

***Advent / Christmas Worship
2023 - 2024***

***“The Heart of Christmas
is Jesus!”***



***Fern Creek Baptist Church
Louisville, Kentucky***

Advent/Christmas Worship

Our theme for this Advent / Christmas season is *“The Heart of Christmas is Jesus!”*. As these devotionals point us to Jesus Christ, our prayer is that you will truly experience the hope, peace, joy, and love found only in Him. Members and friends of our church (from youth to senior adults) 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. These worship services are listed in this booklet.

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

May these devotionals help you to unclutter your hearts in order to focus on the real reason for this holy season. The Heart of Christmas is Jesus!

Merry Christmas!
Linda Barnes Popham



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ADVENT/CHRISTMAS WORSHIP SERVICES

December 3: The First Sunday of Advent

10:45 a.m. – Lighting of the Candle of Hope
6:00 p.m. – “Hanging of the Greens”

December 10: The Second Sunday of Advent

10:45 a.m. – Lighting of the Candle of Peace
6:00 p.m. – Youth and Children’s Choir Program
7:00 p.m. – New Members’ Reception

December 17: The Third Sunday of Advent

10:45 a.m. – Lighting of the Candle of Joy
Adult Choir Christmas Cantata
6:00 p.m. – Instrumental Christmas

December 19

7:00 p.m. – Child Development Center Christmas Program (Four-Year-Olds)

December 20

6:30 p.m. – Service of Comfort and Hope

December 21

10:30 a.m. – Child Development Center Christmas Program (Two and Three-Year-Olds)

December 24: The Fourth Sunday of Advent – Christmas Eve

9:30 a.m. – Pancake Breakfast
11:00 a.m. – Christmas Eve Service
Lighting of the Candle of Love
Lighting of the Christ Candle

December 31: The First Sunday of Christmas

10:45 a.m. – We Celebrate the Birth of Christ.
12:00 p.m. – Prayer Vigil Begins

Childcare for preschoolers is available during the services.

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

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 true 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 mostly 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

The theme for this year's devotional book is "The Heart of Christmas."

I believe the heart is right there in the word of Christmas, and it is "Christ." You will read about the Heart of Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love.

We begin today with the Heart of Hope. I wasn't sure how to explain it, so I used my reference book to search words of Hope listed in the Bible.

Hope Does Not Disappoint

Romans 5:5

"Now hope does not disappoint because the love of God has been poured out of our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us."

Hope That Is Seen

Romans 8:24

"For we were saved in this hope, but hope that is seen is not hope."

Hope Of Salvation

1 Thessalonians 5:8

"But let us who are of the day be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet the hope of salvation."

Hope In God

Psalms 78:7

"That they may set their hope in God and not forget his deeds, but would keep his commandments."

Hope In Christ

1 Corinthians 15:19

"If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are all men the most pitiable."

Hope In The Lord

Psalms 31:24

"Be of good courage, and He shall strengthen your heart, of you who hope in the Lord."

Hope Of The Wicked

Proverbs 10:28

"The hope of the righteous will be gladness, but the expectations of the wicked will perish."

Hope Of Eternal Life

Titus 1:2

"In hope of eternal life which God, who cannot lie, promised before time began."

I believe the Heart of Hope is within us. Our faith, trust, and belief in God. It is that hope which pulls us through the tough times. Hope is the reason we pray. Hope is the reason we can rejoice. It is Hope that can fill our hearts when we know the true meaning of Christmas.

Glenda Coddington

Monday, December 4, 2023

NATHAN'S LAMB

“And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the fields keeping watch over their flocks by night.” Luke 2:8

Among the characters we picture gathered at the manger every year are shepherds. But it's not just at Christmas that we encounter shepherds in the Bible. On the contrary, we read about them and their work often. God is even described as a shepherd in the twenty-third Psalm, which was written by a man who was himself a shepherd.

That man was David and he became one of Israel's greatest kings. He was not always, however, a good king. There was a point in David's life when he took another man's wife, and then had her husband placed on the front lines of a battle to be killed so he could marry the woman. David hoped no one other than the man's wife and her husband's commander knew what he had done. But God knew and sent the prophet Nathan to tell David a story.

In the story there is a poor man who has one precious lamb that he and his family love dearly. In that town there is also a rich man who has plenty of sheep, but when an important visitor comes to his door, he takes the poor man's lamb instead of one of his own and kills it to provide a meal for his guest.

David was enraged. How dare the rich man do such a thing! Nathan turned to David and said “You are that man.”

In an instant David realized that his sin had cost an innocent man his life. He repented and was forgiven. Think for a moment, though, about the imagery Nathan used to bring David to that realization. In the story sin costs a lamb its life, and David's forgiveness is predicated on the repentance that follows the death of that lamb.

Like David we, too, cross the boundaries God has set for our lives. We seize on what's not ours and use it to satisfy our desire for relief, power, or pleasure. It can be as simple a thing as being angry about something the person in front of us doesn't know anything about, and then taking our frustration out on them just because they are handy. It seems like such a small sin, but the cost of forgiveness for it, along with all the bigger sins in our lives, is the death of a Lamb.

Jesus is that Lamb, dearly loved by the Father, whose death both convicts us of the gravity of our sin and invites us to repent so that we, too, can experience forgiveness just as David did. Nathan's story, then, is also our story, helping us each to realize that we need a Savior, and that in the Lamb of God we have exactly what we need.

Karen Purnell



Tuesday, December 5, 2023

THE HEART OF HOPE IS JESUS

“For I know the plans for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.” Jeremiah 29:11 NIV


Prophets, like Isaiah and Jeremiah, after the exile of the Israelites, foretold events of the miraculous birth of the Messiah – the Virgin birth, His humble beginnings, the visit by the Magi. The hymn, *“O Little Town of Bethlehem”*, has this line in the first verse: *“The hopes and fears of all the years Are met in thee tonight. (words, Phillips Brooke; music, Lewis H. Redner)”*. The Messiah is this baby in the manger, not a warrior who would save the Jews from Roman oppression. Jesus is the heart of God’s promise to give us a future; He would be the hope of humankind. He would not wage war. He would not even *“raise his voice (Isaiah 42:2)”*; Isaiah continues verse 42 to describe the servant of God, *“In faithfulness he will bring forth justice; he will not falter or be discouraged till he establishes justice on earth. In his teaching the islands will put their hope.”* Isaiah 42: 3b-4

In his gospel, John gets to the heart of the matter: *“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned* John 3:16-18a

God has a plan and a future for you. God also has a gift for you this Christmas – if you haven’t already accepted it - open it and receive the heart of Jesus. Believe in Him. He has prepared the way to life with Him in heaven by carrying our sins at the crucifixion, being placed in a tomb, and rising again on the third day. *“...because hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.”* Romans 5:5

Let there be a most holy and hopeful Christmas in your heart.

Kathy Fraley


Jesus
is our hope

Wednesday, December 6, 2023

HEART OF HOPE

But since we belong to the day, let us be self-controlled, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet. I Thessalonians 5:8-9 NIV

*And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.
I Corinthians 13:13 NIV*

As we approach the Christmas Season, the world focuses on a message of hope. But hope that is based on what? They have rejected Jesus, the source of hope, so in what is their hope supported? The message I hear is that it will come from the good will of people, or Santa, or something or someone else of the world. What a misguided and sad understanding.

Look at I Corinthians 13:13. Hope is firmly positioned between Faith and Love. Choosing Jesus Christ is not possible without the faith given to us by God and His eternal love for us.

Hope in Jesus is what helps to sustain us as we wait for Him to come again!

Be committed to staying focused on the true hope of us all, as you enjoy the coming time of celebration. Look for every opportunity to show and tell the world where to find true hope.

Rev. Rick Pryor



THE CHRISTMAS OF MY CHILDHOOD

“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light.” Isaiah 9:2

We bought a tree, trimmed the stump
and let it sit in water for a week.
Before the water froze we took the tree,
fresh cut the stump, and struggled
to level it in a stand.
Inside the house one of us
whose fingers minded needles the least
wrapped the tree in lights.
Then out from the back of an ill-used closet
came boxes of ornaments saved from year to year.
They were hung, and finally the tinsel,
new from the store, was draped,
not always carefully, over the branches.

There was work to it all
and not many volunteers, as I remember,
so by the time I was ten,
all but the heavy lifting was mine to do,
because I cared --- not about the tree,
but about the hope it held for me.
It was a dark time --- dark with a sadness
I feared would last forever ---
and what I needed most in the months ahead
was not to be alone in it.

Each year faith celebrates a day of victory over the night
when death is overcome
and all is made new, but Christmas
is the “I am with you in the darkness” moment,
a dim light kindled,
more like an ember than a flame,
around which the desperate and broken gather
to be warmed with the hope
that we will not always hurt and
someday may even be healed.

In many ways I am still that child
peering into the darkness of a world unraveling,
--- impoverished, frivolous, and unjust ---
where anywhere and anytime
can suddenly be the wrong place
and the wrong time.
The difference is that I am not alone now.
The light I longed for in the darkness
has found me, and I am certain
will walk through all of it with me
to where the darkness ends
and His love is all I know.



Friday, December 8, 2023

HOPE-FULL!!!

For God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness", made his light shine in our hearts, to give us the light of knowledge of the glory of God in the face of the Messiah. II Corinthians 4:6

I am a Christ follower. The verse above reminds me that Jesus' glory shines into our hearts when we receive Him into ours. I think we must recognize the difference between Hope-FULL and Hope-LESS thinking and speaking, and then combat it with the truth. Warfare for HOPE!

So, I should be shining bright, right? That said, being Hope-FULL has been a life-long challenge. Hope has been the hardest one to get my arms (heart and head) around. I know, from God's Word that hope is mine. It is a promise. But if I don't pay really close attention to my "feeler" thoughts of doubt and dread, those thoughts can quickly go south. I call this Hope-LESS thinking. But today, I rebuke this Hope-LESS thinking and from my humble heart I really want you to get this truth. We are called to be Hope-filled. Hope is one of the three that remain in. (I Corinthians 13:13 *Now these three remain, faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.*) Hope is wedged right in the middle of faith, hope, and love. So, I honestly believe in God's Word, where we see faith and love we must also "know in our knower" that hope remains there, too.

Hope-LESS thinking (it is a super sneaker) and comments like, "I sure hope so", right after you have boldly prayed, is a stinking little hopeless thought creeping in. Wait a second, was that Hope-FULL? Nope, rebuke it. Instead, activate Hope-Full with God's truth. (II Corinthians 7:10 *Godly sorrow brings repentance that looks to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death.*) Well, I do believe; therefore, it is not hopeless!!

Some of the most comforting words in the Bible are from Jesus: In this world there will be trouble, (I take comfort in this because He told me the truth when He told me I would have trouble in this world). But He did not stop there, **but take heart**, (hello hope) take heart, take heart, dear heart.... because I have OVERCOME the world. (John 16:33 *"I have told you these things, so that you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart, I have overcome the world."*)

Not wishful, but Hope-FULL thinking!! Hebrews 11:6 tells us without faith it is impossible to please God. It does not stop there, but to those who believe He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him. I'm going to add and be bold in saying that without Hope in Him, in all things we do not see, it is impossible to have fullness of joy/peace in your innermost being. Therefore, Arise, Shine in Hope-FULLness.

I HOPE

I hope you love Jesus. I love Jesus. He is what I put my hope in. He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. If you do, it takes care of everything. It truly does. From everlasting to everlasting, a complete finished never-ending glory.

And, the most important thing, the most exciting part is that if you do and I do too, we have each other together from everlasting to everlasting. We are together in the everlasting and we don't need to worry about not being together. There is ALWAYS another time for us to visit.

I hope you love Jesus. That is what I hope.
Becca Thompson (daughter of Sharon and Gordon Thompson)

THE HEART OF CHRISTMAS IS JESUS HEARTS OF 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. Romans 15:13 NIV

Christmas has always been my favorite holiday. The festive lights, the beautiful decorations, the wonderful music, spending time with loved ones and all the other traditions we observe. Even more so, the compassion, peace, and love in the air. Can you feel it? As we get closer to Christmas, the feeling of hope that makes you realize how thankful you are for all the blessings you have... and the ones to come. Fun fact, I start listening to Christmas music on the first of November and don't stop until I put away my tree, usually in March. Yes, I am that type of person who could listen to Christmas music all year-round. Well, I try to until the kids let me know it's time for Easter. Those traditional Christmas hymns are filled with hope!

I remember experiencing hope as a young child with the anticipation of a certain jolly person visiting and dropping off a special gift. As a teenager, it was the anticipation of seeing my aunt and uncle and listening to their stories. Then there were the years of watching my own children getting excited for that special day. Seeing the hope and excitement shining in their eyes!

And every year that sense of hope grows as we get closer to the celebration of Jesus' birthday...and as we grow closer to Him. While the world is racing to that day, I want more than anything to slow down and share that feeling of hope, spending more time rejoicing in the greatest gift from God.

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. John 3:16 KJV

I love spending time on Christmas Eve, after the stockings are hung and the kids are in bed, listening to the quiet – spending that time in prayer reflecting on the gift of God, His love for you and for me lying in a manger all those years ago. The excitement that the day is finally here, that feeling of hope is in the air! It's the feeling of hope you can experience every day of the year by accepting God's most precious gift.

May you be blessed by God's love this Christmas!

Lisa Payne



Sunday, December 10, 2023

The Heart of Christmas is Jesus “Heart of Peace”

Jesus is at the heart of Christmas. His birth, life, and death offer saving grace we can find nowhere else. Peace is a popular word that people use in various ways. Many associate the word with the absence of war or conflict. Peace also refers to rest. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines peace as “a state of tranquility or quiet.” While the Oxford Dictionary defines it as “the state of being calm or quiet.” Such as when describing a place as peaceful or saying your mind is at peace. However, peace in the Bible is a bit different. The Hebrew word translated as peace is shalom. This can mean completeness, soundness, and welfare.

When we speak of Christmas, I think of Peace being at The Heart of Christmas. The announcement of Jesus’ birth to the shepherds by the angels told them that peace was coming to the earth for those on whom God’s favor rested.

Luke 2:8-14

New International Version

*And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.” Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest, **and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.**”*

The shepherds knew of the promise. The story of a coming Messiah had been told to them as children. The promise of the Messiah, the Savior, the one who would bring peace has been born. What excitement they must have felt within their hearts! What a privilege to be told and invited to see the child. The shepherds having seen the baby Jesus, would later return to their flocks. I am sure they did not keep this knowledge to themselves. The privilege given to the shepherds is also available to everyone without respect for position or status in the world. The lowly shepherds heard the news of great joy that will be for all people. And on earth peace to men on whom His favor rests.

Peace does not mean that you won’t have problems; it means during your troubles you can have the peace of God in you heart, mind, and soul. If you seek Jesus, He will reach out to you and save you.

Dr. Mary Kleber



Monday, December 11, 2023

THE HEART OF CHRISTMAS IS JESUS – HEARTS OF PEACE

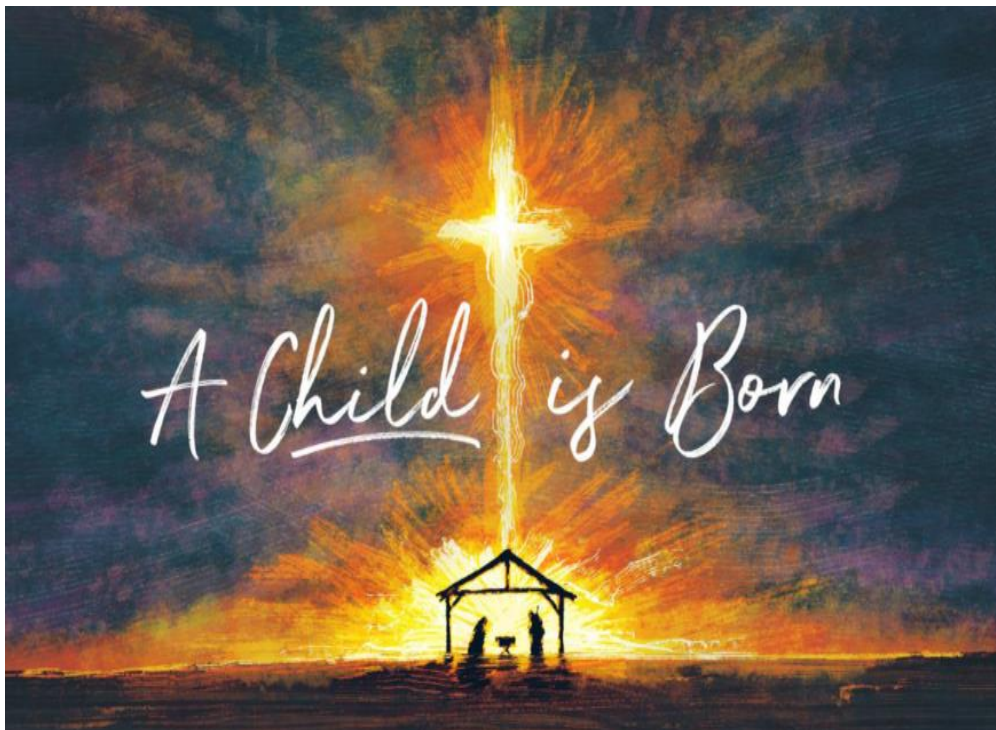
Have you ever thought about what it would be like to be in the stable the night Jesus was born? To see the promised Savior? Sometimes I wonder what Mary was thinking and Joseph was feeling. A part of me feels that there was a sense of peace in that stable.

Isaiah 9:6 ESV

“For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given;
and the government shall be upon his shoulder,
and his name shall be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”

Christmas is a celebration that everyone looks forward to. Knowing that God sent His only Son to earth to save us from our sinful ways and eternal damnation gives me hope! It brings a sense of peace over me. Jesus was born into this world to bring peace. But others didn't see it that way. They tested Him, treated Him poorly, and betrayed Him. As we go into this Christmas season, think of the birth of Jesus. Think of the peace that night brought. Think of the peace Jesus has brought into your life.

Rev. Kayla Hass



Tuesday, December 12, 2023

FEELING OVERWHELMED?

“Doesn’t the Scripture say that the Messiah comes from David’s offspring and from the town of Bethlehem, where David lived?” John 7:42

There are a number of reasons why God might have chosen Bethlehem as the place for His Son to be born. It was a peaceful little village, somewhat off the beaten track, and it had never really been otherwise. Like many other small towns, however, Bethlehem had once been the hometown of a famous person. The family of King David who ruled the nation of Israel a thousand years before Jesus was born had lived there --- and that made Bethlehem noteworthy in spite of its size.

David became famous while still a teenager because he killed a giant. The Philistine army had a champion named Goliath who, day after day, would taunt the army of Israel. “Send one of your men to fight me”, Goliath would say, “and if he wins, we will be your slaves. But if we win, you will be ours.”

Goliath was huge. Besides being tall and muscular he was outfitted with armor from head to toe. No one from the camp of Israel dared to fight him. Instead, it was all they could do not to turn tail and run.

There are days when I feel like I’m up against a giant: inadequate to whatever task it is that I need to accomplish and overwhelmed. Like the Israelite army I want to retreat; to go somewhere else and just hide. Maybe you feel that way sometimes, too.

David didn’t retreat. He walked over to the creek, picked up five smooth stones for his slingshot and then stepped out from the ranks of Israel’s army to confront Goliath. When Goliath ridiculed the boy, David told Goliath that he --- not the giant --- would be the victor, the God of Israel being the source of his confidence. Then David took one of the five stones he had picked up, put it in his sling and let it fly. Goliath died, and it was the Philistines who ran.

Over the years I have learned that, even though I don’t want to do it, it’s better to go out and face the giants who come against me than it is to run away from them and hide. Like David, I rely on the Lord for success, but I also prepare for the battle. I don’t get ready by collecting stones: I use these five spiritual disciplines instead.

1. I take the long view. In the end God is going to win.
2. I pray, keeping God up to date on how I feel, and asking Him for what I need.
3. I listen for God to tell me what to do next, and then I do it.
4. I take care of my body, so I have the strength to do what He tells me to do.
5. I sing hymns and spiritual songs in my heart, especially when I can’t sleep.
The words lift my spirit and a pleasant peace settles around me.

What disciplines work for you when you face your giants?

Karen Purnell



Wednesday, December 13, 2023

HEART OF PEACE

Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests 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

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Galatians 5:22-24 NIV

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

See, I have refined you, though not as silver; I have tested you in the furnace of affliction. Isaiah 48:10 NIV

It has been said that peace is not the absence of conflict, but rather the presence of God. I believe there is more truth in that adage than many of us recognize.

True peace is not dependent on the absence of conflict. On the contrary, it truly shines when conflict is at its peak! A way to better understand peace is as a Fruit of the Spirit. To know it as a way through the storm rather than a way to avoid the storm. Jesus made two things perfectly clear. There will be trouble in our lives in this world, and that we can only grow by facing those trials.

Peace is having the comfort of believing that the Holy Spirit is with us in the trial, and trusting that he will support, teach, and guide us through the trial and that we will be better, more mature, for the experience.

Always remember, not all change is growth, but there can be no growth without changing. Change is an inevitable part of life. When given the chance to grow, don't avoid the challenge; embrace it, and grow from the experience.

Know, and help others to know, the "peace that transcends understanding" (Philippians 4:7). Allow the Holy Spirit to fill your life with that peace and be a faithful witness of it for all to see!

Rev. Rick Pryor



Thursday, December 14, 2023

HE IS OUR PEACE

*“Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.”*

Luke 2:14

What did that Peace look like to Mary that night in Bethlehem?

She had endured numerous “No room!” encounters as they looked for a place for her to give birth to Jesus. Only the presence of God could provide peace in the midst of such a whirlwind.

What did that Peace look like in Jesus’ earthly life?

He CAME. And He didn’t spend 33 years regretting that decision.

He KNEW why He was on earth. His love propelled Him to following His Father’s guidance.

He was PRESENT every moment, whether it was finding food for a multitude on a hillside, or noticing that someone touched the hem of His robe, or having a face-to-face talk with a seeker.

What does that Peace look like in our lives?

It is the boy who gets on his bus each day knowing his seatmates will hassle him. The ones he prays for at night.

It is the lady who doesn’t live on the most desirable street in town. She has spent several years trying to escape total poverty. Yet, when asked about a troublesome situation, she simply replies, “Others have it a lot worse!”

HE IS OUR PEACE. He is our Provider. He is our Way Maker. He is where we take our burdens and leave them there, as we draw a circle on the floor around us and pray. (*Draw the Circle*)

Karen Love



ACCEPT HIS PEACE IN YOUR HEART

Finally, brothers and sisters, rejoice! Strive for full restoration, encourage one another, be of one mind, live in peace. And the God of love and peace be with you. Corinthians 13:11 NIV

One of my favorite Christmas carols is “I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day” especially the rendition sung by the group Casting Crowns. It was based on a poem written by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow on Christmas Day, 1863. His son had recently been injured and left with a crippling, war injury. His loving wife Fanny died two years before that. Around 1872 the poem was set to music by English organist, John Baptiste Calkin.

The following are three verses taken from our Baptist Hymnal in our church:

I heard the bells on Christmas day
Their old familiar carols play,
And wild and sweet the words repeat
Of peace on earth on earth good will to men.*

And in despair I bowed my head:
“There is no peace on earth” I said,
“For hate is strong and mocks the song
Of peace on earth, good will to men.”

Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:
God is not dead nor doth He sleep;
The wrong shall fail, the right prevail,
With peace on earth, good will to men.

Longfellow went from despair to joy, allowing the Holy Spirit within, to bring the peace of knowing Christ. When you have times of sadness or hopelessness, look to Christ, and invite Him into your heart. Accept the peace and love that only He can give.

*This term traditionally included all humankind.

Norma Routt



Saturday, December 16, 2023

PEACE

“But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you. 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 14:26-27

I love and cherish these verses. They have spoken to my heart on so many occasions. There are many times in our lives we struggle to find any kind of peace. It may be we are facing a serious illness ourselves or the illness of a loved one. We may be very concerned about a family member or a dear friend. We may face a financial crisis or loss of a job. It is during these difficult times our heart aches and we know in our own strength there is no peace to be found. The more we feel stress in our lives the less we experience peace or joy. We begin to worry about all the problems we may be facing. We think that everything is up to us and there seems to be no way to accomplish all that must be done.

It is in the stillness of the night when we are alone with our thoughts Jesus calls to us. Jesus told us that the Father would send the Holy Spirit to be our Comforter and Counselor. He tells us that He gives us peace not as the world gives but His own peace. He tells us that we do not have to be afraid. If we have come to know Him as our personal Lord and Savior there is nothing we will ever face alone. We can give Him our pain and our worries and know that He loves us more than anyone else ever could.

I have experienced His peace when facing a medical crisis. In the stillness of the ICU Unit, I felt overwhelmed by His love. I felt a peace I could never begin to explain. I knew beyond any doubt that He would never leave me. I knew that no matter what I belonged to Him. I began to remember Bible verse after Bible verse that spoke to my heart and songs I had sung in church that had blessed my heart. For fifteen days I felt the very real presence of my Lord and Savior comforting me. I went from having eight percent function of my heart to where I am today. I can say I knew a peace then and now that only Jesus can give. Yes, Jesus is the heart of Christmas, but He must be in our heart every day. He willingly gave His life so that each of us can receive forgiveness for our sins and know we will spend eternity in Heaven with Him. In believing Jesus is God’s Son, that He lived on earth and was crucified for my sin and that He died and arose again on the third day, He became my Savior forever and nothing can ever change that. There is peace in knowing that no matter what might happen He is with me. He loves and comforts me, and I never need to fear being alone. There may be many trials to face but I know I will never face them alone. I will have my Lord and Savior, my Comforter, my friend, my very present help in times of trouble with me always.

As the holiday season approaches, I pray we will focus on the true meaning of Christmas. Do you know Jesus as your personal Lord and Savior? Does your heart know the joy and the peace that only our Lord can give? If you have never asked Jesus to come into your heart and forgive you of your sins I pray you will do that today. It is so simple. Jesus loves us just the way we are. We can’t buy or earn salvation and He doesn’t expect us to be better than what we are at this moment. He asks only that we give Him our heart and believe He is the living Son of God and that He gave His life for forgiveness of sin. He died on Calvary’s cross and arose on the third day overcoming death. No matter what happens in this world we can know the peace that only God can give. We can know we are safe in His love forever.

Nancy Shewmaker



JOY

Joy: a synonym of “happy,” “glad,” or “cheerful.” The thesaurus relates it to “exultation,” “rapture,” “satisfaction,” and “pleasure.” Webster’s specifically defines it as “a very glad feeling; happiness; great pleasure; delight”. It also refers to the source or cause of delight.

Joy is more powerful than any of the words listed above. It is a fruit of the spirit; it is a more complex emotion that stays with you in your heart despite what else is happening. The song, “Joy in the Morning”, by Natalie Sleeth explains it: “There’ll be joy in the morning on that day; for the daylight will dawn when the darkness is gone; there’ll be joy in the morning on that day.” This song has so many meanings for me. It could refer to illness, grief, uncertainty, or death. It is important to understand that Joy isn’t an ‘ooey-goey’ feeling that can be fleeting. Many people confuse it with happiness or pleasure that happens and is quickly gone. Joy is with you in good times and bad. It is a state of being that carries you through happy times and sad times. Psalm 30:5 says, *“For his anger endures but a moment; in his favor is life: weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning.”*

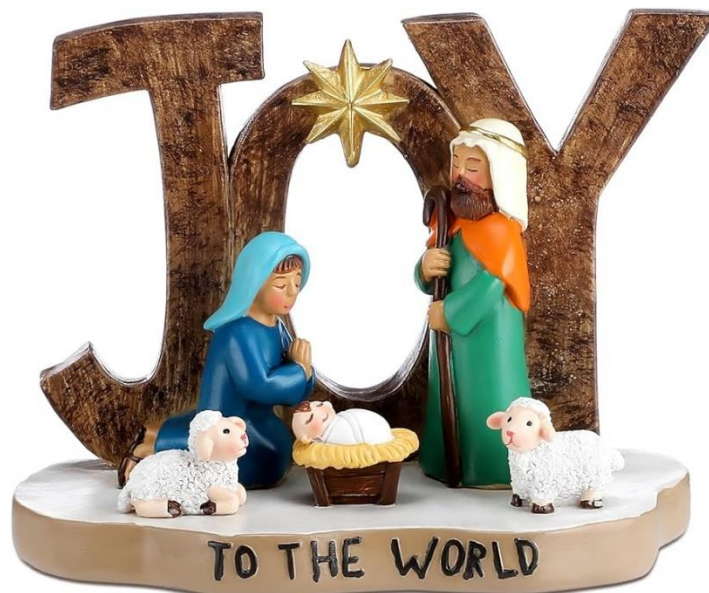
Joy comes from God. He takes care of us in ways we can’t imagine. He loves us totally. He protects us continually. He guides us unerringly. And, when we mess up (and we all do!), He provides a means of forgiving us completely. That means is through His Son, Jesus. He came into this world as a means of providing all of us a way back to God. Through His sacrifice of His life, and our acceptance of this free gift, we have a means of obtaining real and complete Joy.

Mary and Joseph experienced Joy at the birth of Jesus. Even though His arrival into this world was unconventional, they treasured Him in their hearts as their son; but also as the Son of God. They felt uncertainty and fear as they began their new roles as parents. But, they also felt Joy knowing they were being used by God to make possible the redemption of all people.

We should join Mary and Joseph by keeping Joy in our hearts during this Advent season, and throughout the year. Knowing Jesus as your Savior is a perfect way to put Joy in your heart!

“Joy to the world, the Lord is come!”

Lesley Hass



Monday, December 18, 2023

REJOICE IN THE LORD ALWAYS!

“Do all things without murmuring and arguing so that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, in which you shine like stars in the world.” Philippians 2:14-15 NRSV

“Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near.” Philippians 4:5 NRSV

“And being found in human form, he humbled himself...” Philippians 2:7-8 NRSV

For over a thousand years the New Testament letter most closely associated with Advent has been Philippians. There are exactly four chapters in Philippians which fit nicely into the four week framework of Advent, but that’s not why Philippians is so appropriate. Paul was in prison when he wrote it, so we might be inclined to think the letter would be a somber read. It’s not. Philippians is full of joy, and that’s why we read it as we prepare to celebrate Christmas.

Paul had a particularly affectionate relationship with the Church at Philippi. He loved them and they loved him. Because the relationship was so tender, Paul shares with them some of what he has learned about how to find joy --- and to give joy --- even in the most trying of circumstances. Three of those secrets to finding and giving joy are cited in the verses above.

People who want to walk in joy don’t grumble and complain --- not because they don’t have anything to grumble or complain about, but because grumbling and complaining only make a bad situation feel worse. Anyone can gripe. If we want to shine like stars in a world filled with bitter, angry people, we need to find the good, and say something positive.

The Greek word translated as *gentleness* in Philippians 4:5 is a word that’s not used very often in the New Testament and can be translated in other ways. It appears in some English versions of the Bible as *patience*, *kindness*, and even *reasonableness*, but however the word is rendered, the recommendation to tone down the way we respond to frustration is definitely there. Fist-pounding and harsh words may get quick results, but the bad feelings they produce linger. Paul had a forceful personality, but eventually came to see that there’s more joy to be had for all concerned when we deal gently with one another.

Philippians 2:5-11 tells how the Son of God, who once lived with the Father in the glory of heaven, *emptied himself* in order to become one of us. He humbled himself, Paul says, and invites us to do the same. We can’t think that what we need and want is more important than what other people need and want --- and still be happy. We can only walk in joy when we walk with other people, not position ourselves above them.

In the days that remain, may God help us all to walk toward Christmas in joy.

Karen Purnell



CHRIST'S JOY, OUR JOY

"I have told you this so that my joy maybe in you and that your joy may be complete." John 15:11

Let us not forget that when the Lord Jesus uttered these words, He was preparing His disciples to carry on the mission after He returns to the Father. He was fully aware that in few days He would be wrestling with His humanity and the will of God in Gethsemane, then lay down His life at Calvary. So, the questions in order are: [1] How could Jesus be joyful when He knows that His prayer in Gethsemane would be denied and He would soon be crucified? [2] How could the disciples incomplete joy be made complete?

The Lord's farewell speech is not reminiscent, but forward-looking. He does not want His disciples to think that the good old days are the best days of their lives. In many respects it was, but it was meant to be temporary. The disciples' time with Jesus is for a season, but His abiding presence is forever. The Lord spent three years training them and after the ascension He was with them wherever they went until their last breath (Matthew 28:20). Before leaving, Jesus gave them access to His joy in order to make their incomplete joy complete.

The all-knowing Savior is a joyful Lord. From where I stand, knowing what Jesus knew before they actually happen will result in desperation, despondency, and depression. But the joy of the Lord was undiminished even though He knew Judas would betray Him, Peter will deny any knowledge of Him, and every one of His disciples will abandon Him. Where is this joy coming from? It comes from the fact that God is in control. He is in the driver's seat. He knows the road. He knows how long the journey will be. And when He is in charge, we will get to our destiny safely and on time. Earthly joy will always be incomplete, but we have been given access to the joy of the Lord experienced through trusting and resting in God at the backseat.

If Christ is not driving your life, you will live a joyless life.

Rev. George Payocong, Jr.



Wednesday, December 20, 2023

REJOICING IN THE LORD

Rejoice in the Lord always. Again, I will say rejoice! Philippians 4:4

Did you know that Paul used the words “joy” and “rejoice” 17 times in Philippians? These certainly are important words in Paul’s vocabulary. It is an important subject in his theology and absolutely essential in his practice of the ministry. The questions for our consideration are: [1] Is joy an emotion or feeling? [2] If so, can we command emotions and will it to happen or we just wait for it to happen?

Textbook definition states: “emotions are raw data, a reaction to the present reality, whereas feelings can be diluted by stories we’ve created in our head based on events of the past.” Thus, “feelings are experienced consciously, while emotions manifest either consciously or subconsciously.” In other words, “emotions start as sensation in the body; feelings are generated from our thoughts about those emotions.” Indeed, joy and rejoicing are both feelings and emotions stimulated by internal and external realities. Happy thoughts make us feel good and are reflected in a happy face. We feel happiness when we celebrate special occasions and holidays with friends doing fun things. Food, good movies, books, and travel make us happy. Joy, on the other hand, is deeper than happiness for it runs deep in the soul and transcends circumstances. As such, joy is an emotion that evokes the feeling of joyfulness.

Paul commanded the Philippians to “rejoice in the Lord always”! Joy is a fruit of the Spirit and every believer indwelt by the Spirit of God already has inner joy (Galatians 5:22-23). Hence, Paul’s command is not to begin being joyful, but to continue being joyful *in the Lord*. The sphere of rejoicing is *in* the Lord Jesus Christ. The Christians who are in touch with the Holy Spirit experience joy regardless of external circumstances. In the Lord, we can always rejoice with the joy given and inspired by the Holy Spirit.

Rejoice in the Lord always, not sometimes or when possible. Again, I say rejoice!

Rev. George Payocong, Jr.



A STAR OF JOY

“When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy” Matthew 2:10

Matthew’s record of the birth narrative of Jesus included the gift-bearing, Messiah-seeking, and God-worshipping wise men from the East. We do not know the exact place where the wise men were from, but they certainly knew where they were going and who they were seeking. We know they were guided by the stars, but they knew *the* star to follow. We know their story because God preserved it for us, but they knew *the* story because God revealed it to them.

I guess you know where I am going. We are the audience of the Christmas story, and the wise men were the participants in this wonderful story. When they saw the star that rests over the cottage where Mary, Joseph, and the infant Jesus live, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy! We share the same feeling—rejoicing greatly—when we found the Savior. Their story is now our story, except of course, the star.

So, what’s the point? God leads us to Him in different ways and through divers means. Our “star” could be success or failure, good health or sickness, youth or old age, or what have you. The star is not the end in itself; it is but a sign that points us to Jesus. Unlike the wise men, we do not get guidance from the stars but from the Bible. We do not let our circumstances choose for us, rather we rely on the Holy Spirit to guide us in navigating through our circumstance. And like the wise men, we should rejoice in finding the Messiah. We should celebrate with exceeding great joy the salvation we received from God.

When Christmas is centered on Christ, we experience exceeding great joy even when our wish list is longer, the grass is greener on the other side of the fence, health is failing, and the shadow we cast is longer.

Rev. George Payocong, Jr.



Friday, December 22, 2023

THE JOY OF THE GREAT SHEPHERD

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. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." Luke 2:10-12

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about." So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. Luke 2:15-16

When I think of Christmas, I envision the scene of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph surrounded by angels, the shepherds with their various livestock, and the wise men. It's of course an amalgam or combination of the Nativity stories that we see from the Christmases of our childhood. As children, we anticipate Christmas all year and can't wait to see the Nativity scene as it means soon we'll be on Christmas break and enjoying the gifts and celebration of the season. That was always the most joyful time of the year as a child.

As an adult truth sets in that the Nativity was a little different as we read in the Bible. Of course, Jesus was born to Mary and Joseph in a Bethlehem stable but may not have been surrounded by the three Wise Men which are assumed "three" due to the three gifts: gold, incense, and myrrh. Tradition says that there were three and that their names were Caspar, Melchior, and Balthasar, but since the Bible does not say, we have no way of knowing whether the tradition is accurate. Some suggest that the Wise Men did not arrive until Jesus was two years of age and living in a house in Nazareth. This is based on *Matthew 2:1-11*. In this passage, we are told that the Wise Men "came into the house and saw the young child."

However, true to the Nativity story, we do find the shepherds were there after encountering the angels (*Luke 2:10-11*); they did go to see Jesus (*Luke 2:16*). Unlike the Wise Men, shepherds at that time were not viewed as highly. They slept in fields often near their sheep, watching and protecting them. Their work was not glamorous, and they likely smelled like sheep. Why would the angels come to them to proclaim the glory of the Messiah? It's the most interesting fact of the story. When Jesus was born, even the lowliest of people were given the gift of Jesus. We are all given the joy of Jesus. The great Shepherd came to save all who believe and trust in Him. This Christmas don't forget the joy of Christmas is free to all and don't forget to spread the joy like the shepherds did.

When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. Luke 2:17-18

Chris Towles



THE GOSPEL TREE

“You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden.” Genesis 3:3 NIV

“He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness.”
I Peter 2:24 ESV

*“On each side of the river was the tree of life, which bears fruit twelve times a year, once each month;
and its leaves are for the healing of the nations.”* Revelation 22:2 GNT

Why do we celebrate Christmas by putting up a tree and decorating it with lights and ornaments? Where did the idea come from, and why do we do it?

Martin Luther gets credit for setting up the first Christmas tree. As the story goes, he was walking home one winter evening when the beauty of the stars twinkling through the evergreens prompted him to bring a small evergreen tree into his house and put lit candles on it so his family could share the joy of what he had experienced on his walk home.

Long before Martin Luther’s time, however, local churches would dramatize Bible stories in order to help villagers, most of whom couldn’t read, understand the stories better. Eventually small troupes of actors began traveling from town to town performing both Biblical and other religious dramas. One of the oldest of these plays was a twelfth century French drama called *The Play of Adam*. Among the props put on the stage for this play were trees with fruit draped on the branches designed to depict the Garden of Eden. The play would probably not have been performed in winter, and the trees were not likely evergreens, but the idea of branches with round objects tied on them is definitely there.

The purpose of the trees with their fruit was to remind villagers how sin came into the world. Among all the lovely trees in the Garden of Eden, there was one --- and only one --- whose fruit God told Adam and Eve not to eat. When they did, they brought sin, suffering and death into the world. Since Christmas would be totally unnecessary if Adam and Eve had not sinned, putting up a Christmas tree can be a way to remind ourselves why we need a Savior.

The tree in our homes can also remind us of the tree on which Jesus died. In spite of the glittering lights and heirloom ornaments we drape on its branches, we need to see in it the brutality of the cross and what our sin cost God.

There is a third tree that a brilliantly lit and well decorated Christmas tree brings to mind. That third tree is the Tree of Life in heaven which bears twelve kinds of fruit, each in its month, and whose leaves are medicine for the healing of the nations. Those who embrace Jesus in this life will eat from, and be completely healed by, that third tree.

The story of sin, salvation and what God has prepared for those who love Him is the Gospel --- and the whole of it is told by the trees that stand in our family rooms. As Christmas approaches may they continue to remind us of both the grace we have received, and the glory for which we have redeemed.

Karen Purnell



Sunday, December 24, 2023

LOVE AND RELATIONSHIPS

“Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.”

Romans 15:7

God commands us in Matthew 22:37-39 to *“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all of your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: love your neighbor as yourself”*. So, from this verse we know that love is not a suggestion and our relationship with God and with others is important to God. What God does for us out of His love, He wants us to DO for others. So, love is an action. God accepts me unconditionally. Now, that doesn't mean that He approves of everything that I have done but He accepts my faults, and He accepts me.

God says that he wants us to ACT similarly toward others in our life. God places the utmost importance on relationships, and he wants us to do the same. This became apparent to me during the COVID shut down. I truly missed the interaction with people and my relationships became very important to me. I found that when we were able to take our masks off that I missed people's faces. It was wonderful to give someone a smile in a grocery store and see that they needed that as much as I did. It is great to reconnect with friends and make new friends with those God puts in our path. We can deepen those relationships another way by simply listening to others. By giving others our attention, we are saying that you are valued, you are loved. Romans 15: 1 tells us *“We must bear the burden of being considerate of the doubts and fears of others.”* We will encounter people in our lives whether they are a fellow Christian or someone searching for Christ, that have doubts, fears, and concerns but they don't always have someone to express those to. As a Christ follower, we can listen and show that what they have to say doesn't change our love or acceptance of them. This is not always easy. It takes time and attention in a busy world, especially during Christmastime. It takes finding out where people are coming from in their experiences, where or why they are hurting, and without casting judgement. Loving without conditions is not easy. What better time than when we celebrate the birth of our Lord and Savior to put this into practice. There are a lot of hurting people who come into our midst during Christmas who need someone to talk to and who just need a smile.

Loving like Jesus means that we accept other people the way Jesus accepts us. When His love flows through us, it will make it possible for us to love others unconditionally just like He wants us to.

With Love,
Danny Hass



Monday, December 25, 2023

THE HEART OF CHRISTMAS IS JESUS HEARTS FOR JESUS: HOPE, PEACE, JOY, LOVE

Merry Christmas! It's Christmas Day!

Right now, you are probably winding down from Christmas Eve and from this day's activities, whether you visited or were visited yourself. What a good time to be still and read this devotional!

Modern Christmas in America is so very commercialized. Hallmark movies, gift giving and receiving.... BUT, modern commercial Christmas has no idea of the REAL gifts that were given us when GOD sent His son to be born that day in Bethlehem. Hallelujah...Jesus is born! Jesus is the heart of Christmas, and He offers us hope, peace, joy, and love.

“Hope” to a Christian isn't merely a wish. Hope to us means the expectation of a future certainty. The hope of Israel was in the expectation of the Messiah. Our hope is the assurance of eternity in Heaven with Jesus Christ. *“For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”* Romans 6:23 NIV

“Peace” is a result of a life lived with Jesus. *“Therefore, the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son and will call him Emmanuel.”* Isaiah 7:14 NIV. Emmanuel...it means “God with us”. Every hour of every day, Christ is with us. *“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

“Joy” is not the same as happiness. Happiness is a transient condition. Joy comes from our faith in Jesus Christ. *“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.”* I Peter 1:8-9 NIV

“Love was born... one night in Bethlehem.” I can still remember the lyrics of a Christmas cantata we sang years ago. Love had been around since time of old, but the ultimate expression of God's love for us came the first Christmas. *“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life”* John 3:16 NIV. *“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.”* John 4:9 NIV

This Christmas Day, take a few minutes to ponder the Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love that Christ brings into your life.

I wish you a Merry Christmas, and the Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love that comes with Jesus!

Phil Shewmaker



Tuesday, December 26, 2023

HEARTS FOR JESUS

We know all the ways to have a healthy heart. Our doctors tell us that we should:

- 1) Eat healthy
- 2) Get active
- 3) Stay at a healthy weight
- 4) Quit smoking and stay away from secondhand smoke
- 5) Control cholesterol and blood pressure
- 6) Manage stress

Sounds easy, right? Every January 1st many people resolve to do all these things to get their hearts and bodies in the best shape they can. Most people have given up that resolution by the 3rd week of February. People spend a lot of time, money and resources trying to “get in shape”. Make no mistake, that is a good thing to try to do. But what if we worked that hard on getting our hearts healthy for Jesus? What are the steps we can do to achieve our goal?

We can.....

- 1) Spend time daily in God’s Word
- 2) Pray continuously
- 3) Forgive others as God forgives us
- 4) Love our neighbors as ourselves
- 5) Give generously our time, money, and kindness
- 6) Focus on what God wants in our lives

Psalm 51:10, “*Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me*”.
That should be our resolution. That should be our focus for the New Year and for every year.

Martha Blansette

 Create in me
a pure heart, O God,
 and renew a
steadfast
spirit within me.
- Psalm 51:10

PARTY PLANNING 101

When the time is right, I, the Lord, will make it happen. Isaiah 60:22

Party Planning for a once in a lifetime event that will impact future generations:

Choose the date well in advance.

Secure the venue.

Make a guest list.

Choose the food to serve.

Send the invitations.

Advertise...mailings, texts, Instagram, FB, billboards, newspapers, TV stations...

Arrange for the best and brightest creative thinkers to bring about a Gala people will talk about for years.

Where does the birth of Jesus fit on that spectrum?

Well, God chose the date carefully. At just the right time, Jesus was born.

The food? No mention of a morsel that was prepared.

The invitations?

Did you see who God sent the invitations to and how He sent them?

1. Mary and Joseph - He sent a government decree that they had to go to Bethlehem to pay their taxes.
2. The Wise Men - God strategically placed a brilliant star in the sky that they followed until they found The King of Kings.
3. The Shepherds - Unheard of, even today by the Taylor Swift event planners. The sky was ablaze with angels singing!

A common man and a young pregnant woman, three star-gazing foreigners, and a group of shepherds who ate, drank, and slept in the fields with their sheep.

Does that sound like the guest list from any event you've ever hosted or attended? Me, either.

But God chose who to send the invitations to that Christmas night.

He is always there for the poor and lowly...the weak and meek...those that no one else would dream of inviting. The outcasts of society are enveloped by His love.

Maybe I need to rethink my next guest list, or evaluate who I'm hanging around, or let God lead me to those He wants to love.

He is still showing us His favor in our lives at just the right time!

Karen Love



Thursday, December 28, 2023

THE HEART OF CHRISTMAS IS JESUS

Undoubtably, 'The Heart of Christmas *is* Jesus' as the word Christmas is an abbreviated form of Christ's Mass which is a worship service celebrating Jesus Christ's death and resurrection. I think people everywhere have expectant or hopeful hearts that their lives can find meaning. And ultimately, I, as a Christian, think they are looking for Jesus whether they know it or not. Just as YAHWEH is God's name in the Tanakh or Hebrew Bible, Yeshua is the Hebrew name for Jesus in the New Testament. Joseph, the husband of Jesus' mother Mary, was instructed by God to give this name Yeshua to their Newborn.

I claim the Yeshua (Jesus) of Nazareth as the promised Messiah of the Jewish people and ultimately all peoples. I refer to Jesus' birth as his first coming to earth and am anticipating a second coming, maybe in my lifetime!

David Ben Gurion, the first Prime Minister of the modern nation of Israel formed on May 14, 1948, also had an expectant or hopeful heart. He was looking for an imminent Messiah, too!

David Ben Gurion is quoted as saying, "Ezekiel has been fulfilled and the nation of Israel is hearing the footsteps of the Messiah." Jewish people from around the globe were being physically reunited in the biblical lands of their patriarch Abraham. Part of the Tanakh prophecy that Ben Gurion was referring to says, "Behold, I will take the people of Israel from the nations among which they have gone, and will gather them from all around, and bring them to their own land. And I will make them one nation in the land, on the mountains of Israel." Ezekiel 37:21-22 ESV (English Standard Version)



IMMANUEL GOOD SHEPHERD LORD THE LIFE **CHRIST**
SON OF THE MOST HIGH SAVIOR **JESUS** BREAD OF LIFE
EVERLASTING FATHER **MIGHTY GOD** PRINCE OF PEACE

I have turned my reflections on the subject, the coming of the Messiah, into a poem of hope and prophecy.

Footsteps of Messiah

By Connie Carlisle Polley

Do you hear the footsteps
Of Messiah drawing near?
Have you turned to listen
Before His face appears?
Wipe away your fears and doubt.
There's a joy when you believe.
These times of trials point the way
To God's great jubilee!

Footsteps of Messiah
Leave their print on Zion's sand.
God's people reunited
Know His coming is at hand.
Footsteps of Messiah
Can be heard above earth's roar
For the Clock of All the Ages
Strikes with footsteps of the Lord.

Messiah's footsteps:
Stop and listen while you can.
Messiah's footsteps:
Don't ignore God's final plan.

Did you hear His footsteps
Long ago on Calv'ry's road?
Did you see salvation's plan
Before your eyes unfold?
He wiped away your guilt and shame,
Brought joy so full and free.
Now once again He beckons you
To listen and believe.

Footsteps of Messiah
Leave their print on Zion's sand.
God's people reunited
Know His coming is at hand.
Footsteps of Messiah
Can be heard above earth's roar
For the Clock of All the Ages
Strikes with footsteps of the Lord.

A Poem of Hope and Prophecy
Connie Carlisle Polley, 2023-2024
ConnieCarlislePolley.com
NonnyDay.com

Friday, December 29, 2023

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. Psalms 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 have survived a pandemic but still have families at risk of having disease. That disease can be physical or even emotional. We see our country at odds and life can seem unmanageable, but even when all seems chaotic around us, we can still find peace in our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

I found the scripture acrostic poem a few years ago. The more I read these scriptures it is truly the way to have peace as far as it depends on us.

- If we are praising God and worshiping Him, we are not focused on self or the chaos around us. We are developing an attitude of gratitude which changes our perspective.
- 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 His presence is always with us. 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. Not what we want but what we need!
- Committing our lives and actions to Him shows God that we trust Him, and it also shows the world. 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 and personal peace.

I pray you find peace in your heart and rest for your soul during this Christmas Season and throughout the New Year 2024.

Rev. Renee Bryant



Saturday, December 30, 2023

HEARTS FOR JESUS

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death — even death on a cross! Philippians 2:5-8 NIV

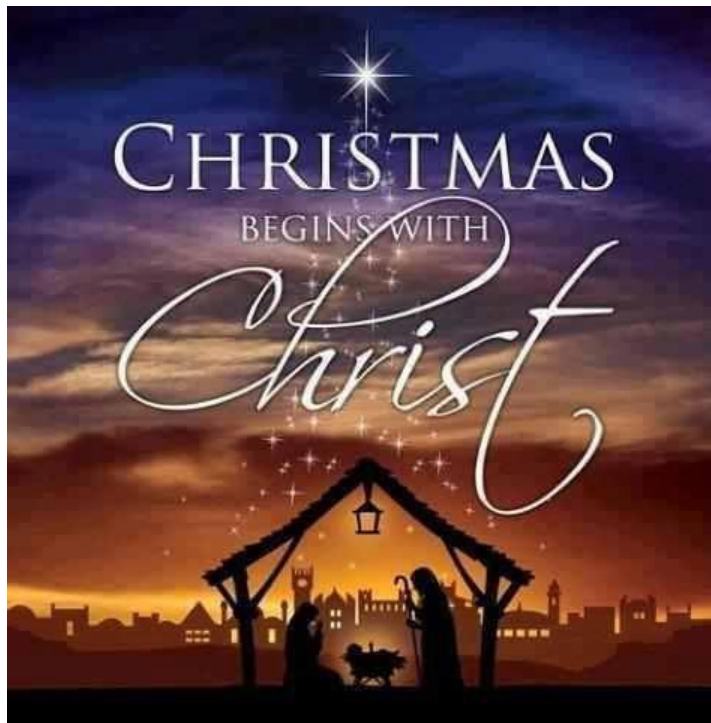
Jesus replied: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” Matthew 22:37 NIV

Thinking of having a heart for Jesus Christ, we need to understand when the Bible refers to our heart “Love the Lord your God with all your heart...” it is referring to our mind. Not in the intellectual sense, but rather in the spiritual. Paul said to let the mind of Jesus Christ be in you. So, to have a heart for Jesus you must chose to act like Him. Do you remember in the past when the ‘what would Jesus do’ (WWJD) was prominent? It encouraged the idea of considering what Jesus would do in any situation and then doing one’s best to take that action. I think that idea is the essence of having a ‘Heart for Jesus’.

It is not enough to know who He is, or even to believe in Him. To have a ‘Heart for Jesus’ we must also choose to act, or react, to any decision like Jesus would.

As we celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ, join me in the commitment to do our best to live and show the world what Jesus would do!!

Rev. Rick Pryor



Sunday, December 31, 2023

WHO ARE YOU?

“And the evil spirit said, “Jesus I know, and Paul I recognize, but who are you?” Acts 19:15

The story of the seven sons of Sceva always puts me in a halt. The story is that the Jews saw Paul casting out demons in the name of Jesus. So, these particular seven sons thought it would be great to make their living off of “casting out demons” as people who truly did not identify with the Lord. So, when they tried to cast, the evil spirit came up instead and asked, “who are you?” I think back to how embarrassed I would be if Satan himself didn’t know my name. The ones who are not constantly identifying themselves as Christians and as saved souls are the ones who the devil does not know. We want the devil to know our name because that means we are constantly being a part of the body of Christ. If you easily let him win you over, you become someone he no longer has to worry about fighting for. He will think he has won.

We constantly have excuses that string a tear with the Lord. We don’t want to wake up, we are there too often, and we become stagnant. We want to allow Satan to win. We truly become stagnant because we think that we are supposed to be glorified for already doing more. But, in God’s eyes we are family. We should be lifting each other up, finding areas to help grow, and doing repairs around the church. We should have constant challenges with the world around us and should seek through the Lord to find solutions.

With the youth, we talk a lot about “being disciples who make disciples”, “know Christ and make Him known”, and being “torchbearers for the light of Christ”. They are constantly reminded that they need to share the light of Jesus with everyone around them. But, I think everyone could use a reminder of this today before we go into 2024. We need to seek to have a heart like Jesus, every day. We should be reaching out to those members we haven’t seen in a while. We should be volunteering to work with the youth or children. We should want to be a church family.

I’ll leave you with the simple question of: Would Satan recognize you if you came face to face? Or would he know you are on his side?

I challenge you to pursue something this new year that makes Satan know your name.

Jayla Grigsby



A NEW YEAR...A NEW HEART

I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. Ezekiel 36:26-27

As an eight-year-old child, when I accepted Jesus Christ as my Savior and Lord, God gave me a new heart. He took the old heart (even though it wasn't very old) and replaced it with a new one. He replaced the heart of sin with a new heart desiring Him above all else. II Corinthians 5:17 reminds us of that newness found in Him: "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!" God filled my heart with His Holy Spirit and that Spirit has never left me. I have not lived a perfect life, but I have had complete assurance of His presence with me for nearly sixty years of living with a new heart.

What about you? Do you need a new heart? If so, accept Jesus as your Savior today! As Ezekiel prophesied to God's disobedient children in Babylonian captivity, he gave them hope for their spiritual heart trouble. God wants to give you a spiritual "heart transplant" today. You will never regret asking God to do just that.

If you are already a Christian, what is your heart condition? Do you have a heart that has grown cold and complacent? Have you become insensitive to the Spirit's working in your life? Have you become willfully disobedient to His Word? Has your heart become hardened to the dark world around us in need of a Savior? If so, will you pray these words right now with the psalmist: "*Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me*" (Psalm 51:10-12).

Please mediate on these "heart" words:

- Psalm 51:17 – *The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.*
- Colossians 3:1 – *Since, then you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God.*
- II Corinthians 4:6 – *For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.*
- Hebrews 3:8 – *Do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion, during the time of testing in the desert...*
- Matthew 6:21 – *For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*
- John 14:1 – *Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me.*
- Isaiah 40:11 – *He tends his flock like a shepherd; He gathers the lambs in his arms, and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young.*

My prayer is that all of you who read these words will begin this New Year of 2024 with new or renewed hearts! May we, like David, be those people who are after God's own heart! And praise God for the assurance that we are in His heart!

Happy New Year!
Rev. Linda Barnes Popham

Tuesday, January 2, 2024

HEARTS OF JOY

There is nothing more precious than the innocent faith of a child. “*Jesus said, ‘Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.’*” Matthew 19:14 NIV

A few years ago, I tried to capture biblical truths, as seen through the eyes of children, in a song I wrote entitled *Sing Hallelujah, Give Him Your Heart*. A male soloist with choir back-up and a mini drama led in a time of worship at my church during the Advent/Christmas season. Here are my lyrics:



SING HALLELUJAH, GIVE HIM YOUR HEART

By Connie Carlisle Polley

Verse 1:

Tiptoe to his cradle,
See the Holy Baby sleep,
While angels raise a great amen
And shepherds watch their sheep.
“Please read that story one more time,”
I hear the children say,
So we open up God’s Word to find
The joy of Christmas day.

1st Chorus:

Sing Hallelujah!
Hallelujah!
Hallelujah! Jesus is born.

Verse 2:

“Did they bring Him presents?”
Says a tiny voice to me,
This child so full of wondr’ing eyes
Who tugs upon my sleeve.
“Yes, wise men brought Him precious gifts,”
I say with a smile.
“But there’s something special you can give:
It’s the heart of a child.”

2nd Chorus:

Sing Hallelujah!
Hallelujah!
Hallelujah! Give Him your heart.

Verse 3:
“Where’s the Baby Jesus?”
The children want to know
As I turn through God’s Story Book
To Calv’ry long ago:
A cross, a hill, a child grown up
Who soon would have to die.
But He fled the tomb, and He still lives!
So, children, don’t you cry!

3rd Chorus:
Sing Hallelujah!
Hallelujah!
Hallelujah! He is alive!
Jesus is alive! Alive!

If you would like to see the video of this performance, you can find it on Nonny’s Blog. Just look under: <https://conniecarlislepolley.com/2019/05/24/video-of-my-latest-song>

A Song Expressing the Joy
Of Children’s Hearts
Connie Carlisle Polley, 2017-2024
ConnieCarlislePolley.com
NonnyDay.com



Wednesday, January 3, 2024

A HEART FOR JESUS

Simeon had a heart for Jesus long before he met Him in the temple that day. The Holy Spirit had revealed to him that he would not die before seeing the Lord's Messiah. Luke 2:27-32 says, *"Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying:*

*"Sovereign Lord, as you have promised,
you may now dismiss your servant in peace.
For my eyes have seen your salvation,
which you have prepared in the sight of all nations:
a light for revelation to the Gentiles,
and the glory of your people Israel."*

God had prepared Simeon to know the Lord long before He was ever born. Most of us have a heart for Jesus after reading and hearing the stories of what He did for us, but Simeon only needed to hear what He was going to do. We also think about the Holy Spirit coming into our lives after we accept Jesus as our Savior, but Simeon had such a heart for Jesus that he had already been filled with the Spirit. Simeon understood the impact that Jesus would have on the world. He understood that He would bring salvation not only to the Israelites but also to the Gentiles.

That day not only impacted Simeon and showed his heart for Jesus but we also see the story of Anna in Luke 2. Anna had a heart for Jesus. She was a prophet, so you know she had a heart for Jesus. She loved the Lord so much that she never left the temple. She worshiped night and day, fasting and praying. She gave thanks to God and began telling everyone about the redemption that He would provide.

These two saints had long known about the coming of the Savior of the world. They had heard the prophecies that foretold the salvation He would bring for both the Jews and Gentiles. They both passed a blessing on to their Savior and his parents and surprised them on the foretelling of His future.

Do you have a heart for Jesus? Do you seek Him daily to be in His will to know His Word and be in communion with Him daily? These saints of old had been in communion with God daily, for many years; that was how they knew when their Messiah came through the doors of the temple even as a baby. There was no one to announce His birth to them that day, no angels singing praises of Hallelujah. Because of their close walk with their Father, they knew Jesus by His presence when He was brought into the Temple courts to be presented to the Lord and consecrated. Would you be so close to the Father that you would have known the presence of Jesus just by the moving of the Holy Spirit? Do you have a heart for Jesus?

Luke 2:21-40

Melissa Logsdon-Young



THE PEACE HE GIVES

Do you have peace within your faith? Peace is what we all need and is so very important in our faith journey. Being at peace in your life is great but that can only happen with God.

God gives us peace in the darkest times. *“The Lord himself goes before you and will be with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged.”* Deuteronomy 31:8 NIV. We have been told that God’s always going to be there no matter what we are going through. No matter what has happened, He’s always there.

So when you are asked if you have peace in your faith, what will you say? If you don’t have peace within your faith journey, talk to God, get more into the scripture so you can have that peace. God will also provide that peace that you need in your life. Life is stressful and tough, but God will always be with us and supply our needs. God is generous, forgiving, and kind. He is our heavenly father.

At Christmas time we are often joyful and happy, but are we at peace with God? God gave us Jesus so we would be able to go to heaven. That’s pretty amazing and miraculous for Him to do for us sinners. Jesus came to save us and give us the after-death peace.

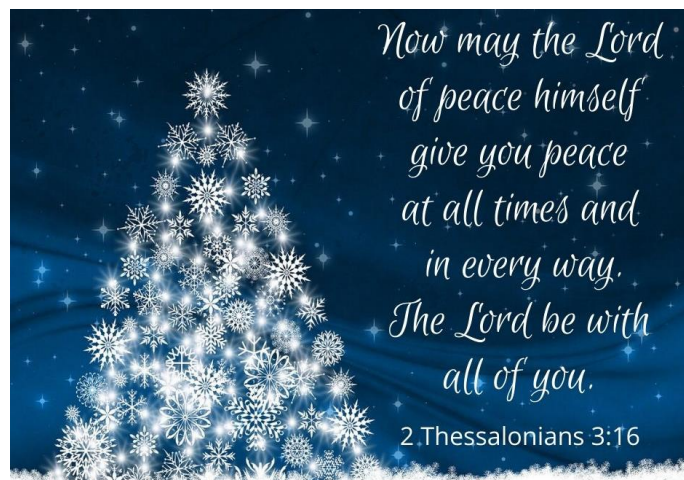
Heaven is some place that we all have imagined at some point in our lives, especially if we are saved. We Christians know where we’re going, but there are some people who are lost sheep and need a shepherd to save them.

I’ve met a lot of people who were in bad condition, and I’ve heard some of them say, “If I die, I know where I’m going and if I get healed it’s still a win.” It shows how strong their faith is and that they have the peace knowing that if they dropped dead right now that they would be in Heaven. We all need to be able to have peace in our faith in God so that we know we will be fine no matter what happens in life.

Christmas Day has passed and now we are coming up on Epiphany Day, so before this holiday season is over, think about your relationship with God. Do you have peace in your life; do you have peace with others; and do you have peace in your faith?

“Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times and in every way. The Lord be with all of you.” II Thessalonians 3:16

Emma Towles



Friday, January 5, 2024

I REMEMBER MAMA

“This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.” 1 John 4:10

When I was asked to do a devotional, I decided to do mine on the love of Jesus. I expect some of you had or have a loving grandmother like I did and can share many memories of the way she showed her love. My grandmother, my mother’s mother, was called Mama by us because that is what my mother and her siblings called her. It has developed into a tradition in our family and our daughters called my mother Mama and now my grandchildren call me Mama.

My Mama was special to us kids in so many ways. None of them material, because she did not have many material things in life. She and Papa never even owned a home. My Mama was one of the wisest people I’ve ever known, and my mother always asked her advice about everything. If Mother didn’t have the answer she would say, let me call Mama, she’ll know.

Mama cooked the best meals you ever tasted. She could whip up fresh biscuits faster than anything and she made them every day. I remember the best pot roast, the best fried chicken, mashed potatoes, green beans and on and on. No fancy herbs in her kitchen either. Just salt and pepper and fresh things from the garden. Also, fresh milk, cream, and eggs from the dairy farm.

She never tired of playing with us. One game was “Big Brown Bear”. We circled around her little house never knowing when she would jump out from hiding and scare us to death like a “Big Brown Bear”. We would laugh our heads off.

But every day at around 10:00 a.m. the games stopped, and she pulled out her Bible and did her studying and talking to the Lord. I knew this was her special time and I did not interrupt her at that time.

My grandfather was the dairyman at Ormsby Village Children’s Home which was a home for dependent and delinquent children. He and Mama lived in a home in the Village which was provided as part of the pay for his work. Papa abruptly died at 60 years of age and Mama had no means to support herself. In a short period of time, she would have to move from their home in the Village. What would she do, she didn’t even have her driver’s license. Mama moved forward. She took driver’s training and learned to drive, and my daddy found her an inexpensive used car. She got a job as a Housemother for a group of girls in Ormsby Village. Ormsby Village gave her an apartment to live in as part of her Housemother’s pay. Those girls quickly realized my Mama was the best thing that could ever have happened to them. They loved her and she loved them, and she shared her wisdom and love with them too.

She continued to love and care for her family on an as needed basis. Sometimes, it was helping Pauline, my mother’s sister, with her kids after school. Sometimes, it was helping with one of Mom’s brother’s kids. Sometimes, it was the girls at Ormsby Village when they needed her. She loved and cared for others until she got very sick and had to be cared for herself.

I could say there is no love like a grandmother, but I know this is not true. There IS a greater love. The love of Jesus. Even though we’re not worthy of His love, He acted on our behalf and gave His all for us. He willingly left His throne to become a man, that He might pay the penalty for our sin. He was mocked, betrayed, beaten, and crucified on a cross as the price for our sin. If you do not have a Mama like I did to teach you of the love of Jesus, no worry. He is there for you, to save you from the sins of this world. All you have to do is ask Him. 1 John 1:8 *If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.*

I know my daughters lovingly remember their Mama (my mother) as I remember mine. I pray that my grandchildren will fondly remember their Mama.

In Christ, Sharon Thompson

Saturday, January 6, 2024

EPIPHANY DAY

Epiphany - I am all in!

My resolution for 2023 was to be more mindful of me and what I wanted for my life. I always said that making other people happy, made me happy, but I was starting to question, “Was I happy?”

I grew up in Baptist Churches. I have always believed in Jesus. I know He has always been with me. But I wasn't following Him. Oh, how quickly that was about to change. My perception also went from what I wanted, to what God has planned for me.

As Reagan got more involved with the children's choir, I found myself coming to church more often. A few days after Pastor Linda met with us in January, a patient brought a Bible in for one of my coworkers. She asked if I needed a Bible; she had brought two. I accepted (It is Purple!). I started to read the Bible before I went to sleep at night. In February, we were invited to the Valentine's Banquet. Little rocks were handed out, and ours said *Trust*. That weekend I heard about the revival going on in Asbury. So, Monday after work, I called my aunt and asked if she wanted to take a road trip. I wanted to experience it for myself. We waited outside for 30 minutes just to get in, and we stayed for an hour. I still wasn't “getting it”. A few nights later, Reagan says, “Mommy, are you going to read your Bible again?” I told her I was. “Why?” she asked. I replied, “I am trying to find out what God wants me to do.” That night I read Matthew 19:16-30. Epiphany – Come and follow me!

I was having lots of conversations about God, Jesus, and Church. I was already thinking about the Office Coordinator position that was open. Financially, can we afford it? Is it the right time to change jobs? All the things you question were being discussed. On Wednesday, March 1, a friend shared a post, “God never gives you a dream that matches your budget. He's not checking your bank account; He's checking your faith.”. Then a text at 2:17 pm, “Hi Tiffany! This is ...Looking for a job? We are now hiring Administrative Support near you.” On my way home from work I called my mom and told her what was happening. I told her, “It feels like Jesus is sitting in the car with me, telling me to just Trust Him and Follow Him.” Epiphany – I am all in!

I met with Pastor Linda on Friday. I told her everything and brought my resume with me. That Sunday, Kevin and I joined Fern Creek Baptist Church.

So, on my name day (as the Greeks say), I pray that you will be listening when God sends you an Epiphany.

Tiffany Keranen

A large, elegant, black-and-white cursive script of the word "Epiphany". The letters are highly decorative with many loops and flourishes, particularly in the 'E' and 'y'.