

Advent / Christmas Worship
2020 - 2021

Journey to Bethlehem



Fern Creek Baptist Church
Louisville, Kentucky

Advent/Christmas Worship

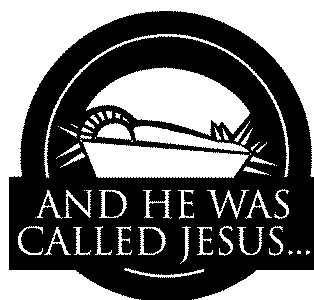
Our theme for this Advent / Christmas season is “*Journey to Bethlehem*”. Our devotional booklet consists of our individual journeys with Jesus, how He has carried us through our present unusual journeys, and about Bible characters who journeyed with Jesus or prophesied about His birth. Members and attendees of our church wrote the devotionals to help us experience the deep meaning of this joyous season. We hope these devotionals will be used as a part of your personal and family worship.

You are encouraged to attend every worship experience during this season. There worship services are listed in this booklet.

Thank you to each who submitted devotionals. Thanks to those of you who typed and compiled the booklet. Thanks to you for accepting this booklet as our Christmas gift to you.

May you all experience the hope, peace, joy, and love found only in our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ! May you worship Him with gladness as we journey to Bethlehem during this holy season!

Merry Christmas!
Linda Barnes Popham



Church Ministerial Staff

Rev. Linda Barnes Popham, Pastor 239-0316 ext. 103
Rev. Steve Skaggs, Interim Minister of Music 239-0316 ext. 111
Kristin Jones, Associate Minister of Music 239-0316 ext. 116

Support Staff

Joellen Johnston, Organist 239-0316
Karen Love, Pianist 239-0316
Donna Grimes, Interim Office Coordinator 239-0316 ext. 100
Jodie Towles, Bookkeeper 239-0316 ext. 102

Child Development Center

239-8952
Terri Bosemer, Child Development Center Director 239-8952 ext. 108
Alice Glenn, Administrative Assistant 239-8952 ext. 107

Fern Creek Baptist Church

5920 Bardstown Road
Louisville, Kentucky 40291
www.ferncreekbaptist.org
239-0316 / 239-0317

ADVENT/CHRISTMAS WORSHIP SERVICES

November 29: The First Sunday of Advent

10:45 a.m. – Lighting of the Candle of Hope

6:00 p.m. – “Hanging of the Greens” (streamed only)

December 6: The Second Sunday of Advent

10:45 a.m. – Lighting of the Candle of Peace

6:00 p.m. – Instrumental Christmas (streamed only)

December 13: The Third Sunday of Advent

10:45 a.m. – Lighting of the Candle of Joy

6:00 p.m. – “Journey to Bethlehem”, a Drive-Through Event: Please enter the driveway on the south side of the property anytime between 6:00 and 7:00 pm. Instructions will be given there.

December 15

7:00 p.m. – Child Development Center Christmas Program (streamed only)

December 16

6:30 p.m. – Christmas Caroling

December 22: The Fourth Sunday of Advent

10:45 a.m. – Lighting of the Candle of Love

6:00 p.m. – Service of Comfort and Hope

December 24: Christmas Eve

11:00 a.m. – Christmas Eve Service

Lighting of the Christ Candle

December 27: The First Sunday of Christmas

10:45 a.m. – We Celebrate the Birth of Christ.

Childcare for preschoolers is available during the on-site services.

Most of these worship services are live-streamed and transmitted to the parking lot. You may view the services by going to our website (www.ferncreekbaptist.org) and clicking the red Worship Livestream button.

For those who choose to stay in their cars in the parking lot for the on-site services, please turn your ignition to accessory and tune in to 91.7 FM.

ADVENT

The observance of Advent begins four Sundays before Christmas. It is a season of spiritual preparation for the celebration of the coming of Christ. The word Advent means “arrival” or “coming”.

Christ *has come* into our world;
Christ *is coming* into our lives;
Christ *will come* again!

For the Christian, Advent is a season of celebration. Our celebration should lead to both an inward and outward sense of rejoicing as we commemorate the birth of Jesus for us, His birth in us, and His final coming in glory.

May you all experience the true spirit of this holy season! May you worship, pray, and live expectantly in preparation for the coming of Christ! Jesus Christ *has come!* Jesus Christ *is coming!* Jesus Christ *will come again!*



CHRISTMAS

The Christmas season is a time to celebrate, to give thanks, and to praise God for being present with us in Jesus Christ. The name was derived from the first service of the season, Christ Mass. Jesus' birth was celebrated on December 25 in Rome sometime between 336 and 354 A.D. A pagan winter solstice festival, the birthday of the unconquered sun, was already celebrated on December 25. Christians adopted that date to celebrate the birth of the Son of God, the Sun of Righteousness.

EPIPHANY

Christmas continues to Epiphany Day, January 6. Epiphany is the celebration of the Wise Men's visit and the manifestation of Christ to the world.

THE CHRISMON TREE

During our annual Hanging of the Greens worship service we will again decorate the tree with Chrismons made by members of our church family. The word Chrismon is a combination of parts of two words: Christ and monogram. A Chrismon is just that, a monogram or symbol of Christ.

Christian symbols date back to the early church and were found in various places. Early Christians used them to identify themselves to one another, to designate meeting places of the church, and occasionally to show non-believers where they stood. Most importantly, these symbols served to transmit the faith and belief of the followers of Jesus Christ. Today we have added other symbols as new explanations of God's never-changing presence in our ever-changing world. Some of our Chrismons are combinations of both old and new elements.

Chrismons were originated by Frances K. Spencer in 1957 and were used to decorate a tree for the Lutheran Church of the Ascension in Danville, Virginia. Chrismons are made in combinations of white and gold. White is symbolic of our Lord's purity and perfection; gold is symbolic of His majesty, glory, and triumph. As you see the tree this holy season, may you realize anew the beauty, power, and purity of our Christian faith!



HOPE

It is sometimes hard to have hope that everything will be alright in these days. We hope COVID will soon be gone. We hope we can stay safe and well. We hope a vaccine will soon be ready.

The truth is, it will not happen instantly. It will take time to vaccinate everyone. We must have hope that we get through this and take lessons from it.

This hope does not disappoint us, for God has poured out his love into our hearts by means of the Holy Spirit, who is God's gift to us.

Romans 5:5

Life's journey is not easy. Like Mary, we all are given a task to fulfill.

The angel said to her, "Don't be afraid, Mary; God has been gracious to you. You will become pregnant and give birth to a son and you will name him Jesus."

Luke 1:30-31

Like the shepherds, we become curious and want to see things for ourselves.

When the angel went away from them, back into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that happened, which the Lord told us."

Luke 2:15

Like the wise men, we start out in one direction, but learn we need to change course.

Then they returned to their country by another road, since God had warned them in a dream not to go back to Herod.

Matthew 2:12

Hope gets us through each day. If we didn't have hope, we would live in gloom. Hope is our faith in God to pull us through life.

May God, the source of hope, fill you with all the joy and peace, by means of your faith in him, so that your hope will continue to grow by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Romans 15:13

We don't know how 2021 will be, but we have more than wishful thinking. We have assurance that God will be with us.

Glenda Coddington



Monday, November 30, 2020

HOPE

She couldn't imagine why her life has been turned upside down. How could she possibly be with child? Why was she being visited by someone who appeared to be an angel? At least the man Joseph married her to help save her reputation. But none of this made any sense. What had she done wrong?

The road to Bethlehem was long and hard for a woman late in her pregnancy, but she was grateful she did have to walk it. It was tough, but it had to be done. But this baby was not going to wait.

When they arrived, there were no beds available for her to rest. Her comforts could only be found in a stable. It would just have to do. Her baby was coming.

In the night she gave birth to her beautiful baby boy. She immediately loved Him. She wrapped Him as best she could to comfort Him against the night air.

It all happened so fast. Strangers began to appear, looking for her baby. They told stories of His birth being heralded by angels. Even the animals seemed curious about her child and the star that shone above them.

It all began to make sense. It had all been true. The sensation of peace washed over her. She loved her newborn Son so much. His love would give the worldHope!

Neal Tingle



THE HOPE WE HAVE IN CHRIST

Romans 15:12-13 (NIV)

And again, Isaiah says,

*“The Root of Jesse will spring up,
one who will arise to rule over the nations;
in him the Gentiles will hope.”*

*May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him,
so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.*

In writing to all those in Rome who were followers of Christ, Paul addressed his words to both Jewish and Gentile believers. In Romans 15 he referred to several Old Testament passages that specifically offer hope for the Gentiles.

Isaiah 11 (verse 10 paraphrased by Paul in the quote above) began with these familiar words: “A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.” This prophecy concerning the Messiah describes Him as being Spirit led and a righteous judge. Isaiah 11 says that He will slay the wicked and usher in an era of peace that will be for all people. “The earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea,” Isaiah wrote. Paul believed these words offered eternal hope for both Jew and Gentile!

In Ephesians 2 Paul said that formerly Gentiles had been “without hope and without God” but that through Christ--through His blood--we can be brought near to God.

Jesus Himself said His ministry was a fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah 42:1-4: “In His name the nations will put their hope” (Matthew 12:21, NIV).

Phillips Brooks, described as one of the most outstanding American preachers of the 19th century, wrote the text of his famous hymn, “O Little Town of Bethlehem,” for the children of his Sunday School in 1868. Recalling his visit to the Holy Land and his view of Bethlehem he finished the first stanza with these words: “The hopes and fears of all the years / Are met in Thee tonight.”

From Genesis to Revelation the Bible tells us of the God of hope. May this Advent season be a time when we rest all our hopes and fears in Him. Amen!

Steve Skaggs



Wednesday, December 2, 2020

HOPE

You are my hiding place and my shield; I hope in your word. Psalm 119:114

We all know the story of the journey to Bethlehem... A young virgin with the baby that was going to be the Savior of the world! Mary had to have so much hope, not only for her, but for Joseph, as well. Mary was literally carrying the hope of the world in her belly. Mary had hope in God's word and His promise to her. Mary had hope that God would protect her. God handpicked her for this mission. Mary had to have the utmost faith that this journey was going to be the start to the change of the world.

For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. Jeremiah 29:11

Mary may not have known the future, but she had hope that all this was part of God's plan. Mary, a young woman, was being judged for the baby she was carrying. Despite all this criticism she knew that the Lord had a plan for her and for Jesus. This journey to Bethlehem was a journey of great hope for the future of her and Jesus.

Elizabeth Mathis



HOPE

Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. Hebrews 11:1

Sometimes it's hard to be hopeful when things seem to be going bad. When I lost my job I was hopeful that God would provide for me, even though I wasn't sure how He would do it. I had faith in God even though I didn't know the outcome because I put my faith in God over 32 years ago. When I realized He was willing to send His Son to die for my sins I knew He would also take care of everything else. There is a song I like that comes to mind, "Pray on the Little Days". A few of the lines say, "But through it all the greatest lesson that I have learned, Is to just let God be God on those little days. And He'll be God there on the bigger days." It goes on to say, "When you need God to be there on the bigger days, pray on the little days."

These lines remind me that God doesn't forget about us. Our faith gives us that everlasting hope that is found only in Christ. Through Christ's birth, death, and resurrection we can all receive this great hope. This Christmas season we need to spread the hope of Jesus as we remember His birth. God gave us all this special gift. All we have to do is to accept, believe, and confess.

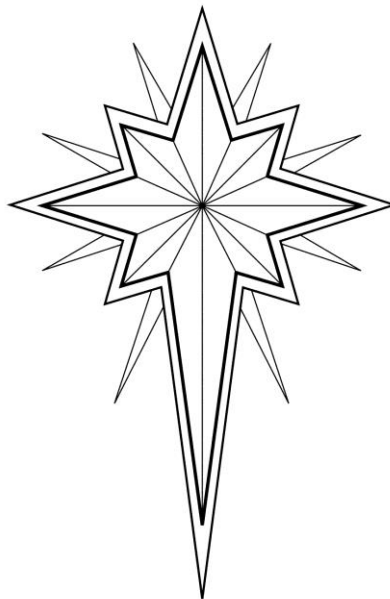
Accept Jesus as God's Son.

Believe that He died for our sins.

Confess our sins and ask for forgiveness.

This will allow you to have faith in Christ which will lead you to be sure of what you hope for. God will always provide in our need. We don't always know how He will provide and it won't always be in the way we think it should be, but He is always faithful to give us hope and a future. Our hope is in our future in Heaven with Jesus. We are just passing through this world. Have Hope!

Melissa Logsdon-Young



Friday, December 4, 2020

A TIME FOR HOPE

It is said that change is a constant – an unwinding process of the unpacking of events in our lives that leave us with new circumstances. The constant state through change can be bashful, yet honest; sincere, yet stoic; and loving, yet painful. How must we navigate through an era of great uncertainty? The way God wants us to. Our pathway through the unknown is paved by God if we are looking forward, rather than behind us. It is through our faith in the Lord that we find success through the solid ground of familiarity and warmth, whether it's an unsuspecting return to a familiar place or the familiarity of love in the new. Cautious optimism is needed, for our trust in God prevails to the succumbing weaknesses that deem us as only human. God is Good. The good He has is far greater than we can comprehend. We can at times see a glimpse of the grand design of good He has planned; though without the full picture, it feels *uncertain* at times.

I find solace in the little things in life. The things that make you pause from your ritualistic routine of a day. These moments pervade our minds from the lulls of the rut, as they have a charm that almost seems as if magic was used. These can be simple things like a squirrel stopping outside your window to look in; throwing a paper wad in the trash from across the room; or a friend offering you a drink seemingly out of the blue. The moments such as these are strikingly different from our day because of this: we are drawn to the present. Not the past. Not the future. The present. It is in this moment of presence, that I present this:

Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus (Philippians 4:6-7 ESV).

You are invited to consider the following as you go about your minute, day, or week:

- What moments of your day have stuck out to you as 'magical' over the last week?
- Keep a mindful eye out for the moments in your day unplanned; the moments that draw you to the external present, rather than the internal past or future.
- See if you can break out of the rut of other people. Simple gestures like offering to pick up lunch or a surprise treat at work can really be a highlight of someone's day.
- When interacting with workers at the grocery store or restaurant, practice expressing warm sincerity for their service. Gratitude goes a long way in times of uncertainty and predisposed pessimism.

With uncertainty amuck, I simply wish you find the stability that is familiarity.

Denver Pascua



SEEING

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth... John 1:14

No one has ever seen God. According to the Bible though, people have seen His glory. The Israelites saw God's glory as a consuming fire on Mt. Sinai. Ezekiel saw His glory as a gleaming figure sitting on a sapphire throne. The night Jesus was born shepherds saw the glory of God as a light shining all around them. Far to the east, wise men saw a star so bright they were able to follow it from their country all the way to Bethlehem.

What the shepherds and wise men saw when they got to Bethlehem was not fire or a glowing figure wrapped in light, however. What they saw was a child --- a child who actually was the glory of God, but with that glory tucked away in a blanket of ordinary flesh and so well hidden that unless you had the eyes to see it, you wouldn't have known it was there.

Jesus talked about having "eyes that see" and wanted us all to have them. "Eyes that see" are not the eyes we are born with that make it possible for us to see shapes, color, and depth. "Eyes that see" are eyes that look past what is on the surface and see what is going on underneath. They notice the glory of God in the beauty, power, and interconnectedness of nature. They believe that every human being is more than he or she seems to be and that God is at work in the lives of us all. They watch God working in and through the everyday circumstances of their lives in mysterious and often unusual ways. They experience wonder and awe and are certain that there is always more of God to be seen.

The days before and after Christmas are busy days, sometimes dreary days, but the glory of God is everywhere around us and within us, waiting to be seen. All we need are the eyes to see it and they can be had for the asking.

Karen Purnell



Sunday, December 6, 2020

PEACE

But Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart. Luke 2:19

I remember coming home with our newborn, Drew, 30 years ago. Yes, I had babysat plenty of times, but never a newborn! Yes, joy filled my soul....but peace, not so much.

Then two years later, I was spending the night with Caleb, in a sterile ICU room with a huge crib in the middle. If he could make it until the morning weigh-in without losing any weight, we could take him home from Vanderbilt Hospital to Bowling Green. Way too many anxious thoughts during that long night with the tiny baby!

Neither of those newborn mama mom moments compare with Mary's experience. Holding the Son of God in that filthy stable the night after Jesus was born. How many questions must have been racing through her mind! What did she do? She pondered. She knew from the prophecies that she was holding the Prince of Peace. She remembered her song of joy she voiced to God (Luke 1:46-55). Somehow I believe God used her moments of pondering all He had already accomplished in her life to instill peace in her heart so she'd be ready for the next day.

We can do the same thing. No matter what battles we're facing, what losses we're grieving, what troubles are perplexing us...we can ponder. We can consider how He has always been with us, and made a way in the past. He's not going to let go now!

It's the peace that passes understanding that only the Prince of Peace can give! Isaiah 9:6

Karen Love



Monday, December 7, 2020

JOURNEY TO BETHLEHEM PEACE

Luke 1:26-38

When we think about Christmas, we do not immediately think of PEACE. The Christmas season frequently brings thoughts of tasks to be done and the frustration of not getting tasks completed in a timely manner. (*The opposite of peace*)

For many of us a family gathering is at the top of the list of things to plan and prepare for. We always knew we would be together for the Christmas holidays and enjoy our time as a family and our time to express our love for God and our love for one another. But one year it did not work out that way. We gathered at my parents' house for our Christmas Eve dinner. We laughed, teased one another, talked, played games, enjoyed the Christmas music and, of course, stuffed ourselves on our favorite foods.

Those with children went home to wait for Santa leaving in a flurry of hugs and kisses. Those of us who remained, straightened up, made preparations for Christmas brunch, finally put the rest of the kids to bed, helped Santa with his final tasks, and attended a Christmas Eve service on TV. (*Peace*) I went home expecting to get up and head over to my parents' house for Christmas brunch. But instead I woke to the phone ringing. It was my dad calling to tell me there had been an automobile accident on their road and the road was closed. I could not get there. He was very concerned that I was alone in my apartment on Christmas Day.

After the initial disappointment, I began my 'alone' Christmas celebration with a special breakfast. I spent some time enjoying my decorations and daily devotions. The difficulties Mary and Joseph dealt with as they traveled to Bethlehem were very real that day. (Luke 2:1-20) The shadow that Mary felt as she thought of her baby son and the difficulties He would face remained with me. (Luke 2:33-35) I thought of our houseful of kids and the problems they would face and prayed for them as I am sure Mary prayed for baby Jesus. (Isaiah 53:2-12)

In thinking back, I realized that this was one of my better Christmases. I enjoyed family, but I also had time alone to worship God, to express my love and appreciation for all He had done for me --- how He suffered to provide for my salvation! And brought me peace! After this, a time to be alone and worship became a part of my Christmas.

This year many are facing the possibility of a Christmas alone because of the Covid-19. Many are seeing it as a time alone, a time of sorrow, already shedding tears as we think of those family and friends we will not see this year. **Or**, we can think of this as an opportunity for an intimate time with God without the hustle and bustle of the season.

Covid-19 has given us this choice ... this period of time, a time to worship and strengthen our relationship with God. An opportunity to find PEACE as we celebrate Christmas either alone or with loved ones! Will you make the choice to find PEACE?

In Christ's love,
Carolyn Simpson



Peace
For
Earth

Tuesday, December 8, 2020

PEACE BEYOND OUR UNDERSTANDING

Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your request to God. And the peace of God which transcends all understanding will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Philippians 4:6-7 (NIV)

In this special season as we approach the celebration of our precious Savior's birth, there are so many, many blessings for which we need to thank Him. He gave His life freely on Calvary's cross that our sins would be forgiven and because of this we have the assurance that we will spend eternity with Him in Heaven. We need only to believe that Jesus is the Son of God, that He freely gave His life for the forgiveness of our sins, and that God has raised Him from the dead. He is our risen Savior and we know He will never leave us nor forsake us. He walks with us through every trial, every joy, and every challenge life holds. I want to share a very personal experience with you about God's love and care for me and for my family. Since the day I became a Christian my life forever changed. I have felt His love in countless ways. With each passing year He has taught me lessons of love and compassion. He has forgiven my failures more times than I could ever count. He has comforted my heart, helped me to make hard decisions, and always I have felt His presence. In past few years I faced a new challenge and needed Him more than ever.

My precious Mother was fighting a battle with Alzheimer's disease and I could see heartbreaking changes almost daily. My dad had passed away fourteen years earlier and I promised him I would take care of mom. It became increasingly clear that she was unable to manage things on her own. I tried to bring mom home to our house and she would not hear of it. As a family we decided to sell her home and place her in an assisted living facility trusting the funds would be enough to care for her needs. That was almost seven years ago. I became the person that would be managing mom's affairs along with the help and support of my sister. I prayed daily that I would make good choices on her behalf. I tried especially hard to be a good steward of her finances. My mom and dad had both worked hard all of their lives and I wanted to honor them both with my actions.

Mom was very happy in her new assisted living home. She had many friends, participated in crafts, church services and choir and was even able to go on supervised field trips and most of all loved spending time with family. There were good times, but always you could see the progression of the disease. My prayer was that she would have some joy in her life each day. God answered my prayer and gave me peace that mom was where she needed to be. As time progressed the disease seemed to steal more and more from her and along with this worry mom's finances were becoming depleted. I would pray and ask God for wisdom; I would ask Him what I should do when the money was gone. I would give Him all my fears only to find the next day I had taken them all back. I would ask him to give me peace and He did! Until, I took all the fears back again. Every month brought fears as to what I should do.

Mom's confusion and loss of memory were painful to watch. How could I move her from the only home she now knew? How could I even know where to place her so that her special needs could be met and she would be safe? I allowed all the unknowns to steal my peace. There were many sleepless nights and tears as I knew mom would have to go to a nursing home. Again, I prayed for peace in all decisions that were going to have to be made. But, God's plan and His timing are perfect. On October 1, 2020 my precious mother went to her real home in Heaven with Jesus. No more confusion, no more suffering, no pain. God gave us both perfect peace. Mom had only one month of expenses left in her account!!! God knew all along that mom was ready for the suffering to come to an end. I had prayed her finances would be enough. They were. I had such peace knowing my mother now lives in Heaven

with Jesus and is healed from all illness and suffering. Perfect peace that far surpasses our human understanding was given to both of us. God was always in control, always aware of how the story would end. He heard every prayer, knew every need, and His plan was perfect.

I pray for anyone reading this that you will give your fears to God for He alone controls our future. He loved us enough to give His life for each of us. I cannot promise I will never feel fear again because I am human and I fail Him daily. I do know God loves me and whatever I face He is with me and I can know a peace that passes all understanding. God offers you His love and His Peace. I pray if you don't know Him, this day, this moment you will give him your heart. He is waiting.

Nancy Shewmaker



Wednesday, December 9, 2020

HAVE PEACE

Hey everyone! I bet you're surprised to see a youth in the devotional book; well I am, too. As you may or may not know, I am George Payocong III, the son of Pastor George Payocong Jr. at ICFL. I am here to talk about having peace and what that looks like. I do want to say I'm sorry to the people who already know this story and that you had to hear this story again, but I promise this is the last time.

On October 16, 2020, I was supposed to take my driver's test to get my restricted license. This is the biggest thing that's ever happened in my teenage life. I could just taste the freedom that I will soon have by having this license. I can finally drive myself anywhere without having to drag my father (because with a permit you must have a licensed driver with you). I can finally drive myself to and from church without having to wait for a ride or having to ask someone for a ride. The whole point was that I am ready to ace this. I have been waiting for this since the day I got my permit.

It was a beautiful day and the sun was shining; I got everything I needed, my license, my driving hours, and that's pretty much it. Then everything went downhill from there. The thing about me is that when something bad or something that bothers me happens, I like to give it three strikes before I call someone out or just call it quits and move on. The first strike was that I got a mean instructor that my friends warned me about; the second strike was that the mean man was very rude when talking to my father, telling him that he should've read the instructions "up on the wall", speaking to him like he couldn't speak or understand English. And the third strike was that we apparently needed a letter from the company stating that I am allowed to use the car to take my test. There was NOTHING in the website that says that I needed that letter and nobody ever told us that before; my parents didn't know that; my friends who have taken the test didn't know that; literally that was new news for everyone. And on top of that, the man just had to announce out loud that the car insurance expired, to the point where everybody could hear it. Finally he said that I couldn't take my test and honestly I just wanted to scream. Things could've been handled differently; the man could've just spoken to us kindly and informed us about the new policy; they could've offered me another day so that I don't have to wait two months just to get another appointment.

At that moment, I had every right to be mad; I worked so hard just to get nothing in return. Not only that but we just got disrespected by a man that was so eager to kick us out ASAP; I mean the man didn't have any patience with us, like *I get you're just doing your job and there are people in line waiting, but I was also waiting in line so I don't see that it makes me any different from anybody*. I wanted to yell at the man so badly, call him names, report him, file a complaint, anything to make him feel my wrath, and honestly that's just human nature; we want justice to be served, we want pay back, we want revenge. But, there was a sense of calmness running through me, I obviously felt angry at the world and why this happened to me, but I strangely felt at peace. It was as if God was there in my room hugging me to tell me to calm down and everything would be okay. And that's exactly what happened to me, even though someone did me wrong. It took a lot of faith and courage to just forgive this guy and just move on. If things were to go my way, if I ever did yell at the guy and respond with malice, I could be banned to take another test again because he has the ability to do that. If I were to take my revenge and report him, what good would that do: they might just give him a warning and that's it, so the best and hardest, but easiest thing to do is just to forgive him and move on.

Proverbs 10:12 "Hatred stirs old quarrels, but love overlooks insults"

The man was just doing his job and maybe something happened at home that I wasn't aware of and he must've carried it to his job. Being angry at him directly might add that to his stress and that's not good so might as well just forgive him.

Philippians 4:15 "And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

The peace that I have felt was very strange: you want to get angry and throw things, but instead you're just calm, and I want others to experience that and to learn from my experience. Sometimes it's easier to forgive than plotting a revenge scheme. It's not easy to do, but it's the easy path to walk. Trust me you will feel a lot better when you choose to have peace because you will seem like the bigger person and not just the whinny toddler. I may not have a license (yet), but I do have a testimony.

Thanks for reading!
George Payocong III



Thursday, December 10, 2020

HOW CAN WE HAVE PEACE?

Praise ye the Lord, O give thanks unto the Lord; for he is good: for His mercy endures forever—
Psalm 106:1

Exalt ye the Lord our God, and worship at His footstool; for He is holy—Psalm 99:5

And He said, My Presence shall go with thee, and I will give thee rest—Exodus 33:14

Commit thy ways unto the Lord, trust also in Him, and He shall bring it to pass—Psalm 37:5

Every word of God is pure: He is a shield to them that put their trust in Him—Proverbs 30:5

How can you have peace when the world is in chaos? We are in the middle of a pandemic and have friends and family at risk. We see our country at odds. I found this acrostic poem using scripture. The more I read these scriptures it is truly the way to have peace as far as it depends on us.

From the first two scriptures we see that if we are praising God and worshiping Him, we are not focused on self or the chaos around us. By keeping our focus on God and truly worshiping Him we can make a difference in our lives and those around us.

The next scripture talks about that His presence is with us always. Let me repeat that His presence is with us always. We are not lost, forsaken, or uncared for. We just must look, listen, and focus on Him to find Him. The second part of this scripture states He will give us rest. If our focus is on God, He will give us what we need – what we want but what we need.

Committing our lives and actions to Him show God we trust Him, but it also shows the world the same. We are to be His examples in this world.

The last scripture talks about the Word of the Lord. If we are in His Word and hide His Word in our hearts, He is our shield and protector. Will bad things still happen? Yes, but God will be with us through it all. In sending His Son, He provided a way for each of us to have a personal relationship. I pray you find Peace and rest during this Advent Season and throughout our new year 2021.

Renee Bryant



Friday, December 11, 2020

PEACE

Of all the things that have gone wrong in 2020, and there have been a lot, I think one of the saddest is the increase in anxiety and depression. By June of this year the number of people requesting anti-anxiety medicine was already up 30% from the first of the year. It has only gotten worse by now.

Every time you turn on a screen you hear about a new catastrophe that has occurred. From record-breaking tropical storms and fires to murder hornets and people being shot in the street. It seems overwhelming and never-ending.

Peace seems impossible to come by. Whether it's peace in the streets, world peace, peace in our relationships, or inner peace, we are struggling.

Society tries many things to achieve peace. They seek it in food, substances, solitude, misguided ideas. The list is endless. And the peace they find there is temporary. It keeps them searching and frustrated.

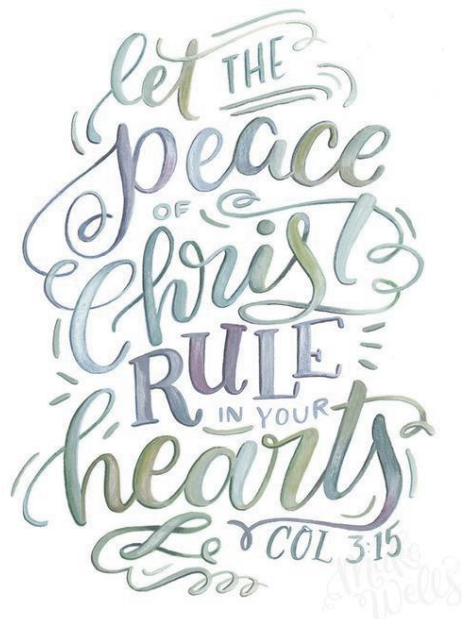
There is only one path to true peace. Jesus is the Prince of Peace. God is the Author of Peace.

Isaiah 12:2 says, "Behold God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid, for the Lord God is my strength and my song and He has become my salvation."

He alone can bring the peace that is never-ending.

May God bring us all to a place of peace and quiet.

Martha Blansette



Saturday, December 12, 2020

PEACE

*Peace I leave with you; my **peace** I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.* John 14:27 NIV

Peace to some may be a feeling that is hard to attain in these strange times that we having been living through despite that it is the Advent season. It seems that the current state of affairs with the coronavirus pandemic combined with the hostile and confusing political climate, as well as the social unrest and violence in our own city and throughout our country, has created a lot of plain old fear and anxiety.

But Jesus said “Do not be anxious about anything but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving; present your requests to God.” Philippians: 4:6 NIV

The singer song writer Toby Mac once said that “Satan tries to limit your praying because he knows your praying will limit him.” I truly believe that all of the chaos we are experiencing is from Satan himself. He just loves to stir up trouble and attempt to separate us from our relationship with our God with fear and anxiety and take away our **peace**.

But again Jesus told us: “I have told you these things, so that in me you may have **peace**. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.” John 16:33 NIV

There have been many times in my life after praying to Him that He laid His peace on my heart that is truly beyond understanding. I remember lying on a surgery table being prepped for emergency bypass surgery and praying/talking with Jesus to take the fear away. I truly had this **peace** wash over me that to this day I still cannot explain. It was like he said “we will talk when you wake up. I will not leave you.”

I know that all Satan’s noise can make it feel like it is not really Advent, but it really is. For the Christian, Advent is a season of celebration. Our celebration should lead to both an inward and outward sense of rejoicing as we commemorate the birth of Jesus for us, His birth in us, and His final coming in glory. I pray that you do not allow Satan to steal that from you and that each of you find that **peace** that you cannot explain through prayer and petition to our Lord Jesus Christ. Come Lord Jesus Come!

“For to us as 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.” Isaiah 9:6 NIV

Many Blessings this Advent Season,
Danny Hass



A ROAD TRIP, THE CENSUS OF QUIRINIUS, AND JOY

Do you remember the reason why Joseph and Mary had to travel to Bethlehem? Luke 2:1 tells us that Caesar Augustus declared a census to be taken before Jesus was born – the Census of Quirinius to be exact. From many accounts, a trip like that taken with Joseph on foot and Mary on a donkey would take four days one way. I'm sure that most pregnant ladies do not want to travel seventy miles on a donkey from Nazareth to Bethlehem just to fill out "some government forms" for a census. It was not an easy journey. Not only was it a long trip but fraught with danger. It was very possible that bandits and robbers lurked around the trails to take travelers' belongings or more. The trail itself was perilous as the rocky terrain could create accidents. Even worse, the Roman vassal King Herod the Great was aware that the new Messiah would become the King so he had a bounty on the unborn child.

So what does a dangerous trip through Judea and a census have to do with Joy? Well, during the time of Roman occupation, there was not much hope for the Jews or anyone else. They had been slaves, lost their kingdom, and now were under tyrannical rule of the Romans who did bad things to people that didn't play their game. The Jews had been promised a Messiah, a Deliverer, and a King who would bring true peace and establish their kingdom again.

Road Trip? Jesus was the Promise, the Messiah, and the everlasting King and He was coming finally. That road trip of Mary and Joseph's? Isn't your life like a road trip? It's dangerous. You have enemies that want to stop you on your journey, but if you have Jesus you have a constant companion who will protect and guide you along your way.

Census of Quirinius? That was what many historians think was the actual census requested. So what does counting people have to do with this devotional anyway? In those days, the census was taken to know how many people lived in each of the areas of the Roman Empire for various reasons. I'm always proud to be counted as an American when the USA census is conducted. Are there other censuses that you or I want to be included? Yes, there is!

A heavenly census! It's difficult to imagine but in God's plans He included a road trip for Mary and Joseph to be counted in the census so that Jesus would be born in Bethlehem and would become our Promise, Messiah, Savior, Deliverer, and everlasting King. Now, anyone who believes in the name of Jesus can be counted in that heavenly census. We can have JOY that God loved us to send his Son!

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. Luke 2:1

But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. Luke 2:10-11

Chris Towles



Monday, December 14, 2020

JOY

James 1:2-3

Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance.

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, for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

The verses from James immediately make me think of how Joseph must have not only persevered the ridicule, but also the unimaginable joy he felt after Jesus was born and the critics were silenced. I have always been taught that our Father in heaven will never give us a task that we cannot handle. I thoroughly believe that to be true. No one knows us better than God. I can't help but think how Mary could have doubted herself the whole time, but whenever I read about Jesus' birth she always seemed so still and trusting in the Lord. With everything going on she knew that what she was doing was the right thing. Despite everything she continued to trust and love God. This is why I picked the verses from 1 Peter. She never saw God face to face, only an angel came to tell her what was going to happen; while that may be pretty convincing for most, I probably would've been a little skeptical. That's part of the reason why God chose her to bring Jesus into this world. God knew she could handle the task at hand, and she trusted him through it all. She never saw God, but she loved and believed in God. It gave her so much joy doing so that she was willing to do whatever he asked!

I think we all need to read the story of Jesus' birth and really focus on those involved. Joseph shows great perseverance and because of that he receives great joy. Mary shows such great amounts of faith and love, and because she is so loyal, she too is filled with joy. I used to think that happiness was the pinnacle of emotion, but recently I have learned otherwise. Joy is uncontested. The Bible tells us that happiness will go away, but joy is everlasting. If we are able to serve God in the ways that we are asked, we, too, will be filled with joy!

Cole Abbott



THE JOURNEY OF JOY

Psalm 30

This psalm is filled with joyful words: *rejoicing, healing, favor, praise, dancing, sing, joy, thanks...* I like those words! Don't you? But, what about those other words that the psalmist spoke? Words like: *enemies, grave, pit, anger, weeping, dismayed, cried, destruction, wailing, sackcloth...* Those are certainly anything but joyful words! However, even in the midst of dealing with such difficulties, the psalmist had the assurance that his journey through the dark night would lead to the light of morning.

When the sun sets and darkness takes over the sky, nine to fourteen hours later (according to the season) the sun starts to rise again. The sunshine erases the darkness from the sky and ushers in the morning.

The psalmist praised God for joyful mornings because he had experienced some weeping nights. What causes you to weep? What is it that brings you distress and grief? What causes you mental anguish, emotional distress, or physical pain? What causes you to be anxious or worried? What causes you to fret and be a bundle of nerves? What makes you lie awake at night?

For some of you the weeping nights may be about the current pandemic which our world is experiencing, the isolation that the pandemic has caused, the unknowns of life, the death of a loved one, the diagnosis of cancer or coronavirus, the state of unemployment, a broken relationship with someone you love, a sin with which you have been struggling, a situation over which you have no control, or a family member or friend who needs to know Jesus as Savior. When we allow God to be in control of our weeping nights, we will be able to see the joy that is coming in the morning.

Genesis 1:5 says: *"God called the light 'day', and the darkness he called 'night'. And there was evening, and there was morning – the first day."* Evening came first. It is only after we experience the evenings – the nights – the darkness – that we can truly understand the mornings – the light.

Whatever your weeping nights are about, God knows all about them. Give them to Him. The longer we focus on the nights and the darkness, the farther we remain from the joy of morning. God will lead you to the light of morning. He will lead you to joy.

We remember that Jesus told us (John 10:10b): *"I have come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly."* Jesus truly wants us to have that abundant life on this earth (even during a pandemic). But we know that the ultimate joy comes when we as Christians meet Jesus face to face in heaven. What a day of rejoicing that will be! We will be rejoicing throughout all eternity!

I am grateful that whatever we face on this earth is temporary. We have questions and not always all of the answers. We may never be able to explain the twists and turns and ups and downs of this life or why we deal with such suffering on this earth. But, we know that God is faithful and will carry us through anything we face on this earth. Warren Wiersbe once said, *"Every difficult experience of life is an opportunity to have a 'pity party' or attend a rehearsal for singing in the choirs of heaven. We have a lifetime of grace to prepare us for an eternity of glory."*

God's desire is that we journey through this life in joy! May your journey on this earth be a journey of joy in spite of whatever circumstances you may face!

"...Weeping may remain for a night, but rejoicing comes in the morning." Psalm 30:5b

Joy to You!

Linda Barnes Popham

Wednesday, December 16, 2020

JOY! A FAVORITE CHRISTMAS WORD

Psalm 98:4-6 (NIV) --

*Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth,
burst into jubilant song with music;
make music to the Lord with the harp,
with the harp and the sound of singing,
with trumpets and the blast of the ram's horn—
shout for joy before the Lord, the King.*

Isaac Watts, a pastor and theologian of the early 18th century, wrote one of our most beloved Christmas hymns, “Joy to the World! The Lord Is Come!” Yet Watts didn’t really write the hymn for Christmas celebrations.

Watts wrote at least one paraphrase of each of the 150 Psalms. He felt the Hebrew Psalms should be Christianized--they should present Jesus as the Messiah--to be appropriate for Christian worship. He divided Psalm 98 into two separate hymns. The hymn we know as “Joy to the World” was based on the second half of that Psalm. Watts titled it “The Messiah’s Coming and Kingdom.” What a great title for an Advent hymn!

Today, after you finish with this devotion, take this time to write down the four stanzas of “Joy to the World.” Rather than reading the words as a Christmas hymn that you hear in the background while shopping or on a TV movie, see the text as a great hymn of the Advent season. See the deep theological points the hymn makes.

Christ came in the past as the baby of Bethlehem. He comes in the present when we invite Him into our hearts. He is coming in the future to reign for eternity.

Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth. “Joy to the world! The Lord *is* come!”

Steve Skaggs



ON THE MOVE

And Joseph also went up from Galilee... Luke 2:4

Have you ever noticed that people in the Christmas story are always on the move? After the Annunciation Mary goes to visit Elizabeth. When she comes back, she and Joseph go to Bethlehem. Shepherds leave the hills to see the baby and then return to their flocks. Wise men come for a visit and then go back home. Joseph, being warned in a dream that his family was in danger, goes to Egypt. The only person in the Christmas story who is not on the move is Herod and he's the villain of the tale!

We might be inclined to dismiss all the movement in the Christmas story and Herod staying put as unimportant details, but are they? Could there be a lesson in what we are told about who went and who stayed?

Thousands of years before Jesus was born God chose a man named Abraham to father a people through whom He would send His Son, Jesus, into the world. The first thing God asked Abraham to do was move from where he was to the distant land of Canaan, and Abraham went. From that time on Abraham's descendants saw themselves as people moving from where they were to a better place.

We are told in the New Testament that Christians are to see themselves the same way. 1 Peter 2:11 refers to us as "pilgrims" and according to Hebrews 11:13 and 13:14 we are "exiles" who have no lasting city here on earth. In Philippians 3:13-14 Paul invites to do what he has done, which is to forget what lies behind and strain forward to what lies ahead.

Unfortunately, it is human nature to do the opposite. Instead of pressing on, we want to settle down. We like the comfort, security, and predictability of life as we know it, and would rather stay put and hold on to what we've have than trade any of it in for something we haven't experienced.

Our call as people of God, however, is to always be letting go of where we are and moving on to where God wants us to be. For us, there is always a next step to take toward Jesus. What is that next step for you, and what is keeping you from taking it?

Karen Purnell



Friday, December 18, 2020

JOY

As I look back on my walk with Christ, I can see times when He walked beside me guiding me in decisions. He walked ahead of me clearing the path to keep me or get me out of dangerous situations. There are those times where He wrapped me in His arms, picked me up, and carried me through sorrow.

One of the difficult decisions was whether to move back to Louisville/Shepherdsville.

I was living in Russell Springs. I went to a wonderful church, loved my job, built a house, and lived on the same street as my best friend, taught a middle school Sunday School class, and loved my church; did I say that already? (LOL)

My oldest daughter and her husband lived in Memphis; my youngest daughter and my three grandkids lived in Maine. I could travel the two hours to Louisville and visit family occasionally on weekends. So, my plan was to live in Russell Springs for the rest of my life.

My mom had emphysema. It began to worsen and she needed help with some things such as going to doctor appointments, shopping, and cleaning. Two of my sisters, Joy and Lori, began doing these things for her, as well as some laundry and cooking occasionally.

I began to feel guilty and began to pray about it. It was more like arguing with God. *Lord, what about church, my Sunday School class?* I put my house up for sale, moved to Shepherdsville within walking distance of my mom, so I could help. I was able to spend time with my mom that I wouldn't have been able to do if I would have stayed in Russell Springs.

My daughter and grandchildren moved from Maine to Shepherdsville within six months of my move.


My oldest daughter and her husband moved to Charlestown, Indiana, and six years ago gave birth to my youngest granddaughter.

My heart hurts to think about moving, but I see all the things God gave me out of obedience, listening, and walking with Him.

As I walk with the Prince of Peace I have a peace and joy that I know I would not have without Him.

Jeremiah 29:11-14 NIV

Deborah Lawrence


BEHOLD,
I bring you
tidings
—of—
GREAT JOY!

THE LORD'S SERVANT

"I am the Lord's servant." Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled." Then the angel left her. Luke 7:38 NIV

What a major shift in Mary's life journey! Mary, the mother of Jesus, was raised in the Jewish tradition of hearing and knowing scripture, believing, and trusting in God. Mary was on the path of most women of her day to marriage and motherhood. She was prepared for this path - learning skills to run a household, engaged to a carpenter. Then, an angel of the Lord appeared before her and changed her journey: Mary, a virgin, had found "favor with God" and would bring the Savior of mankind into the world. Mary praised God: "My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior" (Luke 7:46 NIV). Her faith would sustain her as she raised her son, as she watched Him *grow* "in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man" (Luke 2:52 NIV), as she heard Him preach, heal and perform miracles, as He was crucified. So she experienced the love, peace, joy, and hope that believing in Jesus Christ brings to us. This was God's plan for her.

God has a plan for everyone. It took me most of my life to get on a path that led me to God's love, peace, joy, and hope. I was raised by good people, but they never spoke of personal relationships with Jesus. The earliest memory of attending church with my parents is being spanked when we got home for acting badly during the service. As a teenager, I argued with the Sunday School teacher about the Creation story; I thought some of the Bible stories were allegories of the culture of the time. My visits to churches were dates - definitely, not worship. My personal plan was a career, marriage, and eventually children. The first time my plan failed me was when I became anxious about my pregnancy. I prayed. Jesus came to me in a dream; He told me all would be well. We joined a Baptist church, sent our daughter to a Christian school and got baptized, but this was still *my* plan. I cried almost every time I went to a worship service. I read the Bible sometimes. I thought maybe a different church would give me peace of mind. After visiting several different churches, I finally got the message in one of them. I felt an overwhelming need to profess my faith that Jesus Christ is *my* Lord and Savior. God put "good" people in our path - members, teachers, deacons, and pastor. Reading the Bible everyday made me realize that "All scripture is God-breathed" (2 Timothy 3:16a). When I became frustrated with not being able to understand on my own what some Scripture was saying, I prayed that He would send me a sign that I was making progress as I searched for Him. He did! When a crisis in the family occurred, we prayed and prayed. He sent help and hope. We have peace in this surreal COVID atmosphere because we know God has a plan. His will be done. "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!" (Phil.4:4 NIV)

I am the Lord's servant,
Kathy Fraley



Sunday, December 20, 2020

JOURNEY TO BETHLEHEM: LOVE

Luke 2:1-7 – And it came to pass in those days that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed. (And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria.) And all went to be taxed, everyone into his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David) to be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child. And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. 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.

When I saw the title of the Christmas Devotional this year (*Journey to Bethlehem*), my first thoughts were of Mary taking that long journey to Bethlehem while in her last weeks of pregnancy. If it were today, the doctor/midwife would probably have discouraged Mary from traveling. This journey was not easy. According to <https://www.reference.com>, *the shortest route to Bethlehem was directly south through Samaria, but its hilly terrain would have proven particularly arduous for Mary, who was in the late stages of pregnancy. Other factors in avoiding that route were the hostile Samaritans in the region, who could have posed a threat to the two travelers, and the knowledge that it would be difficult for them to find lodgings.*

It is believed that Mary and Joseph chose a safer and more comfortable route that took them southeast through the Jezreel Valley and further east to the Jordan Valley. Continuing south to Jericho, they probably proceeded up through the Judean Desert to Jerusalem and onward to Bethlehem. By the end of their difficult trek, the couple would have walked more than 90 miles; much of that distance across difficult terrain.

Opinions differ on how many days it took Mary and Joseph to complete their epic journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem. Some scholars believe the trek lasted from four to seven days, while the Institute for Priestly Formation cites the journey as lasting a week and a half.

When Joseph and Mary arrived in Bethlehem, there was no room in the inn, so they had to find alternate lodging. It was in these circumstances that Mary went into labor. She had a natural childbirth without the aid of doctors/nurses and medication. I am sure she remembered what the angel had told her – (Luke 1:30-33 – *And the angel said unto her, Fear not, Mary: for thou hast found favor with God. And, behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shall call his name JESUS. He shall be great and shall be called the Son of the Highest and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David. And he shall reign over the house of Jacob forever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end.*) I remember when my children were born and the feeling of so much love and joy that filled my heart. I can only imagine the love and joy that Mary felt when she first looked at this newborn baby.

When I think of Christmas, I think of love and great joy. God kept His promise and sent His one and only Son to earth as a baby. He is the Savior that is there any time of the day/night and listens when we have difficulty voicing our concerns and fears in public. He is there through the hard times and He is there when joy comes. He is present when we mourn and are in physical or mental pain. He is also there when we celebrate His gifts of love and joy that He so freely gives. When fear and anxiety overtake you, you can always call on Him. He is a God of Love. I cannot think of a greater gift to mankind than the birth of our Savior, Jesus Christ.

Mary Kleber

Monday, December 21, 2020

LOVE YOUR ENEMIES

Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord. Leviticus 19:18

Love Lifted Me, Love is the Theme, What Wonderful Love Is This. These are but a few of the hymns that focus on love. Add to those the many popular secular love songs such as *All You Need is Love, What the World Needs Now is Sweet Love, I Will Always Love You,* and many more. Why is the subject of love so popular?

It is a basic human need to be loved and to give love. Scientific studies have shown that being loved increases our immune system and helps us feel less depressed. Humanity longs for love. And loving someone can be so easy and natural when that affection is reciprocated.

But what if it is not reciprocated? What if someone spreads fictitious rumors about you, discourages, complains, and criticizes you? How can one respond to such a person who treats you with such insensitivity?

Jesus gives us the answer in Luke 6:27-28: “But I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, be good to those who hate you, pray for those who mistreat you.”

An enemy is one who is actively hostile to someone. And Jesus wants us to *love that person?* His answer is yes! “If you love only those who love you, what reward is there for that? Even corrupt tax collectors do that much. If you are kind only to your friends, how are you different from anyone else? Even pagans do that.” Matthew 5:46-47

To love our enemies is to love and honor God. It might not seem easy, but it can be intentional. Reflect God’s love by loving others and praying for them. You will find that loving someone who is not demonstrating love for you is possible.

When asked what the greatest commandment was, Jesus answered, “Love the Lord your God with all your passion and prayer and intelligence. This is the most important, first on any list. But there is a second to go alongside it: Love others as you well as you love yourself.” Matthew 22-41 (The Message)

Norma Routt



Tuesday, December 22, 2020

LOVE...ESPECIALLY NOW

This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. 1 John 4:9 (NIV)

Oh, how we love the Christmas story. We enjoy sharing with our families the Bible passages about the shepherds, the angels, the three kings following a star, and the tiny baby lying on a bed of hay. We decorate our homes with lights, nativity scenes, and angel figurines. We delight in singing the familiar Christmas carols that sweetly remind us about Jesus and His birth.

As much as we treasure the moments of Christmas, what is even more important is what it represents to all of us. Especially now, it's easy to lose sight of God's presence in our world. Life in 2020 has been extremely challenging. We have all been touched by pain, frustrations, loss, and uncertainty. Especially now, we need to remember just how much God loves us...He loves us so much that He sent His son into the world so that we could live through Him. Regardless of what this life throws at us, His love is richly poured out. That special little baby came into the world as our greatest gift - the gift of everlasting love - an everlasting home with Him. All that is required of us is to accept this gift so freely offered.

It has been said that "love" is the most powerful emotion that a human can experience. However, we so often fail to truly love as we should. We allow jealousy, resentment, and hatred to fill our hearts and fracture spirits. We judge others when we have no idea what difficulties or circumstances they are facing. We fail to respect others when their opinions don't match our views. How thankful we should be that we have a God who loves us unconditionally, regardless of our frailties and failures. How blessed we are that a baby humbly entered our world and became the "atoning sacrifice for our sins". How beautiful is that image of God's love for us!

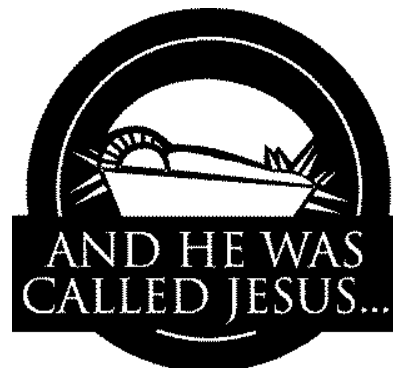
Especially now, let us remember what love really means. Love isn't about "being right". Love isn't about "being in control". Love doesn't care if you have different viewpoints. Love is blind to appearance, personality, color, race, and ethnicity. Instead, love is an emotion that can fill us with everything that is good and right. As Christians, love allows us to conquer all those obstacles and show God's love through us. His story becomes our story to share with the world. That's what Christmas represents to us...God's perfect gift of love for the entire world to know.

*The sleeping town did not know that lying in a manger low,
A Savior King who had no home had come to heal our sorrows,
Is there room in your heart...is there room in your heart,
Is there room in your heart for God to write His story?*

John Mark Hall/Matt Maher

Wishing you a Christmas filled with love...

Nettie Hale



Wednesday, December 23, 2020

LOVING EVERYONE

If I'm being completely honest, then I must say that I find it hard to love everybody. Sure, I know that's not the "spiritually correct" thing to say, but unfortunately it's the truth.

I find it easy to love my husband and kids. I love my friends and my dog. I love the precious orphans that flash across my television screen from across the world. I love the babies in the nursery. I love show-tunes and pizza and soccer and chocolate. But, there are some people that I find it exceptionally hard to love.

I'm not proud of this. And I can honestly say that I try to love everybody, but I find myself saying things like, "Well, I love her because God tells me to, but I don't really like her". Am I the only one?

I John 4:19 says "We love because he first loved us". It doesn't say we love because they are nice to us, agree with us, look like we want them to, smell nice, or give us gifts. It says we love because He (God) first loved us. He is our example. Period. God loves us with all our flaws and sins and He expects us to turn around and follow His lead. That means I can't be picking and choosing whom I love. It's my responsibility and my privilege to follow His example and love everyone.

And if I'm still being completely honest, then I must admit that when I say "I love her, but don't really like her", that's not okay either. That's just something I'm saying to make it sound a little better.

God tells us to love our neighbor. All of our neighbors. All of the time. Show love to them. Be loving to them. That's what we can do for them and that's what we can do for God.

Martha Blansette



Thursday, December 24, 2020

PEACE

This has been a very tough year for us all. It's been easy to get frustrated and angry while being cooped up inside our homes. The Covid-19 pandemic has affected us all in ways we would never have thought. From having grocery shelves bare, to having altercations in stores over cleaning supplies, people are struggling to live in a world full of illness, anxiety, uncertainty, and unrest. Our families, friends, neighbors, and coworkers have become ill with this virus. Most have recovered, but not all.

When Pastor Linda asked for people to write Advent devotionals for this year's book, I couldn't begin to think about it. My grief over my dad's recent death had cast a shadow over me that was, and is hard to get out from under. Compounded on that is the loss of not being able to prepare for this year's Christmas music with the Choir. (Singing Christmas music is what helps put me in the Christmas spirit.) It adds up to a very bleak feeling. I'm saying all this not to gain sympathy, but to try and gather a feeling or frame a perspective.

From the beginning of time, people have experienced many of the same problems and feelings. They have had to deal with an oppressive government, illnesses, anxieties, and worries, too. I'm sure they also felt frustration on a daily basis. They worried about where their daily food would come from, whether they had enough money, etc. They had no peace; we have no peace. Our lives are filled with nonstop noise. It's hard to find a quiet moment. That's where God comes in.

God gives us peace in a world filled with chaos. He comforts our hearts and fills our souls with his presence. I have been given much comfort during my time of grief by knowing that God is still in control of this world. He sees all and knows all. He understands our feelings and helps us to gain freedom from our troubles. God is the same God now as he was during the time of Jesus' birth.

The people on the hillsides of Judea tending their sheep had all of these same problems, too. But God showed them how to find peace. His Heavenly Host singing praises to Him, and about His Son's birth, filled the night sky. It must have been frightening at first, but then it gave them a sense of peace. The angel told them where to find the newborn Son of God and they sought him. Witnessing the holy family together must have been a peace-filled scene.

We can have that same sense of peace today. God can, and is willing to give it to us. He can proclaim it loudly—with a Heavenly Host of angels singing. Or, He can whisper it softly—saying be still, and know. However God speaks to you, listen to Him and gain peace.

Luke 2:13

Psalm 46:10

Lesley Hass



Friday, December 25, 2020

DOES JESUS HAVE A HOME IN YOUR HEART?

Luke 2:1-7

Our journey of Advent has once again led us to Christmas...to the Christ child in a manger in Bethlehem. As we have journeyed to Christmas, we too, like Mary and Joseph, have found ourselves in the midst of the everyday things of life, as well as some very unusual and unprecedented days. And here we are once again at the manger scene in Bethlehem.

When Mary and Joseph reached Bethlehem they found that the census enrollment had crowded the city. The inn was full. There were no available rooms except for a stable with a manger of hay – the place where animals were fed. There was no room in the inn in this crowded and inhospitable little town!

Have you made room for Jesus in your life – in your heart? In the midst of the everyday things of life, does Jesus have first place in your life or have you left Jesus out or have you put Him in second or third place?

Even though there was no room in the inn, Mary and Joseph encountered God in Bethlehem. They encountered God through a human birth in the context of the way the poor commonly lived. They were rejected from the inn, but they encountered God. Most of Bethlehem didn't even know that God was in town. The birth of Jesus Christ changed the lives of Mary and Joseph. The birth of Jesus turned the world upside down! The world will never be the same! We will never be the same!

Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace – born not in a wealthy palace – but in a humble stable – with animals and commoners. There were no barriers in a stable. Only certain people could enter a palace, but anyone could enter a stable. The poor, insignificant, forgotten, rejected people of the world can gather around the manger and know that the Babe who lies there was born for them. He was born for you and me!

Today Jesus continues to seek room and lodging. Long ago He sought entry into over-crowded hearts and did not find room and lodging with many people. Today His search continues and rejection goes on. He is still a stranger to much of our world. However, many people have accepted His favor and have said “O come to my heart Lord Jesus, there is room in my heart (life, routine, schedule) for You.” What about you? Does Jesus have a home in your heart? Is He your Savior and Lord?

Merry Christmas!
Linda Barnes Popham



Saturday, December 26, 2020

FINDING PEACE

Isn't it hard to have a peaceful heart in a time of uncertainty? Sometimes our To-Do list is so long it goes on for miles. Then the overwhelm sets in. The holidays bring in more stress. Not to mention we are in the middle of a pandemic. "Do not be afraid" (or some version of this statement: do not fear, fear not, etc.) is the most frequent command God has given us. I think in this time of uncertainty it is important to meditate and reflect on this.

I started listening to Christmas music on my way to work on November 1st (it was really a couple days before Halloween, but don't tell anyone!) and I came across this song sung by Steven Stewart: "**Do Not Be Afraid.**" It is all about Gabriel going to Mary, Joseph, the shepherds and announcing that the Savior of the world is coming! The chorus goes like this:

*Do not be afraid. Do not be afraid.
You will get through all that's asked of you.
Heaven's child is here. There's no need to fear.
God is bending near and He will stay.
Do not be afraid.*

We're human. We all have fears, but God commands us: "Do not be afraid." In the last chorus Steven sings: *Peace and goodwill have won the day. A perfect love will drive your fears away.* How cool is this and what a great reminder?! God has already won and He loves us so much that He will drive our fears away. It's time to let go and give it to God!

Take a moment, reflect on this year, and write down five fears that are on your mind right now:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

Now pray: *God, I know that you command us to not be afraid, but I am scared. These five things are laying heavy on my heart. Please guide my fears away and bring peace to my heart. Amen.*

This year is definitely one for the books, but remember God ALWAYS has a plan and commands us to not be afraid. I hope you go listen to this Christmas song and that it touches your heart like it did mine. My prayer for you is that you do find peace this holiday season, wherever you are in life.

Loren Pascua



Sunday, December 27, 2020

THE PEACE JESUS GIVES

Along with hope and joy, we often associate peace with the Christmas season. But, peace is something we can have all year long.

Throughout this crazy and unusual year we call 2020, with all the chaos and, of course, with the Covid-19 pandemic, I have been able to keep my peace through all of these difficult circumstances. Do I know a secret no one else knows? No, there is no secret; it's about remembering that Jesus said in John 14:27: "Peace I leave you, my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid."

Jesus gives us peace; it's just a matter of us accepting it. It is that simple. So in the season where we celebrate the birth of our Savior Jesus Christ, remember that He gives us His peace. His peace gives us hope and joy. Will you accept His peace? Will you live in His peace each day?

Merry Christmas and God Bless!
Warren Grumbley



Monday, December 28, 2020

FINDING GOD'S WILL TO BRING PEACE TO YOUR HEART

The Sovereign Lord has given me his words of wisdom, so that I know how to comfort the weary. Morning by morning he wakens me and opens my understanding to his will. Isaiah 50:4

The Bible is the best source for finding God's will for your life. I was saved and became a Christian when I was nine years old, but I have never read all the Bible. Last year in our International Christian Fellowship of Louisville Bible study we were challenged to read the New Testament. Michelle, my wife, and I were given a daily plan and we stuck to it and I am proud to say we finished all of New Testament. I was amazed at some of the things I learned. Now I read the Bible and different devotionals on a daily basis and it has definitely changed my life for the better. Even though I have doubts, fears, and anxiety about what the future holds for me; I know the Lord has a plan for my life. *Trust in the Lord with all your heart; do not depend on your own understanding. Seek his will in all you do, and he will show you which path to take. Proverbs 3:5-6*

I know one thing for sure, the time that I spend reading God's Word and praying each day has brought me much closer to God. Though some days are more difficult than others, all the more reason to turn to God for guidance and wisdom. James gave some excellent advice in the following verses: *If you need wisdom, ask our generous God, and he will give it to you. He will not rebuke you for asking. But when you ask him, be sure that your faith is in God alone. Do not waver, for a person with divided loyalty is as unsettled as a wave of the sea that is blown and tossed by the wind. James 1:5-6*

We have to believe and trust him now more than ever in these times of uncertainty. I pray to God and ask the Holy Spirit to guide me on a daily basis. I go to the scripture to find words of encouragement, to find guidance, and words of peace and comfort. *I am leaving you with a gift—peace of mind and heart. And the peace I give is a gift the world cannot give. So don't be troubled or afraid. John 14:27*

We cannot give in to those daily doubts and fears. I am writing this because of what Paul wrote in **II. Timothy 1:7-8**: *For God has not given us a spirit of fear and timidity, but of power, love, and self-discipline. So never be ashamed to tell others about our Lord. And don't be ashamed of me, either, even though I'm in prison for him. With the strength God gives you, be ready to suffer with me for the sake of the Good News.*

I hope that someone else might be inspired to look for God's will through prayer and reading God's Holy Word. Discerning God's will, may take time and patience, something we all lack sometimes, but I can assure you that our Savior will come through in the end. *Then Christ will make his home in your hearts as you trust in him. Your roots will grow down into God's love and keep you strong. And may you have the power to understand, as all God's people should, how wide, how long, how high, and how deep his love is. May you experience the love of Christ, though it is too great to understand fully. Then you will be made complete with all the fullness of life and power that comes from God. Ephesians 3:17-19*

As we celebrate Christmas, may we be reminded that Joseph and Mary followed God's plan even though they were afraid and uncertain. Their trust and obedience brought peace on Earth and good will to all men.

Blessings!

Steven Rascoe

WHAT IS PEACE?

Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace... Luke 2:14

At the very least, peace is the absence of conflict. Warring nations who decide to stop fighting draft peace treaties in order to keep whatever disagreements they have from erupting into open conflict again. In modern times the United Nations will sometimes send peacekeepers to countries recovering from war to encourage them to abide by the treaties they have signed.

The word “peace” is also applied to things that get wild, turbulent, and out of control (like the ocean or a lake) which we want to settle down. Peace in those circumstances means “to be calm”. Jesus spoke the word “peace” to the wind and the waves when a storm was raging on the Sea of Galilee and instantly they were calm.

Many of us deal with anxiety. We worry about things that haven’t happened yet or that we can’t change and we wish our minds would be at peace. Under those circumstances the peace we want is the kind that can let go of the stress we are under.

From earliest times the Jewish people have greeted each other with the word *shalom*. The way we translate that word when it appears in the Bible is “peace”. When Jesus was born the angels announced that He had come to bring “peace” on earth. The one gift Jesus gave to His followers the night before He died was his “peace” (John 14:27) and when He greeted them after He rose from the dead it was with the word “peace” (John 20:19 and 26). From what we can determine the kind of peace the angels and Jesus meant was the familiar *shalom*-peace of Jewish tradition.

Shalom-peace is more than the absence of conflict. It is more than calming down or letting go of what’s troubling us. *Shalom* is peace to the “nth” degree, peace maxed-out, peace fully achieved. It is tranquility, harmony and wholeness, reconciliation with God, personal well-being, and prosperity.

It was most likely *shalom*-peace that the angels wished for the world that first Christmas night and it is the kind of peace that only Jesus can give. The closer we are drawn to him, the more we have of it. But the *shalom*-peace of God is not something that is ours to hoard: instead it is a gift to be shared. Where, and to whom, can you bring the peace of Christ today?

Karen Purnell



Wednesday, December 30, 2020

PEACE

Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. Colossians 3:15 NIV

Sometimes it is very hard to sit still and be at peace with the world around you and sometimes it is even harder to be at peace with yourself and your own thoughts. In those times I dare myself to reflect on all the good and wonderful people around me. Signs of His love are everywhere, we just have to pause, remember, and give thanks. For me, that is the best way to find peace.

Isn't it wonderful that we serve a mighty God who offers us peace and grace despite the chaos around us? Take a moment to quiet your mind right now and enjoy the quiet God has given you to reflect on Him:

- Wherever you are, take a moment to breathe in the air around you.
- Breathe in through your nose very slowly and out through your mouth several times.
- Sometimes it helps me to place my hand over my chest and remember that God has given me the ability to breathe in His goodness.
- Share your worries and fears with Him and pray for guidance.
- Then, think of all the things and people surrounding you and give thanks for all of them.
- Finally, let go of what has passed and what could be in the future and simply be there with God.

Everything may feel chaotic right now, but God is stronger than all of the discord in the world. His grace, love, peace, and support make all of the wonderful moments, gifts, and people possible in our daily lives. Remember, to take time to be thankful, meditate on His goodness, and find peace in His embrace. God always makes time to spend with us and we must remind ourselves that peace is there, just waiting for us to find Him.

Jamie Gibbs



A NEW BEGINNING

When the people of Israel were in Babylonian captivity, God told them, “Forget, the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the desert and streams in the wasteland.” (Isaiah 43:18-19)

New beginnings! This is a constant theme that runs through God’s Word! Over and over in His Word we hear that God refreshes, renews, heals, blesses, makes whole, cleanses, restores, forgives, and makes us into new creations. These new beginnings are seen in creation, in exile to liberation, in the healing miracles, in forgiveness of sins, and in the new birth that is ours in accepting Jesus Christ as personal Savior.

If you do not know Jesus Christ as your personal Savior, the first *new thing* is to begin that relationship today. In John 3 we find Nicodemus, a wealthy Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin, having a conversation with Jesus about this new beginning. When Nicodemus came to Jesus, he said that no one could help being impressed with the signs and wonders that Jesus did. Jesus’ answer was that it was not the signs and wonders that were really important, but instead it was new birth. “Unless you are born again you cannot see the kingdom of God.” Jesus wants to give this same new birth to all!

A new year begins tomorrow. A great way to start the year 2021 is to decide today to let God do a *new thing* in you as you journey through this year! What new beginning is needed in your life?

- A new beginning of starting a personal relationship with Him...
- A new beginning of living a faithful life...
- A new beginning of being courageous in standing for Jesus...
- A new beginning of a reconciling a relationship with a family member or friend...
- A new beginning of forgiving someone who has wronged you...
- A new beginning of making Sunday School and corporate worship a priority...
- A new beginning of spending daily devotional time with God...
- A new beginning of giving tithes, talents, and time to God’s church...
- A new beginning of praying for others and serving others...
- A new beginning of supporting God’s church...
- A new beginning of living the life of a godly parent or a more patient spouse...
- A new beginning of being a more conscientious employee...
- A new beginning of allowing Him to restore the joy of your salvation...
- A new beginning of resting in His love and accepting His grace...
- A new beginning of showing an optimistic spirit...
- A new beginning of following Him where you know He is leading you...
- A new beginning of accepting the second chance He has given you...
- A new beginning of letting go of the sin that has you in bondage...
- A new beginning of being obedient the area in which He is convicting you...

God wants to do a *new thing* in you! Will you let Him? May 2021 be the year of new beginnings for you! May God do a *new thing* in you!

Happy New Beginning!
Linda Barnes Popham



Friday, January 1, 2021

HOPE FOR THE NEW YEAR

Happy New Year!

Hope. It's a word that has a different meaning for a Christian.

Growing up, my definition of "Hope" was "wish". Most people are like that. "I HOPE I get a new phone for Christmas"; "I HOPE everything turns out OK"; or "I HOPE I get that new job". Most people confuse "HOPE" with "WISH", which is a yearning for an outcome that we really have little control over and no assurance of happening. Many, many people still have that definition of "HOPE".

As Christians, our definition of "hope" is the assurance of a future outcome. No maybes here! Assurance! And we have this assurance through our faith in Jesus Christ. "Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." (Hebrews 11:1). My faith in Jesus Christ gives me that assurance.

When I was 16, I came to know the Lord Jesus Christ. Yes, at that time I KNEW, thanks to Jesus, that I would have eternal life. But, I did not really realize until later that God offers us a plan. You see, to a 16 year old, "eternity" is not only a long time; it's a long time away. God's plan includes walking with Him every day, listening to the Holy Spirit, and growing closer to Jesus as we walk. We as Christians really miss out on a blessing when we are not growing closer to Christ every day.

As I have grown in my walk with the Lord, I learned the real meaning of Hope. The outcome is assured. Jesus Christ has already won. Because He has already won the victory, so have I. Not just tomorrow, but today as well.

As you begin the New Year, my wish for you I borrow from Paul's letter to the Romans: "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in Him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit." Romans 15:13

Phil Shewmaker



CHOOSE PEACE

Isaiah 11:1-9

Isaiah described a day in which a coming king would bring about a radical transformation. He illustrated this coming day when predators, domesticated animals, and an innocent child would live peacefully together. The wolf would dwell graciously with the lamb. The leopard and the young goat would lie down willingly together. A young calf, a young lion, and a fattened bull would exist harmoniously together. The cow and the bear would graze serenely in the same pasture. The lion and the ox would tranquilly eat straw together. The child would hold a poisonous snake and not be harmed. This picture obviously symbolized something far greater than the animal kingdom.

This new age of which Isaiah spoke would be one in which the mighty would live peacefully with the weak. Exploiters of the poor and needy would change such evil habits. People of all races would live together with love and kindness. The vulnerable would be immune from danger. There would be no more ill-treatment, meanness, and corruption. People would live without fear. There would be peace and tranquility.

The day finally came! “Mary gave birth to her first-born son and wrapped him in cloths and laid him in a manger” (Luke 2:7). The Prince of Peace was born. Peace came to the earth.

Then where is that picture of the lamb and the lion and all others living together peacefully in this world filled with social unrest, pandemics, bombings, shootings, terrorist attacks, abuse, lying, meanness, hatred, murder, trafficking, and persecution? We even see bloodshed in our churches...massacres at concerts...killings in schools...murders in homes! Where is that beautiful picture of world peace and that love and tranquility of which Isaiah spoke?

One day that peace will be reality. Complete peace will only be realized when Jesus comes again; however, that peace is not supposed to be so foreign right now as we live together on this earth. We are to live in peace with each other and even with people with whom we differ or disagree. Paul reminds us in Romans 12:18-21 that we are to live in peace with others as far as it depends on us. We can be at peace with others, but we can't make them be at peace with us.

So what can we do to usher in peace as far as it depends on us?

- We can choose to be at peace with God. Peace comes from fully trusting in the Prince of Peace who was born for each of us. Have you trusted Him as Savior and Lord?
- We can choose to be at peace with ourselves. We do this by focusing fully on Jesus. Are you seeking Him above all else?
- We can choose to be intentional about being peacemakers like Jesus told us to in the Sermon on the Mount. Are you actively working to reconcile people to God and people with each other?

Let us join together in bringing peace to the “corner of the world” in which we live! Let us choose peace. Let peace begin with you and me!

Praying for a Peaceful 2021!

Linda Barnes Popham



Sunday, January 3, 2021

THANKS BE TO GOD!

Thirteen years ago when our family moved to Louisville, we bought a home. We bought it without having any idea that six years later I would be using a cane. Now I ponder, how in the world did the builder have so many amenities that would be absolutely perfect, even though we weren't house-shopping with that in mind!

This reminds me of how great our God is throughout the Bible. He had prophets in the Old Testament who foretold the details of our coming Savior. He had Elizabeth prepared for a visit from Mary who so needed a Godly female confidant during her pregnancy. Mary was betrothed to Joseph. How many other men would have honored their betrothal! He had a census ordered to bring Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem....the Savior's birthplace. God even had a man who gave them shelter for that night of all nights. Not one detail of Jesus' birth, life, death, or resurrection was accidental, coincidental, or left to chance. The list could go on for pages! God had orchestrated it all seamlessly so many years before. He was willing to go to any lengths to show us His love clearly....and He is the master of planning ahead.

Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift!

2 Corinthians 9:15

Karen Love



Monday, January 4, 2021

SEEKING JESUS

Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the East, and have come to worship him. Matthew 2:2

For many years I was just a pew sitter and didn't get involved in church. I was living in Evansville when a group of singers from Mobile, Alabama was coming to the church I attended for a Sunday evening concert. I wasn't interested and didn't plan to go, but the pastor called me Saturday afternoon because another home was needed to provide a place for some of the singers to stay overnight. My wife and I agreed to take two of the young people from the group into our home so, of course, we ended up going to the concert.

I was blown away. I had never heard contemporary Christian music before. The power of the music opened my heart to hear the message that God truly loved me and wanted me to love Him back in a way I had never heard it. I went to many more concerts that this group called TRUTH presented and was so moved that after I was transferred back to Louisville I was inspired to start a junior high choir at Highview Baptist Church.

I led youth choirs for many years and eventually "graduated" to adult choirs. One of my favorite times of the year for music was Christmas. One of the churches where I was a part-time Minister of Music had a "Living Christmas Tree" in storage. We got a crew together, took it out of storage and put it up in the church. The first year we had 35 singers on the tree. The next year we combined with another church that wasn't going to have a Christmas program and we not only filled the tree, we had bushes (singers on both sides of the tree in addition to the folks on it)!

My favorite Christmas choir anthem is a song called "Wise Men Still Seek Him" by Christopher Machen. It's about the journey the wise men took to Bethlehem. In the song theirs is a journey from hopelessness to Jesus. My hope for you this Christmas is that you are among those wise enough to have found Him, too.

*Wise men still seek Him;
Through the shadow of night
they search for the light of hope in Christ.
And the darkness gives way to the dawn
when wise men still seek Him.*

Bud Purnell



Tuesday, January 5, 2021

GOD IS FAITHFUL

When I was a child, my family didn't take vacations. Occasionally we would go see my sister in Texas or my mother's sisters. My dad owned his own business and he never thought he should take time off. When my friends talked about going to Disneyland or even the lake, I remember thinking I was going to take my own children places if I ever had children. That thought led to a life choice or two that I would make in the future.

Thanks to the high school art club, I had gone on two bus trips, one to Kansas City and one to New Orleans. I enjoyed the trips and they were uneventful in my mind, probably a good thing today. I had never flown on an airplane.

In 1971, I graduated from high school. From working at Economy Drug Store part-time, I had saved over \$1,000. I decided to go on a trip to Europe with the money. My sister's best friend was my French teacher and was going to be the chaperone. My family went along with the idea. My parents were planning to separate that summer so it seemed like the perfect time to get away. I didn't want to help divide their belongings to go to different homes.

My close friends did not go on this big trip to Europe. It was scheduled for five and a half weeks. A few days before we departed for overseas, I developed symptoms like a cold and almost lost my voice. The doctor prescribed an antihistamine. I had packed my huge suitcase so full it was hard to close.

As a group of fifty plus students, we flew on a big jet out of Kansas City. We got somewhere over middle America when the stewardess walked down the aisle and said we had, "lost an engine."

I thought, "How do you lose an engine? Where did it fall out and what about the people on the ground that it probably fell on?" That's not what she meant. One engine had broken down. We made an unexpected landing in Bangor, Maine. I was dreading being stuck in Maine. After all, I was tired of being stuck in Arkansas. My dread was unfounded. In the month of June, Bangor, Maine is a very beautiful area. I studied the clear blue water, sail boats, great big evergreen trees, and a light house or two. After I studied the coast of Maine for those unexpected hours, I was thankful I got to see it.

After several hours in Bangor, the engine was repaired and we re-boarded the plane. Over the Atlantic Ocean we went, also a first for me. We arrived early in the morning the next day outside of London. We got to the Hillbrow Hotel in London right before sunrise. I was excited to see our new residence not knowing I was going to be lugging my massive suitcase up thirteen flights of stairs because there was no "lift." My cold/allergy symptoms automatically disappeared as I relaxed into our new residence. Also, the people spoke my language, but in a funny way!

After England, we went to France, Germany, Switzerland, Austria, and Italy. Those people did not speak my language. I would talk louder and louder to them, but that didn't help. When I signed the contract to go on the trip, I didn't have any idea what was ahead of me. God blessed me and protected me.

After the 1971 summer trip to Europe, I went to college and I would like to say that it was all rainbows and butterflies from then on but it wasn't. College was a lot of hard work and working part-time while going to college was hard, too. I bought a cute red car but it was a jalopy, a flashy jalopy. I had to buy

cases of oil because it used more oil than gas! I'd like to say my married life a few years later was good, but that's not really how it was. When I was married, God blessed me with two wonderful and very different sons.

After I was single, I spent many years dreaming about going back to Europe but how many single mothers do that? In 1989, I got a call offering me a job teaching school on a U.S. military base in Germany. I jumped at it. My son talked about when I "won that job." I was thrilled, but there was uncertainty facing me again. I did have to get legal permission to take my children out of the U.S. and it was quickly and legally approved. What would my new job be like? Most of my time was spent teaching, helping kids, mine and others. Many weekends we travelled. That was easy because Europe is a small continent and day trips from the base were discounted.

In 1989, Germany was just as beautiful as I'd remembered it in 1971, scenic, clean, and tall evergreens much taller than the ones here in America. I lived and worked there for five years with occasional trips back to the States. My sons were able to see much of the world. I drove all over Europe in my black Corolla, with never a problem, except for the ticket I got on the Autobahn! It was a construction zone and I had not seen the warning sign. Together my boys and I chopped on the Berlin Wall, saw the Vatican and were blessed by Pope John Paul, rode along the canals in Amsterdam, ate pizza in Luxembourg, France, and Italy and other adventures.

My boys and I made friends with wonderful Christian people there. We didn't all look the same or have the same background, but we loved God and knew how He wanted us to act. My sponsor was a Baptist preacher's wife. A neighbor, Kathy, babysat my son for free after school because my son got home before I did and she had a son she homeschooled the same age. Her husband helped me with my resume. Marva babysat for me so I could go to a weekend conference. This list could go on and on, but what matters is that we were Americans and we all looked out for each other. A Jewish specialist helped me with discipline in the classroom. We all pulled together and that helped make the time there very special. I think back on that first big trip and how unsure I was about it all. I think about the second big "trip" the five years we lived in Germany, too, and now I miss hearing the German language and many of the German people I met.

God is faithful and he looked out for us, in spite of all my fears and uncertainty. He kept us safe and opened our eyes about all kinds of people. God meant it all for good and it was good.

2 Thessalonians 3:3

"But the Lord is faithful, and he will strengthen and protect you from the evil one." (NIV)

Merry Christmas and Frohliche Weihnachten!

Martha Carter Falkner



Wednesday, January 6, 2021

A JOURNEY FULL OF HOPE

Have you ever started out on a road trip knowing the highway you were going to take but not quite sure how many miles you were going to travel or exactly what would become your final destination? This was the kind of journey the “Magi,” or “Wise Men from the East” found themselves on as the story is told in the New Testament Gospel of Matthew.

The Magi had seen a brilliant star appear which, as astrologers, they believed was a miraculous sign of the birth of a Messiah King. They thus had begun a journey full of hope seeking to find and worship Him.

With their huge Arabian camels, they followed the direction of the star to the city of Jerusalem in Judea. These large, stately beasts of burden could scarcely go unnoticed by Jerusalem’s inhabitants. And the Magi evidently began to ask everyone they met where they might find this newly born King. Matthew 2:3 verifies their zealous questioning as the verse says, “When King Herod heard this [talk of the Magi’s inquiry] he was disturbed and all Jerusalem with him,” The Holy Bible, New International Version.*

Keep in mind that Judea was part of the Roman Empire at this time. And King Herod, a Jew, was the ruler of the Jewish state although ultimate power came from Rome. So, instead of being delighted by news of the long-awaited Messiah, Herod felt threatened when the chief priests and teachers of the law whom he had summoned told him what the Prophet Micah had said: “But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel whose origins are from old, from ancient times,” Micah 5:2, The Holy Bible, NIV.*

King Herod arranged a secret meeting with the Magi so he could be the one doing the questioning this time. He wanted to know from them the exact time the star had appeared as this would signal when the Jewish Messiah had been born. He also offered them the information he had gotten from the chief priests and teachers of the law, namely that the Baby had been born in Bethlehem. Under the pretext of wanting to pay homage to the Child also, Herod told them, “Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him,” Matthew 2:8b The Holy Bible, NIV.*

These Arabian visitors left Jerusalem and continued their journey to Bethlehem following the spectacularly luminous star. The Gospel Matthew’s relating of the story tells us it stopped right over the house where the Child Messiah was with His mother Mary. The Wise Men and their camels had reached their destination.

The Bible account doesn’t tell us what Mary’s reaction to these strangely dressed foreigners was. So we are left to wonder how she felt as they came into the house and bowed down before her Child in reverence and worship. She had however been told by an angel before her Son’s birth that He was not her betrothed husband’s child. He was conceived by the Holy Spirit. He was the Son of God.

Unlike the paintings you have seen where shepherds and Magi together are bowing before an Infant Jesus lying in a manger, an animal’s feeding trough, the Scriptures are clear that the Magi entered a house. There they found a young Child, not a Baby. Undoubtedly it was an early artist’s decision to

have shepherds and the Magi witnessing the Glory of the Lord at the same time and later artists followed suit.

In a house in Bethlehem is where the Magi presented the gifts they had brought—presents fit for a King—glistening gold, aromatic incense, and woody-smelling myrrh. Some have interpreted these precious gifts as also being symbolic. Gold represented the Messiah's kingship. Frankincense was an incense to be burned in recognition of Christ's deity. And myrrh oil was used to prepare a body for burial. Thus the myrrh presented to the Child foretold the suffering He would endure as an adult and His ultimate death on a cross through the trial, sentencing, and execution by the Roman government.

The last thing we know of the Magi is encapsulated in the twelfth verse of the second chapter of Matthew: "And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route," Matthew 2:12, The Holy Bible, NIV.* These travelers had completed their journey to Bethlehem and their mission to find the Messiah was fulfilled.

**If you would like to listen to a reading of the Scriptures used to prepare this devotional, simply go to www.Bible.com You can install the free Bible app on any of your electronic devices or you can simply click the "Read the Bible Now" bar. At the top of your screen reading left to right, choose the book of the Bible, the chapter, and the version. Under versions a drop-down menu allows you to change the language. Next you may click to compare parallel versions. Then you may tap to hear audio recordings of some selected versions. Finally to the extreme right you may click to enlarge the size and change the font.*

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