



*Something New is
Happening*

A Devotion Guide for Advent

Prepared for the members and friends of

**Friendship United Methodist Church
Sherman, Texas
2018**

Welcome to Something New

As your pastor, it is once again my honor to present this devotional guide for your Advent preparation. I pray that the images, thoughts, meditations, and readings contained in these pages will enable you to focus on the real meaning of the season as you prepare your hearts and homes for the blessings of Christmas day.

I invite you to consider what this season is about. While we have a tendency to begin our celebration the day after Thanksgiving and end it on Christmas day, the tradition of the Church reminds us that these days are a time of preparation for the celebration that is yet to come. As Jesus taught us in the parable of the sower and the seeds, the growth of God's Word depends upon the soil into which it is planted. Rich soil yields an abundant harvest, but unprepared and infertile soil is incapable of producing even a meager crop. So it is with our celebration of the birth of Jesus. When we get caught up in the busy-ness of the season and are distracted by hectic schedules and impossible demands, Christmas becomes just one more event to be endured and does little for the increase of our faith. However, when we take the time to prepare our hearts and homes by reflecting on God's Word for our lives, we find that Christmas takes on new meaning and richness and our faith grows within us.

It is in this spirit that I welcome you into this season and invite you to share in its meaning through the words that are printed here. May the true blessings of God's Advent be yours as you anticipate something new!

As You Begin

People approach devotions in a variety of ways. For some, the quiet moments of the early morning are a good time to focus on God's gift of a new day and to begin that day in God's Spirit. For others, the time just before bed holds a special meaning, giving thanks for all the blessings of the day. Some prefer the solace of being alone, others like to share their thoughts in a group. Family devotions around the dinner table are a routine in some homes, and some people like to sit before the Advent wreath during this special season. The important thing is for you to use this guide in a manner that suits your own spiritual growth.

This guide is designed to help you see the newness God brings to us in the coming of the Christ child through the traditional images of the season. Each day the meditation focuses on one of the items we associate with Christmas and guides you to see God's new gift in each of these items. As you engage in your daily devotion, you may want to focus on the item by placing it in front of you or, at least, picturing it in your mind's eye. Then as you go through your day and the weeks of Advent, each time you see this item you will be reminded of God's presence. In this way, you will eventually find yourself surrounded by the presence of God in your everyday life, which is, after all, the true meaning of our celebration of Christmas: Emmanuel, God with us.

The prayers included in the daily meditations are intended to help you focus on your relationship with God. Add to these words your own praise, thanksgiving, confession and petitions. Also, take a moment or two for silence, letting God's peace wash over you and fill the empty spaces in your spirit. Perhaps in these quiet moments you will encounter the Word of God in a new way and this will, indeed, bring into your Advent season God's hope for your life.

*Grace & Peace,
Roy*

December 2
The First Sunday of Advent

Trumpet
Matthew 24:30-31

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him ...

The trumpet was one of the earliest wind instruments known in the mid-eastern world. The loud, shrill sound of the trumpet made it a handy means of sounding an alarm and/or gathering people together by getting their attention. Thus, it was used to announce the impending arrival of hostile forces as well as honored guests. Since the earliest trumpets were made from the horns of animals, the use of the *shofar* or ram's horn found its way into Hebrew worship at an early date and was used to call the people together for worship and to announce God's presence in the midst of the people.

In the season of Advent, the trumpet calls us to take notice: God is coming. The herald of the trumpet gathers us to worship, to prepare ourselves to honor the arrival of our king, to pave the way for his coming and the new life that he brings. Christ comes with the fanfare appropriate for a king and the sound of the trumpet calls us to honor that arrival. The trumpets that adorn our homes remind us to be prepared: what is about to happen is a new and exciting event and we need to get ourselves ready!

O God, sound your trumpet in my heart and call me to attention. Let me hear its sounds in my waking and my sleeping, in my work and in my leisure, when I am alone and when I am with those that I love, even when I am among strangers. Prepare me to receive the King that comes and make my heart ready to worship you. In the name of the one who comes for me. Amen.

Monday, December 3

Smiles & Laughter

Psalm 126:1-3

¹ *When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion,
we were like those who dream.*
² *Then our mouth was filled with laughter,
and our tongue with shouts of joy;
then it was said among the nations,
"The LORD has done great things for them."*
³ *The LORD has done great things for us,
and we rejoiced*

What would Christmas be without the sight of smiles and the sound of laughter? The cheery greetings from friends we meet, the warm smiles of passing strangers, the giddy laughter of children all fill us with a sense of light-heartedness and express our joy. Is there a better reason to smile or more appropriate time for our laughter? Advent is a season of joy, a joy born from the anticipation of the new deliverance that awaits us in the coming of our Lord. Like the Psalmist, when we consider the graciousness of God, when we remember that God has done great things for *us*; when we anticipate the blessings that wait us in the coming of our Lord, we cannot contain the joy in our hearts and we find ourselves full of smiles and laughter. As you prepare yourself during this season of Advent, look for opportunities to laugh and to share your smiles with those around you, for in so doing you are bearing witness to God's goodness and announcing the arrival of new and better things.

Lord, put a smile on my face and fill my heart with laughter as I remember your graciousness and anticipate the great things you have in store for me. Grant to me your holy laughter as I go about my day, a laughter born in your Spirit. And may the sight of my smiles and the sound of my laughter bear witness to my faith, becoming contagious and bringing those that I meet to a new sense of joy. In the name of Jesus, who is the source of my laughter. Amen.

Tuesday, December 4

Hearts

Jeremiah 31:33-34

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. ³² It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband,^[a] says the LORD. ³³ But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

In the pre-scientific understanding of the ancient Hebrew people, the heart was considered to be more than an organ that pumped our blood. For them it was the wellspring of human life and was, thus, the connecting point with God as the source of all life. It was the source of all our energies, physical, emotional and spiritual and gave rise to all our hopes and dreams. In this sense, the heart determined the entire character of the individual.

When Jeremiah promised a new covenant, it was not a covenant based on the written law or ritual practices that could and would be taught to one another, but a covenant written on the heart. That is, it was a covenant that would spring up like a well from the very center of our being, because it would proceed from a human heart that was connected with God's heart and would shape our entire existence. This new covenant would not be measured by conformity to set of standards, but by the extent to which the human heart and life reflected the heart of God. It is this new covenant that we anticipate with the arrival of the Christ child.

Lord, write your covenant on my heart. Connect me to your heart that your Spirit might well up within me like a fresh spring, ever nourishing my life and flooding my entire being with your love. May my love of life be in gratitude for your gift of life and may my love of others be a reflection of the love that you have given to me: through the Christ who comes to make a new covenant. Amen

Wednesday, December 5

Wreath

Matthew 27:27-29

Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the governor's headquarters, and they gathered the whole cohort around him. ²⁸ They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, ²⁹ and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on his head. They put a reed in his right hand and knelt before him and mocked him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!"

In the world of Greek and Roman athletics, victors were awarded a wreath of laurel leaves as a sign of their accomplishment. This wreath, worn about the head, mimicked a crown and was a sign of honor. In fact, in the Greek language, the same word is translated as both crown and wreath. The crown of thorns that was placed on the head of Jesus at the time of his crucifixion was intended to mock this honor, both as a crown and a victory wreath. The irony, of course, is that what was intended to mock the reign of an earthly king became a powerful symbol of a heavenly kingdom and what was intended as a sign of humiliation became a symbol of God's victory.

The wreaths we see at Christmas remind us of the victory to be won by the Christ child. Being a circle, they represent the eternal nature of Christ's reign, yet the traditional holly leaves, with their spiked ends, remind us that his life was filled with hardship, suffering and pain. While we seldom see them adorning the heads of those around us, the wreaths nevertheless remind us of the kingship that awaits the baby Jesus in God's kingdom and in our hearts.

Lord, in this season of the Advent, help me to see the eternal reign of the baby Jesus in a new way. In the midst of pain, help me to find comfort, in the midst of despair, lead me to hope, and when I feel defeated, help me to experience your victory, that I may find my peace in your eternal realm, through Christ my king. Amen.

Thursday, December 6

Santa Claus

In the little village of Myra in Turkey during the fourth century, there lived a bishop by the name of Nicholas. While there are many legends surrounding this bishop, from him thanking God for new life on the day he was born to raising abused children from the dead, his work among the poor raised him to the level of sainthood. Orphaned at an early age, Nicholas developed a great compassion for children, which carried on into his ministry. In the dark of night, unseen by others, he would visit the homes of orphans and poor children, leaving gifts of food and clothing on their doorsteps, to be found in the morning. Legend has it that even after his death, the poor children of Myra continued to receive these gifts on their porches and the legend of Nicholas, made a saint by the church, continued on.

In the centuries that have followed, the legend of Saint Nicholas has spread throughout the world and taken on many forms. In the United States, Saint Nicholas has become Santa Claus and the tradition of gift giving in the dark of the night has grown even stronger. While Santa has taken on a life of his own in the secular world, we must never forget that at the heart of this Christmas tradition is a great spirit of love and compassion for those less fortunate, for the widows, orphans and lonely people of the world. December 6th is the Saint Nicholas day.

O God, I know that you are the giver of gifts and that Christmas is the time of giving. Help me to also know that part of my Christian commitment includes taking care of others without a thought about rewards and recognition. May your gift inspire me to give of myself for the sake of your children. Amen.

Friday, December 7

Garland

Isaiah 61:1-3a

*The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,
because the LORD has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners;
² to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor,
and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn;
³ to provide for those who mourn in Zion—
to give them a garland instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.*

This passage from the prophet Isaiah is a popular one during Advent, for it speaks of the hope that God brings to those who mourn and are broken; but why the image of a garland? The idea comes from the garments of the ancient Hebrew priests who, in times of great celebration, wound a garland around their head and/or their staff as a sign of joy. The Hebrew word that is used in this context can mean either an ornament of grace or an ornament of beauty, both of which are appropriate for this understanding. The practice was later carried over to other people in special celebrations, including bridegrooms, whose head was wrapped in a garland as an expression of his joy. Clearly the prophet Isaiah used the imagery of a garland to express the joy that God would bring to those locked in the desperate situation of the Exile.

It is certainly in this understanding that we adorn our homes with garland. The greenery draped from our staircases and wound around our columns goes beyond a thing of beauty and expresses the joy we feel in this time of celebration. The fact that it is made from evergreens reminds us that the joy that God brings to us in the baby Jesus is eternal and unlike the earthly happiness we find, which is here today and gone tomorrow.

Lord, grant to me a garland instead of ashes, a time of joy for the things you bring rather than a time of sorrow for that which I have lost. May I find in the beauty of the things around me the expression of your everlasting peace, through Christ my comfort. Amen.

Saturday, December 8

Lights

Psalm 136:1-9

O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever.
²O give thanks to the God of gods, for his steadfast love endures forever.
³O give thanks to the Lord of lords, for his steadfast love endures forever;
⁴who alone does great wonders, for his steadfast love endures forever;
⁵who by understanding made the heavens, for his steadfast love endures forever;
⁶who spread out the earth on the waters, for his steadfast love endures forever;
⁷who made the great lights, for his steadfast love endures forever;
⁸the sun to rule over the day, for his steadfast love endures forever;
⁹the moon and stars to rule over the night, for his steadfast love endures forever;

According to the legend, one Christmas eve Martin Luther was strolling through the forest in meditation. The darkness of the night was broken by a full moon, which glistened off of the icicles hanging on the trees like a thousand tiny lights, making the tree come alive with brightness and showing the glory of God's creation. So impressed was he by the sight and the meaning that he found in it that the priest returned to his home with a tree, on which he hung lit candles. Thus, the glory of God's creation and the joy of the Christmas eve were brought into the home.

What would Christmas be without lights? They cover our homes, places of business and even the city streets. They light up scenes of joy and frivolity and chase away the darkness of the cold winter nights. But more than just sources of beauty and gaiety, the lights remind us of the ever-present power of God's creation. Advent is the time of new creation, when God works within us to make us new, and the lights that brighten our world are signs of the new creation that God brings to us in the baby Jesus. When we place Christmas lights in our homes, we invite that creative power into our lives.

O great God of creation, make me anew. Chase away the darkness of my life and replace it with the light of your grace. May the power shown in the sun, moon and stars transform me into the person you want me to be, through Jesus, my Lord. Amen.

December 9
The Second Sunday of Advent

Candles & Lamps
John 1:1-5

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was in the beginning with God. ³All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴in him was life,ⁱⁿ and the life was the light of all people. ⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

Throughout the Bible, God's presence has been associated with fire, from the burning bush that called Moses to service to the pillar of fire that guided the Hebrews through the dark nights of the desert. In this understanding, a burning flame came to represent God's presence in the midst of the people. While candles were unknown in the world of the Bible, oil lamps served the same function and were lit when the people gathered for worship as a sign of God's presence. Certainly, John had this in mind when he wrote the opening lines of his Gospel, which become for us an image of the whole meaning of Christmas: God chases away the darkness of life by coming to the world in human form.

When we light candles for the season of Advent, we are reminded of God's light shining in the darkness and that God comes again to take the darkness away from our lives in a brand new way. The flame of our candles also becomes a sign of God's presence for us, a presence that allows us to see things hidden by the darkness. Thus, candles become a special part of our Advent preparation as we celebrate God's presence and anticipate the new light that is coming into the world.

Lord, let your light shine on me. Light a lamp within my heart that warms my soul and illumines my darkness. And let my light shine in the world for others to see, through Christ my Lord. Amen.

Monday, December 10

Christmas Tree

Hosea 14:8

*O Ephraim, what have I to do with idols?
It is I who answer and look after you.
I am like an evergreen cypress;
your faithfulness comes from me.*

The true origin of the Christmas tree is unknown. Some link it to Martin Luther's Christmas eve excursion, but evidence points to the use of trees for special celebrations long before that time. In fact, as the reading from the prophet Hosea reminds us, the strength and grandeur of trees was often used as an image of God's strength. We must remember that, in the arid regions where the drama of the Bible took place, trees that grew strong and tall were an uncommon sight. Thus, an image common to us would have been very special to writers of the scriptures.

Our tradition, of course, is to place a tree in our homes and decorate it with lights, tinsel, and symbols of the season. The fact that it is an evergreen reminds us of the new life that comes from God's gift of the Christ child, but we would do well to remember some of the other images that lend meaning to the practice. The shape of the tree points the way to heaven; its branches may bend in the breeze but can withstand even violent storms; the thick branches of the evergreen provided a safe haven for the animals of the forest and a nesting place for the birds of the air. All these images can become signs of God's gifts to us.

O God, help me to see images of your love and care in even the most common things. May your grace become like an evergreen in our home this Christmas, granting us life, safety, comfort and hope; through your son, Jesus. Amen.

Tuesday, December 11

Bells

Joel 2:1

*Blow the trumpet in Zion;
sound the alarm on my holy mountain!
Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble,
for the day of the LORD is coming, it is near—*

From the time people learned to express themselves in dance, they have adorned themselves with all sorts of items that make noise when they move. The evidence of bells and other similar instruments can be found in virtually every culture in the world. But bells were also used to sound the alarm and warn of impending danger. In the Hebrew world bells were placed on the hem of the priest's robes so that when they walked the sound could be heard by all those around, whether in the Temple or the market place. In this way, the people were alerted to the approach of the priests and reminded of God's nearness in their lives. The early Catholic Church adapted this practice by ringing a bell at appointed times in the Mass to remind the people that God was approaching.

While bells take on a festive role in our celebration of Christmas, they can also serve the same function as they did for the Hebrew people. When we hear the ringing of the church bells, we are reminded that it is time to enter God's presence. When we pass the Salvation Army bell ringers, we are reminded that God is also present in the needy people of our world. In the tinkling of the tiny bells on our decorations, we are invited to listen for the still small voice of God. The bells of Advent sound the call to us: get ready!

O God, enable me to hear the sound of bells this Advent. Enable me to hear the bells calling me into your presence. Ring your bell in my heart to wake me from my slumbering faith. May the ringing of your spirit fill my life with joy, through Christ my Lord. Amen.

Wednesday, December 12

Poinsettia

Mark 12:41-44

He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. ⁴²A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. ⁴³Then he called his disciples and said to them, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. ⁴⁴For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on."

Little Pepita made her way to the church on Christmas, sad and embarrassed that she was too poor to afford a gift for the baby Jesus. Her friend Pedro told her not to worry, that God honors even the smallest of gifts, but these words were of little consolation, for she had no gift at all. In desperation, she stooped down and picked a handful of weeds before she entered the sanctuary, knowing full well that they were dried and ugly, hardly a fitting gift for the Christ child. Yet as she knelt before the manger, her tears of sorrow fell upon the weeds and they suddenly burst forth into radiant petals of crimson and yellow. A simple gift became a thing of beauty to adorn the cradle of her Lord. Then she remembered Pedro's words as her tears of sorrow were turned into tears of joy.

Such is the legend of the poinsettia, which we use to bring beauty into our celebration of Christmas. As we see them in our homes and in our sanctuary, we, too, are reminded of Pedro's words and invited to consider our own gifts to the Lord. And we know that the value of our gifts is not measured in dollars, but in the sincerity of our hearts. Even the most humble of gifts is blessed when it is given from the depths of our love for God.

Lord, teach me to give from the heart. I give to you what I have. Bless my gift and make it a thing of beauty for the Baby Jesus, nourished by my tears of gratitude for your new gift to me, Jesus Christ my savior. Amen.

Thursday, December 13

Dove

Matthew 3:16-17

And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. ¹⁷And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved with whom I am well pleased."

There are many references to the dove in the Old Testament. After the flood, Noah sent forth a dove to find dry land. Doves were used as a sacrifice to God, an offering of thankfulness. In several places, God's Spirit is said to "Hover like a dove." It is the latter of these references that gives rise to the image we find in Matthew's gospel: God's Spirit descending on the baptized Jesus "like a dove." In all of these images can be seen the soothing, gentle nature of the dove, which also leads us to understand the dove as a sign of peace.

In our celebration of Christmas, all these images of the dove come into play. It is a sign of God's Spirit coming into human lives. It is a sign of hope, seeking dry ground in the midst of a world flooded with troubles. It is a sign of Christ's sacrifice, given on our behalf. It is a sign of God's peace, which comes to us in the baby Jesus. The doves that are a part of our Christmas decorations are signs of God's presence with us, a presence that brings hope and peace into the world, to satisfy our deepest longings and pacify our wandering spirits.

Lord, send your Spirit like a dove, to bring new hope and peace into my life. Land upon my uncertainty to bring assurance; rest upon my troubled life to bring calmness; pass over the flooding tides of my wandering and set my feet on holy ground; through Jesus, the Prince of Peace. Amen.

Friday, December 14

Gifts

Matthew 2:11

On entering the house, [the Wisemen] saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

The story of Christmas is incomplete without the gifts of the wisemen, and their gifts set the example for our own gift giving. But did you ever stop to think about the meaning of their gifts? In Hebrew, the word for “gift” is the same as the word for “tribute.” A tribute was a special gift given to honor a ruler, usually a neighboring king. The giving of the gift was a way of acknowledging the sovereignty of the ruler, his right to rule over the people, and was a sign of peace, the intention to live in harmony with the king. It is in this sense that the wisemen, perhaps rulers of foreign nations, gave their gifts to the baby Jesus: to recognize his sovereignty and as a sign of peace.

Why do we give gifts at Christmas? Beyond expectation and obligation, do we not give our gifts to honor the other person? Our gifts are ways in which we acknowledge the important role the other person plays in our life, and to express our love for that person, a sign of peace. In giving our gifts, we honor those who receive them and say that they are important to us, that life would not be the same without them. In receiving gifts, we feel honored and humbled, to think that the other person cared enough about us to offer a tribute of love. Christmas is the time of giving and in this season of Advent we prepare our gifts as signs of acceptance and love.

Lord, teach me to give as an expression of honor and love. Teach me to receive with a humble heart the honor that comes from others. Most of all, teach me to honor Jesus with my gifts, that I may better know the giver of all good gifts. In his name. Amen.

Saturday, December 15

Snow

Psalm 51:6-9

*⁶You desire truth in the inward being;
therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.
⁷Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.
⁸Let me hear joy and gladness;
let the bones that you have crushed rejoice.
⁹Hide your face from my sins,
and blot out all my iniquities*

Who knows when snow and Christmas came to be associated with one another? It was probably in medieval Europe, where the dark days of late December are days of snow. But in other parts of the world Christmas is celebrated with sunshine and warm temperatures. And we can be rather certain that Jesus was not born on a snowy night, for snow is almost unheard of in the arid region around Bethlehem. Yet for us in our part of the world, as Bing Crosby's most famous song reminds us, Christmas is a time to dream of snow. This connection is not a bad one.

The Psalmist uses the image of a snowfall to speak of cleanness and purity, both of which we can see in fresh fallen snow. In Biblical times, snow was also associated with beauty, and we can hardly deny that beauty when we look out over a sunlit pasture covered with snow. Furthermore, snow falling in barren mountains is a respite from the heat and brings moisture to the ground. In all of these images, we can see the grace of God, who comes to wash us clean, to bring beauty into our lives, and to refresh the parched soil of our soul. While the association of Christmas and snow may be more cultural than Biblical, certainly the images go together.

Wash me clean, O Lord, like the new fallen snow. Refresh my spirit with the coolness of your grace and nourish my faith with your life-giving mercy. Enable me to see anew the beauty of your gifts as I prepare to greet your son again. Amen.

December 16
The Third Sunday of Advent

Angels
Luke 2:9-11

Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰ But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹ to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah the Lord.

Angels have gained a whole new popularity in the last few years, sporting their own movies and television shows. However, the popular myths about angels are often born in the imagination rather than the scriptures. The word angel means, very simply, a messenger from God and there are many stories in the Old Testament wherein God communicates a special message through special messengers. Sometimes those messengers appear simply as strangers, as in the case of Abraham and the three visitors. At other times they appear in dazzling array to distinguish them from ordinary people. In all cases, however, they come bearing a special message for people whom God has chosen, a message born in God's love and compassion.

As we approach Christmas once again and consider the message of the angels, we do so knowing that they come in God's love, to draw people, in this case, the shepherds, into a new and special relationship with God. Thus, the angels we see serve to remind us that God has a special message of love for us that is new every year, yet as old as Christmas itself. That message serves to create in us a new relationship with God, one that draws us ever nearer to God's mercy and grace. That message is that God has remembered us and loves us enough to include us in the blessed birth of Jesus.

Lord speak your message to me once again and give ears to hear. In the angel chorus, help me to hear the good news of your love in a new way. Attune my mind to the voice of your messengers and let me share in your joy, through Christ my savior. Amen

Monday, December 17

Music Psalm 92:1-4

*It is good to give thanks to the LORD,
to sing praises to your name, O Most High;
²to declare your steadfast love in the morning,
and your faithfulness by night,
³to the music of the lute and the harp,
to the melody of the lyre.
⁴For you, O LORD, have made me glad by your work;
at the works of your hands I sing for joy.*

Every culture has its own music, and in each culture the purpose of music is the same: to celebrate life. Even the earliest historical records tell of music that was used to celebrate birth and mourn death. There has always been an inseparable link between music and the special moments of life, but music is never more alive than when it is used to express joy. Perhaps that is why music and worship are so closely linked. To the Psalmist, music was a great way to express praise to God and many of the Psalms affirm the importance of music in the expression of joy. It seems only natural, then, that music should be a part of our celebration of Christmas. When we sing “Hark the herald angels sing...” we share in the joy of the shepherds, while “Silent Night” fills us with the quiet calm of God’s peace. “We Three Kings” carries us on the journey of the Wisemen and Handel’s “Hallelujah Chorus” expresses our heartfelt joy in the birth of our King. While there is certainly joy in our music and the old carols are always fun to sing, we need to remember that the songs we raise, regardless of where we sing them, are an expression of our praise.

Lord, I raise my song to you. Accept the sound of my music as praise and thanksgiving and teach me to always live with your song in my heart. May my joyful noise be pleasing in your sight, in honor of your son. Amen.

Tuesday, December 18

Star

Matthew 2:9

When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was.

At Christmas time stars begin to show up everywhere. They adorn our Christmas trees, our homes, the tops of buildings and the streets we travel. “Following our star” has become a phrase that speaks of seeking our dreams and “reach for the stars” calls us to set our goals high. Yet we must remember why the stars are there.

The story tells us that it was a star that guided the Wisemen to the stable where Jesus was born. Perhaps this was a comet as some astronomers claim, or a convergence of the planets that was unusually bright. Maybe it was a special star that God placed in the heavens for their benefit. Whatever the case, we must remember that it is really not the star that is important, but the baby that lay beneath it. Anything that leads us to the manger can be our guiding star and all the stars we see can guide us to the manger if we are willing to remember the story and look upon them in the right way. Even other people can become our guiding stars. Even we can become a guiding star for others. Christmas is not a time to follow just any stars ... Christmas is a time to for us to follow God’s star.

Lord, help me to see your star. Help me to see it in the things I do and the people I meet. Help me to see it in the faces of children and beauty of the season. Most of all, help me to become a star for others, to guide them to the manger, for Christ’s sake. Amen.

Wednesday, December 19

Donkey

Luke 2:1-5

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ²This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. ⁵He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child.

In actual fact, there is no mention of a donkey in the narrative of Jesus' birth, but both tradition and commonsense place one in the story. Given Mary's condition, she could not have walked from Nazareth to Bethlehem. Since the donkey was a common mode of transportation for everyone but the rich, it is safe to assume that Mary made the journey upon the back of this beast of burden. For this reason, the donkey has become a part of our Christmas celebrations and a sign of the burdens that are carried for us in the birth of Jesus. Yet, there is more to the sign of the donkey.

When a neighboring king came into a foreign territory, the custom was to declare his intentions upon entering the gates of the city. If he rode on a horse or in a chariot, it was a sign of hostility, but riding on a donkey was a sign of peace. Thus, Mary's entry into Bethlehem on the back of donkey, carrying the soon to be born Jesus, has come to be a sign of God's peace entering into the world. Thus, our Advent celebration is a celebration of God's peace entering into *our* world, brought by Mary's baby, and the donkey points us toward understanding that peace.

Lord, bring your peace into my troubled life. Carry my burdens to lighten my load and let me know that you came to go with me on all my journeys. May the Prince of Peace come riding into our world again this Christmas. Amen.

Thursday, December 20

Manger
Luke 2:16

So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger.

A strong part of the Christmas tradition is that Jesus was laid in a manger after his birth. This act is certainly consistent with the story of his humble birth and we accept it readily, since it was a natural part of the stable that was the place of his arrival into this world. Yet the fact that the angels pronounced this simple act as a sign to the shepherds invites us to take a closer look at what that might have meant.

In the world into which Jesus came, the manger was actually a stone basin, often carved into the wall of the stable, which was used to place grain for the animals. It was the place to which the livestock came for their daily food. Placing the baby Jesus into such a basin made a powerful statement, one that Jesus would later echo in his self-affirmation: Jesus proclaimed himself to be the bread for the world. His coming feeds the hunger of the shepherds, the Wisemen, all who encounter him. To come to the manger on a daily basis is to be fed with the bread of life. Just as the grain placed in the manger was the vital sustenance for the animals, Jesus is the sustaining grace of our lives, in whom we find strength and the ability to live in a troubled world and to dedicate our lives to God. That we encounter the baby Jesus in the manger is more than a sentimental part of the Christmas story: it is the story itself!

Lord, when I awake on Christmas morning, help me to find the baby Jesus lying in the manger of my life. Feed me on the bread of life and bring me back each day to share in the nourishment that he brings. Give me this day, and every day, my daily bread; through Jesus Christ, the bread of life! Amen.

Friday, December 21

Sheep

Jeremiah 23:3-4

Then I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the lands where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. ⁴I will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them, and they shall not fear any longer, or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing, says the LORD.

Israel knew about sheep. Often thought to be rather dumb animals, that is not really the case. Chief among the attributes of sheep is their aggregate nature, the fact that they live in and as a part of a flock. They find their strength, their comfort and their safety in being together. In fact, they are so loyal to one another that they have trouble functioning alone. That is why they must be led in their lives and why the shepherd is so important to them. Since the raising of sheep was the mainstay of life for the people of Israel, many of the images in the Bible focus on the people as the sheep and God as the shepherd. Certainly the most notable of these is the twenty-third Psalm. When Jeremiah wanted the people to hear of the grace of God that would deliver them, he also chose the image of sheep. Left on their own, a situation they caused by their own sinfulness, he compared the people of Israel to sheep without a shepherd. They were defenseless and in constant need of direction and care. Without a shepherd to lead and care for them, they were vulnerable and would fall victim to all the things in life that might do them harm. They were lost and wandering, unable to care for the basic needs of their lives.

As we consider the sheep of the nativity story, we realize that they are us. We are the sheep who need a shepherd, we are the ones that are vulnerable and defenseless, we are the ones wandering aimlessly through the pasture of life. Jesus comes to us as the new shepherd of the sheep.

Lord, we like sheep have gone astray, following the grass wherever it appears to be greener without heed to where it will lead us. Call us from our wandering and into your fold and bind us together in your flock, through Jesus our shepherd. Amen.

Saturday, December 22

Holly John 19:1-3

Then Pilate took Jesus and had him flogged. ²And the soldiers wove a crown of thorns and put it on his head, and they dressed him in a purple robe. ³They kept coming up to him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!" and striking him on the face.

There are many legends surrounding the use of holly during the Christmas season. In one, a simple gift of brambles brought by a shepherd boy was turned to the holly branch. In another, the infant Jesus was hidden under a thorn bush to escape the pursuing Roman soldiers and it turned into the holly bush. These and several more are born out of the characteristic thorny leaves and red berries that adorn the holly bush at this time of the year. When we associate them with the birth of Jesus they become reminders of the thorns that pierced his flesh and the drops of blood he shed for the world. Yet we must also remember that the holly is an evergreen, its leaves remaining bright during the dark days of winter. Together, these attributes call our attention to the painful suffering that awaited the child Jesus, which would lead to his resurrection and our eternal life.

As we share in these images of the Christmas season, let us also remember that life is not always easy and that for some, suffering is more the rule than the exception. Let us remember that the joy of our celebrations is often bittersweet in the memory of loved ones who have passed. Let us remember that, while we share in the warmth and coziness of our homes, surrounded by family, many shiver alone in the cold. It is for these, too, that Jesus was born, and his suffering brings hope to us and the world: a hope that extends beyond the pains of this world and into God's eternal Kingdom.

Lord, may the thorns of the holly pierce my fingers this Christmas, to remind me of the precious gift that goes beyond the things we hold in our hand; may the crimson berries call me to that repentance that leads me to new life; and may the evergreen leaves call me to an awareness of life that extends beyond the comforts of this world, through Jesus, who came for us all. Amen.

December 23
The Fourth Sunday of Advent

Wisemen
Matthew 2:1-2

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage."

The identity of the Wisemen remains a bit of a mystery. We only know that they came from the east and were in some way connected with stargazing and astrology. While this information gives us some clues to their identity, it is only conjecture and their true identity remains a mystery. Why Matthew includes them in the story, however, is not a mystery.

The Wisemen, whoever they were, were foreigners. They knew little of the politics of Herod and were unfamiliar with Jewish customs and traditions. Yet they came a long distance to herald a new king, one whom they believed would impact the entire world. In them we can see the important message that Matthew has for us. Jesus did not come for the lost sheep of Israel alone, but for all the people of the world. His birth would become life changing for those who met him and he would continue to change lives throughout future generations. In their understanding, his birth was ordered by the stars themselves, a sign that Jesus would in some way reorder the universe, enabling the world to see life in a totally new way. One must wonder about the Wisemen as they journeyed away from the manger: did they see what they had come to see?

Lord, help me to see the baby Jesus in the stars of the sky and in the lives of those that I meet. Make me wise enough to know that his birth can change my life as easily as it changed the lives of those who walked with him in his earthly pilgrimage. Reorder my life to celebrate the universal gift that we receive this Christmas, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Monday, December 24

Shepherds

Luke 2:8-12

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹²This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger."

Matthew included the Wisemen in the story to proclaim the universal impact of Jesus' birth, but Luke told the story of the shepherds. To understand Luke's point, we must understand the role of shepherds. To be sure, shepherds cared for the sheep, the mainstay of the people's lives, but shepherding was anything but an honorable profession. Shepherds did not have to be smart and they spent most of their time outdoors, away from home. Their closeness to the sheep probably rendered them quite smelly and less than desirable social companions. For this reason, the work of the shepherd was often relegated to the lowest of the low, those who could not do anything else, the social outcasts of the towns and villages. Socially, culturally, intellectually and perhaps even religiously, they were nobodies, the exact opposite of the Wisemen in Matthew's story. Luke's inclusion of the shepherds makes a significant point about the birth of Jesus, that it was not just for the rich and famous, those with prestige and social standing, but it was also for the lowest of the low. In fact, the special appearance of the angels to the shepherds would imply that they were not just included, they were the honored guests! The birth of Jesus honors the least, the last and the lost and brings them into a special relationship with the savior.

Lord, sometimes I feel like the shepherds, lost and alone, left out in the cold. Help me to know that Jesus came for me, too! And help me to see all those around me, even the outcasts, as honored guests at the blessed event; through Jesus, my shepherd. Amen.

December 25 - Christmas Day

Baby Jesus

Luke 2:13-18

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

*¹⁴“Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”*

¹⁵When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.” ¹⁶So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. ¹⁷When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them.

Certainly, our Advent journey must come to this point, with the baby Jesus lying in a manger. This is the event for which we have been waiting and we rejoice in this day: that God has come to us again in this blessed child. But this is not the end of the journey: it is a new beginning.

Like a tiny baby, life awaits us in the days, weeks and years to come. In these days, we will grow to understand what life means, how to live in relation to others, how to live out our faith as God’s children. Like a child, our faith must be nourished, or it will not remain healthy. As children learn from their parents, so we must begin to learn from those who are wise in the faith, who will teach us how to cope with life from the perspective of faith. And just as a child anticipates each new day with excitement and wonder, we must understand that each day is a new gift from God, not to be dreaded, but to be greeted in the joy and excitement that comes from knowing that we can make the day whatever we choose. If these are the choices we make and if we commit ourselves to grow in our faith, then Christ’s birth will not have been in vain. The best thing that we can do to honor the birth of Jesus is to commit our lives to be a continuation of his. Jesus Christ was born this day so that we might have new life!

Lord, grant me the grace to live this day and each day for you. Teach me wisdom; nourish my faith; guide my steps that Christ may live again through me. Let my life, my joy, my love be a celebration of your gift, this Christmas day and every day of my life to come. And God ... thank you! Amen.