



An Advent Devotional Guide
for the members and friends of

FRIENDSHIP UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
Sherman, Texas

prepared as a gift from:

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2021

AN INVITATION

Advent is a time of anticipation and preparation. Our anticipation is of the coming of the Christ child, a blessed moment in our lives of faith when we are reminded of God's incredible love for us. We look forward to a time of great joy when our salvation is renewed and our hopes confirmed.

Yet as Christians, we know that in order for a gift to be made meaningful it must not only be given, it must also be received. Christmas is made meaningful in our lives not just because the Christ Child was born, but because we receive him into our lives anew. Of course, we can just take the gift from God with little thought to its meaning and still have it, but the full meaning of that gift can only be understood and appreciated when we open ourselves fully to God's grace. Therefore, in order for us to fully receive the gift we must enter into a time of preparation: of our homes, our church, our community and our individual lives.

This Bible study and devotional guide has a dual purpose. First, it serves to remind us of the love that comes down at Christmas, the extent of which was expressed to the world in the birth of the baby Jesus: this is God's gift to us. It also leads us to spend some time preparing our lives through reflecting on our needs, our hopes and our gifts. We are then led into acts of ministry to others through our prayers, presence, gifts and service: this is our gift to God.

I invite you, then, to share in this journey of devotion, being open to the new faith that God gives to you in this season of Advent and to the new life that God gives you through your faith. May the joy of giving and receiving be yours this Christmas.

Roy

About This Guide

You will note that this guide is arranged in daily devotionals that include reading, reflection, and prayer. It is my hope that you will devote some time each day to this study, preferably in the morning. Here are some suggestions on how you might make the most of this study as you go about the daily devotions.

If you live alone, find someone that will engage in this study with you and meet together once a week to support one another in your prayer, meditation and action. Take the time to share your insights and experiences in the study with one another.

If you are meeting in a study group, you may want to make this devotion guide your focus for the month of December. Use your time together to discuss the readings and your personal experiences in prayer and action. If you are not already in a group, this is a great opportunity to begin one.

If you live with your family, set aside some time each day to read, reflect, pray and share together as a family devotion. A time around the Yule Log or Advent Wreath would be most fitting. A good time for this family devotion would be in the morning before you scatter to begin the new day, or in the evening before you retire.

There is a fourth aspect that is implied in the previous three: action. Having read, reflected and prayed, let God lead you to take the words of the devotion seriously and respond through your behavior throughout the day

Most importantly, use this time honestly and sincerely. The benefit you receive from this study will depend upon your sense of commitment to this time of preparation and the seriousness of your devotion. The end product is a celebration of Christmas that you will long remember.

AN INVITATION TO WATCH

Sunday

November 28

Read: Isaiah 64:1-8

O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence - as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil—to make your name known to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence!

When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence.

From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him.

You meet those who gladly do right, those who remember you in your ways. But you were angry, and we sinned; because you hid yourself we transgressed.

We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.

There is no one who calls on your name, or attempts to take hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us, and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity.

Yet, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand.

Reflect: The plea of Isaiah was for God to "come down," to become manifest to the people in exile, to "set things right." Isaiah invited the people to watch for the day when God would come to accomplish these purposes among them, with the assurance that God would, indeed, come. Yet for Isaiah, "watching" was not a passive endeavor, as if the people had only to sit back and wait for what God would accomplish in the world. Instead, the people were to prepare themselves for the day of God's return through acts of righteousness and justice, through repentance and through turning their hearts to God.

In similar fashion, the season of Advent is our time of watching. However, watching does not mean that we sit back in idleness, but that we prepare our minds and hearts for the return of God. It is a time when we focus our activity by opening ourselves up to God and God's leading in our lives so that the path we follow might be toward the manger and the Christ Child rather than toward our selfish longings. The words of Isaiah call us to return to the Lord so that we might receive a new gift. Come, "watch" with us!

Pray: *Lord, I open myself to you in this season of hope. Come and fill my heart and my life that I might know your gift in a new way. Guide my thoughts and my steps that your grace may be a constant reminder of the path you call me to follow. Amen.*

AN INVITATION TO WATCH

Monday

November 29

Read: Mark 13:32-37

'But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.'

Reflect: The concern expressed by Jesus was that his disciples do not get caught by surprise when the "Day of Yahweh" arrived. The issue, however, was more than just not getting caught unprepared by the master. The real concern was that the disciples live every moment in the anticipation of God's grace, watching in each moment for the presence of God's love. Thereby, they found God's grace everyday because they were looking for God's grace every day.

We are the new disciples of Christ and we, too, must hear the words of Jesus. We, too, must learn to live every moment of life watching for the presence of God's love and grace. We, too, must seek those ways in which we make every moment of life God's moment in our lives. What can you do to "watch" for God?

Pray: *Lord, I give you this day. Lead my thoughts and actions that they may be directed toward you. Make me aware of your presence each moment of this day that I may walk with you in all that I do and know your love in a special way. Amen.*

AN INVITATION TO WATCH

Tuesday

November 30

Read: Luke 21:34-36

'Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day does not catch you unexpectedly, like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.'

Reflect: The call of Jesus was for his followers to seek God's strength in their "watching," knowing that only the strength of God would enable them to endure the hardships that they would face. The invitation within this message was a call to repentance, a call to abandon the concerns of this world that would distract them from their mission, a call to watch out for those things that would interfere with their entrance into the Kingdom of God. Thus, Jesus called them to turn away from those things that normally occupied their thoughts and desires and to turn toward the anticipation of God's deliverance.

In this season of watching, we are invited to look at those things in our lives that might be a hindrance to the Kingdom of God and to make those adjustments that would enable us to turn our hearts toward God. In so doing, we become so aware of God's arrival that it does not come upon us "suddenly like a snare." What can you do today to turn your heart toward God?

Pray: *Lord, I confess that there are many things that distract me from following you. It is easy for me to get caught up in my own desires and follow my own agenda. Forgive me. Guide me down a new path and help me understand that the fullness of your coming will only be known when my eyes are focused on you. Amen.*

AN INVITATION TO WATCH

Wednesday

December 1

Read: Colossians 4:2-6

Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with thanksgiving. At the same time pray for us as well that God will open to us a door for the word, that we may declare the mystery of Christ, for which I am in prison, so that I may reveal it clearly, as I should.

Conduct yourselves wisely towards outsiders, making the most of the time. Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer everyone.

Reflect: Paul advised his followers to be faithful in offering their prayers to God, making sure that they did not neglect giving thanks. In his understanding, “watchful” praying meant more than just offering words to God: it meant truly expecting God’s presence to be manifest in the prayers we offer. Thus, to pray meant to anticipate God’s response to one’s prayers, enabling one to give God thanks in all things, knowing that God hears and responds to the needs of God’s people.

Too often our prayers become the way in which we seek to manipulate God into doing what we want. Sometimes, the words of our prayers become empty shells that have little hope or expectation of what God will offer us in response. Yet Paul’s words call us to pray diligently, watching for the response that is surely to come and being so certain of God’s impending blessings that we give thanks in our prayers even before we see the results.

Pray: *Lord, sometimes my prayers are empty and have little meaning beyond the time I spend praying. Yet you hear and you respond. Help me to remember your never-ceasing love so that my prayers are a constant thanksgiving for your gifts. Then help me watch for the blessings you have in store for me today and in this season of hope. Amen.*

AN INVITATION TO WATCH

Thursday

December 2

Read: I Peter 4:7-11

The end of all things is near; therefore be serious and discipline yourselves for the sake of your prayers. Above all, maintain constant love for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins. Be hospitable to one another without complaining. Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received. Whoever speaks must do so as one speaking the very words of God; whoever serves must do so with the strength that God supplies, so that God may be glorified in all things through Jesus Christ. To him belong the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen.

Reflect: In offering his Godly wisdom to his followers and friends, Peter knew the importance of supporting one another and caring for each other, especially in their times of need. Who could understand this better than Peter, the one who abandoned Jesus in his hour of need, yet found the risen Christ kneeling beside him at the lake? Therefore, Peter advised his readers to be good stewards of God's gifts to them, especially the gift of love, not just as a way to please God, but as a way of caring for one another. Where there is love, sinful selfishness is pushed away. Loving one another was, for Peter, the key to living a life of righteousness.

As we move through this season of watching, we find our hearts turning toward others. The cheery greetings in anticipation of Christmas warm our hearts and put us in the right frame of mind. Therefore, we must hear with joy what Peter says to us: practicing the gifts of love and hospitality with those we meet turns us away from Sin and prepares us to receive God's gift of love in the baby Jesus. What will you do today to practice hospitality?

Pray: *Lord, help me in this day to be unfailing in my love toward others. Through the hospitality that I extend to others, help me to know the joy with which you welcome me into your family. And help me to understand that where love abides, Sin dares not dwell so that I may live today free in your love. Amen.*

AN INVITATION TO WATCH

Friday

December 3

Read: I Thessalonians 5:1-11

Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anything written to you. For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. When they say, 'There is peace and security', then sudden destruction will come upon them, as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and there will be no escape! But you, beloved, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief; for you are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness. So then, let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober; for those who sleep sleep at night, and those who are drunk get drunk at night. But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him. Therefore, encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.

Reflect: Paul's love for the people of Thessalonica led him to a desire to give himself to them in support of their needs and through their struggles with life. For him, watching for the coming of the Lord was not a solitary act, done alone, but a communal act, done in relationship with others. It was important for him to know that in his absence the people were receiving support from one another as they waited for his return. Therefore, his encouragement to the people was not to lock themselves in a closet and hide from the wrath that might befall them, but to extend themselves into the life of others, building each other up and encouraging one another in the faith.

Likewise, our faith leads us into a community of friends and fellow disciples. As we live through this Christmas season, we are invited to consider the struggles of others, to reach out to them with words of kindness and to support them with deeds of mercy. Therefore, our thoughts naturally turn to those who struggle to make it through this season, and we seek to offer them a part of ourselves in order to build up their strength and faith. Who do you know that is struggling? What will you do to reach out to them?

Pray: *Lord, as I move through this season of hope, I pray for those who are in despair, who struggle to find joy, who find pain instead of comfort. Lead me this day to reach out to these, to speak kindly to them and to offer them acts of mercy that they, too, may know your joy and hope. Amen.*

AN INVITATION TO WATCH

Saturday

December 4

Read: II Timothy 4:1-5

In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I solemnly urge you: proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching. For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths. As for you, always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully.

Reflect: Paul's word to Timothy was for him to fulfill his ministry by doing the work of an evangelist: preaching, teaching, exhorting. There are two issues that Paul implies in this admonition. First, it is Timothy's calling to share his knowledge and understanding through the task of evangelism, that is, bearing the good news of Christ. Second, it is the message that the people need to hear, calling them away from those things that they substitute for God's Word in order to feel comfortable in their faith.

Thus, Paul's message calls us to two tasks in this season of hope. First, we must take the responsibility that God has given us to proclaim the good news through our words and actions. Second, we must make sure that our hearts are turned away from the sentimentality and worldliness that so easily invade this season so that the hope we proclaim is truly God's hope for the world. When we do this, we not only focus our own attention to the "reason for the season," we also make the glorious coming of Christ manifest in the lives of others. How can you be an "evangelist" today?

Pray: *Lord, lead me to be an evangelist, bearing the good news of your hope into a hungry world. Let my words be your words and my actions your actions that, through me, others may know the great gift of your love this Christmas. Amen.*

AN INVITATION TO HOPE

Sunday

December 5

Read: Isaiah 40:1-11

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins.

A voice cries out: 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain.

Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.'

A voice says, 'Cry out!' And I said, 'What shall I cry?'

All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field.

The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the LORD blows upon it; surely the people are grass.

The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand for ever.

Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, 'Here is your God!'

See, the Lord GOD comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him.

He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.

Reflect: Isaiah's image of the coming of the Lord is powerful: like a shepherd gathering his sheep into his arms, the Lord will come to gather the people for nourishment and comfort. In this image, Isaiah found and shared hope, that life's pain would be soothed by the loving embrace of God. Comfort was coming and it was time for the people to raise their heads to the horizon and see the new shepherd coming to them.

This is our hope, as much as it was Isaiah's. We are invited to see our comfort coming as a child born into the world. We are invited to feel the warm embrace of the shepherd gathering us in. We are invited to be nourished by the grace that breaks into the world. We are invited to know that God has not abandoned us nor forgotten our pain but comes to heal us and make us new. We live in this hope each day of our lives, but in this season, we are called to become even more aware of the promise of deliverance that comes to us. Woes your hope lie?

Pray: *Lord, I offer to you this day the pain of my life. Take away my suffering and replace it with the joy of hope that you bring. Enable me to live in this hope today that I may be a beacon of hope to those around me and that my life might become a source of hope for those who suffer. Amen.*

AN INVITATION TO HOPE

Monday

December 6

Read: Mark 1:1-8

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

*As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,
'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way;
the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
"Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight" ',*

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, 'The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.'

Reflect: The cry of John the Baptizer echoed the call of Isaiah. John called on the people to prepare the way of the Lord by "straightening out" the deserts of their lives and by making the rough edges smooth. This was a call to repentance, a call to focus their lives on the coming of the Lord by abandoning their dependence on the things of the world and their selfish desires and actions. It was a call to make God the center of their lives, in their thoughts, actions and hopes.

Our hope is in the realization that God's coming is a time of newness and new beginnings, when the old passes away and the new arrives; but we must also realize that we are not passive participants in God's coming. If the infant Jesus is to be made manifest in our lives, it must happen because we have prepared the way: we must make room in our lives for the baby to be born in us. Therefore, we must turn our attention to those obstacles that stand in the way of us focusing our full attention on God. This is our time of repentance, when we turn from Sin and selfishness in order to make room for the gift of God's love. What obstacles can you see that would prevent your faith from becoming full?

Pray: *Lord, I confess that I seldom leave much room for you in my life. There is always so much to be done and so much that I want to do that I often forget about you and your love for me. Today, Lord, slow me down and help me to turn from my selfishness that I might embrace the fullness of your gift of hope and prepare a place for you in my life. Amen.*

AN INVITATION TO HOPE

Tuesday

December 7

Read: Psalm 130:5-8

*I wait for the LORD, my soul waits,
and in his word I hope;
my soul waits for the Lord
more than those who watch for the morning,
more than those who watch for the morning.*

*O Israel, hope in the LORD!
For with the LORD there is steadfast love,
and with him is great power to redeem.
It is he who will redeem Israel
from all its iniquities.*

Reflect: The concept of redemption plays a significant role in the Hebrew scriptures, centering around the legal understanding of a price paid to reclaim property that was lost or stolen. For the Psalmist, Israel was "lost" as the result of its sinfulness, but God would pay the price to reclaim the nation and the people. In this understanding was Israel's hope: God would accomplish what the people could not do for themselves.

For us, Christmas is the time of reclamation, God's gift of the son being the price paid for the redemption of our sinfulness. We are unable to redeem ourselves, for the price of redemption is beyond our means. Left on our own, our lives are destined to be spent in slavery to Sin. But we are not on our own: our hope is in the name of the Lord and our redemption rests in the hands of God. Therefore, we wait in anxious anticipation of the redemption God brings to us, our freedom gained at last through the gift of God's son. This is our hope and promise.

Pray: *Lord, thank you for the gift of your son and the redemption that gift brings to me. Help me to live my life today in the full realization of how precious this gift is for me. Loose the bonds of my slavery to Sin and set me free, through Christ my Lord. Amen.*

AN INVITATION TO HOPE

Wednesday

December 8

Read: Lamentations 3:19-26

The thought of my affliction and my homelessness is wormwood and gall!

My soul continually thinks of it and is bowed down within me.

But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope:

The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, his mercies never come to an end;

they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.

'The LORD is my portion,' says my soul, 'therefore I will hope in him.'

The LORD is good to those who wait for him, to the soul that seeks him.

It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD.

Reflect: Lamentations is a book about the pain of suffering. Indeed, that's what the title means. In the midst of the pain of exile and separation, however, Jeremiah found hope: a hope that rested in the realization that God's love would never run out, that each new day would bring another opportunity to experience God's love in a new way. From the pain of their lives, Jeremiah called the people to have hope, knowing that God's love was like a spring of fresh water that would never dry up.

As we consider our own pain and suffering, it is easy for us to lose our hope. We must remember that each day is a new day, and each new day brings a new gift of God's love and grace. There will never be enough days to exhaust the supply of God's grace. Therefore, we look forward to each new day as an opportunity to see God in a new way and to experience the newness of God's love. What can you do today to see God's grace in a new way?

Pray: *Lord, help me to see you in a new way today that I may find the joy of new birth. May the newness of your Spirit give me the hope and encouragement I need to face the hardships of this day and turn my mourning into dancing and my suffering into joy. Amen.*

AN INVITATION TO HOPE

Thursday

December 9

Read: Romans 8:18-25

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

Reflect: For Paul, hope meant putting one's trust into things that are promised, but not yet seen, with the full confidence that in time the object of that hope will be revealed in its glory. Underlying this sense of hope was the faith in God that leads to the certainty of God's care, concern, and grace. Thus, the Roman Church was invited to "wait with patience" for the revelation of God's grace, which was the fulfillment of their hope.

Such is the hope of our salvation: promised, but not yet fully seen. It is easy for us to get discouraged in life when the object of our hope is delayed in coming. Yet Christmas is the visible reminder that God has not forgotten us, the time when we can catch a glimpse of the glory yet to be revealed. Much more than hoping for "things," the patient waiting of Advent is the hope in God. Our hope for what we will receive pales before our hope in the One who will bring us the gift. While we often focus on the gifts of Christmas, Paul's words invite us to turn our attention to the giver of Christmas.

Pray: *Lord, as I wait for Christmas, grant me the patience that comes through confidence in your grace. Keep my mind focused on you as the giver as well as the gift so that my hope may be complete, and I can see the revelation of your glory. Amen.*

AN INVITATION TO HOPE

Friday

December 10

Read: Ezekiel 37:1-14

The hand of the LORD came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the LORD and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. He led me all round them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. He said to me, 'Mortal, can these bones live?' I answered, 'O Lord GOD, you know.' Then he said to me, 'Prophesy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD. Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the LORD.'

So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them. Then he said to me, 'Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord GOD: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.' I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

Then he said to me, 'Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, "Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely." Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord GOD: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken and will act, says the LORD.'

Reflect: Ezekiel's vision of the valley of dry bones was a statement about the power of God to turn hopelessness to hope, even when it appears that all hope is lost. Israel was broken and defeated, powerless to stand against its foes. In Ezekiel's vision God promised new life, taking away the death of brokenness and defeat, raising up a new people. From the barrenness of human tragedy would come new life, by the grace of God.

God's promise through Ezekiel is also God's promise to us. There is never a defeat so strong or a tragedy so deep that God cannot overcome it and bring forth new life. Out of the barrenness of our human tragedy God can and will bring new life. We live in this hope, knowing that the coming of the Christ Child is the sign of the new life that God brings to us in this Christmas season. We embrace the promise of God, for it leads us to know that there is never a situation so desperate that God cannot bring forth hope and promise.

Pray: *Lord, sometimes I feel so defeated that I want to give up. Sometimes I feel like all my hope has dried up and there is no end to the problems I face. Remind me of the new life that you bring. Tie sinews of life to the dry bones of my defeat that I may once again find hope and life in you. Amen.*

AN INVITATION TO HOPE

Saturday

December 11

Read: Romans 15:1-6

We who are strong ought to put up with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Each of us must please our neighbor for the good purpose of building up the neighbor. For Christ did not please himself; but, as it is written, 'The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me.' For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope. May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Reflect: Paul identified two elements of hoping: steadfastness, joined with the assurance of the Scriptures. His invitation to the people was for them to remain steadfast to the faith they had learned from the scriptures, knowing that in them was the wisdom that would lead to their understanding of God's love and their ability to live a life of faithfulness. The important part was for them to not abandon what they had learned but hold on to it as the hope from God and to offer the strength that they found to those who were weak.

When we are faithful to God's calling and trust the witness of the scriptures, we find hope. In the many stories of faithfulness that we hear from the scriptures we find that we are never alone, and that God's hope comes to us as it has to the saints of the past. Then we are led into a life of harmony with others as we stand together in praise, for we have the assurance of our salvation. In this hope we are able to support those who are weak, that they might be built up and that we might stand together as one in faith. Who do you know that needs to be built up in faith?

Pray: *Lord, I know the stories of the saints, but sometimes I forget the lessons they teach me. Help me to stand with my brothers and sisters in need. Teach me to love them as you love them, knowing that when I reach out to others, I find the strength of your mercy and the power of your grace. Amen.*

AN INVITATION TO LOVE

Sunday

December 12

Read: Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

*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 broken-hearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners;
to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn; 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.*

*They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, to display his glory.
They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations;
they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations.*

*For I the LORD love justice, I hate robbery and wrongdoing;
I will faithfully give them their recompense, and I will make an everlasting covenant with them.
Their descendants shall be known among the nations, and their offspring among the peoples;
all who see them shall acknowledge that they are a people whom the LORD has blessed.
I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my whole being shall exult in my God;
for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of
righteousness,
as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.
For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up,
so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.*

Reflect: For Isaiah, the coming of the Son of Man signaled the time when God's love would be made manifest to the world. This love, however, was not an abstract idea or an emotion that was only sometimes felt. The love that was coming was a love that would heal broken hearts and set free those who were bound. When John's disciples asked if he were the Christ, Jesus used this passage to describe his own ministry. In this action, Jesus clearly claimed Isaiah's role of the Suffering Servant for himself.

It is this love that we anticipate in this season of Advent, a love that sets us free. While our attention certainly is focused on God's gift of love in this Christmas season, however, we need to remember that the love God brings to us is not an occasional gift. God's love is everlasting, and that means that there is never a time when it is not ours. God's love sets us free, not just for a moment, but in each new moment of life.

Pray: *Lord, through your love in Christ Jesus, set me free. Loosen the bonds that enslave me to my selfish will and let me find the freedom to love others as you love me. And help me to know the freedom of your love, not only in this moment of my day, but in every moment of every day, for the sake of Christ. Amen.*

AN INVITATION TO LOVE

Monday

December 13

Read: John 1:6-13, 19-28

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, 'Who are you?' He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, 'I am not the Messiah.' And they asked him, 'What then? Are you Elijah?' He said, 'I am not.' 'Are you the prophet?' He answered, 'No.' Then they said to him, 'Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?' He said, 'I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, "Make straight the way of the Lord"', as the prophet Isaiah said.

Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. They asked him, 'Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?' John answered them, 'I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.' This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.

Reflect: In the prologue to the Gospel of John, the author calls attention to the fact that God's love came into the world via the birth and ministry of Jesus, yet the people chose to live in darkness and could not see the light that had come. Desperate for love, they chased after John the Baptizer in the hope that he was the one who would bring them the love they sought. Yet John simply pointed to Jesus as the true light that enlightens everyone.

The image of light and darkness that John uses so skillfully in these words is a fitting image for our understanding of God's love. The darkness of our Sin often overshadows the brightness of Christ's light, yet it does not ... indeed cannot ... overcome it. Shinning in the shadows is always the light of God's gift of love. When we tire of the darkness, there is always a glowing ember of God's love waiting to be fanned into a flame.

Pray: *Lord, I confess that there is a sense of comfort in the darkness, for there I can hide. Yet I know that there is no darkness that can enable me to hide from you and that what I need the most is not more darkness, but the true light of your love. Fan the embers of my faith and let me burn for you today. Amen.*

AN INVITATION TO LOVE

Tuesday

December 14

Read: I John 4:9-12

God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.

Reflect: John's witness was that God loved the world so much that He sent Jesus to take away Sin, even though the people of the world had not fully loved God. This was God's doing, not because the people deserved to be loved, but because they needed to be loved. In this unselfish and unilateral love of God, therefore, they were called upon to love one another, not in exchange for God's love or as a prerequisite for it, but in response to God's unconditional love for world, a love made manifest in Christ Jesus.

In this season of love, we are called upon to remember that God loved us first, not because we deserve it or because we ask for it, but simply because we need to be loved. This is God's nature: God is love. The unmerited and unconditional love of God is what transforms us into people of love and empowers us to be loving toward others. When we love we become like God; when others see our love, they see God in and through us. Thus, the best thing we can do for God is to love one another and let God's love be manifest in us.

Pray: *Lord, teach me to love. I know that I am not always the most lovable person that I can be, but I also know that you love me anyway. Guide me in this day to be the living expression of your love to those around me, that in me they may see you. Amen.*

AN INVITATION TO LOVE

Wednesday

December 15

Read: Matthew 22:34-40

When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. 'Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?' He said to him, '“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.'

Reflect: The question may have been intended to trap Jesus in a fine point of Jewish understanding, but his response did just the opposite. In his summary of the Law, Jesus identified his own two-sided approach to life: loving God and loving his neighbor. While loving God was truly the most important part of the entire Law, for Jesus it was in loving one's neighbor that the people were able to show their love for God, so it was impossible to have one without the other. If life revolves around these two things, one doesn't have to worry about anything else, for one will naturally fulfill all the law and the advice of the prophets.

Our own lives would be much happier if we could follow Jesus' direction. As we turn our attention to the gift of God's love this Christmas, we cannot ignore the fact that God's love for us leads to a natural response of loving God. If loving God means also loving our neighbors, then understanding God's gift of love must lead us, ultimately, to being a loving neighbor to those around us. If we truly do love our neighbor and our love of neighbor is truly a reflection of our love of God, then we are not far from the Kingdom of God.

Pray: *Lord, you know I love you, but sometimes I forget that loving my neighbors is important, too. Help me to let my love for you translate itself into love of those around me as I prepare to receive your gift of love this Christmas. Amen.*

AN INVITATION TO LOVE

Thursday

December 16

Read: Matthew 5:43-48

‘You have heard that it was said, “You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax-collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Reflect: Jesus had a way of turning things upside down. Loving one’s neighbor was an important part of the Jewish Law, but so was hating one’s enemies. Turning against the enemies of Israel was understood as turning toward God. But Jesus moved beyond the strict legalism of the Law to embrace the fullness of mercy and to accept all people as children of God. Even one’s enemies deserved to be loved, for they, too, were God’s people.

It is easy to love those people who love us in return; it is more difficult to love those who cannot or will not return our love; it is next to impossible to love those who despise us and are out to do us harm! Yet that is the love with which Christ loved others and even now he calls on us, his disciples, to have the same kind and strength in love. What would life be like if we suddenly began to love those who hated us? Maybe their hearts might be turned; most certainly our hearts would be changed!

Pray: *Lord, love does not always come easily for me. I like to give love to those from whom I receive love, but loving my enemies is a different matter. Today, Lord, empower me to love just one of those persons who stands against me and grant me the courage to pray for those that I consider to be my enemies. Amen.*

AN INVITATION TO LOVE

Friday

December 17

Read: I Corinthians 13:1-13

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

Reflect: Have there ever been more beautiful words written than Paul's discourse on love? Yet there is an unselfishness in this love that sets a standard not easily met. Paul's preface to this marvelous chapter sums up the importance of it: *"Earnestly desire the higher gifts, and I will show you a more excellent way."* For this apostle, there is no higher aim in life than to love those around us with this pure, unselfish, and undefiled love, a love that places one's own needs beneath those of others.

It is in Jesus that this kind of love is most clearly seen, a love that goes beyond human expectation and touches on divine grace toward others. The birth of the Christ Child reminds us of the fullness of this love. Jesus comes into the world, not to be crowned king, but to love those he meets, even those who turn against him and who seek to do him harm. Even his dying words proclaim the strength of that love: "Forgive them, for they know not what they do."

Pray: *Lord, write these words of love on my heart and plant them firmly in my mind this day that my every moment may be spent fully offering love to others. Perfect your love in me that I may always have your love in mind, in my waking and my sleeping, my working and my playing, in my hopes and in my vision. Amen.*

AN INVITATION TO LOVE

Saturday

December 18

Read: Romans 8:31-39

What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written,

*'For your sake we are being killed all day long;
we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.'*

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Reflect: Written at a time when Paul was experiencing a sense of defeat, persecuted by the authorities, imprisoned and kept from completing his journey to Rome, these words show the despair that threatened to fill the apostle's life. Yet even in the midst of what seemed like defeat, Paul could joyously affirm the ever-present love of God, a love that overpowered all his own feelings of defeat and would overcome all the obstacles in his way.

What can separate us from God's love? Nothing! There is nothing that we can do or say, nothing that anyone else can do, no natural disaster that can take away God's love for us. In that word is our hope and assurance: God will always be at our side loving and caring for us. Paul's faith becomes a testimony to us at those times when we feel down. Even at those times when we feel most unlovable, God loves us still. There is no way around it... we are loved by God!

Pray: *Lord, when I think of your love for me, I am overwhelmed! Thank you for loving and caring for me, even in the midst of my own failures and shortcomings. Lead me to know your love in a special way today so that I will never forget your gift of grace! Amen.*

AN INVITATION TO CELEBRATE

Sunday

December 19

Read: Luke 1:5-25

In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.

Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. Now at the time of the incense-offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. But the angel said to him, 'Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.' Zechariah said to the angel, 'How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years.' . . .

. . . After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she remained in seclusion. She said, 'This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people.'

Reflect: Imagine Zechariah's surprise! He was filled with doubt when he heard the angel's pronouncement, for the news went beyond what he thought was possible. Yet eventually he came to understand that where God was at work, nothing was impossible and that whatever God brings about is blessed. Because God, through the Holy Spirit, was at work in his life, great things would happen!

As we read the angel's announcement, we can certainly understand why Zechariah was skeptical and, at least for a moment, unbelieving. We often find ourselves in a similar situation, unable or unwilling to believe that God is truly at work in the world because things happen that we don't expect. Yet the mark of true faith is not only that we believe that God can work, but that we anticipate the working of God in our everyday lives. We celebrate because we know God is with us and where God is, great things happen! Where do you see God at work in your life?

Pray: *Lord, sometimes I have trouble seeing you at work. I get so caught up in what I expect to happen that a change of events is hard to accept. Let me see your work today, O Lord, and come to believe in the extraordinary ways in which you touch my life. And thank you for not relying on my belief to work your wonders. Amen.*

AN INVITATION TO CELEBRATE

Monday

December 20

Read: Luke 1:26-38

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.' But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.' Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?' The angel said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.' Then Mary said, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.' Then the angel departed from her.

Reflect: Although originally filled with fear, Mary found the coming of the angel an occasion for rejoicing. After all, it is not everyday that an Angel shows up and makes such an announcement! The extraordinary turn of events came to Mary without any warning or anticipation and caught her off guard. Yet when she realized the beauty and wonder of the angel's news, her fear was turned to rejoicing. The fear of the unknown was transformed into jubilation in the realization that it was God that was at work in this special event.

How often do we get surprised by events that we don't expect? Our first reaction is almost always negative: fear, denial, confusion, disbelief. It takes a little time for us to sort through the realities, but when we do, we often find wonder and joy. Such is the case with Christmas: it is hard for us to accept that God loved the world so much that Jesus was born. Yet when we are able to work past our doubts and confusion, we find the blessedness of God's love transforming our fear to jubilation. Only when we can see this love does the joy of Christmas truly become ours!

Pray: *Lord, my life is often filled with doubt and confusion, and I often dread that which I cannot understand. As I await the blessings of Christmas day, take away my dread and worry and let me see the miracle of your love, that I may celebrate with joy and jubilation. Amen.*

AN INVITATION TO CELEBRATE

Tuesday

December 21

Read: Luke 1:46-56

And Mary said, 'My soul magnifies the Lord,

and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.

His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.

He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly;

he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.

He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy,

according to the promise he made to our ancestors,

to Abraham and to his descendants for ever.'

And Mary remained with her for about three months and then returned to her home.

Reflect: These familiar words are often referred to as the "Magnificat" of Mary, words that take the form of a hymn praising God. Of course, these words are brought forth by Mary's pregnancy: she carries a child conceived by the Holy Spirit who will be the Savior of the world. The joy of this miraculous event led her to understand that the impending salvation of the world was her own salvation as well and in her visit to her cousin Elizabeth, her praise of God pours forth.

Like Mary, we recognize that the coming of the Christ Child brings salvation to the world, but we also realize that it is our own salvation that comes as well. This global, universal event has a very personal side. We rejoice for the world and celebrate God's gift to the world, but we also celebrate the gift of God that comes into our lives as a very personal gift. We are honored that God has chosen us to receive this great gift of love!

Pray: *Lord, when I think of your gift to the world, it fills my heart with joy. When I also realize that this gift is mine, my joy is turned to jubilation! Thank you, Lord, for loving me enough to give me this wonderful gift! Amen.*

AN INVITATION TO CELEBRATE

Wednesday

December 22

Read: Luke 1: 57-79

Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her. . . .

. . . Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke this prophecy:

'Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them.

He has raised up a mighty savior for us in the house of his servant David,

as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,

that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.

Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham, to grant us that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins.

By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us,

to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,

to guide our feet into the way of peace.'

Reflect: Zechariah's joy is eloquently expressed in this song as he celebrates the birth of his son. Yet his celebration focused on more than his own satisfaction as a father. His joy is accompanied by a strong resolution: the salvation that he is experiencing is to be followed by the acts of mercy to which he and the people Israel have been called. In his own joy Zechariah finds the fulfillment of God's promise and the hope of God's deliverance and finds himself called to new righteousness in his own task of ministry.

As we anticipate the joy of salvation that is brought to us in the celebration of Christmas, we have the clear reminder that we are not saved just so that we can rejoice, but so that we can show God's mercy to others and spread our joy into the world. Christ's birth is not for us alone, but for all humanity and a true understanding of Christmas must, and does, lead us to accept our responsibility for God's kingdom on earth. We rejoice and celebrate, but we also are led forth to new levels of our Christian ministry and responsibility.

Pray: *Lord, as I embrace the gift of your love this Christmas, let me also hear your voice calling me into your world, leading me into new ministry. Grant me the courage and conviction to dedicate my time and talents to ministry in your name, for the sake of Jesus Christ. Amen.*

AN INVITATION TO CELEBRATE

Thursday

December 23

Read: Philippians 4:4-7

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Reflect: Paul's word to the Philippians was to rejoice: the Day of the Lord was at hand! They no longer needed to worry over what was about to transpire, nor be anxious about their days. The peace that passes all understanding was about to come their way and their lives would be transformed.

As we finally approach the end of Advent, we, too, rejoice, for the coming of the Lord is at hand. Our anxiety is diminished as we focus on the blessed event and our worries fade away. We prepare to be filled with God's hope, love, and peace. In a short time, we will pause to remember and reflect as we worship together, the flame of God's presence burning in our midst, and we know that our hearts will be filled with the love of God, for the Prince of Peace is coming!

Pray: *Lord, the time for which I have been waiting is at hand. I have worked to prepare myself for your special gift and there is no time left. I pray that all that I have done until now is sufficient to adequately receive your gift. Come, Lord Jesus, and fill me with your peace. Amen.*

AN INVITATION TO CELEBRATE

Friday

December 24

Read: Luke 2:1-7

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph 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. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

Reflect: Joseph and Mary had to go to Bethlehem. It was a trip they would have preferred to pass up, but they went anyway. Nine months pregnant, already weary from the stress and struggles of beginning a new relationship, they set out on the arduous journey that would take them to a strange place. When they arrived, there was no place to stay. Then the time came, and Jesus was born. The agony of their journey was transformed into the joy of new life. That new life was the fulfillment of God's promise and the sign of God's faithfulness. It was this gift that Mary came to treasure in her heart.

By now we are worn out. The endless parties and obligatory gatherings have taken their toll on us. The shopping, the decorating, the wrapping, and the baking have left us exhausted. Our faces are fixed in a permanent smile, placed there even when we haven't felt like smiling. But there is a moment coming soon that will make it all worthwhile. It is that moment when all the work pays off in new life. It is the moment when all that we have done comes together with what God has done and we welcome God's new life into our lives. This is our hope, and the consummation of our relationship with God is just around the corner.

Pray: *Lord, I'm tired, but my life is filled with hope. I know that I will not be disappointed. Send me today the gift of patience, that my tiredness may begin to give way to the triumph of your grace; through Christ my savior. Amen.*

AN INVITATION TO CELEBRATE

Saturday

December 25

Read: Luke 2:8-20

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 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: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.' And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!'

When 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.' So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Reflect: The shepherds rejoiced, for God had come to them. Of all the people on the earth, God chose these lowly people to receive the good news. The heralded event was for all humankind, but it was especially significant for the shepherds, who were often left out and neglected, the forgotten and discarded members of society. If God could love and include them, could not God love and accept everyone?

On this Christmas day, we rejoice with the shepherds, for the love shared with them has been shared with us as well. We find our hearts warmed and our spirits lifted in the realization that on this day we celebrate the gift of God's love, a child newly born and laying in a manger. Our lives can never be the same. In the baby Jesus, we are claimed anew. This is the object of our watching, the fulfillment of our hope, the expression of God's love, the cause for our celebration:

CHRIST THE SAVIOR IS BORN !

Pray: *Lord, how can I thank you for your gift. It's beauty and magnificence are beyond my comprehension, yet this gift has come to me! I rejoice in what you have given me and pray that the celebration of this day may resound in my life forever as I seek to live in the fullness of your love. Receive my thanks and praise, through and for the Christ who has come to me. Amen.*