

Bread of Tears

“You have fed them with the bread of tears, and given them tears to drink in full measure. Our enemies laugh among themselves.” -Psalm 80:5-6

Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19

Grandfather Solomon was a survivor of the Armenian massacres. In a memoir he described how soldiers swarmed his village one April, rounding up the men in the stables of an inn and executing them in the surrounding mountains. Solomon was spared because he was a child. Alone after his mother’s death, he was taken in by non-Armenian neighbors, sheltered through the harvest and turned over to deportation caravans once his usefulness had ceased.

Ninety five Aprils later Solomon’s memoir was translated by my friend Sonia as she cared for her dying mother. That month I took the memoir to the Genocide Museum in Yerevan, Armenia. My trip was to check on the delay of my pending adoption. I didn’t know it would be the start of the unraveling of the adoption process and the loss of the child I’d been waiting for.

Whether our tragedies are epic or our heartbreaks personal, God’s people cannot escape the pain of this world. We feel betrayed. Like the psalmist we cry out to God, “How long will you be angry with your people’s prayers?”

The sovereignty of God, the problem of evil, the meaning of suffering—deep theological questions have no easy answers. Easy answers in the face of human pain run the risk of making God seem capricious, indifferent or even monstrous.

God is not distant. In Jesus God has joined us in our grief, placed himself in the stable of an inn, and become our brother in all things—even our cry, “My God, why have you forsaken me?”

God, may we, like Jesus, commend our spirit into your hands and find our restoration in you.

Mary Shamshoian, M.A., LMFT, On-Site Counseling Program Director

Word Becomes Flesh

"And the Word became flesh and lived among us." -John 1: 14

Read John 1: 1-14

Long ago a young woman was visited by an angel. She was terrified at this holy apparition, but the angel somehow spoke a word, a soothing word, that brought peace beyond understanding to the young woman's soul. She humbly accepted her role. She forsook all claim to dignity as she carried a child she could not explain in words. When it came time, the pains of labor were at their height. The woman and her husband were still searching for a place. Finally, they placed a babe in a manger amidst the animals. The small babe cried out into the night, filling his lungs with air he had long before once breathed into existence. As she brought this small being to her breast, the word that soothed her months before faintly echoed in the stillness of that moment, again flooding her soul.

The Word Jesus is also the creator. The creative power of the Word became a tangible, living body so that word and flesh were joined. We humans are sensual beings who experience life through our bodies—flesh. While our bodies identify us as human and contain us, our personhood is not wholly bound by flesh. For every moment of confusion, pain, terror or disappointment, there is a word that can transcend boundaries, that speaks at a soul level, and that enters and forever alters the experience of that time. Word continues to become flesh.

Jesus, thank you for joining us in the flesh. Show us the Word we may yet need, and give us the Word yet needed by others.

Liz Mason, M.A., MFCC alumna (2011), Fresno, CA

Our Lord Born in Human Likeness

"[Christ Jesus] emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness." -Philippians 2:7

Read Philippians 2:5-11

As an active participant in my son's first year of life I learned that the human body contains both absolute beauty and absolute humility. The soft, irresistibly kissable skin is a magnet for dirt and drool. The wonder of the first tooth mixes with the pain of the second. Piercing cries shatter the peaceful picture of a sleeping baby.

Jesus endured humility and pain when he took on the form of the human body. His obedience to being human led to the trauma of birth, life and death. His obedience to birth led to his death; his obedience to death allowed us to enter into relationship with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

During this Advent season we celebrate the birth of our Lord Jesus. While we often see images of a perfect baby Jesus sleeping peacefully during this season, let us remember that Jesus chose to become human. In so doing he identified with human joy and struggle. He fell down learning to walk. He relied on others to clean his tender skin. He jammed fingers into his mouth in an attempt to soothe the pain of teething.

We serve a humble Lord whom God has exalted to the highest place. He reflects both the splendor of a king and the humility of a baby. Let us seek to reflect the splendor and the humility of Jesus this Advent season.

Lord, please show us how to reflect both your splendor and your humility in our relationships with each other and with you this Advent season.

Andy Johnson, M.Div., Director of FPU Biblical Seminary Admissions

Gaudete! Rejoice!

"What are human beings that you are mindful of them?" -Psalm 8:4

Read Psalm 8

We've just past the third Sunday of Advent. Up to this Sunday, the mood of our praying's been heavy -- hushed and somber, not loud, not triumphant. The glad news of Christmas is already bandied about in stores and on TV, but Advent's not about gladness; it's about expectation and our humble preparation to meet our God. We're peeling away whatever may stand in the way of this meeting. And so, a week ago today, we listened to the fiery, get-yourself-ready sermon of John the Baptist. In Advent we keep ourselves alert and sober-minded for the sake of our prayers (1 Peter 4:7).

But two days ago, *Gaudete* Sunday, joy broke through. We lit the pink candle. We sang, "Joy to the World." We basked for a while in the light that is coming into the world on Christmas Day. The joy that comes to us in Christ, God in the flesh, God... *human*.

Are you so familiar with Christmas that such things no longer make you giddy? And yet, giddy with joy is what this psalm wants of you. Giddy because God—sovereign and majestic (vv. 1, 9)—is mindful of humanity (v. 4). But there's more. In Christmas God's not merely *thinking* about humanity, God's *being* humanity. God with us, in us, one with us! Divinity and humanity woven together, and humanity made sacred in the weaving. That's you ... me ... everyone. No one on the planet left out, forgotten, ignored. If that won't make you giddy, what will?

Gaudete! Rejoice!

O Christ, what are human beings? What am I? Who's my neighbor? No mere hunk of flesh. But sacred, priceless, the very cradle of divinity. Gaudete! Rejoice!

*Chris Neufeld-Erdman, D.Min., Adjunct Faculty, FPU Biblical Seminary;
Senior Pastor, University Presbyterian Church, Fresno*

Being Good News

"The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me... he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed." -Isaiah 61:1

Read Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

Two years ago I attended a Bible study primarily composed of homeless folks in a downtown coffee shop. My hope was to learn from these dear people and to place myself in a position to create friendships. During a time of sharing I listened as a single father (with his two children) talked about how God had come through for them by mysteriously providing a home when he was convinced they'd be on the streets. The short back-story is that he had recently received custody of his two boys, 3 and 10, rescuing them from a mother addicted to drugs. Now, he needed a refrigerator and food.

Touched, I offered him my college dorm fridge; but when others heard about the situation, resources came together beyond anticipation. One person offered a full-size refrigerator. Another had the idea to purchase Christmas gifts for the kids. Yet another decided to buy gift cards to a grocery store. That night we pulled in with a vanload of hundreds of dollars in gifts, groceries and the fridge. The father, completely overwhelmed, wept aloud with tears of gratitude for us and for the God we serve! That day began a friendship with a father who wanted the best for his kids but simply needed some *Good News*.

What today's passage reminds us of is that the Good News is more than a message, it is acting in love for the most vulnerable in our society. May we ask the Holy Spirit to empower us to be *Good News* this advent season and beyond.

Father, help me to see you at work in the world. Enable me to experience the anointing of the Holy Spirit, that I may be empowered to be Good News.

Kurt Willems, M.Div. student, Visalia, CA

Salvation Is God's Initiative

"The LORD declares to you that the LORD will make you a house." -2 Samuel 7:11

Read 2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16

Houses come in many different shapes and sizes. When I entered the engineering profession, my aspirations of building a dream house came a step closer to reality. I dreamt of elaborate structures made of reinforced concrete beams, steel columns and timber joists. During my career I worked on roads and bridges. Surely my own house would someday consist of spacious rooms complete with high ceilings, large windows and extravagant furnishings. Of course you do not have to be an engineer to share the American dream of someday owning your very own house, complete with a white picket fence.

King David expressed a similar desire to build a house for the Lord. It seemed a suitable request. Why should the ark of the Lord continue to be housed in a tent when it could be in an elaborate temple? Surprisingly, the Lord does not approve David's construction plans. The Lord responds by promising that he the Lord would build a house for David. This "house" is a relationship of mutual loyalty. The Lord promises to give rest to Israel and a dynasty to David. Later the New Testament describes God's people as a house built with Christ Jesus as the cornerstone (Ephesians 2:20).

My aspirations and dreams today look somewhat different from my days working as an engineer. Today I dream about how God's blueprints for a spiritual house become a reality in the here and now. Thankfully, because of Jesus we are all invited to participate in God's plans for salvation.

God, thank you for directing us to your continued work of salvation. Help us to participate in your construction initiative by inviting all to respond to Jesus in faith.

J. Matthew Hildebrand, M.Div. student, Winnipeg, MB

Returning to God

"I will let them walk by brooks of water, in a straight path in which they shall not stumble; for I have become a father to Israel." -Jeremiah 31:9b

Read Jeremiah 31:7-14

As my wife and I traveled throughout Europe last summer, I felt like I got a taste of exile. The people in each new place we visited spoke a different language and practiced cultural customs that were unfamiliar to us. We often had to ask for directions as well as advice concerning etiquette.

As we read Jeremiah 31, we can recognize that our God is a God who actively longs for restoration. Jeremiah preaches many speeches of both judgment and warning, but Jeremiah 30-33 provides words of comfort. In these chapters God is not content to sit idly by and watch Israel languish in exile. Rather, God will work for restoration by bringing them back into right relationships with God and others.

In Jeremiah 31:7-14 we see yet again that God's parental love for God's children knows no bounds. God will stop at nothing to bring Israel home from exile. We can see that there is hope even in the midst of the most difficult times because our God is involved in our world, actively working for restoration.

Just as God restored Israel, God works today to restore broken lives, broken neighborhoods and a broken world.

Instead of being overwhelmed with the brokenness all around us, we can join God at work to restore all things.

God, give us eyes to see the brokenness around us. God, give us hearts of compassion for those in exile. God, give us creativity to join you at work this Advent season.

Phil Schmidt, M.Div. student, Goshen, IN

A Light in the Darkness

"The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in the land of deep darkness—on them light has shined." -Isaiah 9:2

Read Isaiah 9:2-7

I will never forget the darkest day of my life. Our newborn son lay on a hospital table gasping for breath. There was nothing I could do to help him. We had been preparing for his birth for nine months. The walls of the nursery had been painted a deep blue. The crib placed in a quiet corner. Opposite the crib, the rocking chair awaited its inaugural run. The struggles of pregnancy and birth diminished by the joy we would soon experience. As I stood in the sterile hospital room, my own limitations as a husband and father came crashing in. I was helpless to change the fact that my wife might never experience the joy of rocking him to sleep. Nothing I could do would change the situation. It was the darkest day of my life. Just as that darkness is burned into my memory, so is the light that burst in as the Air-Transport Team pushed through the door.

The darkness that I experienced that day is nothing like the darkness experienced by the people of Israel. They had lived in exile so long that it had become a way of life. The darkness of exile had become their identity. The prophets were not silent. The words of hope spoken by Isaiah promised that light would break into the darkness, and from that darkness new life would spring up. With the birth of a child dawn would eventually come with the hope of a bright future.

Lord, as we journey through this Advent season may we become sensitively aware of those who are experiencing dark times and share with them the light of hope.

*Steve Bomar, M.Div. alumnus (2011), Worship Pastor at North Fresno
Mennonite Brethren Church*

Joy to the World

“Go through the gates, prepare the way for the people; build up the highway, clear it of stones, lift up an ensign over the peoples.” -Isaiah 62:10

Read Isaiah 62:6-12

Our congregation recently studied the fruit of the spirit from Galatians 5:22-23. The preacher reflected that “joy is the fruit produced when we witness the overlap of the world ‘as it is’ and ‘the way it should be.’” Isaiah helps us glimpse joy.

The prophet tells us that our produce won’t be given to our enemies. Foreigners won’t consume the food for which we have labored. Hard work won’t be futile. The Savior is coming. He’s bringing rewards to the faithful! Advent is about eagerly awaiting this overlap when the world will finally be as it should be. Those who hope for God’s salvation will be redeemed. The place where they gather will be “Sought Out.”

Our role is to prepare a way: build up a highway; smooth the path; remove the stones; raise the banners; to make the journey easier. These words are connected with the arrival of the Messiah in Isaiah 40:3, but here Isaiah seems to have someone else in mind—*everyone* else. “Raise a banner for the nations,” guiding them in.

In the world God is creating our food will not feed our enemies. Foreigners won’t consume our labor. Isaiah envisions transformation (not elimination) of enemies. We won’t label others as *enemy* or *foreigner* any longer. Our work will feed friends and family.

What is truly beautiful is that we can begin the overlap whenever we want. This is truly “Joy to the World.”

Lord, we yearn to experience the joy Isaiah proclaims. May we have no more enemies and no more borders. Give us the courage to experience your redemption.

Trent Voth, M.A. New Testament student, Halstead, KS

Worth Getting Excited

“How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation.” -Isaiah 52:7

Read Isaiah 52:7-10

When we called to announce to my parents the exciting news that we were expecting our first child, we were met with an eerie silence. After several failed redials, we were able to get through again. “Is everything OK?” we asked. “Yes! We are excited! We just screamed so loudly we broke the phone!”

Writing for exiles, Isaiah portrays a time when sorrow will turn to joy. Those who were formerly slaves in a foreign land (Babylon) will become the free people of God. This freedom will be proclaimed as peace, good news and salvation.

Peace is more than an absence of war or hostility. Peace speaks of healthy relationships, wholeness and health. Shalom describes a positive and holistic state that is personal, communal and related to God.

Good news involves happiness and prosperity. Good news of salvation is open and spacious living, no longer restricted or confined but freed into the lavish love and grace of God. Salvation is an experience of God’s liberating power. Salvation is at the core of who God is and how he identifies himself (Exodus 20:2).

The message proclaimed by Isaiah is one of good news. Isaiah proclaims God’s reign of freedom and salvation. Jesus also brings this message. It’s worth getting excited about! Calling to share the news of a birth is a joyous occasion. Even more so is sharing the Good News of Jesus to those around us. It spreads God’s message of peace, good news and salvation.

Saving God, thank you for the Good News that Jesus brings. May this good news excite us so that we may announce your peace, good tidings and salvation.

Justin Hiebert, M.Div. alumnus (2011), Fresno, CA

A Blessing Comes to Life

“The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you.” - Numbers 6:24-25

Read Numbers 6:22-27

I have heard this blessing, read this blessing, memorized this blessing and sung this blessing countless times, but it remained nothing more to me than a pretty set of words until I witnessed this blessing in action.

One day as a pastoral intern I accompanied my supervising pastor on pastoral care visits to church members at a local retirement facility. At the end of a visit I watched the pastor place his hand on an older man’s shoulder, look him in the eyes, address him by name and pronounce this blessing from Numbers. Suddenly the words of the blessing felt alive, as if the two men had become a conducting wire for the peace of God.

This blessing is known as the priestly benediction because God gave Aaron and his sons, Israel’s priests, the task of pronouncing this blessing over the people of Israel. As priests, they were to convey the love and peace of God to God’s people. This communication system, however, was less than perfect, and eventually God decided to deliver his blessing in person. Jesus didn’t simply come to dish out a few lessons, die on the cross and be on his way. Jesus’ goal was not efficiency. Jesus came to touch us on the shoulder, look us in our eyes, call us by name and tell us that we are beloved and blessed. By blessing and embracing us as he lived and died among us, Jesus connected us physically and spiritually to the aliveness of God’s love.

Lord, thank you for touching us with your blessing. May we share the aliveness of your blessing with gentle hands and open hearts.

Laura Neufeld, M.Div. alumna (2011), Fresno, CA

Abba, Father, We Are Yours

“God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law... so that we might receive adoption as children”. –Galatians 4:4-5

Read Galatians 4:4-7

It was November 20, 2010, the 11th National Adoption Day. On that day 4,800 children from foster care systems throughout the U.S. were adopted into their permanent families. Through tears of joy adoptive mom Lisa remembers the moment that the adoption of her own daughter became final. “The day we sat with the court, the judge said, “This is your *child*. This is *your* child. Forever! There is no difference between this little girl and your biological daughter now. She’s yours!” Formerly a ward of the court, this daughter had been redeemed!

We are God’s *children*, daughters and sons adopted into a family bound together in love. When the law declares us unacceptable, our Father responds, “I am yours and you are mine.” Our hearts cry out, *Papá! Baba! Leefsta Voda! Daddy!*

We are *God’s* children, brothers and sisters, heirs of the heavenly kingdom. Jesus, himself, is our brother. He too was born of flesh and blood under the law so that he could show us the way to freedom. Together our future and our inheritance are now bound with his.

Lisa’s daughter has been redeemed, no longer entrusted to the court; she lives in the loving embrace of her family. We too have been set free. No longer fellow slaves, we are brothers and sisters, daughters and sons, willingly bound together by love, through the Spirit of God’s Son, our brother, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Our Father, thank you. Your beloved Son has set us free. By your Holy Spirit, teach us to grow your kingdom of love on earth as it is in heaven.

Amy Stone, M.A. MFCC & M.Div. student, Assistant Pastor at College Community Mennonite Brethren Church, Clovis, CA

Do Not Be Afraid

“Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife.” Matthew 1:20

Read Matthew 1:18-25

What are you afraid of? You have received this question and you have asked it. As a teenager I wanted to ask a certain girl to go out with me, but I was afraid of failure and rejection. What if she says NO?

One of our most common fears is that we will fail God and those who depend on us. Our other fear is that God will not do what we expect him to do or what we asked him to do. We are afraid that we will fail God or that God will fail us. And when it is both kinds of fear at once, it is easy to be overwhelmed.

Imagine that you suddenly faced an obviously real and overwhelming angel of God who spoke with a powerful voice to tell you that God was contradicting what you believed God would normally want you to do? You would be frozen in terror and confusion, just like Joseph, and you would urgently need to hear that angel reassure you, “Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife.” Do it even though it may not seem right or make any sense.

God was telling Joseph to do something that normally would be wrong and that would surely subject him to public disgrace as the father of someone else’s son, a boy ironically named “God is with us.” But Joseph did what the angel of the Lord had commanded. And that made all the difference.

Lord, what we think we know keeps us from knowing what we cannot yet think. Let the fresh coming of Jesus release your perfect love that drives out our fears.

*Richard Kriegbaum, Ph.D., former president of Fresno Pacific University,
Interim Dean of the School of Business*

Righteousness That Shines

“I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being shall exult in my God.” -Isaiah 61:10

“The nations will see your righteousness, and all the kings your glory.” -Isaiah 62:2

Read Isaiah 61:10-62:3

The birth of a child is always a sign of hope. It is a sign that parents have not given up, that they believe this life is worth investing in. Not everyone agrees. Some people have chosen against having children precisely because they believe the world is too awful for future generations. The world, they believe, is beyond hope, irredeemable.

The Bible continually reminds us that God has not given up on this world and that God never will give up on it. God’s promises are sure. The world and its people will be redeemed. We can be confident that the best is yet to come.

Our primary guarantee of this is the birth of Jesus, God’s Son. Jesus came to shine forth God’s righteousness and glory into this dark world. He came to draw to himself a faithful people who would reflect that light, who would exhibit righteousness and glory themselves, as Isaiah prophesied they would do. When Isaiah 62:2 speaks of “*your* righteousness” and “*your* glory,” it is not referring to God’s but to ours. God’s plan is for the nations to see people of faith shining with righteousness and glory, and then be drawn to himself. Then we will join Isaiah in affirming: “I delight greatly in the LORD; my soul rejoices in my God.” (Isaiah 61:10) God does not give up on this world -- neither do we. God shines his righteousness and glory into the world—so do we.

As we celebrate our Savior’s birth, let’s be renewed in hope. Let’s recommit ourselves to shine forth God’s righteousness and glory into this dark world until Jesus comes to make all things new.

Lord Jesus, let your righteousness and glory be reflected through us that the nations may see and give you praise.

*Gertrud Geddert, M.Div. and MFCC alumna, Adjunct Faculty at
Fresno Pacific University*

While There . . . Deliver

"While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child." -Luke 2:6

Read Luke 2:1-7

According to Luke's birth report, things are as they should be in the midst of socio-political decrees, migration, unjust taxation and Mary's pending delivery. *Things are as they should be* may appear to be an out-of-touch characterization. In light of contemporary wars, poverty, violence, slavery and political polarization, how can such a claim be made? How can one live with abiding peace and trust?

In Luke's narrative we are reminded that God has not forgotten about you and me. Even though it may seem as if political governments and powers are driving history, God remembers us. The God of history, who chose to enter our time and space in a unique way through the person of Jesus, is present to redeem. Jesus reveals the depths of God's just, righteous and compassionate leadership juxtaposed against the existing leadership of his day. God has not left us and will not leave us alone.

Where are you this Advent season? Have you been pushed and pulled by circumstances beyond your control? Have you forgotten to tend to what God has placed within you? Have you become embittered because God seems not to be there? With Mary and Joseph you are invited to experience God's providential care regardless of the socio-political reality. While there in your particular place, be aware of God's reign in and over history. In doing so you will bear witness to your time of delivery.

We celebrate you, God, for dwelling with us in the person of Jesus, and in us through your Holy Spirit. Wherever we are, may we be conscious of your eternal presence and time to deliver.

*Karen D. Crozier, Ph.D., Assistant Professor of Biblical and Religious Studies,
Fresno Pacific University*

God Dances with Nobodies

"In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night." -Luke 2:8

Read Luke 2:8-14

The first names in the guest book at Bethlehem's birthplace belonged to shepherds—*nobodies*. First-century shepherds were considered misfits and outcasts. Michael and Stormie Omaritian in their musical *Child of Promise* give this perspective from a first-century shepherd:

It's lonely out here in this isolated job.
 Our position is without esteem.
 We're socially challenged.
 We're society's scourge.
 We're not exactly every woman's dream.
 Shepherds have a humble purpose.
 Of our fate few people care.
 Sometimes I wonder if God knows we exist.
 If he does, he's forgotten where.

God didn't, however, forget these *nobodies*! He wrote them into a privileged class by first announcing to them the birth of the Messiah. The black night explodes with dazzling light and ecstatic song. God danced with the nobodies! When the shepherds heard the song of the angels, they moved on it and became the first witnesses to this miraculous birth.

God loves nobodies! Paul says that God deliberately chose things the world despises to shame the wise and the powerful, "so that no one can ever boast in the presence of God" (1 Corinthians 1:26). God intentionally chose these first-century nobodies to give us a glimpse into the nature of the ministry of the good shepherd who laid down his life for the sheep (John 10:11). God continues to identify with marginalized people and gave us the task to be his hands and feet to the nobodies of our world.

God, thank you for choosing us to bring your Good News to others like us, people without great value to the world but very precious to you.

Larry Martens, Ph.D., past president of MB Biblical Seminary, chair of the FPU Board Seminary Committee

Flying High

“The shepherds went back to their flocks, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen.” - Luke 2:20

Read Luke 2:15-21

On a windy June day in southwest Saskatchewan I watched a kite festival. Flyers had come from as far away as Germany and France. Kites were shaped like alligators, sea horses and even deep-sea divers. Some flew low, others rose to great heights.

The previous evening my wife Phyllis had related a story about a Christmas drama in India where her parents, J.N.C. and Anna Hiebert, were missionaries. Indians love drama. In portraying the Christmas story, the shepherds came on stage acting drunk, as shepherds in India often were. They became so boisterous and “high as a kite” that Rev. Hiebert stepped in to bring the scene to a halt.

Imagine the shepherds returning “high as a kite,” intoxicated not with wine but with the excitement of their visit. The God of the universe had come to them, people of low status. That is how God is! His compassion is given to both the least and the greatest. If they were excited it was because they were privileged to be bearers of good news! God’s promise of a Savior was a promise fulfilled—a promise they believed at once and told to everyone.

Let us join the shepherds in praising and glorifying God with exuberance. The angel’s message was one of joy. The Hebrew-Christian faith, unlike other religions, says a German scholar, is characterized by joy!

The performers at the kite festival wanted to share the joy of kiting with people around the world. More compelling by far is the sharing of God’s heavenly news with everyone.

God, have mercy on us when the oft-repeated story of your coming to us in Christ becomes commonplace. Refresh us with the excitement of the Good News and give us eagerness to share it.

Elmer A. Martens, Ph.D., President Emeritus, MB Biblical Seminary

Packing Away the Decorations

“When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth.” -Luke 2:39

Read Luke 2:22-40

Have you finished your Christmas parties, or do you have one more family gathering yet to come? Do you start packing away the lights and tinsel today, or will you keep things out until Epiphany, January 6? Which customs do you follow?

Jesus’ family followed Jewish Torah protocol (mentioned five times in our text). Mary and Joseph were careful to do things the right way. Only after they had followed the Jewish customs regarding Temple purification did they return home. According to Luke’s Gospel that’s when things got back to normal. The boy Jesus grew up, became strong and lived with God’s favor.

After the Christmas hiatus our lives return to normal, too. The truth is, most of us are happy to return to our routines. Kids go back to school, job rotations are routinized, expectations at church relax. Perhaps Jesus’ mother Mary was Luke’s source for this story. If so, we can be sure that her life didn’t return to the old normal. Ringing in her ears was Simeon’s blessing which concluded “a sword will pierce your own soul, too.”

Today consider how the Advent preparations have changed you. Consider Simeon’s song. Join Jesus as “a light . . . to the peoples.” Pray for a neighbor or colleague by name, asking God to let his light shine through you. Like Simeon and Anna, keep your eyes open to the prompting of the Holy Spirit so that you will see the work of God’s Messiah.

Open our eyes, Spirit of God, to see your salvation. Open our mouths to speak the Good News. Open our hearts to share your life with neighbors and friends.

*Lynn Jost, Ph.D., Vice President and Dean, Professor of Old Testament,
FPU Biblical Seminary*

There Goes the Neighborhood

“And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of the Father’s only Son, full of grace and truth.” -John 1:14

Read John 1:10-18

This is John’s Christmas story – no manger, no Magi, no shepherds, no angels. What are we to make of this story? Eugene Peterson (The Message) translates, “The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood.” Did you hear it? God moved into the neighborhood! God loves us so much that God came down to dwell among us, among all of us. This includes not only you and me but also the hard to love neighbor and the difficult co-worker. Talk about lowering your standards! God gave us Jesus, the uncontainable, indescribable, infallible deliverer. Jesus is God’s glory exemplified. Jesus shares grace and truth with us.

John reminds us that when we celebrate Christmas, we are doing so much more than commemorating a historical event that occurred in Bethlehem many years ago. We are bearing witness to God who was willing to leave eternity for us, who loaded up the U-Haul and showed up in our neighborhood! God continues to show up today.

The Christmas season compels us to look around our neighborhoods. We see Jesus in the faces of our neighbors. We see where we can reveal Jesus, where we can be Jesus for those who are struggling. Who needs your witness this day? Whose hand can you hold? Whom can you welcome to the neighborhood?

Dear God of love, joy, and peace, please fill us with your grace and truth. Give us courage to be the people you’ve called us to be, sharing mercy and love among all neighborhoods.

Julie Dixon, M.Div. student, Fresno, CA

Treasuring these Things

“But his mother treasured all these things in her heart.” – Luke 2:51b

Read Luke 2:41-52

wish I could forget the dread I sensed when our daughter, at four years of age, was out of my sight for mere minutes.

A parent’s worst nightmare, a missing child, is the catalyst in this story of Jesus’ childhood that concludes the Christmas season Gospel readings. The lost pre-teen was found, and his confident response to the parents’ astonishment and anxiety pointed to his future ministry. Mary treasured these things in her heart, and Jesus went on to mature physically, mentally, socially and spiritually.

Questions—the teachers’ questions of Jesus, Jesus’ questions of the teachers, Mary’s questions of Jesus and Jesus’ questions of Mary—caused his mother to later treasure the incident in her heart. Like Mary, when disappointments, fears and discouragements are realized in our lives, should we be surprised by outcomes that seem mysterious? Should we treasure these things as God’s working in our lives? Are we to expect those who cause disruptions to be in relationship with us? And can those who hurt, confuse or disappoint us grow in a way that furthers God’s reign?

This story does not answer these questions. But when situations and relationships are resolved in a way that furthers God’s reign, let’s consider these results to be a working of God’s Spirit in our lives, our hearts and our world. Even when the outcome is not exactly what we hoped and prayed for, God’s Spirit is at work.

May we treasure your spirit’s working in past situations so we grow in trusting your future working in our lives, in the lives of those we love and in our world.

*Donna Voth Jost, M.Ed, FPU alumna, Fresno Unified School District
special education teacher*

No One Can Thwart God's Plans

"Out of Egypt I called my son." -Matthew 2:15

Read Matthew 2:13-23

Sometimes we cannot imagine the places to which God calls us. We experience difficulties that we had never imagined possible for our lives. I had not imagined my marriage would end in divorce. Living alone after the divorce, I could not imagine residing anywhere but close to my family in Salt Lake City. I had left my family to move to California when I had married. Being a single mother of four small children was difficult enough, but being in a place with no family support was frightening. I fought hard to return to Salt Lake, but God never opened that door.

In retrospect I can clearly see God's hands protecting me, nurturing me and providing me with a caring, supportive family of believers. Since my divorce, I've come to a personal relationship with my Lord Jesus. I have grown leaps and bounds in my faith. I am in ministry to raise a new generation of believers. I cannot imagine how different my life would have been had I moved to Salt Lake six years ago.

God did not allow the evils of divorce to thwart the plans he has for me. Just as he protected his beloved son from imminent death, he has also made provisions for our lives. During this Christmas season ask yourself, "What is my 'Egypt'?" Is it a place to which God is calling you that frightens you? Is it a ministry he has put on your heart? Is it letting go of a relationship, habit or sin? Regardless, our Lord is calling you somewhere. He is calling you to know that no one can block God's plans for you.

Lord Jesus, give us faith to surrender to your will even when things seem frightening and impossible. Thank you that you don't allow anything to thwart your plans.

Seng Leang Chea, MFCC student, Visalia, CA

Thankful For the Mystery

*“He has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure.”
-Ephesians 1:9*

Read Ephesians 1:3-14

Chances are good that the 2011 year did not go exactly as you planned. Perhaps you welcomed change this year because it meant joy, celebration and laughter. On the other hand this year may have contained moments of deep sorrow and loss—the death of someone close to you, illness, unresolved conflict, broken relationships. More painful experiences can invade our lives even when we feel that there is no lower point of despair. We may find ourselves unwilling to praise God throughout the more difficult, confusing circumstances of life.

The author of Ephesians begins the body of his letter with these words: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Ephesians 6:20 indicates that Paul sent these words to the Ephesians from prison. Yet the first thing he can think to tell his companions is “God is so very good!”

He goes even further to tell them exactly why God is good. Paul describes God’s blessing to you like this: God decided long before you were on this earth that you would be his child and an example of his glorious grace (5-6). You have been completely forgiven, redeemed through the Christ’s death (7-10). Because of your faith in him, he will continually remind you of his promise of salvation (11-14).

Wherever you may be at the end of this year, I pray that you find the strength to thank God for continuing to love us in mysterious ways. I pray that you may find the courage to shout, whisper or proclaim, “Lord, blessed be your name!”

Lord, reveal to us the mystery of your will. Help us to remember to praise you for all you have done for us, during life’s most joyful moments and in the most painful.

Sarah Jean Rhoads, Intercultural Mission student, Fresno, CA

The Right Fit

“As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.” -Colossians 3:12

Read Colossians 3:12-17

Today we make New Year’s resolutions. We want new results in lifestyle, health, careers and families. We want to look better, feel better, to be more faithful Christians.

We’re tempted to seize control in order to change externally before we examine the state of our hearts. What is hiding within your inner heart? Is it God’s word, or are you hiding pain, anger or unrealistic expectations and unhealthy patterns? Today’s text offers a gentle probing of what’s ruling your heart.

Before rushing off to fulfill New Year’s resolutions with a new gym workout or a new study Bible, consider the newness that Christ has already accomplished in you. In Christ you are a new creation. Perfectionistic self-change is a vain pursuit. You are “God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved.”

God in Christ offers a custom-designed wardrobe fitting the new creation. No garments are more flattering than the ones designed by Christ Jesus. Jesus invites you into the “dressing room” of the private place of prayer to put on the garments that suit God’s chosen ones.

In the private place of prayer allow God to strip off the old, worn-out tattered apparel. Be sure to take off every old piece of clothing. As you leave the changing room and find that you are experiencing tension and discomfort, it may simply mean that there’s still an old garment underneath. Continue with this “changing-room” process. Emerge from the place of prayer changed and changing, forever new.

Loving God, in this new year help me learn to step out of old tattered patterns into the new wardrobe of compassion, kindness, humility, patience, forgiveness and love. Thank you!

Erin Scholz, Head Women’s Basketball Coach, Fresno Pacific University

Jesus Our Brother, Our Co-Sufferer

"Jesus shared the same things, so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death." -Hebrews 2:14

Read Hebrews 2:10-18

Unannounced, a woman from a church in town came to the food pantry that I had organized. She brought boxes upon boxes of food flooding out of an SUV. Since the pantry struggled for donations, this unexpected gift was a huge answer to prayer. The donor was most gracious. Her smile lit up the basement where the food was stored. Her generous spirit freed her to give without expectation or need for praise. Even though we'd just met, I cared deeply for this person. We were sisters in Christ.

Days later I learned that our benefactor's young daughter had died suddenly in an accident. My heart broke for this mother and for her church. Painful loss had changed the woman's life forever. Her lighthearted spirit had suffered unspeakable grief. Though I grieved that she had lost so much, I felt helpless to ease her pain.

When God became human, he knew fully that he would suffer the grief that we humans suffer. He came for us because he loves us. He gave everything up for that love. He came so that we would no longer suffer grief alone.

Our aloneness can be overwhelming in times of grief and suffering. Our hearts ache. Our guts are wrenched with pain. Lonely grief attacks our spirits. Grief lies to us, telling us that we are not loved. God-come-in-flesh overcomes that lie. God gave up heaven and surrendered his human life, so that we could be released from death, from pain, and from grief.

Father, you love us in our weakness, pain, and grief. You came as Jesus to understand our suffering. Thank you for the love that gives so much.

Megan Zupancic, MFCC student, Fresno, CA

Uncomplicated Praise

"Let them praise the name of the LORD, for at his command they were created."

-Psalm 148:5

Read Psalm 148

Like most farm children I spent plenty of time playing in the outdoors. I was particularly fond of our swing set. While on it I would create simple songs that I would sing for Jesus. I was happy that we were friends and that we loved each other. My praise wasn't complicated.

Psalm 148 is filled with talk of praise. This psalm, too, isn't particularly complicated. Whether you are a wild animal, the sun or the rain, you can praise the Lord. We aren't told how exactly it is that nature can praise God. The psalm simply assumes that this is possible, even imperative. Eventually humans are mentioned. We too have reason to praise. No intricate instructions or requirements are given. We are to praise God simply because he created us. He is worthy of honor.

Christmas is a complex season. It can be both busy and relaxing, joyous and sad. Amidst all that is Christmas it can become difficult to praise God. As we move from Advent past Christmas, this struggle can remain. Psalm 148 reminds readers to consider praising God. This psalm offers no directions on how best to praise our Lord.

If the big and grand causes you to lose focus, it is OK to step back to ponder. Consider how you might better connect—even if that means a whirl on your childhood swing set.

We praise you, Lord. Help us to find ways to keep focused on you. Help us not to get lost in complications we design. Thank you for your marvelous creation!

Heidi Fischer, MFCC student, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada

Hot Potato

“May the Lord give you children by this woman to take the place of the one she prayed for and gave to the Lord” –1 Samuel 2:20

Read 1 Samuel 2:18-20, 26

Do you remember the childhood game “hot potato”? Imagine playing with someone who sabotaged the game by greedily retaining possession of the potato instead of passing it along. Sometimes we Christians try to live like someone misplaying “hot potato.”

From time to time God blesses us with a special relationship, talent or even responsibility. We receive the “hot potato” with joy, but think it’s ours to keep. Grasping the blessing too tightly comes at a cost – perhaps pain, maybe even scarring of the soul. We have a choice. We can risk permanent damage through greedy grasping, or we can surrender to the one who gave the blessing in the first place.

The faith of Samuel’s mother Hannah led her aright in her turn with the “hot potato.” We can imagine that when God blessed Hannah with the desire of her heart, she must have wanted to hold Samuel tightly. Was she tempted to smother and spoil this long-awaited child? By faith Hannah gave the weaned child back to the Lord. She returned to the temple. She entrusted her child to God. She “tossed the potato” before her life was burned by greedy grasping.

Let us remember that God takes perfect care of everything we surrender to him. We can affirm with Paul, “I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him” (2 Timothy 1:12).

Generous Father, grant us the wisdom to entrust to you every gift with which you have blessed us. When we feel idolatry’s burn, gently remind us of your faithfulness. Strengthen us to return to you that which only you can perfectly keep.

Celeste Scott, MFCC Student, Coarsegold, CA

Safe in the Father's Arms

"In his love and mercy he redeemed them. He lifted them up and carried them through all the years". – Isaiah 63:9

Isaiah 63:7-10

Do you remember being carried as a child, secure in the arms of the one who held you close?

My two-year-old son and I walked down to the beach. Catching sight of the water, he ran as fast as his little legs could go, pulling at my hand. Fascinated by the darting waves and sparkling sand, he happily played at the shore's edge. The sinking sun informed us that it was time to head back.

Turning away from the water, he took one look at the climb ahead of him, and promptly sat down. After some encouragement, he stood and took my hand for the return trip. We moved slowly up the trail. This time there was no beautiful scene to run toward, only a twisted, steep path. Pleadingly, he asked if I would carry him.

At first, he squirmed around, trying to see where we were going, making the journey more difficult. Eventually, he decided he would trust me, relaxing his head on my shoulder.

I will never forget the delight I felt at his surrender. For those precious moments, he was no longer an energetic toddler striving for independence, but my content and trusting baby boy.

I imagine the Father feels the same joy when we look up, arms outstretched, asking him to carry us. He looks at us tenderly, even though we have overestimated our own strength. Even more precious are the times when we surrender the entire journey to him, yielding to his leadership.

Dearest God, an entire year lies before us, a path with unknown twists and turns. Help us remember that no road is too long, or too steep, for you. May we trust you to carry us until we are strong enough to continue the journey, walking by your side.

Better Late Than Never

"Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising and have come to pay him homage." -Matthew 2:2

Read Matthew 2:1-12

As a children's ministry director I have often found it interesting that the wise men are included in our Christmas productions as part of the manger scene. The Magi had such a long journey that they may have arrived late to the birth of Jesus. I remember one year we had three children rehearsed and ready to play the wise men. The day of our program a fourth child wanted to join them. Since the passage does not specify an exact number of visitors from the east, we included the fourth "wise man." Having not rehearsed, he bumbled onto the stage creating for a humorous moment that was enhanced by the fact that we now had four wise men on stage, and one didn't have a gift!

Have you ever felt like that fourth wise man? You have every good intention of playing your part and coming to see the King. Instead you arrived feeling disheveled, unsure and without anything to offer. Perhaps God has been drawing you closer, yet you have been putting off true surrender for a time that is more convenient to your schedule.

Today consider that, as our fourth wise man did, it is better to come late than never. An imperfect arrival is better than none at all. In our surrender we give God the gift he desires from us.

Dear Jesus, draw us to you this day. Help us remember that it is our arrival, our surrender, which matters most to you. Bless the gifts we bring and use us for your glory today.

Rebecca Orchard, MFCC student, Fresno, CA

A New Thing: Will You Know It?

"I will do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?" -Isaiah 43:19

Read Isaiah 43:18-25

Having been married to an engineer for a number of years, I am amazed at his use of technical terms to describe the changes that need to occur at an individual and corporate level. Once in a discussion related to a relationship with which I was struggling, he said simply, "Perhaps you need to recalibrate your expectations." Recalibrate: a profound term that means to "re-determine the deviation from a standard so as to ascertain the proper correction factors" (*Webster's*).

After Epiphany on January 6 the church focuses on the newly recognized ministry of Jesus. (Old Testament) Scripture is the reference point through which we determine our understanding of the new thing that God is doing. We are called to recalibrate our understanding and perceptions based on the manifestation of the incarnation of Christ.

How might our vision need recalibration? In what ways can we see and know the new thing God is doing in our lives and in those around us? Will we be willing to allow others to remove the obstacles that impair our vision? Will we ask God for corrective healing if our vision has grown dim due to neglect or complacency? If we are in positions of leadership, will we serve Christ by providing vision for others even if that vision or direction may prove difficult? Can we humbly receive insight from others that will correct our vision?

Father, help us to recalibrate our vision so that we can see the new thing you are doing in our life in this coming year. Increase our vision for your glory sake.

Cathy Pope, RN, MFCC student, Fresno CA

God's Yes

"In the Son of God, Jesus Christ, proclaimed among you, it is always 'Yes.'"

-2 Corinthians 1:20

Read 2 Corinthians 1:18-22

My son has worked for two agencies that provide services to younger children with autism. Both agencies use affirmation as a primary reinforcer of desired behavior. In one of the agencies the directors emphasize that positive affirmation extends to the staff. This agency, rather than the other, creates an invigorating work environment. Saying "Yes" builds up.

Today's text addresses a polarized community consumed by negative relations. Polarization excludes potential partners. Negative thinking draws boundaries. Criticism divides the community. God counters the negative environment through Jesus. Jesus is God's living "Yes." Jesus unites the community by the anointing power of the Spirit. Jesus' yes extends radically to others. Jesus says "Yes" to us in our brokenness.

Jesus faithfully welcomes us in moments of doubt. Jesus proclaims God's promises when questions overwhelm us. Jesus restores even when we act in ways that threaten covenant commitment. Jesus' yes strengthens us to extend the "Yes" of God's Good News to others.

At coffee break today a colleague reported that his wife of 47 years recently told him, "If I had to do it again, you'd still make the short list!" That's affirmation, isn't it?

The Good News of Jesus is, "You're on my short list! I affirm you. I am with you to the end of the earth."

Jesus, thank you for anointing us with the Holy Spirit. We joyfully receive your gracious affirmation. Help us to pass your affirmation to others.

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