AMERICAN BAPTIST CHURCHES OF THE CENTRAL REGION

Advent

DEVOTIONAL GUIDE

2025

THE INVITATION OF ADVENT

MORGAN ASPINWALL

Advent comes to us as a gentle invitation to look honestly at the world as it is, and to lean hopefully toward the world as God intends it to be. I suspect that many of us are entering into this season with heavy hearts; carrying both joy and weariness, gratitude and grief, longing and love. Advent is not a time where we are expected to ignore the darkness around us, in fact, it is important that we acknowledge that darkness and let it serve as a reminder that it is not the end of the story. Even in the shadows of human suffering, Christ continues to shine a light that cannot be overcome.

During this season of advent, as we prepare to celebrate an event that took place long ago, we are to also recognize that Christ is still present with us; still guiding, still calling, and still transforming His people. The same Jesus who began His life on the margins, in a borrowed manger, now calls us to stand with the vulnerable in compassion, gentleness, and enduring hope. Advent reminds us that the birth of Christ is not an event we simply remember; it is a reality we are invited to live.

As we journey toward Christmas, we are called to make space in our homes, churches, and lives for the One who brings peace to all humankind. Just as John the Baptist prepared a way for Christ, advent teaches us to prepare the way for others. In a fractured world, this preparation looks like loving our neighbors, working for justice, extending mercy, and creating space for others to encounter the living Christ. Hope becomes real when it is shared. Peace becomes possible when it is practiced.

Be encouraged that in this season, we do not have to wait alone. We wait as a community shaped by grace, held together by the work of the Holy Spirit, and sent outward as bearers of light. We are witnesses that Christ has come, Christ is with us, and Christ will continue to be present with us. We bear witness to who Christ is with every act of love, in every word of peace, and in every moment we choose the way of Jesus over the way of darkness and fear.

As you move through this devotional guide, may you discover again the wonder of Emmanuel. May you feel the steady hope of Christ's presence in the midst of whatever you are carrying. May your hearts be changed by the invitation of the King who still calls us to follow Him, live in Him, and reflect His light in a world longing for hope.

FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

JOY MARTINEZ- MARSHALL

Isaiah 2:1-5, Psalm 122, Romans 13:11-14, Matthew 24:36-44

The Advent season is an opportunity for us to wait, hope, and anticipate the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. We spend this time lighting candles in the midst of darkness. In this darkness, we are transformed and become alive to the mystery and majesty of Jesus's entry into the world as a baby. The world was as broken as it is now when Jesus was born. Our world has not changed much. Still war, violence, destruction, and powerful empires that wish to control remain some of the most powerful reminders of brokenness. It is easy to look around and be consumed by anger at what is happening, frustrations with leadership, and sadness that lives are caught in the crossfires. A scroll on Facebook or a tuning in of the news can bring all these feelings to the forefront and share the narrative of how we respond. Yet, Advent is a season about learning to wait and be awakened to God's hope for our world. Each week, we light a candle in the face of evil and proclaim that light will overcome. That the light of Christ has power over poverty, violence, and apathy. The lighting of these Advent candles is not a naïve way to navigate the everyday challenges but an act of defiance that finds its hope in Jesus Christ. Jesus's birth speaks to us of such defiance as the Messiah entered into time and space as a humble, innocent baby not as a military warrior or bomb.

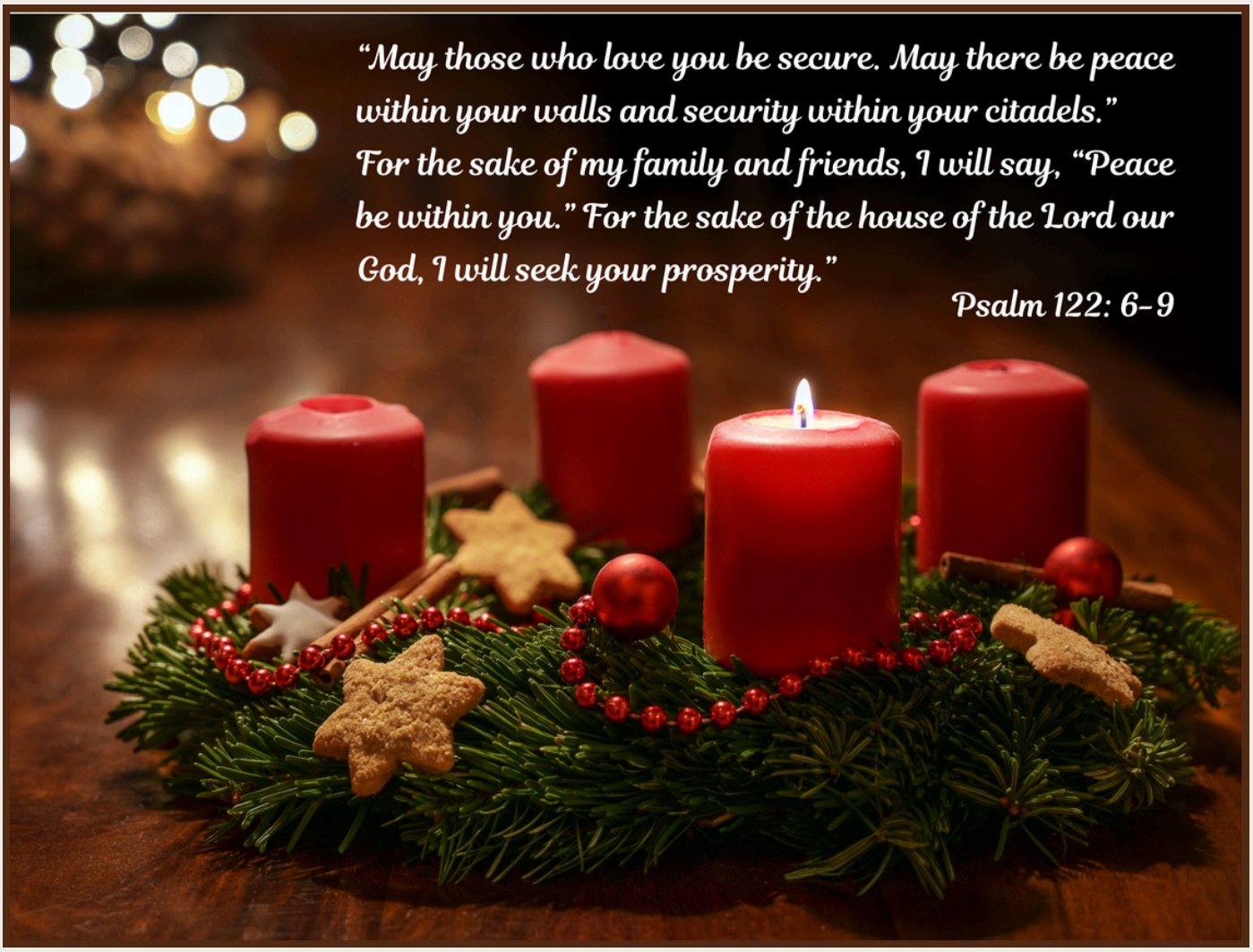
The prophet Isaiah was tasked with sharing the harsh news of judgement always coupling the news a promise of hope. Hope that God was going to do something new and the "in days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains…" (v 2). God wanted God's people to be accountable to the ways in which they contributed to injustice and idolatry. They sought to line their pockets at the expense of the poor and followed other gods that could not and would never be in relationship with them. But even in words of accountability, God vows all nations will come to know God's blessing and "out of Zion shall go forth instruction and the world of the Lord from Jerusalem" (v 3). Even in our own brokenness God invites us to be a people of peace set apart from the cycles of destruction and violence in our world. To follow Christ's call to love God and love neighbor that can look like calling out injustice and working for peace.

I love this passage in Isaiah because the prophet gives us an image that I believe our world longs for. "They shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation; neither shall they learn way anymore" (v 4). Deep in our hearts we ache for peace. We long for war to come to an end and for violence to be obsolete. Advent's resistance asks us to embrace this peace despite the pervasive presence of war.

As we prepare to celebrate the birth of the Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:6) let us examine our own hearts. As we wait for the arrival of the Prince of Peace's return to make all things true, good, and new it is our calling to be peacemakers.

Let us resist warring with our neighbors. Let us be known by our love to "guard each man's dignity and save each man's pride." Let us put down our own swords and spears. When we lay down our weapons, we live into the Kingdom of God that is already and not yet. God takes these tools to then be used for the good of the community and for the good of humanity. Plowshares to work the land so that all people have something to eat and pruning hooks to ensure what we reap is acceptable.

Together, we choose peace as an act of resistance to war, violence, and empire. In the season of Advent, we wait and work for peace in our churches, families, and neighborhoods. As the Apostle Paul wrote to the Philippians "the peace of God, which transcends all understand, will guard you hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:7). Lasting peace is on the way. Hold on to hope. Light the candle. Work towards peace. "Let us walk in the light of the LORD!" (v 5).



SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

JOHN CLARK

Isaiah 11:1-10, Psalm 72:1-7,18-19, Romans 15:4-13, Matthew 3:1-12

Ruth and I sat down with our calendars the other day and talked about our kids and Christmas. We have 5 children. They're great kids. All five are married. We have a beautiful bouquet of a dozen grandchildren. We won't see them, any of them on Christmas Day. On Christmas Day, they head out to their in-laws' Christmas gatherings. We will see them all about a week later.

So, what do Ruth and I do? Here's what I am proposing to Ruth. I want to repeat the events of a Christmas six or seven years ago when we met Bill Fletcher for breakfast before driving to Wichita. I want to drive there and visit two cemeteries. We will start with Rest Haven on West Kellogg. Rev. Darrell and Betty Heidner, Ruth's parents, are buried there. The first thing is to locate the grave site. (Seven years ago, there was a helpful young fellow in the office who provided maps. I just called. They are sending me maps.) I want to stand at the graves of Ruth's parents and hold their daughter in my arms and pray and weep and tell her how much I love her and be thankful for her mom and dad and the life they gave to her (and me). And then I want us to sing, as loudly as we can sing the first two verses of "Joy to the World."

It will be cold and windy at Rest Haven, I know, two verses might be our limit. And then I want to drive north up to the Kechi community where my parents, Rev. Ernest and Jean Clark are buried. There we will do our encore performance. Here I must include some dancing, but since we were both raised in non-dancing families, we may not dance!

Matthew 3:1-3 says,

In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the Desert of Judea and saying, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.' This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah: 'A voice of one calling in the desert, "Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him."'

Isaiah spoke of God's plan. Someone would go before and diminish hindrances. Isaiah looked toward John the Baptist and in those days, John the Baptist came (Matthew 3:1).

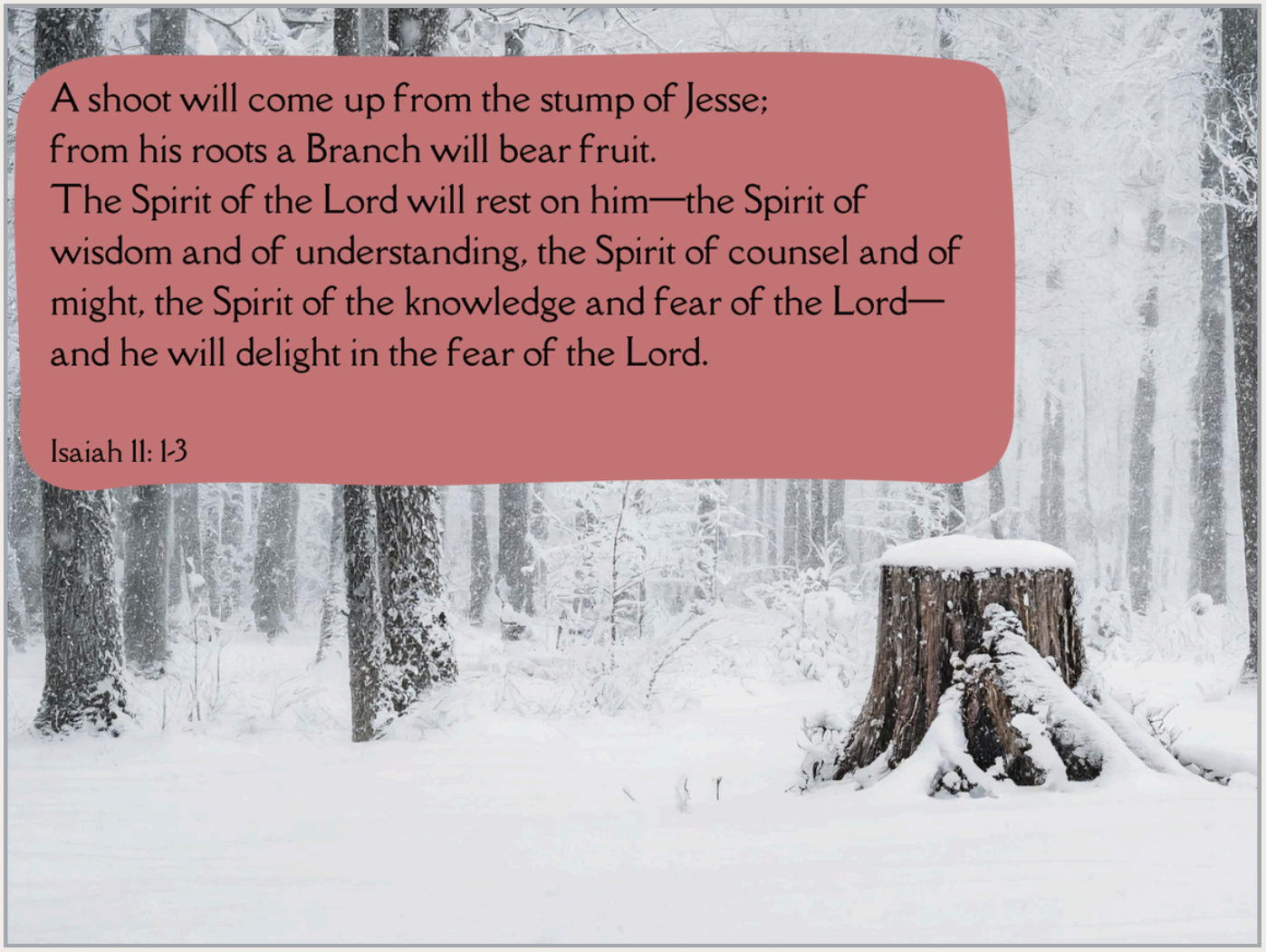
John went to theological seminary and graduated with a degree in civil engineering. He lowered hills and raised valleys. He made the Lord's paths straight. The things that would delay or detour a relationship with the Son were called out and pushed aside. You mimic the work of John the Baptist when you clear the snow from your front steps. Hindrances, be gone!

It was our parents who filled the role of John the Baptist. They cleared the path to Jesus. They were preachers who did not back off from the call to repentance, but their best preaching as the daily and constant life given to the Savior to whom John pointed and said,

"Behold the Lamb of God Who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29).

We looked, and we could see the Savior's love for us. The path was straight.

Think of those who have helped clear your path to Jesus. How many? Two or three, or maybe bunches. I imagine there is someone in your life who needs assistance in clearing a path to the Savior. Take up your spiritual shovel and lend a hand. You've got a degree in civil engineering. You might as well use it.



THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT

JENNIFER SCHNEIDER

Isaiah 35:1-10, Psalm 146:5-10, James 5:7-10, Matthew 11:2-11

The Prophet says in chapter 35, "The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad; the desert shall rejoice and blossom, like the crocus; it shall blossom abundantly and rejoice with joy and shouting." On this third Sunday of Advent, we are surprised by a burst of joy in the midst of the dark shadows of winter. As we light the pink candle, Christ invites us to experience joy even as we are dealing with our own darkness. Many of the Advent scriptures are set in darkness: Israel's exile, Zechariah's silence, Mary's uncertainty, and John the Baptist's wilderness. Amid all the Christmas preparations, many of us are still struggling with fear, grief, loneliness, or uncertainty.

The good news this Advent season is that we can still find Joy despite the darkness! Our joy isn't based on our circumstances but on the promise and presence of God. Life can be tough. We might feel grief, personal burdens, concern for the world, or overwhelming anxiety. Still, joy remains possible. It doesn't erase our struggles, but it helps us focus on our hope: Jesus Christ.

However, Advent anticipation is not passive; it is active. As we await the coming of Christ into our churches, our homes, and our hearts, we are looking for signs of God's light breaking through in the world. Henry Nouwen wrote," Joy does not simply happen to us. We have to choose joy and keep choosing it every day." As we prepare for Christmas in our homes and churches, may we find joy. When the sometimes-overwhelming burdens of the preparations get in the way of our joy, it is okay to put them aside and turn our focus to the reason for the season.

I wonder where you are experiencing joy this Advent season. In the midst of the business of the Christmas season, are you seeing glimpses of joy?

The joy of Christ is both now and not yet. God keeps meeting us in our darkness and promises to be with us. But there is also joy! My prayer for you is that you will experience the light and joy of Christmas this year.

"Blessed are those whose help is the God of Jacob,
whose hope is in the Lord their God.
He is the Maker of heaven and earth,
the sea, and everything in them—
he remains faithful forever."
(Psalm 143:5-6)

FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

NANCY KILLINGSWORTH

Isaiah 7:10-16, Psalm 80:1-7;17-19, Romans 1:1-7, Matthew 1:18-25

Every fall, as we approach November, my heart turns with joyful anticipation toward a day etched in my memory, November 26th, the anniversary of our marriage. It marks not just a date, but a covenant; a holy moment when we vowed to love, nurture, respect, and remain faithful to one another. Those promises are not remnants of the past; they are living commitments we renew daily, woven into the fabric of our shared life. As Advent begins, I am reminded that our vows echo a deeper promise: God's faithfulness to us in Christ. Just as we await His coming with hope, our marriage reflects the joy of promises kept.

Yet as we look around us, we continue to see a world and its people suffering from war, poverty, hunger, divisiveness and hopelessness. We long for peace and hope to see the promises God made to us, fulfilled. Our situation is much like that of King Ahaz who was in crisis as the kings of Syria and Israel formed an alliance against Judah. They plotted against him, posing a direct threat to Jerusalem. So, God sends Isaiah to bring a message of hope to him, encouraging him to not be afraid and to seek a sign from God. Ahaz refuses to ask for a sign, yet God provided him with a sign through the promise of the birth of a child in Isaiah 7:14, "Therefore, the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him, Immanuel." Isaiah's foretelling of the child, Immanuel, God with us, was and is a sign of divine intervention and hope for troubled times. It was a promise not only for Ahaz, but for all of us who feel surrounded by uncertainty and fear.

God's people in Psalm 80, cry out for God to restore Israel, as they long for God's presence. They faced a time of great distress and upheaval. They pray, "Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved. They too, long for a promise from God for salvation and God's presence to be with them. Then Paul in Romans 1 reminds us that the holy scriptures prophesied the fulfillment of an ancient promise. A promise that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, descended from David, would have power and be resurrected from the dead.

Matthew 1:18-25 brings all this together for us. Joseph, caught off guard by Mary's pregnancy, is afraid and confused. He receives reassurance from the angel that this child is from the Holy Spirit. He will be named Jesus and save his people from their sins. Here we see the prophecy of Isaiah fulfilled. God's promise is kept as God is truly with us in the person of Jesus Christ. "All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: 'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,' which means, 'God is with us.'" (Mattthew 1:23)

Fully entering into Advent means journeying through this season of waiting, longing and preparing our hearts for the arrival of Jesus Christ. The promise God made to us, is now a promise kept. These scriptures are an invitation to us on this Fourth Sunday of Advent. We are invited to wait expectantly for God's intervention in our lives and in our world. God invites us to trust in the promises of God, even when circumstances seem bleak and overwhelming. We are invited to celebrate the incarnation of Jesus Christ where God has entered human history and our lives in the most intimate way.

Ann Weems in her poem, The Promised One, The Expected One, The Messiah, wrote:

"We've heard that the people of the time
had certain ideas about the Promised One,
thought that the Expected One would be born in a palace
or come down from Heaven on a cloud,
never expected the Messiah
would be sent as a baby to people like Mary and Joseph...
Our question is this:
What is our expectation?
What promise do we hold to our hearts?
Who is this Messiah born to us?"

("From Advent's Alleluia to Easter's Morning Light," Ann Weems, page 31)

As we await the second advent of Jesus Christ, what does "God with us" mean to you personally in this season of waiting?

Where in your life area you longing for restoration and reassurance to see God keep the promises God has already made?

Prayer: God of Grace and Glory, in this season of Advent, help us to wait with hope and trust. Remind us that your promises are true and your presence is near. Restore us, shine your face upon us, and dwell with us as Immanuel. In the name of Jesus, Amen

CHRISTMAS EVE

STEVEN MILLS

Isaiah 9:2-7, Psalm 96, Titus 2:11-14, Luke 2:1-14

Beloved of God, as hearts turn toward the wonder of Christ's coming, we are invited to pause in the stillness and allow the truth of God's Word to speak to the very core of our being. Advent is a season of longing and expectation, a sacred journey that reminds us that God's promises never fail. What was spoken through the prophets was not forgotten. What was foretold in faith was fulfilled in grace. In the coming of Jesus Christ, God proved once more that His Word stands forever.

The prophet Isaiah proclaimed hope to a weary people, declaring, "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined" (Isaiah 9:2). This was no ordinary light, but the light of God's redeeming presence. It was the promise that despair would not have the final word, that oppression would not last forever, and that God's peace would one day rule without end. "For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon His shoulders, and He is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace" (Isaiah 9:6). In Jesus, this promise took on flesh. The light that Isaiah saw from a distance became the light that now shines in the hearts of those who believe.

The psalmist invites all creation into worship, saying, "Sing to the Lord a new song; sing to the Lord, all the earth. Sing to the Lord, bless His name; tell of His salvation from day to day" (Psalm 96:1–2). The birth of Christ is the new song of the redeemed—a song not born of comfort, but of conviction; not born of ease, but of eternal hope. When we worship, we do not merely look back upon a distant event; we join with all creation in giving glory to the God who reigns. The Lord who "made the heavens" (Psalm 96:5) chose to enter His own creation. The Creator became the created, so that humanity might be restored to Him. That is why every voice, every heart, every nation is called to sing. The One who is worthy of all praise has come near.

In the Gospel of Luke, we witness the quiet unfolding of God's divine plan. "In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered" (Luke 2:1). To human eyes, it was an act of bureaucracy, a census of empire. But to the eyes of faith, it was the movement of God's hand, guiding Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem—the very place foretold by the prophets. There, in the humblest of circumstances, Mary "gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths and laid Him in a manger" (Luke 2:7). The King of Kings entered the world with no crown, no throne, and no audience—only the sound of animals, the watchful eyes of His mother, and the quiet breath of heaven's promise fulfilled.

Yet while the world remained unaware, heaven could not remain silent. “An angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them,” and shepherds—ordinary, overlooked men—were chosen to hear the first announcement of salvation (Luke 2:9). The angel declared, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people. For to you is born in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord” (Luke 2:10–11). That message is the heartbeat of the gospel: good news for all people. No matter who we are, where we have been, or what we have done, God’s grace extends to us. Heaven rejoiced, saying, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom He favors” (Luke 2:14). That peace is not merely the absence of conflict—it is the presence of Christ.

The apostle Paul, in his letter to Titus, helps us understand what this grace means for us now: “For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all” (Titus 2:11). The same grace that entered the world in the form of a child continues to transform lives through faith. That grace teaches us “to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly” as we wait for the blessed hope—the appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ (Titus 2:12–13). The birth of Christ is the visible expression of the invisible mercy of God. It is the dawn of redemption that shines until the fullness of His kingdom comes.

The message of Christmas reaches far beyond Bethlehem’s borders and beyond a single point in time. It is a message that speaks into every heart that has ever longed for peace, every soul that has ever sought forgiveness, every life that has ever needed hope. The same God who entered the world through a manger still enters into the lives of those who make room for Him. The same light that broke into the darkness still shines in every corner of despair. The same Savior who brought joy to shepherds still brings joy to those who believe.

Let every heart remember that the coming of Christ is not a story confined to the past—it is the living truth of God’s love revealed to the world. The cradle reminds us that God came near. The cross reminds us that His love was poured out. The empty tomb reminds us that His power cannot be defeated. And the promise of His return reminds us that His reign will never end.

So, with reverent hearts and voices lifted in faith, let us join the chorus of creation and echo the song that has never ceased—Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward all. May the light of Christ shine in every heart, every home, and every corner of the world until the fullness of His glory is revealed.

CHRISTMAS DAY

REGAN STOOPS

Isaiah 52:7-10, Psalm 98, Hebrews 1:1-4, John 1:1-14

I was in eighth grade when I asked for the most anticipated Christmas gift of my life. I found it in the JC Penney catalog, and it was a leather jacket of my favorite football team. This was the 90's when Starter jackets with your favorite team were all the rage; but a leather one was next level.

A little background here is important. My brother and I had a history - nay a reputation - for seeking and finding our Christmas presents most years. We would wait for our parents to be gone and then search the darkest corners of our house to find our gifts. Often, they would be already wrapped, and we would skillfully cut the tape, unwrap, celebrate our finds, and then replace the tape with new. One year our parents even put a lock on the storage room door to keep us out of the presents; but again, we waited, unbolted the lock from the door jam, and found our shiny new bikes.

Everyone says the surprise on Christmas morning is the fun of it all, but every time I opened my previously known gift, it was a joy. This particular year I asked for nothing but my leather jacket. I wanted no other present, and made sure my parents knew it. They trolled me constantly with threats of buying me a faux leather jacket and then using puff paint to add my favorite team's logo. So, I searched the house as I always had; never finding the treasure. They must have hidden the jacket at church or at my mother's work. It was nowhere to be found.

Christmas morning came with great excitement, but also a lot of nervous energy. This request was extreme, and for once I had no idea if they would come through.

When I tore open the present, I worried that I'd have to feign gratitude for whatever else they may have bought me; knowing they always gave generously at Christmas. But I didn't have to. My jacket was there, and it was perfect.
My first question was obvious. "Where was it? I looked everywhere!"

Then my parents gave up their secrets. It was in MY CLOSET the entire time. I could have found it and celebrated weeks ago, but I never even looked.

Jesus coming to earth; God incarnate is reason to be elated even beyond a kid receiving their most prized gift. God chose not just to fix our broken world, He entered into it to show us what our lives were made for, and to empower us to become just that.

But for us, 2000 years after Jesus was born to humble parents and laid in a humble manger, Christmas is also an opportunity to remember that though we celebrate His incarnation in this season, He has been with us all along. And He hasn't been hiding in the closet. His presence is found throughout history in the stories of the Old Testament and His covenant people. His presence is among us when we gather in loving Christian community each week in our local church. His presence is found with us throughout the year when we seek Him and choose to abide in Him.

My Christmas that year was an exciting beginning. I wore that jacket all through high school and into college. May this Christmas be a new beginning for us. Not just a culmination of our Advent preparation; but a chance to remain with Jesus going forward. May we take Him with us as messengers of the Gospel so that those that hear it might just say,

"How beautiful on the mountains are the leather jackets of those who bring good news..."
(Isaiah 52:7 - 8th grade Regan's version)

SUNDAY AFTER CHRISTMAS

JANET PACE

Isaiah 63:7-9, Psalm 148, Hebrews 2:10-18, Matthew 2:13-23

The presents are unwrapped, the gifts are admired, and the glow of Christmas is still very much alive and well. It may sound like many of our homes this first Sunday after Christmas, but in some ways, it was that way for Joseph and Mary, too. The shepherds had visited. The wise men had brought lavish presents. The meaning of Jesus' birth, the promise of his life made the world seem a whole lot brighter and anything seemed possible. But now it was time to return home to the day-to-day of real life.

But then, Joseph has a dream. Well, more of a nightmare. The world which the day before had seemed so bright was now a night filled with terror.

"Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him"(Matt 2:13)

Imagine the frenzy of activity, taking what they could carry and fleeing to Egypt as fast as they could—hearts pounding every time they passed a soldier. They are safe, but the nightmare continues for those left behind as Herod massacres innocent baby boys.

Joseph has two more dreams. His second dream reveals that Herod is dead, and it is safe to return home. Home! After dealing with a strange language and different customs and food as refugees, they could now return to the familiar: to their friends, their neighbors, their favorite foods, and the home they left behind years ago.

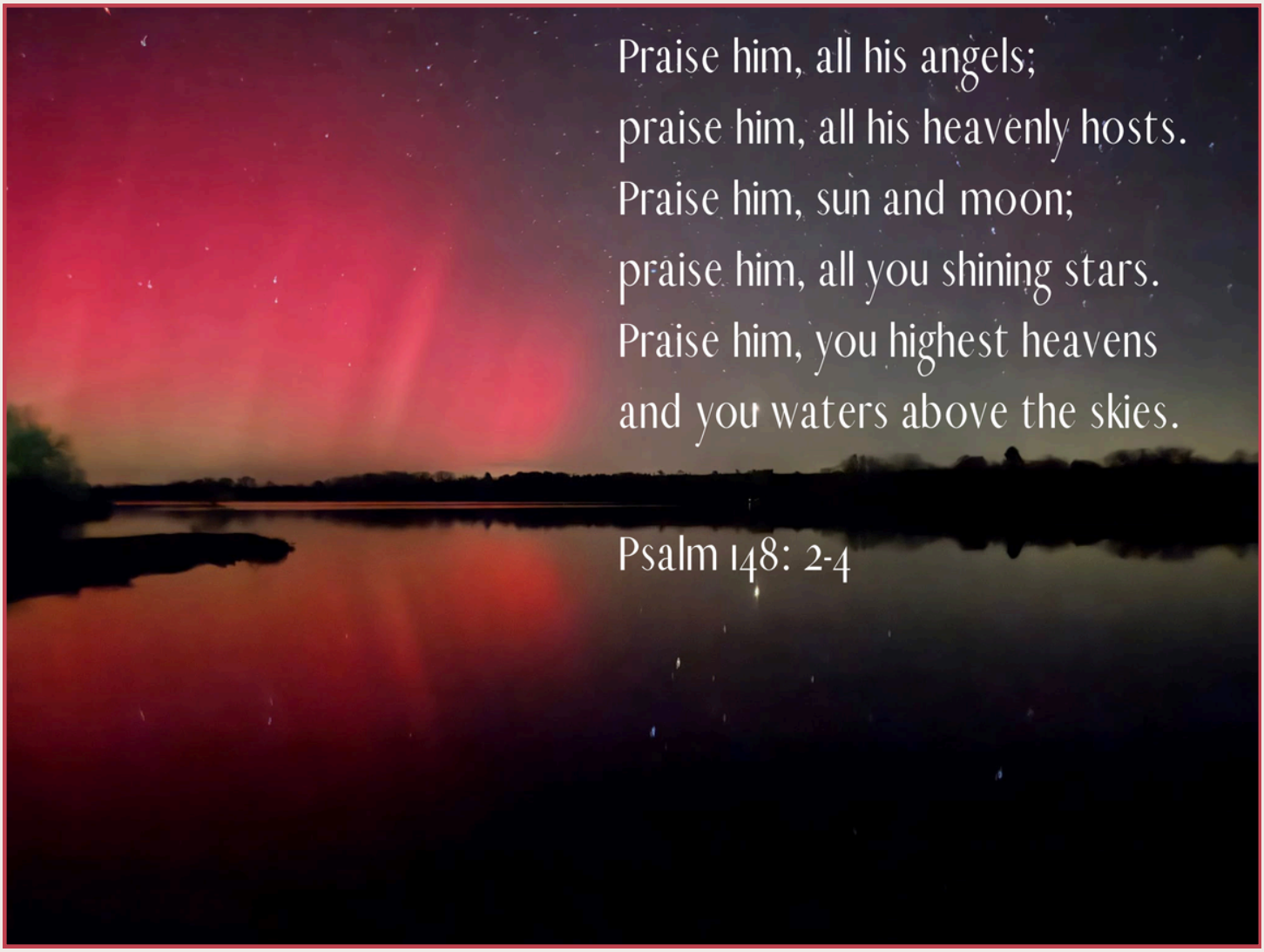
But when they arrive, reality sets in. Herod is gone, but his son is ruling over Judea with equal cruelty. A final dream directs them to move once again—to Galilee. There will be no homecoming after all; no return to normal.

Jesus may be alluding to his childhood when he says in Matthew 8:20:

"Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.".

Theologian Thomas Troeger offers an intriguing perspective on this first Sunday after Christmas. He writes that after Christmas we usually put away our manger scenes until the next year. But he says we may have it wrong. Yes, we should put away the shepherds because they returned to their fields. We should put away the magi because they returned to their homes in the East. But he suggests we should keep Mary, Joseph and Jesus out—all alone, still facing the terrors of a brutal despot. No fuzzy sheep. No reliable donkey. No doting visitors.

He says that maybe we should put the holy family in our windows, looking out on the larger world: the world where today there is still violence, there are still refugees fleeing, there is still humankind for whom Jesus is crying to us for protection. Until there is peace for all humankind on earth.



EPIPHANY

SCOTT BERRY

Isaiah 63:7-9, Psalm 148, Hebrews 2:10-18, Matthew 2:13-23

(Please read Matthew 2:1-12)
You cannot have two kings. Joseph learned that in a terrifying moment. An angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said "Get up and get out! You have to go to Egypt – and do not come back until I tell you... Herod is going to search for your boy, and kill him!" (see MT 2:13)

Joseph must have been terrified, knowing that his little toddler had a giant bullseye on him, drawn there by Herod the Great, King of Judea. Joseph and Mary gathered up their precious boy and ran from their home, because Joseph knew that you cannot have two kings.

Herod knew this as well. He spent most of his reign trying to eliminate his competition. In order to protect his position, he ruthlessly murdered his wife, along with three sons, a mother-in-law, a brother-in-law, and many others. Herod's reign was bloody and brutal.

So his reaction to the news from the magi is not surprising. "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews?", they asked. (MT 2:2) They talked of being guided there by a star, and they said they wanted to worship the new king.

Hearing this, Herod was "greatly disturbed." (MT 2:3) He jumped into action, summoning his experts and religious leaders for advice and pummeling the visitors with questions. Herod claimed he wanted to worship this new king, but his intentions were sinister and severe. I can almost imagine Herod, standing at the window in his palace, looking over his kingdom as he speaks through clenched teeth, hissing "This child must die. We cannot have two kings."

His bitterness and paranoia drove Herod to yet another heinous act: the murder of the baby boys of Bethlehem. (MT 2:16)

Don't you imagine that this moment changed Herod's life forever? The question of the magi must have stayed with him: "Where is the one who is king of the Jews?" Every time someone came into his court, Herod must have wondered "Is this the one?". Every time there is a rumor of military or political change, he must have worried "Is this the end?" Herod knew he was out there. And he knew that you cannot have two kings.

Herod was of little help to them, but the Magi did find the child they had been searching for. The travelers were filled with joy when the star that had guided them to Bethlehem reappeared. (MT 2:10) It led them to a house, and stopped. They must have been breathless as they made their way inside. And there, they found him. A little guy – a toddler, not more than 2 years old. It is likely that they found him sitting on his mother's lap, or perhaps he was on the floor, playing. This was the one they had traveled all of those months and all of those miles to see.

Amazed and awestruck, they bowed down and worshiped him. (MT 2:11) There seemed to be no doubt that this was "the one who was born king of the Jews". After worshipping him, they opened their bags and presented him with their treasures.

They gave this king the gifts they had been carrying all throughout their journey. They had these gifts when they first met Herod, but they did not take them out of their baggage. Instead, they kept them in reserve, for this moment. Apparently they knew the truth: you can only have one king. Jesus was the one king they had been searching for.

Don't you know that the magi came back from this journey changed? They must have felt so blessed and so amazed by the fact that they had bowed down in worship and looked into the eyes of the one true king. Imagine the story they must have told to their grandchildren, and to anyone who would listen! Surely this moment profoundly affected them for the rest of their lives.

That's what happens when you meet the one true king – you come back changed. That encounter changes those who, like the Magi, accept Jesus and bow before Him as King. And it changes those who, like Herod, reject Him. Which of those two are you? To Herod, Jesus' arrival was a stumbling block, leading him into a life of bitter paranoia and desperate desire.

Like Herod, many today are threatened by Jesus, and many reject Him. We don't like the idea of Jesus being Lord – instead, we declare ourselves kings over our own lives. Sadly, many reject Jesus, because He is a threat to us, and because you cannot have two kings. Like Herod, many become consumed with remaining on their own throne. Is that you?

Wouldn't you rather be like the magi? To them, Jesus was the keystone, leading them to a life of joy and hope. They knew there was a king, and they knew him personally– His name is Jesus.

Is Jesus a stumbling block to you, or is he a cornerstone? You cannot ride the fence on this one. Herod and Joseph and the Magi were right: you cannot have two kings.

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