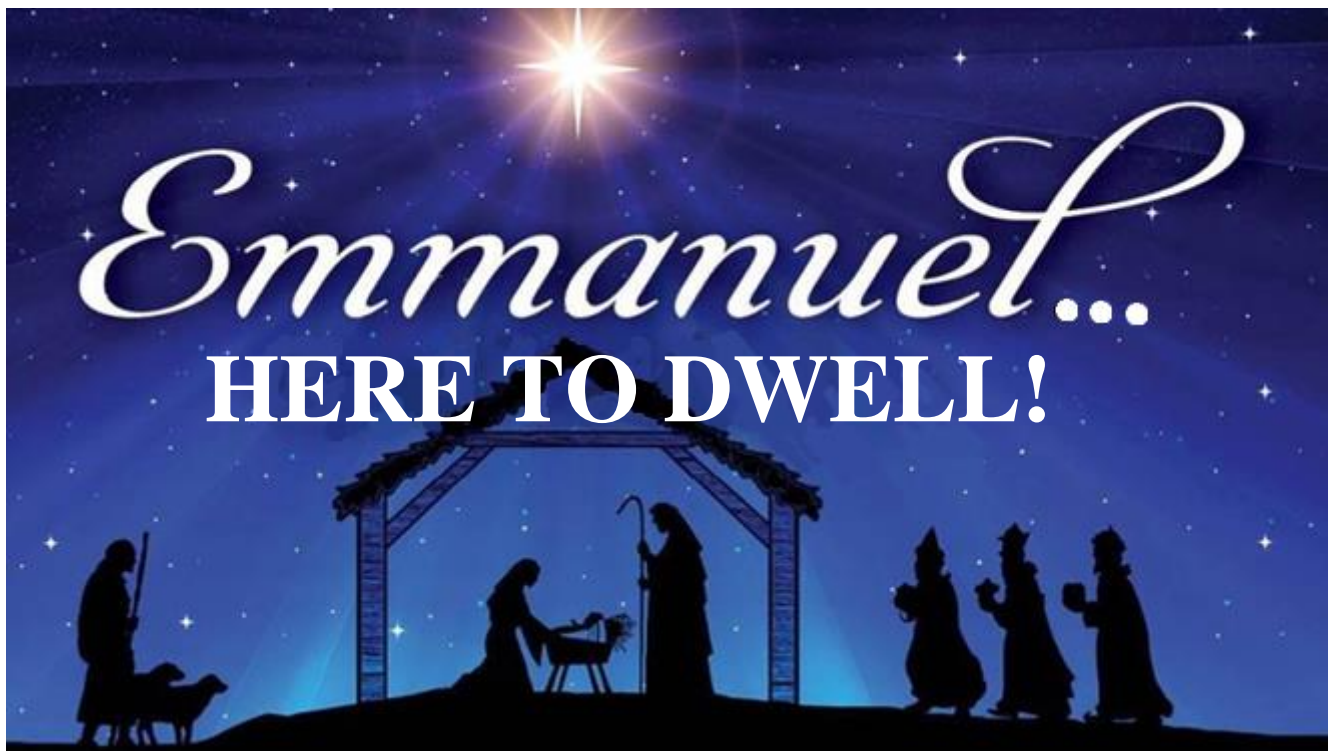


Advent / Christmas Worship
2024 - 2025

EMMANUEL...
HERE TO DWELL!



Fern Creek Baptist Church
Louisville, Kentucky

Advent/Christmas Worship

Our theme for this Advent / Christmas season is *“Emmanuel...Here to Dwell!”*. 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. Emmanuel is here! Let’s worship and adore Him!

Merry Christmas!
Linda Barnes Popham



Fern Creek Baptist Church

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International Christian Fellowship of Louisville

(Filipino Ministry)

Rev. George Payocong, Jr., Pastor

Fire Evangelism Mission Church

(Congolese Ministry)

Rev. Jean Claude Luzolo, Pastor





ADVENT/CHRISTMAS WORSHIP SERVICES

December 1: The First Sunday of Advent

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

6:00 p.m. – “Hanging of the Greens”

(led by the Adult Choir, Youth Choir, Young Musicians, and Narrators)

December 8: The Second Sunday of Advent

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

6:00 p.m. – Youth and Children’s Choirs Christmas Service

December 15: The Third Sunday of Advent

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

“Stay Tuned” Ensemble

6:00 p.m. – Instrumental Christmas

7:00 p.m. – New Members’ Reception

December 17

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

December 19

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

December 22: The Fourth Sunday of Advent

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

“A Thrill of Hope” (by Joel Raney), presented by the Adult Choir

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

December 24: Christmas Eve

9:30 a.m. – Pancake Breakfast

11:00 a.m. – Christmas Eve Service

Lighting of the Christ Candle

December 29: The First Sunday of Christmas

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

Childcare for preschoolers is available during all these 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 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!



Sunday, December 1, 2024

EMMANUEL BRINGS HOPE

Emmanuel...the Hebrew word literally means “God with us”!

The nation Israel was promised by God a Savior, a Redeemer. Isaiah’s prophecy is recorded in Isaiah 7:14 “Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign; Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Emmanuel.”

An Angel of The Lord appeared to Mary and told her: “You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob’s descendants forever; his kingdom will never end.” [Luke 1:31-33 NIV]

Even though for generations Israel held the hope of Emmanuel’s appearing, God had even larger plans for Israel: And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, ‘Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord.’ ” [Luke 2:8-11 KJV]

Hope – it’s more than just a wish. We all equate “wishes” with “hopes”. “I hope I get a raise at work”, or, I hope we can afford a vacation next year”... But HOPE is so much more. The hope of Jesus’ coming was a certainty expressed through the prophets. The HOPE that Jesus brings you and me is the certainty of Jesus’ presence in our lives. “I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly.” [John 10:10b] and his promise of everlasting life “but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life.” [John 4:14 NIV]

I carry that hope. My future is certain. I have been saved by the blood of Jesus. He is a constant presence in my life. Emmanuel...He is with me.

The Christmas Story began long ago with the prophets who foretold the coming of Jesus. The story isn’t over. Jesus was born, lived, was crucified, and died on the cross...but rose again and ascended back to heaven. And the story continues...He is coming again!

This Christmas season, my wish for you is that you too have the HOPE that Jesus offers.

Phil Shewmaker



HOPE

Be of good courage, and he shall strengthen your heart, all ye that hope in the Lord. Psalm 31:24

As we near the end of the year, we often reflect back to the past and think about the future.

I remember all the Christmases past and think of the loved ones no longer with us.

I think about the future and what it will hold.

I hope my knee continues to heal, and I will soon walk with ease.

I hope I will stay healthy for a long time and be able to take care of myself.

I hope I don't have dementia as my mother did.

Most of all, I hope I will always have faith that God is with me and will guide me through all my "I hopes."

Psalm 23:6

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

He is the constant in our lives, and we don't have to wonder or hope He will be there. He sent His Son to take on our sin so we can dwell with Him always.

John 3:16

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.

I hope this Christmas season brings you happiness, peace, and hope.

Glenda Coddington



Tuesday, December 3, 2024

THE GIFT OF HOPE

The Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and you will call him Immanuel. Isaiah 7:14

For unto us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Almighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Isaiah 9:6

“Hey! Something really awesome is coming soon. Get ready!” What if a prophet, or someone you trusted, said that someone was definitely coming that you believed could change the world? How would you prepare for this? Would it change anything? In this case, the people were told a virgin would have a son – something impossible! Yet, this baby that was coming was from God! Just imagine... the Messiah, God’s Son! Pretty major, right? Perhaps you’ll believe it, but you might be cynical and say, “Oh sure, whatever.”

Hundreds of years before the birth of Christ, the people were struggling. The prophet Isaiah told the Hebrew people that a Messiah would come and rescue them from their oppressors. As you know, some assumed it’d be a mighty King that would arrive soon, but it gave the struggling people hope. It was a very long time between that prophecy and the birth of Jesus. We have the advantage of knowing the outcome and that yes, Jesus was indeed born in Bethlehem, as Micah had forecast. It was an unlikely city for the birth of a king. Most kings were built in large cities, such as nearby Jerusalem. (We call it near, but we don’t walk everywhere.) One other king had been born there – David, which was the very reason they traveled there for the census. Joseph was a member of that family.

*O Come, O Come, Emmanuel,
And ransom captive Israel,
That mourns in lonely exile here;
Until the Son of God appear.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel.*



This is one of my favorite songs, not just for Advent, but for any time. I love its haunting melody, but even more, love how it so beautifully reflects the mood of Advent. From ancient times, people heard of the coming of a Savior, the Messiah, who would free His people. They waited and watched for signs of this arrival.

Unlike our ancestors waiting for the appearance of a Messiah, we are blessed, knowing He came once and wait for His return. He is always with us, but we acknowledge the wait, refocusing our faith. When we light the first candle, the candle of hope, we are reminded and celebrate the hope of the Advent season in anticipation of what is to come. Lighting the first candle is a reminder of that hope.

Barbara Creasy

HOPE

Hope is a really great word. The Oxford Language dictionary defines it as such: “a feeling of expectation and desire for a certain thing to happen.”

Hope is spoken about and used all through the Bible. From Isaiah where it says, “Those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength”, to Romans, “But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.” Titus 2:13 tells us, “To live self-controlled, upright and godly lives...while we wait for the blessed hope—the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ.” Finally, Hebrews 11:1 says, “Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.”

We use the word hope quite a lot in our daily conversations. We hope to get a raise. We hope to get to work on time. We hope to sleep in on Saturday. We hope the car starts. Sometimes, we should use another word that better describes what is happening or how we feel.

Right now, I'm full of hope and expectation. Our family is expecting the imminent arrival of our first grandchild. She is due to arrive on Thanksgiving Day, but we're hoping for a few days earlier. As first-time grandparents, we are very excited for this blessed event! We've made plenty of preparations for our grand-girl; and her parents are patiently (impatiently) waiting for her birth. We already love her very much and can't wait to meet her.

Now, think back to about 2000 years ago, when another young couple was waiting for their precious child's arrival. I'm thinking that his grandparents weren't as excited as I am. They were probably very embarrassed by the supposed behavior of their children. With all the brouhaha that surrounded their hasty marriage and Mary leaving town for a while, the grandparents probably just wanted it all to go away. So, when Joseph and Mary had to travel to Bethlehem for the census, it was an answer to their prayers. I imagine they were hoping the notoriety would blow over by the time the couple came back. But, they completely missed out on being the grandparents to the best grandson ever!

Jesus' birth was the fulfillment of countless prayers, prophecies, and predictions. He was the hope of the world. Coming to earth as a tiny baby, someone's new grandson, He became the lamb of God. The hope, expectation, and desire of all humanity was accomplished through His birth. His arrival meant we would no longer be separated from God, but would be reconnected to Him through His birth, life, and death.

Thank you, Jesus for your all-encompassing love. Thank you for coming to earth to give us hope. During this Advent season, help us to enter it with a feeling of expectation and hope!

“Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus”

*Come, Thou long-expected Jesus,
Born to set Thy people free;
From our fears and sins release us;
Let us find our rest in Thee.
Israel's strength and consolation,
Hope of all the earth Thou art;
Dear desire of every nation,
Joy of every longing heart.”*

Isaiah 40:31; Romans 8:25;
Titus 2:13; Hebrews 11:1

Lesley Hass



Thursday, December 5, 2024

RENEW

Christmas always seems like a time to renew our HOPE. As children we placed our hope in Santa Claus to bring us something good which was usually broken within a month. As adults, are we much different? What are the things we place our hope in as adults? When we place our hope in humans, we will disappoint each other because we are not perfect. When we place hope in things, they break. When we place hope in money, it goes away. The only true One, to place our hope in, is Jesus Christ.

As we enter this Advent season, remember where true hope comes from. It can only come from Jesus Christ who is the Son of God born of Mary, who grew to be a man, serving and healing those around Him. He chose to die on a cross for our sins even though He was sinless. He then rose from the dead on the third day, appearing to the multitudes before ascending into heaven. Because of His death we have a hope of a bright future with Him in heaven. If we believe and place our hope in Him, He will not disappoint.

**Instead of wishing or hoping
for something to happen, a
believer knows that their
hope is solid, concrete
evidence because it is
grounded in the Word of God
and we know that God
cannot lie (Heb 6:18; Num
23:19).**

I pray your hope is renewed this Advent Season!

Blessings,
Rev. Renee Bryant

“AND HE SHALL REIGN FOREVER AND EVER”

The seventh angel sounded his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, which said:

*“The kingdom of the world has become
the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah,
and he will reign for ever and ever.”*

Revelation 11:15

This fall I have had the opportunity to be a part of a group called Bible Study Fellowship. It's an international organization with local chapters, of which I am a member. It gives me a chance to study the Bible with women of different backgrounds and denominations in my local community. This past week our study took us to the book of Daniel.

Do you remember the story, found in Daniel 2, of King Nebuchadnezzar's dream of the menacing statue with a gold head, silver arms and chest, bronze belly and thighs, iron and clay legs and feet? Daniel, after praying for God's revelation (which he needed in order to save his own skin and that of the king's other wise men) was able to tell the king what he dreamed and what it meant. His explanation of the dream for King Nebuchadnezzar revealed that the statue represented four kingdoms, each being conquered by another less valuable kingdom. Then, "...a rock was cut out, but not by human hands." (*Daniel 2:34*) The rock then struck the statue smashing it to pieces until it was swept away completely, leaving no trace of the former kingdoms. The rock then became a huge mountain that filled the whole earth!

What does this have to do with Advent, "Emmanuel...here to dwell," or hope? We have seen the fulfillment of Daniel's interpretation played out in history with the rise and fall of Babylon, Medo-Persian Empire, Grecian Empire, and the Roman Empire, along with many others. It is faith-fueling for me to know that, if so many prophecies have been realized, so will the ones yet to be fulfilled be accomplished. As I was contemplating the interpretation of this prophetic dream, knowing that the Rock that filled the whole earth was Jesus reigning over the Kingdom of God, another verse came to mind. "The kingdom of this world has become the Kingdom of our Lord...and he shall reign forever and ever!" Hallelujah! What a promise! In the midst of wars, contentious elections, injustice, riots, nightly shootings, generational cycles of poverty, all manners of evil, we can know that because Emmanuel came here to dwell with us and die for us, we can be a part of that promised kingdom through faith in Jesus Christ. He is King of Kings and Lord of Lords forever and ever, AMEN.

Rev. Debbie Gorbandt



Saturday, December 7, 2024

HOPE FOR THE WORLD

“But as for me, I watch in hope for the Lord, I wait for God my Savior; my God will hear me.”
Micah 7:7

Then at last, God came near. At just the right time, after hearing all the cries of His people through the years. Jesus was born and hope was born.

This is what’s now, posted on the NextDoor neighbor app 21 hours ago:

“I don’t know where to go or what to do anymore. Defeated and hopeless is an understatement.” CL

So how do we navigate the days of our lives now, living with the Hope in our hearts?

What about the man standing with a cardboard sign as I drive from Kroger to turn on Bardstown Road?

And the list goes on....

My only answer is to do what God places before us and gives us the ability to do.

The FB post was from a friend in PRP on the lookout for children’s books that she could have on a table for children who had no money for the School Book Fair – An idea that I had never thought about but loved. So, I forwarded it on FB. A few days later I met up with a high school friend with a shopping bag of books (she had plans for them, but sometimes God gives you other plans). The next day I met the PRP friend, got to hear about the ministry she had with children at her church, gave her the bags of books, and hopefully provided a moment of hope for those children on Book Fair Day at the Elementary School.

Or there’s the lady working as a clerk who realized the dire situation her customer was in and proceeded to fill a grocery cart with the basics of life...and give her hope.

The answer stays the same. As we fix our eyes on Jesus, He will show us ways we can give hope to those lives around us. There are big ways, like Samaritan’s Purse doing massive numbers of helicopter flights and rescue efforts to towns ravaged by Hurricane Helene. Then there are the slow plodding mule teams who climb those same mountain trails to bring hope to the hopeless with their life-giving supplies.

God sent Hope to our world, when Jesus was born in Bethlehem. Someone gave us a reason to trust in the Hope of the World. Now we can go and do likewise!

Karen Love



Sunday, December 8, 2024

WAR OR PEACE

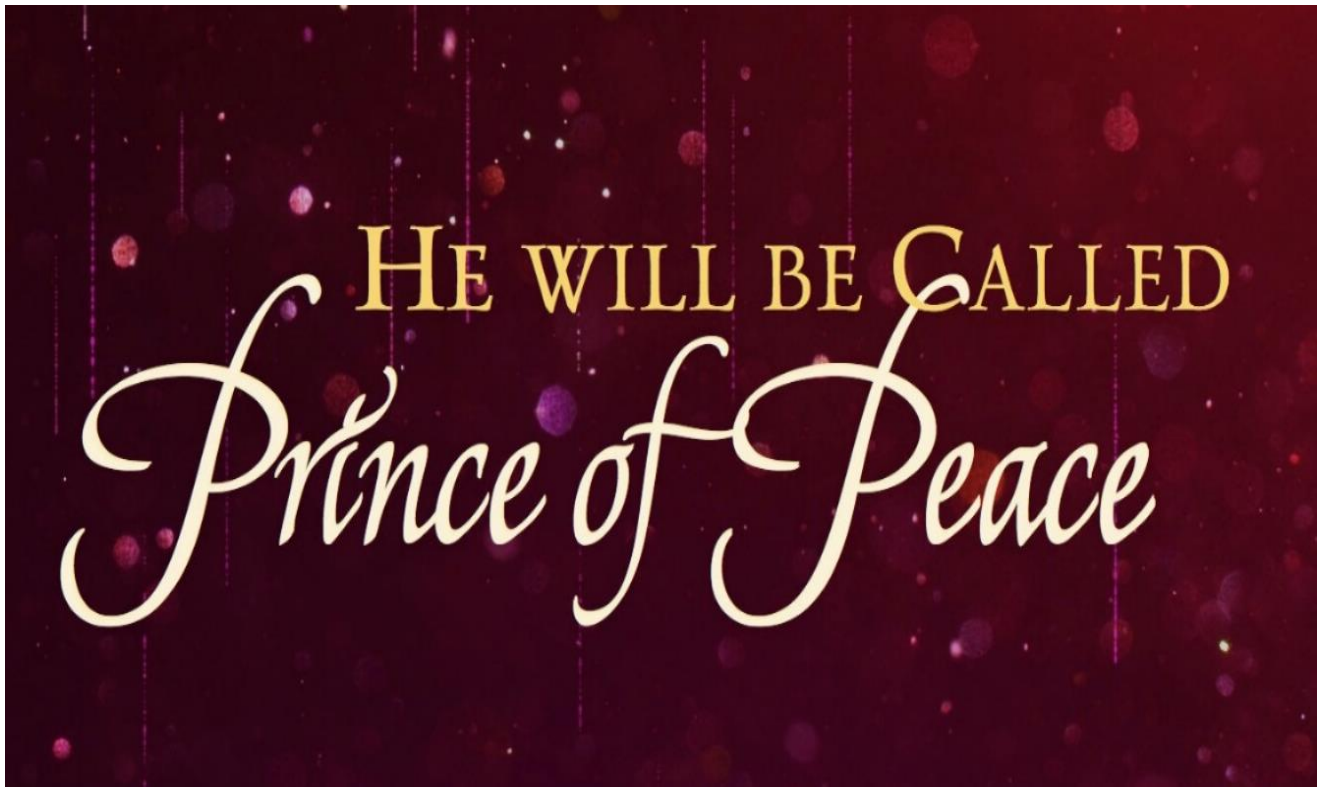
*“These things I have spoken to you, so that in Me you may have peace.
In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world.”*

John 16:33

War and Peace. Leo Tolstoy wrote a novel about it, but I have not yet read it. In the news, we hear too much about the wars in Israel, Ukraine, and elsewhere these days. We live in a troubled world that has too much conflict. I was concerned about unrest during our last election. Somehow, the country avoided the conflict. Fortunately, many have peace in the form of the Prince of Peace.

We read in Isaiah, chapters 7 and 9, of the prophecy of Emmanuel and the Prince of Peace. When I think of the greatest reason to be a follower of Jesus, I always want to tell others that it is the peace that God gives me. When I am praying, when I read His Holy Word, or just when I am at rest, I feel a very real sense of peace that comes from knowing the Lord. We may have bad days and physical illness, but it is reassuring to know the peace that only the Lord can give. We can be tranquil as we know we are restored to God and at peace with Him even if other people are not at peace with us. As believers, we have the Holy Spirit to guide us in love. I pray that all may know the Lord's peace by knowing the Prince of Peace by God's Grace.

Chris Towles



Monday, December 9, 2024

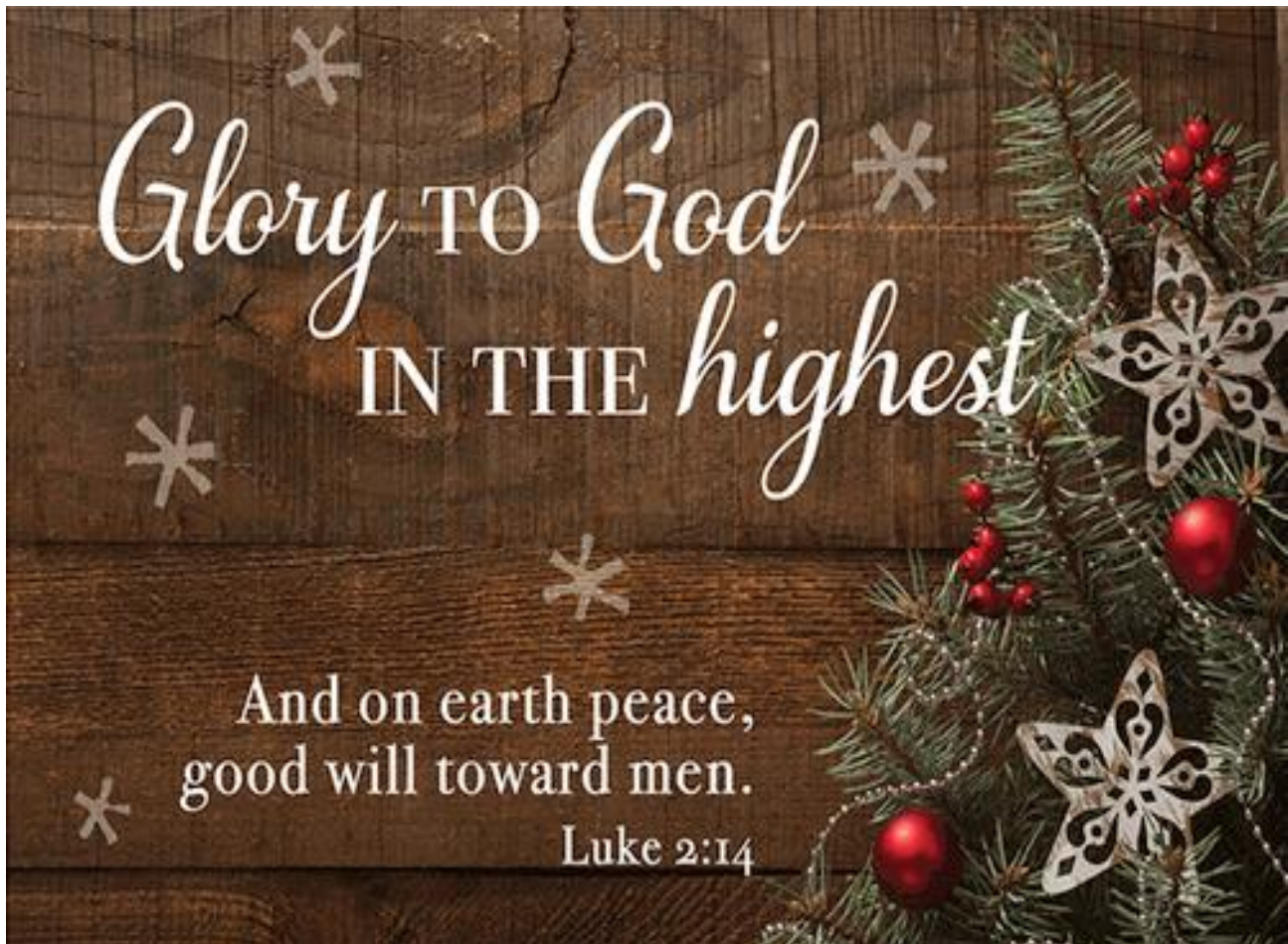
EMMANUEL BRINGS PEACE

Emmanuel means God with us which is also associated with peace. God's presence is peace itself and knowing God as Emmanuel can bring an anchor of peace in the soul. At the last supper, Jesus said, "Peace I leave you; my peace I give you." (John 14:27) Micah prophesied that "He (Jesus) will be their peace." (Micah 5:5). The peace that came from Christ's presence came in history that Christmas night, but His peace did not stop being with us at the manger or even at the cross. His peace continues to come each day.

This unshakable peace comes from knowing God and trusting Him with every detail of our lives, like sheep in the care of a good shepherd. "He will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. And they will live securely, for then his greatness will reach to the ends of the earth." (Micah 5:4) God's peace is available to all of us; we just must humble ourselves and allow Him to run our daily lives. We were not designed to carry the weight of the world, but God can. The presence of God is with us and His name is Emmanuel; God with us forever.

Lord Jesus, please be with us now and forever. When You come again, we know that we will receive the gift Your perfect peace. Amen

Hydiatu Konneh



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

What is the difference between Spiritual Peace and Worldly Peace?

Spiritual Peace

Peace is a gift from God

God wants us to live in Peace.

God’s peace can’t be taken away.

Jesus’ peace is inner peace. Peace with God and mankind.

His peace refers to a hope and reassurance that goes beyond what a fallen world can offer.

Peace is a fruit of the Spirit, so if we allow the Spirit to rule our lives, we will experience His peace.

When the fruit of Peace is produced within us by the Holy Spirit, we can live life to the fullest in harmony and tranquility despite our circumstances.

As we learn to depend on the Holy Spirit and understand that He will be with us in EVERY situation, we will be more at rest and anxiety will be further away from us.

Throughout the Bible, Jesus commands us in numerous verses to seek/obtain peace.

As believers we have an obligation to let the peace of God rule in our hearts. Colossians 3:15 states:

“Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body, you were called to peace.”

God commands us to seek peace. Psalm 34:14 states: “Turn away from evil and do good, seek peace and pursue it.”

We should make every effort to do what leads to peace. Matthew 5:9 states: “Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called children of God.”

We are assured the following with Jesus’ peace.

- Jesus is the Prince of Peace. Isaiah 9:6 states for until us a child is born, to us a Son is given and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, **PRINCE OF PEACE**.
- Our sins are forgiven. I John 1:9 states: “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and **will forgive our sins** and purify us from all unrighteousness.”
- We are accepted and loved by our heavenly Father. Ephesians 1:6 states: “To the **praise of His glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the one He loves.**”
- We have a secure hope for eternity. Hebrew 6:19-20 states: “We have a hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure. It enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain, where our forerunner Jesus has entered on our behalf. He has become a high priest in the order of Melchizedek.

When Jesus returns in His second coming, there will be PEACE.

Worldly Peace

Temporary – Chaotic – Not Everlasting – Trouble – Discord – Discomfort – Conflict – Strife – Uncertainty – Trouble - Nervousness

When Worldly Peace knocks at your door and it will, remember what the Lord says in John 16:33: “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.”

Seek HIS Peace, He wants you to have it!!!

Michele Crider

Wednesday, December 11, 2024

PEACE

“Don’t worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank Him for all He has done. Then you will experience God’s peace, which exceeds anything we can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus.”

Philippians 4:6-7 NLT

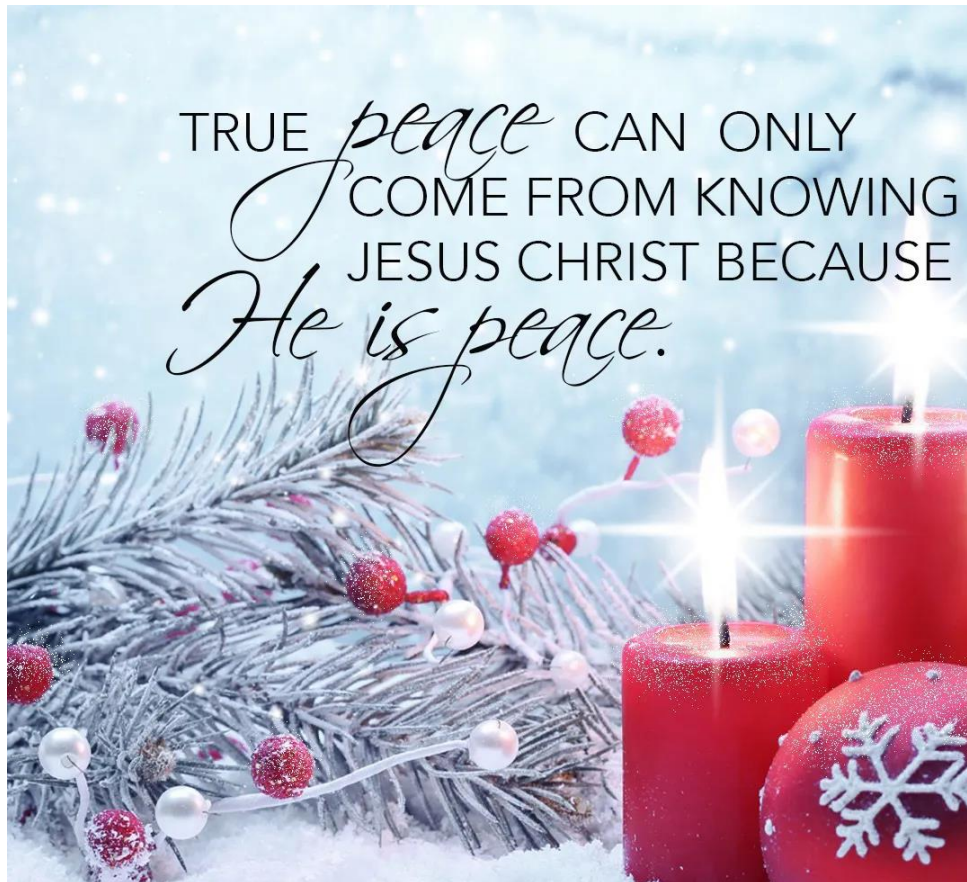
According to the World Health Organization, anxiety disorders are the world’s most common mental disorders. Nearly one third of our country reported anxiety and depression symptoms in 2023 per the U.S. Census Bureau Household Pulse Survey.

Anxiety is an emotion characterized by feelings of tension, dread, and uneasiness. It can also include physical changes such as increased blood pressure and rapid heartbeat.

Have you ever experienced anxiety? I have! The feeling is very disconcerting...until I start praying to God. Sometimes it takes minutes and sometimes it takes hours, but finally I allow myself to feel His peace. He is my therapy.

When you are burdened and feel anxious, depressed, or even a raging anger, start praying to God and allow Him to give you peace which exceeds anything we can understand.

Norma Routt



EMMANUEL BRINGS PEACE

⁹ And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. ¹⁰ And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. ¹¹ For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. ¹² And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. ¹³ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, ¹⁴ Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.

Luke 2:9-14 KJV

Growing up I heard the story of my Savior's birth every year at Christmas time. I remember studying a very small and humble looking nativity scene that was part of the Christmas decorations wondering what it was like that night. Did it snow? Was it cold? And was it a peaceful night? All the Christmas shows and specials gave the message it was a peaceful and quiet night. But was it really?

During my teen years, I enjoyed sitting in the living room in front of the Christmas tree. I purposefully kept all lights off except the ones on the tree. They were beautiful and colorful. I sat there enjoying the small amount of quiet that one can find in a house of five. I would meditate on the meaning of the season, but I had forgotten about those questions from years before.

Now years later, after the hustle and bustle of getting the kids to bed on Christmas Eve and wrapping the last remaining gifts, I find it well after midnight. I still turn off all the lights except the ones on the tree. There are no sounds of traffic... no barking dogs in the neighborhood... not one sound. In these quiet moments, I think about that nativity scene, pray and meditate on the verses from the book of Luke, chapter 2. And in those quiet, still moments I feel the peace of God. There might not have been snow that night (especially because His birth was likely in the springtime), but I believe there was peace. It's a peace unlike anything I have ever known, and I am so thankful to experience it. It's a peace that is only possible through Jesus Christ.

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

Lisa Payne



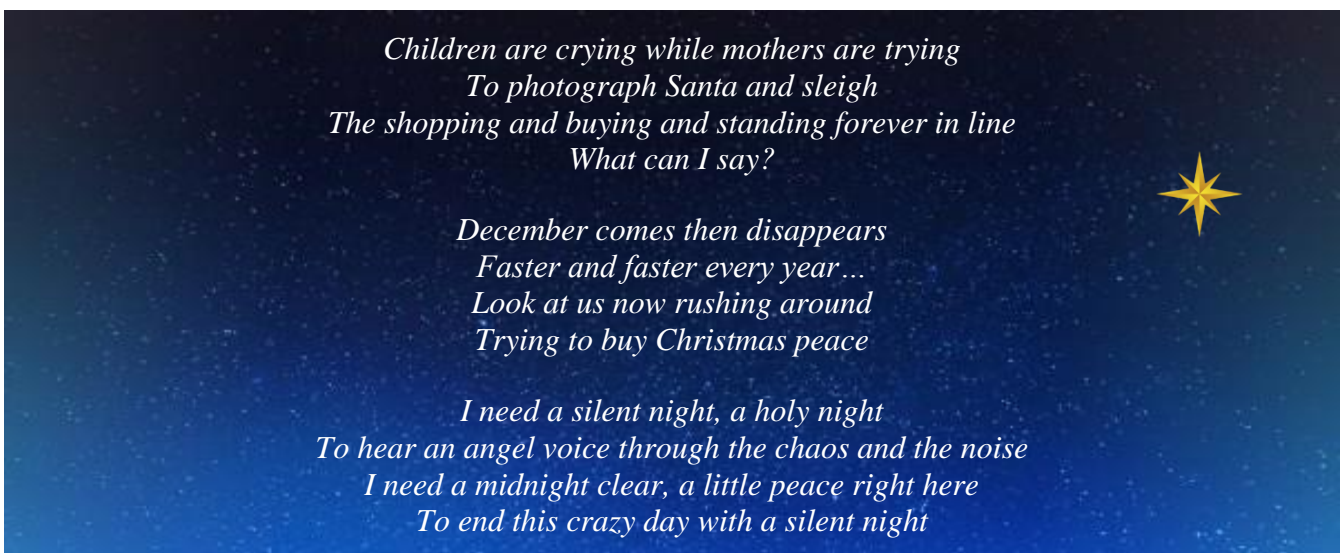
Friday, December 13, 2024

DO NOT CONFORM, BE TRANSFORMED

“Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is - his good, pleasing, and perfect will.”
Romans 12:2

Christmas is not my favorite holiday. Yes, you heard correctly. It’s not that I don’t want to celebrate Jesus’ arrival on Earth as fully man, fully God. THAT part of it makes my heart sing. That part of the Christmas observance is a prelude to, “The Greatest Story Ever Told.” The part that I struggle with is the fight to keep my focus and proper perspective of this blessed event. I find the season of Advent the most difficult time of the year to, “...*not conform to the pattern of this world*” (Romans 12:2).

Amy Grant recorded a song titled, “I Need a Silent Night.” Here are a few of the lyrics:



Are there any other moms (or dads or grandmas or grandpas, etc.) who can relate? Or perhaps your struggle isn’t with the over-indulgent activity of the season, but rather loneliness, grief, or sickness.

Please don’t take this as knock on decorations, great food, gifts, parties, or even Santa Clause (aka St. Nicholas). Those are all good things when kept in proper perspective. When used in our faith context they can point us to Emmanuel, the reason for the season. It’s just that we are so bombarded (earlier and earlier every year) with the money-making industry of “the holiday season,” it takes extra effort and commitment to, “... *be transformed by the renewing of your mind.*”

How do you intend to keep your focus on being, “...*able to test and approve what God’s will is - his good, pleasing, and perfect will,*” this Advent season? Here are some things I plan to do and would humbly suggest for you:

1. Make worship a priority (both individually at home as well as at FCBC).
2. Ask for the Holy Spirit’s help.
3. Focus on giving and ministry to others.
4. Let the trappings of the season serve to remind you of Jesus’ birth and how He is truly, “Emmanuel...here to dwell.” What a treasure His presence is!

Rev. Debbie Gorbandt

Saturday, December 14, 2024

PEACE

*“Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you.
Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.” John 14:27*

In the Gospel of John, we find this beautiful promise given to us by our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. It seems so important, especially during the Christmas season, to reflect on this precious promise. As Christmas draws near many of us will decorate our homes and bake special treats to share with others. We will search for the perfect gift to give to each of our loved ones. We might attend wonderful church services and listen to the story of Christ’s birth and enjoy beautiful Christmas music. It can indeed be a wonderful time of year!

Christmas can also be one of the loneliest and saddest times of the year. Loved ones may be seriously ill and in need of care. Some of us may have lost loved ones and our lives are forever changed. We may struggle with how to build a life without those we have loved so very much. Our children or grandchildren may be experiencing serious issues, or our own lives may seem in shambles with financial or relationship problems. We may not feel there is any peace in our lives as we try and solve these problems. Christmas can be a very challenging time of year filled with worry and fear.

Yet, Jesus Christ, the one who loves us most of all tells us that He gives us peace not as the world gives but His own peace He gives to us. Those who celebrate joyfully will find peace in the traditions of Christmas and happy times shared with family and friends as we celebrate the birth of our Savior. If we have come to know Jesus as our personal Lord and Savior, there is nothing we will ever face alone again. We can give Him our cares and our worries and know that He loves us more than anyone else ever could. This is the true meaning of Christmas.

For those who do not know Jesus and the peace only He can give, Christmas is the perfect time to ask Him to come into your heart. Jesus 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 our sin, and that He died and rose again on the third day, He can become your Savior forever. Nothing on this earth 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 will never face them alone. His peace goes far beyond anything this world has to offer. We can search for a lifetime and never find peace in earthly things. Only Jesus can give peace that passes all earthly understanding.

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. He doesn’t expect us to be better than 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 rose 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. We can know the true meaning of Christmas.

Nancy Shewmaker



Sunday, December 15, 2024

IMMANUEL BRINGS JOY

As Christians, we have always heard that Christ brings us joy because He lives in us, but have we ever stopped to think about what this actually means? We are often quick to react to something positive with a display of happiness, however, it is important to distinguish this emotion from Joy. Compassion International says that “Happiness is a temporary emotion that will come and go depending on your circumstances,” however, they say that “Joy isn’t a simple emotion – it’s eternal and remains no matter what you go through.”

I believe that God does not simply bring us temporary happiness, but instead instills everlasting joy within in us through the Holy Spirit living in us. Matthew 1:23 states, “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel (which means, God with us).” This verse shows us that Christ’s name alone tells us that God will always be with us, which should be the source of our joy. Hebrews 13:5 says, “Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have, for he has said, ‘I will never leave you nor forsake you.’” We can see through this verse that earthly commodities can only bring, at most, temporary happiness, which God tells us not to focus on. We are instructed to focus on the fact that God is always with us, therefore we must choose to focus more on the everlasting Joy that He gives us.

While we may experience some sort of temporary feeling of happiness through earthly means, God is the only one who can provide us with true Joy. This earth will constantly fail us, but God never will. Even when we face trials and changes in our daily lives, He remains unmovable. I believe that the song “My God is Still the Same,” by the Sanctus Real Band explains this well by saying, “When did He break His promise? When did His kindness fail? Never has, never will. My God is still the same.” This song is a great reminder for me that no matter what we may face in this world, our God’s promise to remain with us will never change. Romans 15:13 says, “May the God of hope fill you with all Joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.” I believe this scripture affirms what was said in the song lyrics, because it shows that our hope should not be in what this world has to offer, but instead should be in God who gives us hope for a future with Him, as well as joy from the Holy Spirit living in us as believers.

Throughout this Christmas season, it is important to keep in mind that while we may experience temporary happiness in giving and receiving gifts, and taking part in other activities, we must remember that the only source of true, everlasting joy, is God. We must also keep in mind that Christ died so that we could have eternal Joy with Him, which is what our focus should ultimately be on this Christmas.

Lucas Seraphine



Monday, November 16, 2024

JOY TO THE WORLD! THE LORD HAS COME

“Shout for joy to the LORD, all the earth, burst into jubilant song with music.”

Psalm 98:4

This best loved Christmas carol was written in 1719 by an English clergyman named Isaac Watts. It was based on Psalm 98. The music was adapted from Handel’s “Antioch.” The first stanza reads:

Joy to the world, the Lord is come!
Let earth receive her King;
Let every heart, prepare Him room,
And heaven and nature sing.

I remember singing this song as a young boy while going house to house caroling. There was a time when Christmas was about celebrating the birth of the Savior. Many years ago, people greeted each other “Merry Christmas” without any hesitation or fear of offending people. Now, we live in a different time. The focus shifted to the day—holiday—happy holiday making it empty. Can you imagine people celebrating your birthday while ignoring you? It is no wonder, the holiday is joyless. But not to us who welcome the Lord and rejoice in His coming!

Rev. George Payocong, Jr.



Tuesday, December 17, 2024

THE ACTIVITY SET

Now all this took place that what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet might be fulfilled, saying, "Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and shall bear a son, and they shall call His name Immanuel," which translated means, "God with Us." Matthew 1:22-23

It was 1989 and Joanna and I were serving at Fall Creek Baptist Church in Indianapolis, Indiana. Jamie, our son, was a ripe old age of three years...and wise beyond his years. The following is an article that was written for our weekly church newsletter after an enlightening conversation with our son concerning the true meaning of the nativity set.

It's very amazing how young children take the seemingly complex and make it easily understood, many times in new and refreshing ways.

This year at Christmas we received a nativity set from one of Joanna's longtime friends. Since we already had one up (with four wisemen and several re-glued parts), I didn't pay much attention to the new one. As I look back, it was a busy time. Santa was trying to finish up, there were still some presents to find for family, and then there was the Living Christmas Tree. Well, that shoots several weeks right there. It was an extremely busy time.

The new nativity set was unbreakable, so Marcie and Jamie managed to spend a lot of time with it on the floor under the tree. One afternoon as I was hurrying through the house, Jamie asked, "Dad, can I play with the activity set?" Naturally, I stopped and said those brilliant words that busy parents so often say, "What did you say?" Jamie continued, "Dad, I want to play with the activity set." Bingo!

Once again the three-year-old outsmarts the parent. Even though he probably didn't realize the ramifications of what he had just said, Jamie had hit the nail right on the head. It was an activity set.

Webster's dictionary says that activity is action. One of the definitions under action says "to have an effect." The nativity set of nearly 2000 years ago has certainly had an effect on the world. Has it had an effect on you personally?

I've had to re-evaluate a lot of my Christmas activity. I found that some of it wasn't as Christ-centered as I intended or hoped it would be.

As the new year begins, Jamie has helped me re-confirm that the nativity really is the reason for all the activity.

May your celebration of the nativity be filled with the right kind of activity. Merry Christmas!

Gene Wright



J IS FOR JOY

And the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid, for behold I bring you good tidings of a great joy which shall be for all people; for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord." Luke 2:10-11

And what was this **joy** of whom the angel spoke? Why it was the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ!

According to the Webster New American Dictionary, **joy** is a feeling or sense of well-being. It is a source of happiness, bliss, delight, enjoyment, and pleasure.

This overwhelming feeling of **joy** is what we felt at the birth of each of our three grandsons. Were we happy that the months of knitting those tiny bodies together had passed? Of course, we were! Were we happy that the hours of labor for our dear daughter-in-law were over? Absolutely! Were we delighted that each little boy was born healthy and whole? We were! But you know, the real all-consuming feeling that we shared with our son and daughter-in-law, together with our daughter Marcie, was one of pure **joy**!

Using an acronym for the word **joy**, I would like to share with you some of my **joyful** thoughts.

J is for Jesus!

In the passage found in Luke 2:10-11 we find a great reason for **joy**. Prophecy had been fulfilled as foretold in the Book of Isaiah!—a baby would be born to us; a Son would be given for us, so that we might have a means to reach our Heavenly Father through His Son's sacrifice of life and the forgiveness of our sins. Our eternity in Heaven would be made secure by the gift of Jesus to humanity.

O is for Others!

Those closest to us—those closest to our hearts, are our immediate family members and those friends who become family members by choice. Our Marcie, Jamie, and Amanda continually encourage us in our walk of faith as we observe their love and service to our Lord.

During the Advent season, we especially empathize with Mary, the mother of Jesus. We, too, had longed and awaited the arrival of a boy child in our family. Elias James Wright was born into the welcoming arms of his parents, Jamie and Amanda Wright on November 19, 2014. This new family addition captured our hearts and gave us great **joy**. God in His grace would add two more little boys to our family tree to love. We welcomed Callum Arthur in 2016 and Finley Davis in 2020! Praise be to God!

Y is for You!

You, our church family, continually give us **joy** as you minister alongside us to further grow and glorify the kingdom of our Lord.

You, our church family, have loved us, prayed for us, and welcomed us into your fellowship of believers.

You, our church family, have given us a place to worship and serve at a time when we were without a church home and a place to serve.

You, our church family, are a wellspring of love in our hearts and a constant **joy** to the Wright family.

During this third week of Advent, we wish you Hope, Peace, and of course, **Joy**!

Joanna Wright and Family

Thursday, December 19, 2024

JOY: A FEELING OF GREAT PLEASURE AND HAPPINESS.

Throughout my lifetime, I have experienced the wonderful emotion of **JOY** many times; birthdays, first day of school, my baptism, finally getting my driver's license, graduation, my wedding day, the birth of my son, all the holidays, but most of all Christmas. Some of my fondest childhood memories are of the **JOY** that always filled our home at Christmas. It wasn't so much about the presents, of course, I always enjoyed getting gifts, but to me it was all about the preparations leading up to that special day of the year. This is what **JOY** is to me.

We always had a real tree that my dad cut from the woods near our home. While he was gone on the hunt for the perfect tree, my brothers and I would make colorful paper ornaments from construction paper, the Sunday paper comics, the Sears catalog, glitter, and glue. Of course, I always wanted the tree to be full of beautiful glass ornaments from the department store, but our parents would tell us that we just didn't have money to spend on ornaments that would break. (Now I know they said that only because they would rather have the ones that we handmade.) Dad would always struggle to get the fresh cut monster tree through the door and into our living room and I remember him saying, "It sure didn't look that big out in the field". After he managed to get the tree secured in the stand, the big bulb colorful lights were strung, the silver tinsel icicles draped, then it was ready for ornaments. Mom had a few family heirloom glass orbs that she first strategically placed near the top of the tree and then it was our turn to hang our paper creations right in front. We then placed our chalk nativity scene with the big bright star on top, under the tree, and plugged it in so it would be fully lit as well. Once everything was fully decorated, it was showtime. Mom would turn all the living room lamps off so that the room was in total darkness and Dad would then plug in the tree. Oh wow! The **JOY** that we felt at that special moment was immeasurable. We all sat on the sofa, drinking hot cocoa, singing Christmas carols, and admiring our beautiful tree. Mom would then read us several stories from our big thick Christmas book before bedtime. My favorite story was always the one of how the big bright star led the shepherds and the wisemen through the darkness to the place where Baby Jesus was born. I remember while she read that story, I would focus on the big electric star glowing in our nativity and think how excited those shepherds must have been to see that big bright star to light their way through the dark night; just like we were so excited when Dad turned on our tree and lit up our dark room. Each year, I would think that our tree was the most beautiful Christmas tree ever! On Christmas morning, my brothers and I would wake up early to get to the tree before our parents got up and mysteriously the tree lights would be on, and it was totally covered in red and white striped candy canes. We just knew Santa had left them, because our parents would never have had money to spend on all those candy canes at the store. To me, this was Christmas; it was our family tradition, and it was pure **JOY!**

Decades have passed and although I am much older, I still feel **JOY** when I see the Christmas lights everywhere. I now drive my grandchildren around, sipping hot cocoa with the radio blasting the "songs of the season" and admiring all the neighborhoods decked out in beautiful sparkling lights. I have even seen some yards or store fronts displaying huge, illuminated letters spelling out the word **JOY** and it truly warms my heart. Seeing all these beautiful light displays and elaborate decorations immediately takes me back to my modest little childhood living room. I can't help but laugh when I recall our huge monster tree glowing with big colorful light bulbs, shiny tinsel and handmade ornaments, but most of all I remember the true **JOY** I felt seeing that bright white star lighting up our nativity. Matthew 2:10 "When they saw the star, they were filled with Joy". NIV

As this beautiful season approaches and **JOY** fills the air, it is heartbreaking to think of all those who may, for whatever reason, not feel so joyful. People all around us are struggling, due to countless

reasons of despair, and it may be very difficult for them to have a “Merry Christmas” or feel any **JOY** at all. I know that feeling of despair. There have been many times that I faced challenges in my life when I felt there was no way possible that things would ever get any better. Without my faith and trust in God, and a lot of prayer, I may not have survived. Many life situations will try to take away our **JOY** and we often feel abandoned in total darkness, but God is always there to pull us through. When we are challenged, we should pray for hope, strength to tackle our struggles and ask God to shine His light on our path and guide us in the right direction. We need to keep our focus on the one true light, our hope, which is Jesus Christ. We need to share this light with all others; especially those that are less fortunate and continue to pray they will find peace. John 8:12 “When Jesus spoke to the people he said, “I am the light of the world: whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.” NIV

At Christmastime, we all think of the light, hope, peace, and joy that Jesus brings. God wants us to be joyful, not only at Christmas, but every day despite negative circumstances. Just before Jesus went to the cross, He told his disciples, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your heart be troubled and do not be afraid.” John 14:27 NIV

Blessings to all for a **JOYFUL** Christmas!

Jeryl Presley



Friday, December 20, 2024

AWAY IN A MANGER

It may be called a manger, the nativity scene, or a creche. During the Middle Ages, people set up living creches in Italian villages in order to share the story. Whatever name you use, you probably have one.

The word Nativity has to do with birth, but this was not just any birth, but a birth that changed the world then and now. It has been said that the manger used by Jesus was most likely a food trough in a cave, as that is where they kept their animals.

Traditionally, most people have a manger under the tree. I have several, actually, closer to 20, yet rarely located under a tree. Mine are set up around the house. The more delicate ones are put up in a safe place but others are on tables to be enjoyed. Several are extremely kid-friendly and accessible on purpose.

My collection grew over time, but we had one that was called the “real” manger, the official family one. Our children were familiar with the nativity story and enjoyed “acting it out” not only doing church plays, but on a regular basis at home. It was left out on a table, so it was always accessible. Each child had a particular way of arranging the manger, according to individual interpretation so I could guess who came by last. Now the grandchildren enjoy arranging that one and others.

When she was about 5, I overheard our daughter say, “Who put all these animals in here? I moved them outside (the manger) where they belong, You can’t have dirty animals with Baby Jesus!” One son usually moved all the animals to one side and added Matchbox cars to the manger like a garage. It was possible for me to identify which child had touched it last by the position of the pieces! Occasionally, Fisher-Price animals managed to join “the regulars” as well.

One morning I noticed that while the animals were all arranged, Baby Jesus was missing! When I asked about it, one of the kids had it in a coat pocket. He thought “Baby Jesus would like to see the large Nativity Scene at church” so he took him to church and showed him! On Christmas Eve, after our birthday meal for Jesus, we had birthday cake and Keith read about the birth of Jesus from the Bible as was our tradition. As kids got older, it was a big deal to them to be the one to read it. But no matter who read, I noticed that whichever child was the current youngest moved the pieces in the manger, re-telling the story in their own way.

Why did we allow the kids to play with the Nativity scene? I wanted it to be real to them. After all, it IS real. Young children love the story of the baby in the manger. Reenacting the story gives them joy.

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. Luke 2:7

A prayer for today:

Dear Lord,

I want to keep the story of the Nativity real in my heart, just as a child. Help me keep the love and wonder alive. Remind me to show MY life to Jesus and include Him. Amen.

Barbara Creasy



Saturday, December 21, 2024

WHAT I DESERVE!

“I have come that they may have life and have it abundantly.” John 10:10

On my way to work one morning I heard someone ask people to finish this sentence,

“I never got....”

Of course, the usual answers come to mind for people. I never got “the perfect person”, “the big job promotion”, “the grand house”, “the fancy car”, “the child that I wanted”, “the salary I should have gotten”. So many things that we think we should have gotten and for whatever reason, we didn’t.

Honestly, the answer that came to my mind to finish that sentence was “what I deserve.”

I don’t think I have ever gotten what I deserve in this life. If I had gotten what I deserve I would not be the person that I am. I would not have the life that I have. I would not have the wonderful family and friends that I have. I would not have the job that I love. I would not have the home that I have or the friends. Most of all, I would not have the promise of eternal life with the Creator of the Universe. I would have to pay for every sin that I have committed in my life.

God sent His Son to be the sacrifice for the world. He gave His Son to give His life so that I would have the life that I don’t deserve. On the day that I accepted Christ into my heart and into my life, I was filled with an unexplainable joy. Joy that has carried me through some pretty dark times in my life. Because no matter what happened, I still believed that God was in control of my life here on earth and my eternal life. I still believe that now. Even when things don’t go my way, I believe that God is in control. I believe that He holds me in the palm of His hands.

I don’t deserve the life that He has given me. But I’m so thankful that He has.

Martha Blansette



Sunday, December 22, 2024

GOD IS LOVE

The phrase “God is Love” is found in multiple scripture verses like I John 4:8 and 4:16. Many would agree that love is not just one of God’s attributes but is at the very core of His being. Have you ever just ruminated on the depth and scope of the meaning of “God is Love”? In my humanness, I have a difficult time wrapping my head around what God really wants us to understand about His love and how we are to emulate His love. Love is just His character. In my limited human understanding, I can only understand the depth of God’s love for us in reference to how I have experienced love.

Part of my testimony is telling people that when I look back at my life before I invited Jesus into my heart, I realize Jesus knew me and loved me way before I knew him. Through that love, He truly took care of me and guided my life in the path he wanted for me. He used many good and bad times to shape me and mold me into what he wanted and needed. When I was a child and a young adult, I remember what it felt like to have grandparents who loved me unconditionally. I could have been arrested (of which I was not) and they may have been disappointed in my actions but ultimately, they would just say in not so many words that: “Yes he may have done that but he’s such a good boy!”. I learned that forgiveness and unconditional love were an unearned constant with them toward me and I strived to not disappoint them.

When Lesley and I became parents to two fantastic boys whose behavior was not always fantastic, we learned what it was like loving your children unconditionally, sacrificially, compassionately, slow to anger, and many other love characteristics of Jesus. We may not have always liked them at a particular moment, but we always loved them.

Learning about the depth of God’s love in Sunday School classes I have taught, I have used an example of man that fought hard to avoid Jesus. Over his many years of obstinance and sin, he finally accepts Jesus. Soon after, he suddenly dies. He finds himself walking in a garden talking with Jesus. He’s too ashamed and cannot look up at Jesus’ face. He tells Jesus that He must be disappointed in him for all the times he resisted Him and His life. Jesus tells the man “I’m not disappointed, I love you. I just knew on the 77th time you were going to get it”. Love is patience.

When we celebrate Jesus’ birth, we recognize the unfathomable love God bestowed on us by giving us Jesus’ life and lessons here on earth. Ultimately and sacrificially, giving His only Son’s life in a terrible death and then a beautiful resurrection so that we as Christians could have eternal life with God! Then gifting us with the Holy Spirit so that His love can live within every Christian here and now. He gave us a living document called the Bible so that when read, we can hear the very words God wants to convey to us in love at that moment.

God’s character embodies love as He showed us is unconditional, sacrificial, unearned, everlasting, patient, faithful, provisional, redeeming, compassionate, slow to anger, loyal and much, much more. My prayer for each of us is found in Ephesian 3:18-19, “*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 fully understand. Then you will be made complete with the fullness of life and power that comes from God.*”

Many Blessings during this Season,
Danny Hass

EMMANUEL BRINGS LOVE

“and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” Ephesians 5:2

To love like Jesus, we need to think and feel. We need reason and emotion. Both head and heart, working together! It’s the only way to bring perfect love into our imperfect lives. For us to love like Jesus we must:

1. become more *mindful* — less detached.
2. become more *approachable* — less exclusive.
3. become more *graceful* — less judgmental.
4. become *bolder* — less fearful.
5. become more *self-giving* — less self-absorbed.

Christmas is the season of love. During Christmas, we are reminded that our Savior and true love was born in a barn. We are to love others just as Jesus loved us.

Lord, show us how to love like Jesus and how to love without being cautious or to get something. Help us give ourselves to others. Fill us with Your Spirit every moment of every day to love like that. In Jesus’ Name, Amen.

Hydiatu Konneh



Tuesday, December 24, 2024

THE EMMANUEL WHO DWELLS WITH ME

The Old Testament prophet Isaiah, in the midst of many other prophecies, foretells the birth of the Messiah this way: “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, Holy Bible, New International Version.

Emmanuel means “God dwells with us.” And because of the vastness of His love, this God of celestial riches descended from a heavenly throne to come dwell among the earthly humans He had created. Thus, the historical birth of a Baby Boy to an innocent young girl probably in her early teens became the greatest gift God gave to the world since He breathed the breath of life into the first man Adam.

What did the Son of God do as He dwelt among humankind? As a child Jesus grew physically and mentally—see Luke 2:52. As an adult He called His disciples—see Matthew 10:1-4. He healed the sick—see Matthew 4:23-25. He taught in the synagogue—see Mark 1:21. And Jesus was crucified—see Luke 23:32-34. He died—see Luke 23:44-46. He arose from His burial tomb—see Luke 24:33-35.

Everything Jesus did in his approximately three and a half years of ministry after his baptism by John the Baptist—see Matthew 3:13-17—was “to seek and to save the lost”—see Luke 19:10. Jesus today is still calling disciples and still seeking to save the lost.

Here’s a poem I’ve written to express my relationship with Emmanuel.

Emmanuel Dwells With Me

**Who is Emmanuel?
He is the newborn King,
The Baby in the stable
About whom angels sing.**

**But He became my Teacher
And His love foretold the way
To God’s eternal vision
For my life ev’ry day.**

Advent/Christmas Devotional and Poem by
Connie Carlisle Polley, 2024-2025
ConnieCarlislePolley.com



GLORY TO THE NEWBORN KING

*Suddenly a great company of heavenly hosts appeared with the angel, praising God saying:
"Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom His favor rests"*

Luke 2:13-14

A Christmas song with solid theological foundation is entitled "Hark the Herald Angel Sing" composed by Charles Wesley and George Whitefield, two founding ministers of the Methodist movement. The tune was adapted from Mendelssohn's Festgesang (AKA Gutenberg Cantata). At the heart of this Christmas carol are the lines,

Mild He lays His glory by,
Born that man no more may die.
Born to raise the sons of earth,
Born to give them second birth,
Hark! The herald angels sing,
Glory to the newborn King,

I can't sing this part without feeling stirred within. God became man so that we can be sons and daughters of God. He laid His glory by so that He can lift us up to glory. His birth brings new birth that cancels sin's curse—death. When the Son of God was born, His "crib" was under the shadow of the cross. Think about God's love today!

You may have not received the present you wanted, but God has given you a Gift that surpasses every gift. You may not be able to give the gifts your loved ones wished for, but you can share Jesus who can fulfill their deepest needs and longings.

Merry Christmas! Celebrate God's love!

Rev. George Payocong, Jr.



Thursday, December 26, 2024

GOD WITH US

All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: “The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel”— which means, “God with us.” Matthew 1:22-23

Does anyone really care? Will someone just hold my hand? Will anyone listen to me? Is there anyone who understands? The good news today is YES! His name is Immanuel!

His very name – Immanuel – God with Us – reminds us of the constant presence of God in our lives. Even though sometimes we may not feel that God is with us, we still know that He is with us. He will never leave us. He will never forsake us.

Sometimes there is no human being on this entire earth who can be the answer to our seemingly vain questions. Not to cast gloom during this joyous season, but I think you probably understand because you live in the same world I do. So, please hold on to the promise of Immanuel!!

Jesus is “God with us.” He is God-in-the-flesh! Jesus is the fulfillment of God’s promise to always be with His people! Matthew said that this child who was to be named Jesus, is the ultimate fulfillment of that prophecy. That was the promise given in Isaiah’s words to King Ahaz and it has been His promise to His people throughout His Word.

That promise of “God with us” is still true today. He is no longer with us in the flesh as He was with His disciples. But today He is with us through His Spirit – the Holy Spirit.

And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever— the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. John 14:16-18

Immanuel is God’s promise to always be with us.

- When everyone around us seems to have disappeared, Immanuel is with us.
- When times are tough or we want to quit, Immanuel is with us.
- During uncertain financial difficulties or fiscal cliffs, Immanuel is with us.
- In the valleys, on the mountains, and in ordinary moments of life, Immanuel is with us.
- When going through tests, surgeries, and illnesses, Immanuel is with us.
- When no human on this earth seems to understand, Immanuel is with us.
- When our hearts seem to be breaking, Immanuel is with us.
- When standing beside the casket of a loved one, Immanuel is with us.
- When we have big decisions to make, Immanuel is with us.
- When we need to confess our sins, Immanuel is with us.
- When the marriage is rocky or the children are rebellious, Immanuel is with us.
- When we need comfort, strength, and hope, Immanuel is with us.

The name Immanuel is a reminder of the hope and assurance of His presence. And Matthew’s gospel ends with the words, *“I will be with you always”*.

If you do not have that hope and assurance and have never invited Immanuel to be your Savior and Lord, please do so now. He wants to be your Savior and Lord today. If you are a Christian, embrace His presence anew! Immanuel is with us! And He always will be!

Rev. Linda Barnes Popham

CHILD-LIKE FAITH

*Unless you... become like children, you will never enter
the Kingdom of Heaven. Matthew 18:3 GNT*

When I was young, I wanted to be admired and appreciated. When I wasn't, I was offended and responded by feeling rejected, ill-used, and angry. It mattered to me that I mattered, and it grieved me when someone thought I didn't.

I am old now and (strange as it sounds) I am increasingly content not to matter to anyone but God anymore. I don't feel like I need to be in charge of anything, or to have people look to me for answers. I'm truly happy the universe doesn't revolve around me, and would rather just do my part quietly, without fanfare or accolades.

I enjoy seeing myself as small and insignificant now because I finally know how profoundly and deeply God loves me. He is a wise and good Father who likes me just the way I am, but at the same time wants more for me. I can be changed for the better, and I want to be made better because it delights my Father for me to become all I can be.

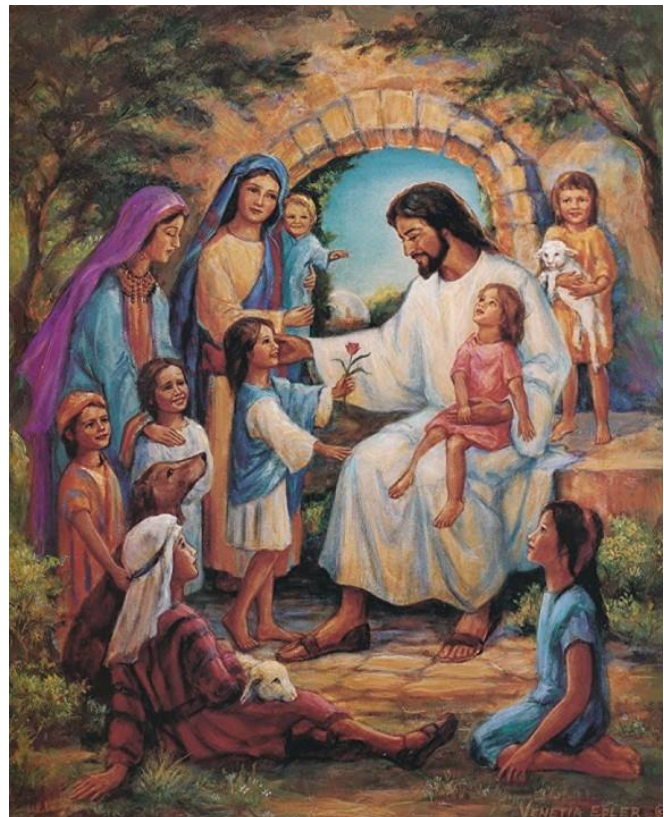
I can't see the big picture and I don't know what lies ahead, but I believe God has arranged for me to get where He wants me to go. I believe He will walk with me all along the way and then be waiting for me when I arrive, because I am His child. I trust Him and all I want to do is please Him.

It has taken me a long time to let go of trying to be all grown-up. Had I known how much peace and contentment there is in being a child, I think I would have surrendered more of myself to God's love a long time ago.

Karen Purnell

Psalm 131

¹ O Lord, my heart is not lifted up;
my eyes are not raised too high;
I do not occupy myself with things
too great and too marvelous for me.
² But I have calmed and quieted my soul,
like a weaned child with its mother;
like a weaned child is my soul within me.



Saturday, December 28, 2024

EMMANUEL, EMMANUEL

*Wonderful, Counselor
Lord of life, Lord of all
He's the Prince of Peace, Mighty God, Holy One
Emmanuel, Emmanuel*
Amy Grant, "Emmanuel" from *A Christmas Album* - 1983

For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace. Isaiah 9:6-7 King James Version (KJV)

Back in my senior year of high school, I was in our "Singers" choir. The choir teacher chose many songs for us to perform for the winter concert including the very 80's sounding Amy Grant classic "Emmanuel" which is still stuck in my head especially during Christmas time when it gets an increased amount of airplay. 'Tis the season for Christmas music!

I am sure many of us will hear this song at least once this season. Like some hymns, it's based on Isaiah 9. This season, let's remember the many names of the Lord... Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace. We have a Wonderful Counselor who can guide our words and actions through the Holy Spirit. We have a Mighty God who is omnipotent and omniscient (all powerful and all knowing). He is the Everlasting Father who created the universe and all things within. He is the Prince of Peace (The Son) who has given us peace of salvation by restoring us to God. This season, let's remember God's names are not just not names but proclamations of who God is. Jesus is Emmanuel. He is "God with us". Have a Blessed Christmas!

Chris Towles



Sunday, December 29, 2024

GOD IS WITH US

Then your salvation will come like the dawn, and your wounds will quickly heal. Your godliness will lead you forward, and the glory of the Lord will protect you from behind. Isaiah 58:8-9

God was with me in 1998...

We had been at New Colony Baptist Church in Massachusetts leading a Music Week for the children. Our vans were unloading at Logan Airport in Boston to go home to Bowling Green. My hand got shut in the rear door of one of those vans. After fainting, put in a wheelchair, and rolled into the terminal I had one of the most humbling moments of my life. Karl, one of our team members, came by and asked if he could pray for me. He knelt there on the floor of the crowded terminal and petitioned God for my safety and protection. When we arrived back in Bowling Green and went to Urgent Care for an X-ray...there were no broken bones.

Fast forward to 2024...the same Karl...God was with him.

He and his wife, Renee, were headed from Birmingham to their trip of a lifetime at Yellowstone National Park. Their flight was delayed in Dallas (what else is new?) but they finally made it to their hotel in Gardiner, Montana. They grabbed a quick bite to eat, and went to bed, excited about all that was awaiting them. Karl's beautiful bride of 36 years went to her heavenly home during the night. Here he was in Montana, all alone, experiencing the greatest tragedy of his life...and God was there with him.

God was with him through the EMT who prayed for him, packed up their bags, and loaded the van for him. God was with him through the coroner who prayed for him and kept texting him scripture. God was with him through the man God placed on the plane in the seat beside him as he flew home alone. A church builder who was supposed to be on a special trip with his wife, but came to Montana to check on a church that was under construction! Did Karl have any desire to talk to anyone...? No! Did God map out an interaction that continued way past the plane ride? Yes!

I could recount so many moments when I was overwhelmed by the goodness of God in my life. I could write paragraphs Karl has posted about God's watch care over the past two months. Keep your eyes open to His presence, provision, and protection in your life this Christmas season!

Karen Love



Monday, December 30, 2024

WHILE SHEPHERDS WATCHED

Luke 2:8-17

Few visions of Christmas are more precious to me than the Nativity Story shared in a play by the children. It is a familiar story, yet we enjoy the reminder each year. Memories of performances, all wonderful, fill my head. (Truthfully, there are some pretty funny mishaps along the way, but they are even more endearing.) As the children age, they are animals, then angels, on to shepherds and wise men, maybe even Mary and Joseph.

The shepherds are my favorites, little boys dressed in over-sized bathrobes with fabric slipping off their heads, or other years, actual costumes – but the headpiece still managed to slip! Somehow, at least one of them will have his outfit on crooked. There is something simple and refreshing about the shepherds. They are unpretentious and available. The shepherds were watching their sheep that special night when Jesus was born.



And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round them: and they were sore afraid.

How would you react? It was the “same old work as usual” night, when suddenly, there was an angel! Frightened would be an understatement in my case.

And the angel said unto them, “Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord.

Of course, the shepherds did not hesitate at all! They were the only visitors we know of that night. After seeing the incredible sight in the manger, they went quickly to tell everyone what they had seen. They were early disciples, joyously sharing what they witnessed.

The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told unto them.

Shepherds have a special place in my heart for many reasons throughout scripture. They were the first to hear of the birth of Jesus, so perhaps God shares my fondness for them. What a wonderful thing to witness! After the invitation of the angels, they hurried as quickly as they could to see for themselves.

It has always been significant, in my opinion, that Shepherds, common people, were the first to visit, not royalty or powerful people. They quickly shared the news with others about what they saw.

When we experience the presence of God touching our lives, we too, should praise Him and tell others about it.

Barbara Creasy

REFLECTING

“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

Reflecting on this past year, and my faith journey as a whole, I am filled with joy about the promise that was made for me long ago.

When I was younger, I grew up with just a mom and a brother in the house. I spent lots of time with my nana as my mom worked many, many long hours. To me that was normal until I began noticing what I felt I was missing out on when I was that age. There were many things I did not have, and many places I did not get to go, but I did get to go to church. And at church, I was able to make lasting relationships, be loved by many God-given families, and be taught how I am supposed to live the life I was growing into. I am so blessed that God put someone special in my life that invited my family to church, so we were all impacted.

At church, I was taught to live like Jesus did. We should accept the sinners, help them grow, and lead them to Him. Jesus forgives, is compassionate, and is patient. We should indulge in our faith and reflect on it. Jesus has a serving heart that He wants us to follow. I am so grateful for the path I have been put on to learn about what it means to be a Christian and what is in store for me.

I am so grateful for the promise of Jesus from long ago. The first Bible verse I ever learned was, *“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*, and I think that is such a great reminder for the end of the year. To remember what is now promised to us after we live this life. I hope everyone has a blessed New Year!

Jayla Grigsby



Wednesday, January 1, 2025

WHAT'S NEW?

"Behold, I make all things new." Revelation 21:5

Beginning a new year with God is exciting! Whatever condition we may find ourselves in at the moment, we can be certain that because God is good, something good is going to happen to us in the days and months ahead.

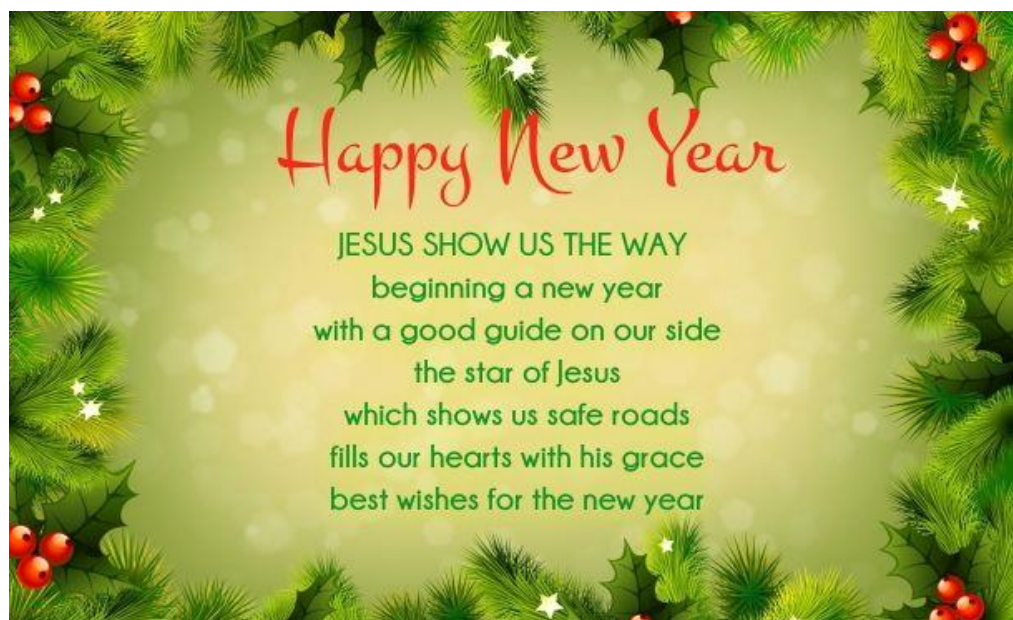
Right now, the canvas of the new year is blank, and we wonder if it will be filled with colorful days, or the same kind of drab frustrations and sorrow we may have experienced this past year. While the details of exactly what will happen in the future aren't ours to know, there are some things we can say for certain about the year ahead.

First of all, we can be certain that the seed of the new life God planted in us when we were saved will keep on growing as we "put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness" (Ephesians 4:24). If we lend ourselves to the work of the Holy Spirit, we are going to become more like Jesus --- day by day, month by month, throughout this year and into the next. The year may get old, but in Christ we are constantly being made new.

Another thing we know will happen this year is that God is going to do something new in our lives. Long ago through the prophet Isaiah, God said, "Remember not the former things, nor consider the things of old. Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert" (43:18-19). What God is telling us here is that He is not in the business of repeating Himself. This new year, then, will not be just like last year. There will be new challenges, new opportunities, new joys, and new problems as well, but whatever wilderness or river may block our path forward, we can be sure God is going to provide a way through it.

Finally, what will always be new in the new year is God's mercy. Lamentations 3:22-23 tells us that "The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases and his mercies... are new every morning." Whatever else happens, God will love us, forgive our failings and gently move us through the year ahead to that great day when He will make all things new.

Karen Purnell



GOD WITH US

“Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel, which means, ‘God with us’.” Matthew 1:23

God with us.
Sounds wonderful.
Sounds powerful.
Sounds like it could really make a difference in our everyday lives.
But can He still be with us today?

We know He could do it in the Old Testament:
...how else could Noah have built the mammoth ark?
...how else could the walls of Jericho have disintegrated?
...how else could David have killed a giant with his slingshot and a few stones?
...how else could the three men have survived being thrown in the blazing furnace?

We know God continued in the New Testament:
...a virgin gave birth to the Son of the Most High
...and that Son was raised to life after death on a cross
...Paul was miraculously saved from death over and over

But what about today? Can God do the same for us?

Have you ever been half a mile in front of a wreck before it happened?

Have you ever been in a hopeless situation and God sent just the right person to give you hope?

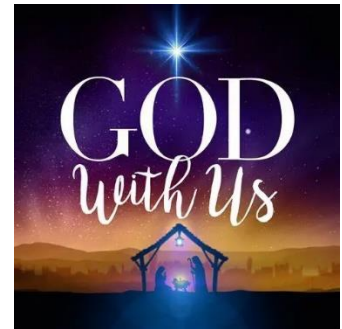
Have you ever had a need so great you were certain it was an impossible dream...then God came near through a friend...or even a stranger?

Have you ever prayed for days, weeks, months, years...and suddenly your prayer was answered way better than you ever dared hope?

We have not because we ask not.

In this new year, determine to ask God for the ordinary - even the extraordinary.
He loves to embrace our lives in good, good ways.
Because He's a good, good Father who loves to give gifts to His children!
He will never leave us or forsake us.
He is Immanuel, God with us - today and for the rest of eternity!.

Karen Love



Friday, January 3, 2025

DO YOU HEAR HIM?

Therefore, the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel. Isaiah 7:14

That was a pretty big sign, wouldn't you agree? But not everyone believed it. Then or now.



Hold on to the signs God gives you. Remember He will make a way when there seems to be no way. Count your blessings (because all gifts come from our Father's hand).

Some ways I have seen that God is with us, looking at our church family:

A need in our church was met by a new member. No one else could have met it.

Healing was given when earthly life seemed in its final days.

What? You are gifted in that area? Go for it!

There weren't enough leaders for " ", Until you stepped up to the plate.

Well, he/she isn't really old enough or mature enough for the task (neither was David, the young shepherd).

He/she didn't finish strong before (neither did Saul before God changed his name to Paul).

The children don't listen or pay attention to me (then they pray in their total innocence and belief leaving me in tears).

Someone else would do a better job than I (but perhaps you are just who God positioned to do it).

You don't feel you're up to the task? That's ok. God just asks you to do what you are capable of. He'll carry it to completion.

You've failed before. That's ok, God is able to make all things new.

You feel others are more qualified. Maybe so. But being qualified is not the litmus test. It's being called and being obedient.

Immanuel. Our God is with us. And if God is with us, who can be against us? Our God is with us, Immanuel. **Be ready to hear His voice and say yes in 2025!**

Karen Love

FAITH AND HOPE

Before Jesus was born, Mary had been told she was to have a baby. Now Mary was a virgin so how could this be, but by the Holy Spirit who put this child in her womb. She was to have God's Son. When the angel told her, Mary said "I am the Lord's servant. May it be done to me according to your word." (Luke 1:38) Mary showed how much faith and hope she put into God by knowing it would all be okay. That shows how strong her faith truly was and how ours should be, too.

This new year that we have now entered should be the year we put our full hope into God for everything we face. While it is hard we can make it happen. When we do put our hope in God great things can happen in our lives physically, mentally, and spiritually.

In Luke 1:37, the angel Gabriel said, "For nothing will be impossible with God." That is the truth, God doesn't want us to worry or stress about things that are out of our reach. He wants us to give it all to Him and just have faith and hope that He'll make our path straight.

Mary was first scared that she was pregnant, but when she got told that the baby was God's Son, she put faith in God of what would happen next. Lots came from her faith; and even Joseph showed great faith, too. When he figured out Mary was to have a child, he almost divorced her, but an angel came to him in a dream and explained. Now the people around them might have thought other things about them because they didn't know that this baby was the Messiah. But Mary and Joseph just followed God's plan, and that's what we should do, too!

Sincerely,
Emma Towles



Sunday, January 5, 2025

EMMANUEL GOD WITH US

How could such a tiny baby be the form of God? It had been promised in Matthew 1:23 that a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, God with us. How is this tiny baby laying in the hay the third person of the Trinity, God's Son, Jesus? There must be some mistake. He seems like a regular boy, born to a Jewish carpenter and his betrothed. But wait, is that the sound of angels singing?

Shepherds are reporting that angels were out heralding the birth of the Messiah. They said He was wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger in Bethlehem. This can't just be a chance. I don't see any other babies lying in mangers. This must be the same baby.

But how is this tiny baby going to be with us? How is a baby going to save us? God always has a plan. That tiny baby would have to grow up. Of course, there was a king that wasn't very happy about His birth and He sent people looking for him and unfortunately many baby boys died because of His birth. But God was always one step ahead. He had sent His family on their way to a safe place.

But He did grow up and He did one day die for our sins. When we ask him to come into our lives and forgive us of our sins, then God sends the third part of the Trinity to be with us, the Holy Spirit.

God has kept His promise of God with us. He sent a baby to the earth to save us from our sins and then when Jesus left the earth, God sent the Holy Spirit. God always keeps His promises, but more importantly, God is always with us.

Melissa Logsdon-Young



EPIPHANY

“You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.”

Jeremiah 29:13

An epiphany is a manifestation of the divine. It's understanding something about God you hadn't been able to understand before or experiencing Him in a new way. It's an encounter with God, and being changed by that encounter.

You can't plan to have an epiphany. That's because God isn't an object to be grasped either with the mind or the heart --- and because He isn't, all the effort in the world won't produce an encounter with Him. God is a person with such hidden depths of delight and wisdom that He has to reveal Himself to you if you are ever going to know Him. He must show Himself to you, and all you will need to do is simply see what He has shown you in order for the encounter to change you.

One night a long time ago a handful of men who didn't know God were led by a star to a house in the Judean town of Bethlehem. They thought the star meant that a Jewish boy who would one day be king had just been born. They were not Jewish themselves, and were too old to hope to see the child grow up and be crowned, but they wanted to meet Him anyway.

Why were they so determined to see this child? Could it be because God wanted to show Himself to them? Could the star have been the invitation to an encounter with God so He could manifest Himself to them in Jesus? Evidently so, because when the men saw the child, they realized who He was “and they bowed down and worshiped him” (Matthew 2:11).

God manifests Himself to us in all kinds of ways: in the iridescent beauty, raw power, and complex design of nature, in the love that brings us together as friends and family, in the quest for peace, justice and truth. There is no clearer, more perfect and complete manifestation of God, however, than in the person of Jesus Christ, whom we, like the wise men of old, can only meet because we have been called.

God wants to show Himself to you today, or more of Himself if you and He have already met. Searching for Him is how you respond to the call, so look everywhere you think you will find Him --- and you **will** find Him. Just before He died Jesus said, “...he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him” (John 14:21). The meeting has been arranged and the invitation sent. How then will you respond?

Karen Purnell





O Come, O Come Emmanuel

**O come, O come Emmanuel,
And ransom captive Israel,
That mourns in lonely exile here,
Until the Son of God appear.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel!**

**O come, Thou Dayspring, come and cheer
Our spirits by Thine advent here;
Disperse the gloomy clouds of night,
And death's dark shadows put to flight.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel!**

**O come, Thou Wisdom from on high,
And order all things, far and nigh;
To us the path of knowledge show,
And cause us in her ways to go.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel!**

**O come, Desire of nations, bind
All peoples in one heart and mind;
Bid envy, strife, and quarrels cease;
Fill the whole world with heaven's peace.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel!**