SAINT MATTHEW
church



ADVENT DEVOTIONAL

Sunday, November 29
Light Dispels Darkness
By Mike Neace

As the season of Advent unfolds, we are invited once more into the sacred rhythm of waiting. In a world that rushes toward celebration, Advent calls us to pause and prepare our hearts for the coming of Christ—the Light who enters our personal darkness. A favorite verse that reflects Light entering our darkness is one from the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah declared, "The people walking in darkness have seen a great light" (Isaiah 9:2). This is not merely a historical announcement of the Child born in Bethlehem; it is a living promise for every soul still longing for hope. In the quiet of these weeks, God meets us in our unfinished places, teaching us that true preparation is not frantic activity but a quiet turning of the heart toward the One who is already near.

Let this Advent be a season of holy expectancy. It is the custom in many Christian circles to light candles during the Advent Season. As each candle is lighted—hope, peace, joy, and love—may we remember that the same God who kept His promise to Israel keeps His promises to us today. Christ has come, Christ is present, and Christ will come again. In the waiting, may our hearts be made ready to receive Him more fully, and may our lives become living lights that point others to the Savior who brings everlasting joy.
Amen.

Monday, November 30
The Focus Remained on Jesus
By Amy Determann

And whatever you do, in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him. ~ Colossians 3:17

Growing up, our family's Christmas was traditional and very happy, but in some ways, it was uncommon from how others celebrated and what we saw on television. There was incredible excitement; we had gifts under the tree, celebrated with family, and enjoyed the best dinner and treats for the whole year! But there was no Santa!

I remember the intentional effort from my parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles to not allow us to get caught up in the commercial frenzy of the holidays and focus on sharing time as a family and celebrating Jesus as the center. I do remember my Dad reminding me and my sister that celebrating Christmas is important, but celebrating Easter is just as, if not more important because Jesus

was born on Christmas, but the ultimate victory was won at Easter. Our Christmas was always a reminder of the bigger story.

As we got older, jobs as an ER nurse and firefighter, along with other on-call responsibilities, sometimes kept us from gathering with the whole family on December 25th. Being together was what mattered most, so it was not uncommon for us to celebrate Christmas on another day when everyone could be there. The focus remained on Jesus, the love of our family, and our praise for Him.

That is not to say there wasn't tremendous effort put into making Christmas special—or plenty of excitement as we watched everyone open gifts they had hoped for. We had wish lists and dreams of new games, toys, and clothes. But while I knew Santa played a role in other families' traditions, he was not part of our gift-giving tradition.

If I could choose scripture that would remind me of our family traditions, it would be when Jesus visited the home of Mary and Martha in Luke 10:38-42. It reads:

As they traveled along, Jesus entered a village where a woman named Martha welcomed Him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to His message. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations to be made. She came to Jesus and said, "Lord, do You not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her to help me!" "Martha, Martha," the Lord replied, "you are worried and upset about many things. But only one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, and it will not be taken away from her."

Our family realized that Jesus doesn't care about the perfect "December 25th" aesthetic; He cares about our presence. It would be easy to get caught up in the frenzy of the holi- DAY, but we need to remember that celebrating God should not be confined to a single day so as not to rob us of His love and gifts EVERY DAY!

Tuesday, December 1
God Communicates the Future
By Keith Morgan

But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days. Micah 5:2 ESV

While in the U.S. Army, I met a young man named Steve. I didn't know it at the time, but Steve would help change my life. We both worked together on a small base in southern Germany.

Steve shared two things with me. The first was a Bible tract called, the Four Spiritual Laws. The Four Laws explained how I could have a relationship with God through faith in Jesus Christ. It showed me how Jesus became the bridge from God to me; that God's Son, Jesus, died in my place and that my part was to receive this gift by faith. I wanted to know more.

Steve also showed me a book by Hal Lindsey, The Late Great Planet Earth. Lindsey explains how Micah, an ancient Israelite, predicted the birth of Israel's Messiah. Around 735 BC, Micah, a contemporary of Isaiah, predicted Israel's (long-expected) Messiah, would be born in the lineage of King David … and in the city of Bethlehem. I thought to myself, "how did Micah know this?" How was it possible for a man to know specific details of an event approximately seven hundred years before it happened? How could he know details of this birth and that this birth would perfectly align with other, even older, biblical predictions? "True or false," right?

I tucked all this away and thought. A few weeks later, I got word my father had taken his life. My life was suddenly upside down. A sudden storm formed in my soul because Dad's death was unexpected, gruesome, and so final. It hurt. It caused me to question how my own life would end.

Despite my questions, it was clear that a God who could communicate specifics of future events through an obscure Jewish religious leader before they happened was real, wanted a relationship, and was able to forgive me. I told Steve I wanted to know God and I expressed my faith in Jesus' death together with Steve through prayer. I wanted to know my Creator. And I immediately knew something wonderful had happened!

Since then, I have seen God working, in real-time, in my life and in my family, even in global affairs. I have learned how God, in His love, takes the initiative, but also walks nearby waiting for me to seek His strength and skill in living each day together.

This great King foretold by Micah is the same person King David also foretold as his own King in Psalm 110. He is the manger King born in a dusty roadside inn located in King David's hometown, Bethlehem.

Jesus is God's perfect Lamb who took human form and died to offer us a new kind of life. He showed us what God's love looks like 'in human skin' two thousand years ago.

Do you know God's humble manger-King? He enjoys being with us during Advent and each day.

Wednesday, December 2

His Zeal Will Accomplish This

By Ted Gajewski

For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given, and the government will be upon His shoulders. And He will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of His government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish and sustain it with justice and righteousness from that time and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of Hosts will accomplish this. ~ Isaiah 9:6-7

This is a familiar passage at Christmas, indeed. In the quiet hours of meditation, what a sweet comfort it gives us to reflect on the Christ child being born into this world. The recalling of his life, his teachings, his miracles, his love as well as his sacrifice for our sins affirm our eternal salvation with our acceptance of Christ as our savior. Not only is He our Savior, but He is called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace. There will be no end to the greatness of his government and peace. And he will establish it with justice and righteousness for all eternity.

We can imagine a cute baby, but it is hard for us to imagine an eternal time of peace, security, an all-encompassing love surrounding us, no more sin, no more sickness, no death, worshipping in the presence of our LORD, fellowshipping with Him as Adam and Eve experienced in the garden. It gets a bit more than our imagination can comprehend. We have nothing really to compare it to. The baby is all grown up and is our Messiah King. How can all of this really happen? Our assurance comes in the final words of this passage, "The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this."

Zeal is defined as an eagerness and enthusiastic interest in pursuit of something. That pursuit of something is found in this passage in Isaiah 9. That pursuit of something is us. The gap between God and us has been bridged. That child born to us did it. God sees us through the blood of Christ. We have been redeemed. As believers we will live forever in the presence of God, and we know it is true. We know it will and has been accomplished because the "zeal of the LORD Almighty" will and has made it happen with eagerness and enthusiasm. He eagerly and enthusiastically waits for us. What love he has. What comfort it gives us.

In the words of Fanny Crosby, "Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine!

Thursday, December 3
By Tracy Crawford

The Cambridge Dictionary defines advent as the fact of an event happening, the invention of something, or the arrival of a person. Many Christians celebrate the four weeks leading up to Christmas as the season of Advent, commemorating the arrival of the long-awaited Messiah into the world.

"The Pharisees and Sadducees came to Jesus and tested him by asking him to show them a sign from heaven." (Matthew 16:1) In this verse the religious leaders who lived during the time of the incarnate long-awaited Messiah demanded that the Messiah perform a sign to prove Himself as the Christ, but He had already been working many miracles as foretold by the prophets, evidencing that He was the One they had longed to see. They had prayed for most of their lifetimes that God would send His Messiah into the world, but because they refused to see the divine work Jesus was doing, they missed the miracle of the Incarnate Christ.

I have been praying and waiting for several years for some circumstances to change. For many years, my joy and peace were tied to the end results for which I petitioned God, and I missed the work He was doing in and around me. God also started teaching me to cherish His presence in the waiting, Emmanuel, God with us, God with me. He reminds me too that He is working even when I can't see it.

Is there a longing you're waiting for God to fulfill? May it be said of you, and of me, as it was said of Mary, the mother of Jesus, "Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her." (Luke 1:45)

Friday, December 4
By Sean Reime

During the Christmas season, our days can quickly become filled with shopping, decorating, preparing meals, and planning gatherings with family and friends. In the midst of all the activity, it can be easy to lose sight of the One we are celebrating. When Jesus was born in Bethlehem, there was no room for Him in the inn, yet His arrival changed the world forever. Luke 2:7 reminds us, “And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.” This humble beginning reminds us that God does not need grand surroundings to accomplish extraordinary things. The Savior of the world entered life in the simplest of circumstances, showing us that His presence is far more valuable than anything this world can offer.

As Christmas approaches, let us consider whether we are making room for Jesus in our own hearts. It is easy to fill our lives with responsibilities, worries, and distractions until we have little time left for prayer, worship, or reflection on God's Word. Yet, the greatest blessing of Christmas is not found in what we can accomplish or receive, but in the relationship we have with our Savior. We can make room for Him by setting aside quiet moments to pray, expressing gratitude for His blessings, and choosing to love others as He loves us. As we celebrate this season, may we remember that Jesus came not to be surrounded by earthly riches, but to bring eternal hope to a world in need. May we welcome Him into our hearts and allow His love to guide our thoughts, words, and actions throughout Christmas and into the new year.

Saturday, December 5
By Sheree Bingheim

Key Verse: Titus 2:13 ".....while we wait for the blessed hope - the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ....."

The general meaning of the word "advent" is arrival, appearance or beginning of an important event. So, Advent in December, in the Christian faith, is a season of preparation, prayer and anticipation leading up to Christmas. It's a time when we not only celebrate the "coming" of the Christ Child's birth, but we also need to remember to focus on the anticipation of Christ's future "Second Coming". It's like the second part of Advent! He came as a baby, but that's not the complete event! He's coming back! He's arriving again! Of course, He never really left us. He's been working in our hearts and lives all along.

As we wait for Jesus' second arrival, let us not grow weary of living for Him, working for Him and sharing Him during the Advent season and all year long!

Sunday, December 6
Overwhelming Seasons
By Brook Mitchell

"When the cares of my heart are many, your consolations cheer my soul." - Psalm 94:19 ESV

'Tis the season to be merry and bright, with lists aplenty and perhaps worries a-many.

The holiday season brings sparkling ornaments, twinkling lights, cozy outfits, and beautifully wrapped gifts. For some, the joy arrives as early as October, with garlands hung, trees trimmed, and tinsel ready to shine. There is a

special kind of magic in the air.

Among the beauty and excitement, the holiday season can also hold heartache. It may be the first Christmas without a loved one, a reminder of an empty seat at the table, or the ache of missing someone who once made the season feel whole. For others, the worries may come in the form of financial strain, the pressure to give more than they can afford, or relationships that feel more complicated than the picture-perfect moments we see around us.

The holidays can be a rollercoaster of joyful highs and sorrowful lows. We can feel gratitude and grief, excitement and exhaustion, all in the same day. And while the world encourages us to make the season merry and bright, God never asks us to hide our burdens behind a smile. Instead, He invites us to bring them to Him.

God is not distracted by our busyness, discouraged by our worries, or distant in our grief. God is always near, always listening, and always welcoming us into His presence. The lights eventually come down, the gifts are put away, the season will pass, but His goodness remains.

Dear Lord, as we move through this holiday season help us to lay down our burdens, and be grateful to You always for our blessings. Help us remember that our hope is not found in the perfection of our celebrations, but in the steadfast love of You, our Savior, Amen.

Monday, December 7

More Than What's Under the Tree

By Cindy Beckman

As a mother, Christmas has always been about so much more than presents and decorations. Some of my most treasured memories have been made in the midst of the holiday bustle: staying up late wrapping gifts, waking up early to prepare a special Christmas breakfast, and watching the excitement on my children's faces as they came downstairs on Christmas morning. Now that my babies are teenagers, many of those traditions are beginning to change. Their growth reminds me how quickly time passes and how important it is to cherish every moment God gives us with the people we love.

In the middle of the shopping, baking, decorating, and busyness, God gently reminds me of the true meaning of Christmas: the gift of His Son. *"For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given"* (Isaiah 9:6). As my children grow older, I realize that the greatest gifts I can give them are not found under the tree. They are the memories we've made, the love we've shared, the prayers we've prayed, and most importantly, the faith we've nurtured together.

My prayer is that long after the gifts have been forgotten and family traditions have evolved, one legacy will continue to be passed from one generation to the next: that my children will teach their children to know the love of Christ, cherish the gift of His birth, and keep Him at the center of Christmas and every season of life.

Tuesday, December 8
By Sara Cox

Philippians 4:7 “May the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus”

Peace. It’s a word talked about a lot: peace and quiet, keep the peace, peace and love. And wouldn’t all those things be wonderful. But sometimes when we have “peace and quiet” we might also have loneliness. Or when we try to “keep the peace” we feel like we can’t be our true selves. “Peace and love” sounds perfect, but is often a phrase used by people who don’t want to be criticized for doing what they want. All this “peace” comes with a lot of strings attached. But God’s peace comes with no strings.

Paul wrote the letter to the Philippians while he was confined to house arrest in Rome. I don’t know what this looked like, but I would imagine he had a lot of “peace and quiet.” But I would also assume he wasn’t lonely. God had given him peace. God’s peace gives us the comfort we long for when we don’t know the outcome of the situation we’re facing. God’s peace reminds us that no matter how things are in this life, our eternal life is promised. God freely gives his peace to those who ask.

Philippians 4:7 isn’t a traditional “Christmas verse,” but this season I would urge you pray for God’s peace. When you feel yourself overwhelmed by the season’s busyness-pray for peace. When you don’t know how you will afford to give your family the Christmas you want-pray for peace. When you don’t know how you will keep your cool around the extended family-pray for peace. God gives it freely.

Wednesday, December 9
I Wonder As I Wander
By Kathy Dever

Isaiah 9:6 - “For to us a child is born, to us a Son is given, and the government will be on His shoulders. And, He will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”

The most significant event in human history was foretold in the Old Testament prophecies and fulfilled in the New Testament with the birth of Christ, Immanuel, God with us. Much of the true meaning of Christmas has been captured in scripture and in the melodious lyrics of Christmas carols that proclaim the coming of Christ. Scripture provides the foundation of our faith. The music becomes the voice of our souls. Sometimes the songs are bold and glorious as in the “Hallelujah Chorus” and some stir our hearts through beautiful melodies and poetic verses.

One such song is “I Wonder as I Wander”, composed by John Jacob Niles after capturing musical fragments from a young Appalachian woman named Annie Morgan. The song combines the wonder of Christ’s birth with the solemn weight of His ultimate sacrifice on the cross. The lyrics tell the Christmas story from the humble perspective of a young destitute woman during the Great Depression pouring out her gift of song to a Savior King born in a stable.

The first stanza fills one with a sense of awe about the gift of Christmas. It asks and answers why Jesus would step down from Heaven.

“I wonder as I wander out under the sky
How Jesus, the Savior, had come for to die.
For poor on'ry people, like you and like I.
I wonder as I wander out under the sky.”

The second stanza contrasts the humble birth of Jesus with the fulfillment of the promise of the ages.

“When Mary birthed Jesus, t'was in a cow's stall
With wisemen and farmers and shepherds and all,
But high in God's heaven a star's light did fall;
And the promise of ages, it then did recall.”

As we wander through the season and reflect on the traditions that have defined Christmas for us, do our hearts long for the wonder of the gift we have been given? Centuries before our favorite family traditions began, God started the greatest tradition of all when Jesus stepped out of Heaven into His creation to save poor on'ry people, like you and like I. I wonder as you prepare for Christmas, whether you would set aside some quiet time to reflect upon the divine gift that forever changed the course of humanity. There is no greater gift.

Prayer - Lord Jesus, as we wander into the Advent season, may the wonder of the priceless gift of Your Son linger in our hearts now and forever. Amen

Thursday, December 10
Finding Christ in the Christmas Season
By Rachel Kriss

Proverbs 3:6: "In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths."

Christmas is coming! Although these days, it seems Christmas starts showing up in July! Before we know it, our calendars are filling up with shopping, decorating, baking, family gatherings, and all the other responsibilities of everyday life. We rush from one thing to the next, trying to make everything just right, yet somehow still feeling like we haven't done enough. But what if, this Christmas, we gave ourselves permission to slow down? To curl up with a warm cup of hot chocolate or peppermint mocha, admire the soft glow of the Christmas lights, and simply take in the beauty of the season. Sometimes, the most meaningful moments aren't found in everything we accomplish, but in the quiet moments when we pause long enough to appreciate the blessings all around us.

In the middle of all the hustle and bustle, it's easy to forget that CHRIST is at the very beginning of CHRISTmas. He is the reason we celebrate, and His birth is the greatest gift we could ever receive. My Grandma Melba, who was part of this church family, often shared one of her favorite Bible verses, Proverbs 3:6: "In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths." What a beautiful reminder that when we put Christ first, He can guide us through even the busiest seasons of life. Think back to that first Christmas, to a humble manger in Bethlehem, where the greatest gift the world would ever know arrived without decorations, beautifully wrapped presents, or a perfect celebration. Just a baby, born to bring hope, love, and salvation to us all. Perhaps that's our reminder this Christmas: we don't have to make the season perfect to experience its greatest blessing. So slow down, hold your loved ones close, and make room for Christ in the moments that matter most. When we keep our hearts focused on Him, we may just discover that the peace we've been searching for has been there all along.

Friday, December 11
By Heather Biegler

James 1: 17 Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning.

Every year, during the holidays, it's always the same. People going crazy over the latest gadget, the hottest new toy, or the trend of the year. We always

want to give our loved ones the best gift. We strive to top last years "great" gift and always try to meet the expectations of the world. While I still tend to lean towards the gift giving and merry making, I know that the greatest gift ever received is the gift of eternal life given to us from the Father through the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus and that is something that can never be topped!

We get so wrapped up in the buzz of the holidays that sometimes it is hard to remember this, but when if we just take a step back to truly look at everything we have we can remember the reason we have it. The family around me, I didn't choose them, God already knew we were going to be together. The faces of my two beautiful children I prayed for, they also came from God. The amazing church I get to attend every week? God kept us in this neighborhood and guided us here. I can look at every single great thing in my life and know that I never did it on my own and I will never do it on my own again. So while I spend time this holiday season in all the stores looking for those "great" gifts I think everyone needs, I will take some extra time to thank God for the gifts he has already given to us and share that gift with those who are still searching for the one perfect gift!

Saturday, December 12
By Jacob Strausbaugh

Mark 10:45 (NIV) - “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

As someone who has often struggled with selfishness, particularly when it comes to finances and material possessions, Christmas reminds me of what truly matters. It’s easy to get caught up in gifts, spending, and the desire for more, forgetting that life is about so much more than what we own. Mark 10:45 reminds me of God’s incredible love and that Jesus came not to be served, but to serve and ultimately give His life for us. It challenges me to remember that true happiness isn’t found in money or material things, but in loving and serving others.

I recognize how blessed I have been with a loving family, a rewarding career, and the ability to provide for my family. Those blessings should remind me to look beyond myself and serve those who may be less fortunate. Some people need more than material gifts; they need kindness, encouragement, generosity, and compassion. This Christmas, I want to focus less on what I have or what I want, and more on how I can use my blessings to positively impact others. My blessings aren’t simply meant to make my life better; they’re also an opportunity to make someone else’s life better.

Sunday, December 13
Wonderful Counselor - Blessed Hope
By Katie Bromley

Isaiah 9:2,6 - “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone… For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”

Christmas has always been my favorite holiday. I love everything about it! The lights, the music, the decorations! My family is intentional to gather and celebrate with a saturation of traditions - especially on my dad’s side of the family. Growing up I could count on a delightful spread of treats, four-part harmony caroling, a reading of Luke telling of the birth of Jesus, and a fun gift exchange. The season was always a joyous and hopeful one for me! As an adult, I still look forward to Christmas, but I’ve found there to be a weight that comes with it that didn’t used to be there. I’ve been very blessed to have my grandparents in my life into my 30s, but both of my paternal grandparents passed away within the last five years. We still gather, but we miss our patriarch and matriarch. A smile still comes to my face as we carol, but tears also come to my eyes more easily. My Wonderful Counselor gives me peace that they are both with Him and I will see them again one day, but I feel their absence and a shift in how Christmas feels without them. I’m finding that my longing and hoping in the coming of Jesus my Savior has shifted from simply reflecting on the anticipation of celebrating His birth, but towards His second coming and eternity in Heaven with Him. I long for the place where there will be no more grief and no more pain. I hope in the eternity that He promises with Him and to be reunited with those I love who have gone before. While I treasure traditional carols, a newer Christmas song that has blessed my heart and brought comfort is “Wonderful” by the band Cain. They reference the accompaniment of sadness with the joy and laughter of the season and the need for a wonderful counselor who brings peace and strength. Praise be to the One who we can place everlasting hope in; who brings light into the deep darkness of this worldly life. May He fill your hearts with joy and peace this Advent season.

Monday, December 14
By Mady Roberts

"For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right but not the ability to carry it out." Romans 7:18 (ESV)

A lot of the time, as Christians, we want to follow God's ways. We want to do what is right, resist temptation, and keep our eyes on Jesus. But the reality is, we don't live in a perfect world, and we aren't perfect people. For a long time, I struggled with an addiction that no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't seem to quit. I remember asking myself so many times, "Why can't I just stop?" I knew what I wanted to do, and I knew what I was supposed to do, but I just couldn't seem to do it on my own. Romans 7:18 says, "For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right but not the ability to carry it out." I came back to this verse a lot during that time because it reminded me that wanting to change wasn't enough if I was trying to do it all by myself. I was weak, and I needed God to be my strength. I needed to stop thinking that I could fix everything on my own and actually give that struggle to Him.

I think sometimes we forget just how much we need Jesus. We can convince ourselves that we just need to try harder, be stronger, or have more self-control. But the truth is, we were never meant to do this life without God. And I think that's one of the most beautiful things about Christmas. Jesus came because we needed a Savior. He didn't come because we had everything figured out or because we were strong enough on our own. He came because we weren't. So whatever you might be struggling with this Christmas season, whether it's something everyone knows about or something you've never told anyone, I hope you remember that you don't have to overcome it in your own strength. Sometimes our weakness is what reminds us to lean on God the most. I've learned that I am powerless without Him, but I don't have to be afraid of that, because His strength is greater than mine will ever be. And because Jesus came, we don't have to face our weakness alone.

Tuesday, December 15
By Alex Mitchell

Matthew 1:22 : All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel" (which means, God with us).

I consider myself a deconstructed Christian. Deconstruction is the process of dismantling one's worldview or core beliefs, usually due to a change in one's life or environment; Reaching adulthood, a traumatic experience, Christian nationalism, etc. For me, deconstructing is like sitting amongst shards of old beliefs that I once held dear, and deciding which ones still matter. These pieces represent fundamental truths for many - "Is Jesus the man my church says he is?", "Are we sure the Bible is divinely inspired?" I'm certain I will spend years picking up these pieces and re-discovering what I believe in.

However, there is one powerful truth that I cling to when I'm unsure about everything else. Jesus was a real person, and God. God became man, and lived amongst us. This simple and profound truth reminds me that I am not alone amongst my deconstructed beliefs. Jesus entered this world to be with us, to walk with us, and to teach us. Jesus came to this earth to show us what is true. I'm learning to lean into this, to offer up my pieces of truth to Christ for Him to judge. In these times of profoundly loud voices, we must be still and listen to the only voice that matters.

I invite you to do a little deconstruction of your own. What things do you believe are true? What things do you hold valuable? How do these beliefs and values shape the way you view the world? Offer these up to Jesus, and see if He agrees.

Wednesday, December 16
By Sara Huller

When I think about Christmas, one of the first things that comes to mind is decorating with my family. One of my favorite traditions was always putting the lights on the Christmas tree. I loved how they illuminated our living room, making it feel warm, welcoming, and full of life, even on the darkest winter nights.

As I grew older and stronger in my faith, I began to wonder if that was how people felt before the birth of Jesus. To me, light represents safety, hope, love, comfort, and home. And as Christians, we don't have to look any further than Jesus to find those things.

Isaiah 9:2 (NIV) says, "The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned."

Hundreds of years before Jesus was born, God promised His people that a great light was coming. He didn't tell them they had to find their own way out of the darkness. He promised to send them a Savior.

John 1:9 (NIV) tells us, "The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world."

That promise was fulfilled through Jesus. God didn't wait for the world to become perfect before sending His Son. He sent Jesus because the world needed Him. And that same truth applies to us today. We don't have to have everything figured out before coming to Christ.

I think back to those Christmas lights and how they changed the feeling of our living room. The room itself hadn't changed, but suddenly it didn't feel so dark anymore. Our relationship with Jesus is similar. Following Him doesn't mean our struggles disappear, but it means we never have to face them without hope.

This Advent season, I encourage you to look beyond the Christmas lights and remember the true Light of the world. The decorations will eventually come down, and the season will end, but the hope we have in Jesus remains.

Christmas reminds us that God's promises are never forgotten, His love is never out of reach, and no matter how dark life may feel, we never have to walk through it alone.

Thursday, December 17

A Snickerdoodle Christmas Tradition

By Nancy Knapp

John 1:14 "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen His glory as the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth."

A Snickerdoodle Christmas Tradition

A fond childhood memory comes back to me each time I see, smell, or taste snickerdoodle cookies. My Mom routinely made these yummy cookies each year as Christmas grew near. Throughout the early weeks of December, the pleasing scent of snickerdoodles filled our home; and I knew Christmas preparations were underway! Something about the sugar and cinnamon is what I thought made this cookie so special, but later learned it's the "secret ingredient" that gives them their distinct, tangy flavor and uniquely soft, pillowy texture. Without CREAM OF TARTAR, a snickerdoodle is just a standard sugar cookie.

In the same way, the Christmas story introduces a "secret ingredient" to humanity, GRACE! Just as cream of tartar transforms a hard, ordinary cookie into something tender, God's grace softens our hearts. Jesus entered a harsh, rigid world to bring tenderness and a new covenant.

Also, let's be reminded that the sweet scent of snickerdoodles coming from the oven is like the Aroma of Christ! And we don't need to wait until December to make snickerdoodles or celebrate Jesus! Enjoy the sweetness all year long!

Snickerdoodle Cookies (My Mom's recipe)

1 cup shortening

2 3/4 cup flour
1 1/2 cup sugar
2 eggs
1 tsp vanilla
1/2 tsp salt
1 tsp baking soda
1/2 tsp cream of tartar
1 cup sugar and cinnamon mixture

Cream shortening and sugar, add eggs and vanilla, stir in flour, salt, baking soda and cream of tartar. Chill in refrigerator for at least an hour or more, then form dough into balls and roll in sugar and cinnamon mixture. DO NOT FLATTEN THE DOUGH BALLS. Bake 8-10 minutes in a 350 degrees oven.

Have a blessed and sweet Christmas!

Friday, December 18

Why Such a Humble Birth?

By Doug Weaver

Do you ever wonder why God chose to send Jesus to earth in such a humble way? I would think Jesus deserved a royal birth and celebration over all the earth. He is after all the King of kings and Lord of lords! But God's plan was to entrust his birth to a few ordinary people. Mary was visited by an angel who explained to her that the Holy Ghost would be the father of her baby. She was just a young virgin girl; not famous, not wealthy, but pure and willing. Joseph was a carpenter; a righteous man, but just a common man. He was also visited by an angel who convinced him that Mary had not been unfaithful to him. He also was willing, and did not "put her away privily" Matthew 1:19 (KJV). Jesus was born in a stable in Bethlehem, a small agricultural village. A small group of shepherds got the news of the birth from an angel and a multitude of the heavenly host. Shepherds weren't high on the social ladder; in fact, many people looked down on them. Of course, it was a miraculous birth, but the places, people, and circumstances were humble.

Jesus was sent to earth to dwell among us. To be one of us. To be tempted like us, but to remain sinless. During his life on earth, he never accumulated physical possessions or wealth. His humble birth and life make him relatable for all of us. He understands our struggles. We can go to him with all of our concerns. Ultimately, he bore the pain and humiliation of death on a cross to pay the price for our sins and provide redemption for us.

We should examine our lives every day, but especially during this Christmas season. What place does Jesus have in our lives? Are we committed

to following him? Have we accepted him into our lives and hearts to be our Savior? He is the one true source of happiness in this life, and gives the promise of eternal life with him in heaven at the end of this life.

Saturday, December 19
By Marilyn Lewallen

Hark! the herald angels sing, Jesus, the Light of the world.
Glory to the newborn King, Jesus, the Light of the world.
We'll walk in the light, beautiful light. Come where the dewdrops of mercy shine bright.
Shine all around us by day and by night. Jesus the Light of the world.

These are words to a gospel hymn I love hearing Eddie and Ruth Anglin sing throughout the year at St. Matthew.

The song and words are simple, but the truths become more meaningful as we enter into the Advent season.

John 8:12 reads: "When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, 'I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.'"

The word "Advent" takes my mind down two distinct directions. First, and most importantly, I think of Jesus and the long-awaited miracle of His birth. But it also brings me back to my roots. I did not grow up in a church that practiced the tradition of the Advent wreath. Instead, my church always focused on the season through the inspired scriptures. We heard the prophecies that foretold the coming Child, read the Christmas story and were reminded that Christ's birth was the beginning of a far greater story yet to unfold. I'm so grateful to God for raising me in a Christian family who took me to church where I was taught the rest of the beautiful love story; that through the death and resurrection of God's only Son, Jesus, we received the free gift of salvation. He promised that if we acknowledge Him and repent of our sins, He is coming to earth again at God's appointed time to gather all believers and welcome them into eternal life with Him in Heaven.

John 3:16 -17 were among some of the first verses I memorized as a little kid, and still cherish today. It reads: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believeth in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through him might be saved."

It was at St. Matthew Church that I first experienced the celebration of the Advent season and came to appreciate the symbolic meaning behind the wreath and the progressive lighting of the candles the four Sundays leading up to Christmas. What began there has grown into a much-enjoyed Christmas

tradition, one that centers my heart and mind as we prepare to welcome Jesus, the Light of the world and our Savior.

Sunday, December 20
By Cindy Littlefield

I can easily think of a vivid, childhood, Christmas memory. That would be the church Christmas pageant. It was always a big event and all of us kids were involved. My mom directed the play for many years, so my involvement was a given. In 3rd grade I was cast as the "Fear Not" angel. I would speak my piece and then sing "O, Holy Night". I think I played that role until I went away to college! That "Fear Not" verse, Luke 2:10, was definitely stamped permanently in my mind.

Throughout my adult life the Holy Spirit has brought to mind that Christmas pageant role and the angel message of "Fear Not". During times of uncertainty, loneliness, or failure, that 2 word command has calmed my mind and my spirit and given me God's peace. "Fear Not".

Monday, December 21
Slow Down
By Jeff Redman

It was 1987, summer. I had a summer job with Mayflower Moving and Storage after my freshman year in college. I didn't yet own a car and I honestly can't remember how I got to and from work each day, but I know it was in a car. There was one evening though, that I remember very clearly not having a ride. So I walked. Now even though Mayflower Moving and Storage is gone, and a search through Google Maps has just informed me that my house is gone too and even the street that I lived on, I pieced together my route and discovered that I walked 3.6 miles home that evening taking an hour and 17 minutes (because Google knows all). I remember seeing Wrightstown, NJ like I'd never seen it before; as if I was seeing it for the very first time as I walked instead of drove through town. I marveled at the buildings that were there that I'd never seen, each one a home or business occupied by people I'd probably never met just in the stretch of three miles.

Time did slow down.

I thought about everything and everyone that I was seeing for the first time in between the 'moment' that I usually left the house and arrived at work. And that 'moment' now lasted an hour.

How much do we miss as we drive where we're going?

How much do we miss when we text instead of picking up the phone?

How much do we miss when . . .

What does God want to prepare us for when we walk?

Luke 2:4-5: 4 So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. 5 He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child.

Imagine the trip. Mary is carrying Jesus. They went to fulfil a prophecy, but was God also preparing them as they walked in that 'moment' into what we now call Christmas?

Father,

We're told every Christmas season to slow down; slow down so that we don't miss the point. As we slow down this time, reveal to us what it is that you are preparing us for this year. Let us slow down, not to miss the joy alone, but to hear you, to be with you in the 'moment' as you prepare us for your plan.

<u>Tuesday, December 22</u>
By Karin Kitson

Advent

When I think of Advent I remember the family traditions of my childhood. My mother lighting purple and pink advent candles on a wreath centerpiece each week, opening our advent calendars for a tiny chocolate treat, and on Christmas Eve my Papa reading Luke 2 about the God of the universe coming to earth as a tiny baby.

Advent reminds us to hope. We look forward with great anticipation of the joy to come. The excitement of a child who can't sleep Christmas Eve. Advent reminds us of peace. Jesus brings us a peace beyond our understanding, which we can only experience in his love. Advent reminds us of joy. Together with the heavenly hosts we celebrate the birth of the Christ child. Advent reminds us of love. Jesus gave up his home in heaven to become human on earth. He loved us so much. He loves us still.

1 Peter 1:8–9: "Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy."

Wednesday, December 23
By Nathan Eichholz

Advent is the season of waiting and preparing.

When Advent comes around it starts a season for us of waiting to celebrate the birth of Jesus. However, it's not just Christmas time that puts us in a season of waiting. At any time God can call us to a season of waiting. Sometimes it's difficult to be in that season but we can have confidence and faith in God that He will get us through the difficult time.

Advent isn't just a season of waiting, it is also a time of preparation for Jesus's second coming. Which goes hand and hand with the season of waiting you might be in. When God calls us to a season of waiting, He is almost always also calling us to a season of preparing. So that we may prepare properly for what He has waiting for us.

Thursday, December 24
Reclaiming Wonder in the Gift of Jesus
By Larisa Redman

"Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift!" - 2 Corinthians 9:15

"And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. And the angel said to them, 'Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.'" - Luke 2:8–11

As the holiday season approaches, our calendars quickly fill with gatherings, shopping lists, and traditions. Amid the busyness, the story of Christmas can become so familiar that it loses its sense of wonder. We hear the familiar carols, gaze at nativity scenes, read the Christmas narrative - yet our hearts (sometimes) remain unmoved, deaf to the magnitude of what took place.

Advent is an invitation to pause and step out of the busyness routine. It is a holy pause designed to help us look again at the mystery of the Incarnation until our souls are captured once more by holy awe. Consider: the Creator who spoke galaxies into existence, who holds the oceans in the hollow of His hand, chose to enter human history as a fragile infant. Omnipotence wrapped itself in swaddling cloths; Royalty laid its head in a feed trough. God did not keep His distance in the realm of glory. He stepped down into our dust, our weakness, and our brokenness to redeem and restore.

And unlike worldly presents that fade or break, Jesus meets every longing of the human heart:

In our guilt, He brings full pardon.
In our sorrow, He offers abiding comfort.
In our confusion, He shines as the Light of the World.
In our distance from God, He becomes the Bridge of reconciliation.

When we truly grasp that this gift was freely given to us - unmerited, unearned, and offered out of profound love - our only natural response is reverent wonder.

Abba, Father,

Forgive me for the times I have allowed the wonder of Christmas to become ordinary. Open the eyes of my heart this Advent season so that I may behold the miracle of Your Son anew. In the precious name of Jesus, Amen.

Friday, December 25
Getting Ready For Christmas
By Rob Tevis

Galatians 4:4-5 - But when the time had fully come, God sent His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive our adoption as sons.

Growing up in a single parent home, I took for granted how much my mom did to get ready for Christmas. She would make sure I didn't know that we were poor! She would set up trees, decorations, and family meals. She would put toys at K-Mart on lay-away with money she really didn't have and get them the week before Christmas. She tried to make my Christmas special despite the situations we were in.

My mom's efforts remind me of God's preparation. We all can prepare for Christmas, but no one can prepare like God for Christmas. The first Christmas happened at the right time, at the right place, at the right situation. And it was all because God prepared for it.

God prepared the world for the first Christmas in several ways:

1. He made sure that the entire world for the first time had a common language, Koine Greek, due to international trade. Now the Christmas story could be spread from nation to nation!

2. He made sure that roads were built when he sent the Roman armies across the known world. Now people could travel to share the Gospel!

3. He made sure that the same armies provided Pax Romana, a relative Roman-enforced peace. Now people could travel without harm to share the message of Christ coming!

4. God made sure the Jews had a story of hope about a Messiah. While the rest of the world was worshipping pagan gods like Zeus, the Jews set up synagogues around the Mediterranean world to spread this hope. God even led the Jews to put their Scriptures in Greek so everyone could read it.
God set up the world at “the fullness of time” (Galatians 4:4), and then sent Jesus, the Divine Christ child who became human. He did this so that everyone might have a chance to be adopted by God!

So this Christmas when you set up your tree, make figgy pudding, or prepare for the family meal; thank God that He set up the entire world for Christmas. Our little preparations can be a reminder of His big preparation - when the time had fully come, God sent His Son!

Cover by Abigail Anderson.