

### Prepare THE WAY

## Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for Him.

MATTHEW 3:3

hat do you want to awaken to on Christmas morning? How are you preparing to experience that very thing? First Baptist's Advent theme for 2016 is *Prepare the Way*. Over these days of Advent let us *Prepare the Way* for the birth of Jesus, the Messiah and Savior of the world.

Prepare the Way for Christmas! Prepare the Way for hope, peace, joy, and love. Preparation is active. Preparation is patient. Preparation is intentional. Preparation requires discipline. Preparation makes straight paths. Preparation allows us to arrive at our destination. What are you preparing for?

Each Sunday during Advent and on Christmas morning we will consider a passage from the Gospel of Matthew. We will witness how people prepared for the coming of the Lord. Noah waited. John preached. Disciples questioned. Joseph awakened. Shepherds watched. Magi searched. I am fascinated by the various ways in which people prepare. And today, people continue to prepare.

Prepare the Way for the Lord. I want to be ready for Christmas. I do not want to miss the birth of the Messiah. Will you join me on the path that leads to Bethlehem?

This devotion guide is a gift from First Baptist Norman. The members of our church wrote its pages as they reflected on how they *Prepare the Way* for Christmas. It is our invitation for you to prepare for Christmas as well. Prepare by meditating on these personal stories and Scriptures. Prepare through quiet waiting. Prepare by attentive watching. Prepare through diligent seeking. Prepare by honest questioning. What do you want to awaken to on Christmas morning? Let us make our preparations. Let us make straight paths to Bethlehem. Let us *Prepare the Way* for *good news of great joy!* 

Let us Prepare the Way for. . .

HOPE

PEACE

JOY

LOVE

Dr. Wade E. Smith

# Prepare THE WAY ... PHOTO ASSIGNMENT

rst Baptist Church of Norman has a strong tradition of celebrating Advent and Christmastide through our annual devotional guide. Writers from all across the congregation take up the mantle and craft beautiful stories and lessons to help us understand better the themes of *hope*, *peace*, *joy* and *love* in relation to the birth of Jesus Christ.

This year, we hope to encourage further artistic expression by hosting the first, church-wide **Advent photo assignment.** Our hope in hosting this assignment is simple: we want to deepen both our understanding of Advent and the 2016 theme, *Prepare the Way*.

Below you can find a few general guidelines for submitting an entry. If you have any questions, please, let us know.

### **GUIDELINES**

- 1. The assignment runs from November 27 through January 1, 2017.
- 2. Everyone is welcome to contribute.
- 3. Along with your submission, please include your name and a caption of how your photo captures either FBC's 2016 Advent focus *Prepare the Way* or a more traditional theme of *hope*, *peace*, *joy* or *love*.
- 4. Each artist retains all rights to any photograph they submit, including ownership rights. In submitting a photograph, however, you grant First Baptist Church a royalty free, nonexclusive right to display the photograph and allow for third-parties to share your art on social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter.
- 5. First Baptist Church will assume all those who submit images are the photograph's copyright owners; falsification of, or infringement upon, another person's copyright with not be accepted.
- 6. Prominent submissions may gain specific recognition during a weekly service, or through FBC Norman's online and/or social media outlets. In each case, First Baptist Church will endeavor to credit all photographs with the artists full name when available.

To enter, you can email your photo and caption to canary@fbcnorman.org.

### Prepare THE WAY

### ...GIFTS

ifts are one of the special ways we celebrate Christmas. In fact, there would be no Christmas without gifts. Proverbs 18:16 proclaims that a gift opens doors. In other words, gifts Prepare the Way for something beyond or greater than the actual gift. What will your gifts Prepare the Way for this Christmas?

The first Christmas gift was given by God the Father, who gave His only Son, Jesus. The gift of *Immanuel (God with us)*, opened the door and prepared the way for Easter resurrection. Magi from the east brought gifts of worship to baby Jesus. Their gifts prepared the way for Joseph, Mary, and Jesus to flee to Egypt, safe from King Herod's decree to put to death all infant boys.

What do your Christmas gifts *Prepare the Way* for? Do they clamor of the chaos and consumerism of our culture? Are your gifts an end to themselves or do they open doors to something greater? What if your gifts opened doors to deeper relationships? What if your gifts opened doors of compassion and generosity? What if your gifts prepared the way for redemption and reconciliation? Gift giving allows us the unique opportunity to *Prepare the Way* for Christmas *hope*, *peace*, *joy*, and *love*. Let us *Prepare the Way* of the Lord through our gifts this Christmas.

What if your gifts prepared the way for someone to know Jesus? Would you consider two special Christmas gifts this year? First, the need for our missionaries is great. A gift to world missions through the Lottie Moon and/or Global Missions offerings opens doors for missionaries to share and live out the gospel of Jesus among the people of the world. Our World Missions goal is \$68,000. Your World Missions gift can be designated and given in worship, brought by the church office or made online at fbcnorman.org. How will God lead you to Prepare the Way for those who have yet to hear the name of Jesus?

Second, our Christmas Eve service is one of the special services of the year. Join me in bringing a gift for baby Jesus. Bring a package of diapers or baby wipes to symbolize the miracle of His birth. Others may bring a warm blanket or coat for a mother or child to keep warm. Some may bring formula to satisfy the hungry cry of an infant. Allow your special gift to open a door to a new experience and perspective of the birth of Jesus to a homeless Mary and Joseph. These gifts will be distributed through our Community Ministry. They will open doors and touch the lives of our neighbors in Norman. *Prepare the Way* for these needs to be met through your generosity.

How will your gifts *Prepare the Way* for *Hope*, *Peace*, *Joy*, and *Love* this Christmas?

Dr. Wade E. Smith

### ADVENT CALENDAR

On Mission with Operation Christmas Child November 29 - December 1 Mission trip to Dallas to work at the OCC Processing Center

Holiday Trip to Branson
December 6-8

Detailed itineraries available at the Family Life Center

Youth Christmas Party
6 p.m.
December 7
Youth Hall

Norman Christmas Parade December 10 Join us at Common Ground, 324 W. Main St.,

at 9 a.m. for fellowship and hot chocolate

Giving Tree

Continues until December 11

Select a tag from the tree on display outside the media center, gifts will be delivered to families at Lincoln Elementary

Sounds of Christmas Concert
6 p.m., December 11
7 p.m., December 12
Sanctuary

Gingerbread House Party 6 p.m. December 14 Hallock Hall

### ADVENT CALENDAR

Lights of Muskogee

December 16

For a detailed itinerary, visit the Family Life Center

Smith Family Holiday Open House 2-4 p.m. December 18 Home of Dr. Wade and Gay Smith

First Family Christmas Caroling
5-8 p.m.
December 21
Family Life Center

No Regular Wednesday Evening Activities

December 21

December 28

FLC and Church Office Closed
December 23 - December 26
January 2, 2017

Christmas Eve Service
6 p.m.
Bring diapers and wipes
to put under our tree for baby Jesus

Christmas Morning Service 10:00 a.m. Sanctuary

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# PREPARE FOR



## Family DEVOTION

### November 27 to Vecember 3

henever we go on a trip we have to prepare. We pack our bags and make sandwiches for the road. We might even create a special musical playlist to listen to in the car. We pack our favorite stuffed animals, coloring books, crayons, and storybooks, all in order to be ready for the journey ahead. Our **HOPE** is that the journey will be smooth and we will arrive safely at grandma's house or our favorite vacation spot.

Wherever you travel to this Advent season, my **HOPE** is that as you prepare for your journey, you will remember the people of God. As the people of God, we should always be prepared. Prepared to serve, prepared to give, and prepared to show love to all. Just like we prepare for other things in life, we are also to prepare ourselves to show love. It should be our **HOPE** that we will shine God's love to all, especially during this season of remembering Jesus' birth.

How do you prepare your heart to share God's love? How do you prepare to be the hands and feet of Jesus? We cling to the **HOPE** we find in Jesus. The **HOPE** that we are loved, and that when it is our time, we will be welcomed by those who have gone before us and be with God forever. As you prepare for this Advent season, don't forget to prepare to share the **HOPE** you found in Jesus.

#### FAMILY ACTIVITY

Take a trip to look at Christmas lights or to sing carols. Prepare for the journey with your children. What will you need? What do you anticipate as you prepare for your outing? What do you **HOPE** will come from your fun time together as a family?

Talk with your children about being prepared and their **HOPES** for the season. Explain to them that just like preparing for a family adventure, we are also to prepare ourselves to share the **HOPE** that lives in us because of Jesus.

Pray together and thank Jesus for the **HOPE** He gives us. Pray that we will be prepared to share His love with all those we meet.

# PREPARE FOR

The Son of Man's Arrival will be like that:

Two men will be working in the field

– one will be taken, one left behind;

two women will be grinding at the mill –

one will be taken, one left behind.

So stay awake, alert. You have no idea

what day your Master will show up.

But you do know this:

You know that if the homeowner had known what time of night the burglar would arrive, he would have been there with his dogs to prevent the break-in.

Be vigilant just like that.

You have no idea when the Son of

Man is going to show up.

Matthew 24:36-44

### GO AND GLOW THIS CHRISTMAS

November 27

ust plug another one of those splitters into that extension cord." I looked dubiously at the two 3-way electrical splitters already attached to the cord, but I shrugged my shoulders. Jim Stewart knows what he's doing, right? I complied, and the Christmas lights on the bushes lit up.

This was the second Christmas season Brandon Arrington and I have helped Jim assemble his glorious montage of Christmas decorations. This Christmas, we are looking forward to helping Jim yet again! It's become a tradition – we go over to Jim's house a couple of weekends and spend several hours decorating.

Several more hours are spent sitting indoors, visiting with the Stewarts and enjoying some Coca-Cola and Oreos. I enjoy those days and look forward to them for two reasons. The first is obvious. We love the Stewarts.

The second, however, I believe is less obvious, but certainly no less important. We are there to spread hope. Christmas lights make a statement, simply because they are beautiful lights. In the dark, they glow boldly, pushing back the gloom. They catch the eye and they say, *Look at me!* Read Matthew 4:14.

We, the Church, are told by Jesus that we are the light of world. We are here to spread hope to the world. We are here to guide those astray back home, and we are here to glow and catch the eye of those not knowing what or whom to follow. With this thought, be mindful of the places you go and the people you interact with. Glow this Christmas.

My favorite Christmas lights are the multi-colored ones, because they all work together. Even though they are vastly different (we could get into a wave-length discussion, but I will refrain), they all accomplish the singular goal of beauty.

We, as Christians, are also vastly different. However, we know that when we work with each other, in communion with the Holy Spirit, great things are accomplished. The glory – the beauty – of God is revealed. So, let's be multi-colored Christmas lights for Jesus.

No deep theological truths here, no heart-warming memories. Just a simple reminder that we are called to be the light of the world, following in the footsteps of the Light. Go now, and Glow.

10

Anthony Strevett

You are the light of the world

A city on a hill cannot be hidden.

MATTHEW 4:14

### THE GIFT OF WAITING

### November 28

bile it's true that the Advent season is about waiting on the birth of Jesus, it goes back much farther than the story of Mary and Joseph and the shepherds and wise men.

The entire Old Testament is the story of the Israelites waiting for the Messiah to arrive and deliver them from their struggles. I myself wonder at times when Christ will return and if it will be in time to save me from whatever trial I am facing at the moment. I believe God calls us all to experience long periods of waiting at various points in our lives.

At these times, we may do well to examine our actions and ask ourselves, "Am I waiting well? Am I thriving or shutting down during the wait? Am I worshiping God, or am I complaining and whining?"

We all have a story to tell while we wait. As a military spouse moving locations every three years, I feel I am constantly waiting on the next chapter of my life to begin. Whether waiting to find out where we will move next or waiting for my husband to return from a deployment, I tend to become disheartened with the uncertainty that comes with never knowing where we will be and when.

I currently find myself waiting on the Lord to reveal what path He wants me to pursue at our next location. Will we find a loving community? A church home? A vocation that serves Him? I know God will lift me up "in due time" (1 Peter 5:6), but waiting for Him to reveal His plan can be difficult.

Convenience, however, never produces character. If it is necessary to face "trials of many kinds" in order to become "mature and complete" in our faith (James 1:2-4), then we should welcome these periods of waiting and see them as opportunities for our faith to grow.

Advent is not only a celebration of Jesus' long-awaited arrival, but it is also an anticipation of the second Advent when Jesus returns to earth as the Conquering Savior and makes all things new. Until that day arrives, God has given us the gift of waiting. Advent summons us to wait. We are all called to wait patiently for the Lord as he waits patiently for the lost (2 Peter 3:9). How well are you waiting? What story are you telling others while you wait?

Cathleen Clough

### HOPE GETS US THROUGH

### November 29

he word "advent" means coming. The concept is something that could be accepted as a single occurrence many years ago, but I think it most helpful to consider the ways that God continually comes into our lives. During Advent, we take one week each to remember the hope, peace, joy, and love of God that continue to come into our lives.

But are we ready for the kind of hope that only God can provide? In October 2006, our current president wrote a book titled *The Audacity of Hope* while he was still a senator. I've never read it, but can sympathize with why this book became so widely circulated, above and beyond the fact that he was at the time a major political party candidate for president. I believe that we all have a deep need for hope.

We see times when our circumstances seem hopeless. I unexpectedly lost my best friend this last year. Others have lost loved ones and are working through the grief process at various rates while facing their first Christmas without those they loved most and best. Others have family members who are still very much present, yet endure holiday seasons with fractured family systems where everyone else seems to be happy. Others have had job changes. Others have had to confront facts about health and ability changes. Others have gone through massive transitions in their lives and still haven't figured out the new normal.

Hope seems to be what gets us through this. At times, we try to, by sheer force of will, get through circumstances on our own. These attempts might be successful for a short time, but can eventually fall apart. So how do we make it through? By turning to God and the hope that only God can provide. How can you *Prepare the Way* for the rest of Advent by turning to God for the kind of hope that can only come from the Divine One?

Maybe, you start with the idea that audacious hope can only come from God.

Pray: God, grant me the audacious kind of hope that only you can give. Amen.

Rich Lubbers

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

**ROMANS 15:13** 

### IT'S NOT A TRACTOR

### November 30

ope: To desire with expectation of obtainment.

Jim bought a tractor in the hope that someday he would have a farm to use it on. I was not thrilled with the new piece of yard art. It was not a shiny new tractor. It was a hunk of rust held together with baling wire. He worked on it and got it into running condition.

He bought a piece of property and was happy playing with his tractor for a while. But then he wanted a bigger tractor and more implements. He found a nice property that was remote. I liked the place and we planned how to build a house overlooking the countryside. But the thought of driving 50 miles to get supplies was not appealing to me. I am not a pioneer!

For my birthday that year we got a bigger tractor. Then, for our anniversary, we got another tractor. It became a family joke: "What kind of farm implement did you get for your birthday this time?" For my last birthday I received a ring. Inside was engraved "It's not a tractor."

It was not until Jim retired from his "real job" that we found a farm where we could live and he could play with his toys. If you need hay, call us.

Just as Jim waited for his farm, as we get older we find ourselves waiting for Heaven, anticipating joining those who have gone before. We're looking forward to celebrating with Christ whose birth was eagerly anticipated so long ago.

Jane Callison

My God, I love Thee; not because I hope for heav'n thereby, Norn yet because who love Thee not Must die eternally.

> MY ETERNAL KING FROM 17TH CENTURY LATIN TRANSLATED BY REV. EDWARD CASWALL

### GREAT ANTICIPATION

### December 1

erry Christmas and Happy Holidays are two familiar greetings you hear in the month of December. But, have you ever thought about the amount of work it takes to make Christmas merry and holidays happy?

Lights are hung, trees are trimmed, gifts are purchased and wrapped, and elaborate meals are prepared. And, that is just at your own home. Think about the extra work required for school events, office parties, and church services.

I am convinced that preparation is the driving force that makes the holiday season worthwhile. Preparation generates an expectation of good results. When you spend hours baking those mouthwatering treats for your office Christmas party, do you not envision the pleased reactions? On Christmas Eve, when you see your name on a gift tag of the huge box wrapped in exquisite paper and elegant bows, do you not expect the best gift ever?

As Christians, we assuredly understand the expectation and anticipation that comes from preparation. In fact, that is the reason we celebrate Christmas. The story of Christ's birth was the most anticipated event in our world's history.

In Luke, there are accounts of two people who anticipated and prepared for Christ's birth, and who were rewarded for their preparation.

Moved by the Holy Spirit, Simeon went to the temple courts in Jerusalem, where he met Mary and Joseph, and their newborn son, Jesus. Upon seeing Him, Simeon said:

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

Luke 2:29-32 (NIV)

Anna, the prophetess, was married for only seven years, and remained a widow for 84 years. She was probably more than 100 years old when her prophecies about Christ's coming were fulfilled:

... She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying. Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.

Luke 2:36-38 (NIV)

As we prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus, I hope you look forward with great anticipation to the wonderful gift He has in store for you: His salvation, His revelation, His redemption and His love. It is a gift so worth receiving.

14 Kim Marks

### **MESSIAH**

### Necember 2

ot long after Thanksgiving I begin to listen to the Christmas portion of George Frederick Handel's *Messiah*. I listen to enjoy the wonderful music that is combined with scripture passages, mostly from Isaiah 40. It prepares me for the celebration of Jesus' birth by remembering that God planned for the incarnation before the foundation of the earth.

My soul becomes excited singing ancient passages from Isaiah, Malachi and Haggai. I sing these scriptures to myself, the air, in the shower, driving to and from work and occasionally to an unexpected and surprised

co-worker.

The very first word sung in the oratorio is "comfort," from Isaiah 40. God speaks tenderly to His people, regardless of their rebellion, they are still His people. Comfort ye, comfort ye my people. The music and God's word begins to sooth. I enter into the stillness, well-being and peace that comes through Christ, and hope others will too.

I listen as Isaiah 9:2 is sung the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. It's time to rejoice that those in darkness have seen, and will see the Light of the World, Christ Jesus. I pray that more will see it. And may we as followers lose our blindness and see more clearly His wise and caring guidance.

I am in awestruck reverence at our powerful God and King who will shake the heavens and earth the sea and the dry land.

Haggai 2:6-7 gives us the assurance that God controls nations and history. He has awakened the whole world to the glory and beauty of His Son, Christ Jesus, through His humbleness, obedience and sacrifice. May we have His same mind.

When the alto begins to sing of the *glad tidings to Zion* (Isaiah 40:9) my feet begin to tap. We realize that we have good news to tell. Say to the cities of Judah behold your God. We have nothing to be embarrassed of. Be a herald of good news, lift it up fear not. We should tell others about the glory of Christ. It will not matter how people respond toward us, we have exciting news to tell. Go tell it.

Gary Wood

For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given.

ISAIAH 9:6

### PREPARE YOUR LIFE AND VOICE

### Necember 3

hen people ask me to tell them about how God called me to missions, I always have to start from when I was a little girl and tell of these little moments throughout my childhood when I felt God softening my heart to the mission field.

God was paving the course of my life so that I would be a mouthpiece proclaiming the works of our Savior. This is what He has been doing from the beginning: using human voices to *Prepare the Way* of the Lord.

God prepared the way for Immanuel's birth in the days of Isaiah, and continued orchestrating His plan through Zechariah and Elizabeth. They would be a part of preparing the way for the Messiah's arrival through their son, John the Baptist (Luke 1:41-44) who was created to be

A voice of one calling in the wilderness,

'Prepare the way for the Lord,

make straight paths for him.

ISAIAH 40

The Lord has been orchestrating the lives of His people since the beginning of time to prepare for the arrival of the Savior of the world. All God's people have been created with the commission to be voices making known the way of salvation that began when Jesus was born.

God has not been preparing us to just meditate on the birth of the Creator of the Universe and keep this extraordinary news to ourselves; He has been orchestrating the steps of our lives so that we would extoll His praises and help prepare the world for His second coming, so that when He comes again His name will be magnified and glorified among all nations. (Rom. 14:11; Rev. 7:9)

This Christmas season, we not only prepare our hearts to remember His birth, but we must also prepare our voices to proclaim the Good News of why Christ came to earth. How has he been preparing your life and voice to tell of His birth this Christmas season?

Diane Montgomery

### SHINE THE LIGHT

December 4

C. Ryle, legendary "Evangelical Bishop" of late-19th century and the not stirred up nearly as much trouble for the religious hypoerites of his church hierarchy as he did the purveyors of vice, immorality, and unbelief in his nation. It seemed that the fear of God made Ryle so fearless of all else.

Ryle's commentary on Luke powerfully depicts the birth of Jesus and the world in which it happened: Notwithstanding their mighty conquerors, and poets, and historians, and architects, and philosophers, the kingdoms of the world were full of dark idolatry. (Perhaps our own time is not so different from previous ones?) It was indeed, Ryle continued, due time' for God to interpose from heaven, and send down an almighty Savior.

Our beloved church of Christ faces colossal challenges from within and without, but that is, indeed, nothing new. Neither politicians nor armies nor wealth can deliver us. As in Christ's time, our troubles may be both our judgment and helpful instruments that God uses for our deliverance.

Let us ever rest our souls on the thought, that times are in God's hand (Psalm 31:15), Ryle wrote further. He knows the best season for sending help to His church, and new light to the world. Let us beware of giving way to over anxiety about the course of events around us, as if we knew better than the King of kings what time relief should come.

Ryle concludes: The heart of a believer should take comfort in the recollection of God's providential government of the world. A true Christian should never be greatly moved or disturbed by the conduct of the rulers of the earth. He should see with the eye of faith a hand overruling all that they do to the praise and glory of God. He should regard every king and potentate—an Augustus, a Cyrenius, a Darius, a Cyrus, a Sennacherib—as a creature who, with all his power, can do nothing but what God allows, and nothing which is not carrying out God's will.

Let us serve, encourage, and pray for one another to let our Christ-trusting light so shine before men and women, that they may see our good works and glorify our Father in heaven. And may that light shine the more brilliantly, the darker our earthly surroundings.

John Dwyer

# PREPARE FOR



### Family DEVOTION

### December 4 to December 10

do you feel most at **PEACE**? Often it is our daily worries and hurrying about that causes us to no longer feel **PEACE**. But we are at **PEACE** with God. We are forgiven and loved by God. Nothing can or will ever change that fact.

How can we create a daily routine that helps us to remember the **PEACE** God has given us through Jesus? Maybe it's a family devotion at breakfast or family prayer time before we all start to get ready for the day. Maybe it is taking a moment to give everyone a hug and say, "I love you," before we head off to work and school.

Whatever you choose, ask God to help you remember the **PEACE** you have throughout your day. Let go of your worries, the things that scare you or make you sad, and focus on the Prince of **PEACE**. Jesus came to give us abundant life. He came to fill us with the love of God so that we might share this love with others. He came to bring us **PEACE** and through us it can spread to the world.

#### FAMILY ACTIVITY

Cook up some Disappearing Worries Hot Chocolate.
You will need:
mugs
hot chocolate
marshmallows
and your favorite family game.

Pour hot chocolate into your mug and sprinkle one marshmallow for every worry or thought that makes you sad.

Set your mug on the table and begin to have fun playing your favorite family game. Focus on the **PEACE** you have as a family, playing together and having fun.

After a little while, check our your marshmallows. They should be melted away just like your worries melt away when we trust God.

We do not have to worry because God will be with us through all times. God takes care of us and helps us to have **PEACE**.

## PREPARE FOR

While Jesus was living in the Galilean hills, John, called "the Baptizer," was preaching in the desert country of Judea. His message was simple and austere, like his desert surroundings: "Change your life.

God's kingdom is here...."

"I'm baptizing you here in the river, turning your old life in for a kingdom life. The real action comes next: The main character in this drama—compared to him I'm a mere stagehand—will ignite the kingdom life within you, a fire within you, the Holy Spirit within you, changing you from the inside out. He's going to clean house—make a clean sweep of your lives. He'll place everything true in its proper place before God; everything false he'll put out with the trash to be burned."

Matthew 3:1-12

### PASS IT ON

### Necember 5

hey say that every great journey begins with a single step.
This is well and good, but there is another important step in preparing for any journey. It helps to know where you are going, or at least where you want to go.

There are a couple of verses, very diverse in their nature that, if thought about carefully, have a very close connection. Interestingly, neither seems to be connected with Christmas. But follow me for the next couple of minutes and you just may see that connection.

The first is found in Isaiah. You know it. Many of you can quote it. "The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, 'Prepare ye the way of the Lord'. Make straight in the desert a highway for our God." (KJV).

It doesn't seem very Christmassy, I'll admit. But God had tried everything to get the attention of the world, and very few seemed to really care. So he tried one more thing. He sent his Son into the world, and he sent a messenger ahead of Him to prepare the way.

Do you see the connection? God sent his messenger (John the Baptist) into the world to declare His coming. Granted, John appeared 30 years after our Lord's birth in that stable in Bethlehem. But that doesn't change the fact that the way needed to be opened, and that was John's mission - to prepare the way.

And that's where we come in. Proverbs 22:6 tells us to "train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it" (NIV). What does that say to us? To me, it says that we are to prepare the way for his coming into the hearts of children and into the hearts of all who haven't heard or accepted the wonderful news of salvation.

God is Love. And we are His extension into a dark world. Just as he lit up the world with angels singing the coming of His Wonderful Son, so we

are his voice in preparing the way for others to follow into that awesome love!

"God so loved the world..."

That's what it's all about, Pass it on!

Doug Upchurch

### ALL IS WELL

### December 6

unday, November 26, 1989, is a day I will never forget. It was the first Sunday of Advent and my family was asked to be a part of the "Hanging Of the Green" service.

This annual worship experience was always a very special and memorable event in the life of our church. The entire church family would gather in the Sanctuary to decorate the church for Christmas. It was during these worship experiences I learned the sacred symbolism of evergreen trees and garland, Chrismon ornaments, and the beautiful colors of Christmas.

As we took the platform, my grandmother began sharing the Christmas traditions of our family. She talked about how we would all gather at her and my grandfather's house each year on Christmas Eve for a wonderful dinner followed by opening presents and spending the night at their house.

She beamed with joy sharing how she would buy the grandkids new Christmas pajamas each year and asked us to wear them that night so early on Christmas morning a photographer could take our picture with her in our pajamas. She loved taking pictures with her grandchildren and capturing memories that she forever treasured.

After sharing about our family traditions, she opened her Bible to the Gospel of Matthew and began reading the Christmas Story in her warm and captivating way. Following reading from the Scriptures, she spent time explaining why the world needed a Savior and why the Creator of the Universe would come to earth by such humble means. She talked about sin and the struggles we often go through in life.

She ended her message by sharing a very encouraging truth that has stuck with me to this very day: no matter the struggles and hardships of life and no matter how hard it gets, we can be assured as God's children that All Is Well because of the Christ Child. Immanuel. God is with us.

To close our family's portion of the service, I sang my very first solo in church. With knees knocking, shortness of breath, and cold sweaty hands I began to sing a song that perfectly summed up what my grandmother had just so eloquently shared: "All Is Well," by Michael W. Smith and Wayne Kirkpatrick. To this day it remains my favorite Christmas song of all time. I pray you will be blessed by the lyrics:

All is well all is well angels and men rejoice For tonight darkness fell into the dawn of love's light Sing alle sing alleluia

All is well all is well let there be peace on earth Christ is come go and tell that He is in the manger Sing alle sing alleluia

### ALL IS WELL

### Necember 6

All is well all is well lift up your voice and sing Born is now Emmanuel born is our Lord and Savior Sing alleluia sing alleluia All is well

The past six months have been some of the most difficult of my life. My grandmother whom I have talked about in this devotional unexpectedly passed away. My wife has undergone significant health concerns and surgeries that have led to a difficult decision of her letting go of working for a season of healing and restoration.

I have been given both the honor and extreme difficulty of becoming the executor of my grandmother's estate following her passing. As a full-time minister, husband and dad, executing an estate has been a tremendous job and responsibility that no one can quite prepare for in advance.

In addition, I am grieving the loss of my grandmother in a very deep way that creates significant depression and weighs heavily on my soul. Yet, in the midst of the struggle and sometimes-intense darkness, Immanuel continually reminds me in so many ways that *All Is Well*. May you be reminded of and encouraged by this wonderful truth this Christmas. God is with us.

Grace and Peace, Chad E. Smith

I'll never forget the trouble, the utter lostness, the taste of ashes, the poison I've swallowed. I remember it all—oh, how well I remember — the feeling of hitting the bottom. But there's one other thing I remember, and remembering I keep a grip on hope: God's loyal love couldn't have run out, his merciful love couldn't have dried up. They're created new every morning. How great your faithfulness! I'm sticking with God (I say it over and over). He's all I've got left.

LAMENTATIONS 3:19-24 (MSG)

### JUST BREATHE

### Necember 7

hristmas! Christmas is coming. Advent! Advent is here. Where am I? Where does my life and my family fit into this picture?

There is a piece of music that I have been hearing on the MESSAGE radio station titled *Breathe*, by Jonny Diaz. For those of you not familiar with the lyrics I will include a few of the lines.

Alarm clock screaming bare feet hit the floor It's off to the races everybody out the door I'm feeling like I'm falling behind it's a crazy life Ninety miles an hour going fast as I can Trying to push a little harder trying to get the upper hand So much to do in so little time, it's a crazy life It's ready, set, go it's another wild day When the stress is on the rise in my heart I feel You say just Breathe, just breathe Come and rest at My feet And be, just be Chaos calls but all you really need

Is to just breathe.

Now add to this routine those expectations of preparing for Christmas in this world we live. School programs, church programs, kids' gatherings and parties, same for adults and families. Shopping, wrapping, stressing on who wants what. Cooking, cleaning, preparing for extra guests. The day's become fuller, we fall further behind, time passes faster and I was already *going as fast as I can*.

What was Christmas supposed to be about? Have we forgotten how to recognize this tiny miracle baby? Do we recognize this Lamb of God, the Root of Jessie, the Lion of Judah, the Savior of the World, the Giver of Grace and second chances?

During this Advent season, we do need to stop...and *Breathe*, *just breathe*. We need to consider our actions and words, the life that we model as we choose and bring gifts to Him, to Jesus. God gave us THE GIFT - the greatest gift ever. Now what gift do I bring to Him?

Breathe, just breathe
Come and rest at my feet
And be, just be
Chaos calls but all you really need
Is to take it in, fill your lungs
The peace of God that overcomes
Just breathe, just breathe.

During this Season of Christmas I invite you to breathe in the hope, the peace, the joy, the love of our Beloved Savior, Jesus Christ.

Barbara James

### PEACE TALKS

### Necember 8

here's a story which arises from the First World War in the year 1914. In commemoration of Christmas, the tale goes, soldiers on both sides of the trenches – British, French and Belgian on one side, and German troops on the other – reached a cease fire of their own accord. Some evidence suggests Pope Benedict originally calling for the Christmas truce, but other accounts from the soldiers themselves say it happened by way of carols.

One side would sing a carol from their tradition; then the other would respond with a carol from theirs. Finally, the tale goes, British, French and Belgian forces began singing *O Come, All Ye Faithful* to which the German soldiers responded by adding their own voices.

Peace is one of those Advent themes I'm not quite sure what to do with, and the idea of *Preparing the Way* for it is all the more difficult.

When we talk about violence, it's often the images of war that come to mind. To be sure and in a very real sense, peace can include unloading one's gun or calling for a ceasefire; but, it also seems to me much more than that.

Peace, to me, seems more comprehensive. I want to say it includes redemption – meaning ruptured relationships are mended. I want to say it includes restitution – meaning that which has been taken by force or otherwise is returned to its rightful owner. I want to say peace includes generosity – meaning someone has to make the first move to initiate it. And I want to say peace includes stability – meaning it takes serious action on our parts to maintain it.

I recognize peace is difficult work, but I hope with all sincerity that this Advent season, our church – which includes you and me – can be on the front lines calling for peace in all its variegate forms, even if it means we have to put ourselves in the way of harm or danger.

Come let us adore him, Christ the Lord.

Christopher R. Canary

God has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly.

LUKE 1:52

# PREPARE FOR



### Family DEVOTION

### December 11 to December 17

he coming of Jesus was great news. It was more than great; it was a reason to be joyful. It was a reason to sing out to those who were hurting, the sick and the poor. It was a reason to shout, Look, the Messiah has come to us! Jesus is called Immanuel, which means God with us. Don't you think that having God with us is a reason to be joyful?

Where do you experience God's presence everyday? I see God in my family and friends. I see God in the sweet smile of my kids. I experience God's presence in the helping hand and the loving spirit. I feel God in the evening sky or the bright moon, shining God's glory. Maybe you feel God when a friend shares with you at school or when you help a neighbor rake their leaves. Maybe you experience God's presence in the hug of your spouse or the meal you cooked together to nourish your little ones. Maybe you see God when you are playing outside or snuggling up with your dog or cat. Maybe you feel God in that moment of still and quiet.

God is everywhere, all around us. God is shining through all creation to tell of God's deep love for the whole world. God's love brings us **JOY**. God showed us holy and unconditional love through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. You see Jesus is the biggest and brightest sign of God's love for humanity. Jesus is the reason for my **JOY** and for yours. Many things in this world bring me **JOY** but none compare to the **JOY** experienced through Jesus. How about you? What brings you **JOY**?

#### FAMILY ACTIVITY

Cover your tree or your mantle with a **JOY** paper chain. You will need strips of construction paper. Pick one color for **JOY** and one for Jesus.

On the strips for **JOY**, write down or draw a picture of what brings you **JOY**, what causes you to experience the presence of God. Put one joyful idea on each strip. On the strips for Jesus, write down different names for Jesus: Immanuel, Prince of Peace, King of Kings, etc. Then create a paper chain, making a circle out of the strip of paper and glue or staple the strips of paper together, alternating between a **JOY** strip and a Jesus strip.

Once all your strips are connected together, take your **JOY** paper chain and wrap it around your tree, drape it over the fireplace, or tape it around our doorway. Put your **JOY** paper chain where you will see it everyday this Advent season. Your paper chain will remind you of your **JOY** and remind you to look for the ways in which you experience God's presence everyday.

### PREPARE FOR

When Jesus finished placing this charge before his twelve disciples, he went on to teach and preach in their villages.

John, meanwhile, had been locked up in prison.
When he got wind of what Jesus was doing, he sent
his own disciples to ask,

"Are you the One we've been expecting, or are we still waiting?"

Jesus told them,
"Go back and tell John what's going on:
The blind see,
The lame walk,
Lepers are cleansed,
The deaf hear,
The dead are raised,
The wretched of the earth learn that God is on their side.

"Is this what you were expecting? Then count yourselves most blessed!"...

...Let me tell you what's going on here: No one in history surpasses John the Baptizer; but in the kingdom he prepared you for, the lowliest person is ahead of him....

### THE MEANING OF THE SEASON

### Necember 9

this writing we are just a few days into Autumn. Looking ahead to *Prepare the Way* for Christmas brings back many childhood and family memories.

Large family gatherings at grandmother's house for Christmas dinners and time playing red rover and stick ball with all my cousins. Deer and quail hunting with our uncles. Heartwarming music prior to the anticipated day. The town Christmas parade where everyone received a paper bag filled with nuts, oranges, apples and candy. Then the school and church Christmas Eve plays always with the Living Nativity. Working for days on that special gift for a loved one. Then came the Christmas morning gift exchange.

Years later Junie came up with a way to build our own family tradition of a Christmas tree of candles. We would gather around the tree on Christmas Eve and each light a candle, looking back on the past year to consider what we had to be most thankful for. We would finish with the reading of

Luke 2:1-20 and a prayer for the blessings of the new year to come.

So much love and joy going around. The reason for all this was to celebrate our savior Jesus Christ's birth. This reminiscing makes my mind swarm with differences of those days gone by and today. We seldom take time to go to grandmothers' house for dinner. Instead we travel far away to Disney Land or to a ski resort during Christmas vacation.

We rush here and there to shop for gifts for our friends and family at the last minute. Seems to me if we could only slow down and ponder the real power of Christmas many of the issues of our day would fade.

Have you ever wandered who we would be without Christmas or Christ's birth or for that matter His coming to earth as God's Son to save us from our inevitable sins and granting us the free gift of eternal life (John 3:16).

It is my prayer that we will all take time in advance of the Christmas season to ponder the meaning of the season and what it would be like without Jesus' hope and saving grace.

Jerry & Junie Chenoweth

### ADD YOUR VOICE

### December 10

can't remember a Christmas season when singing praises and carols weren't part of that time. Growing up in a home led by a mom and dad that were strong in their faith was one of the reasons for that. My mom's musical and creative talent also contributed to it – so all of the Moss brothers loved music in general, and that included the songs and music of the Christmas season.

Getting ready for Christmas, for the celebration of the birth of our Savior, has always meant preparing our hearts through worship and studying the Word. But there also has always been something special about hearing the story of His birth when set to music, whether those songs were slow, pensive pieces that cause one to contemplate just what that birth meant for us, or the large, joyous, celebratory choruses sung by choirs or carolers. I believe God designed a particularly powerful connection between our ears and our hearts that allows Him to touch us through music.

So this season, I intend to give special attention to the music and songs that help us prepare for the coming of the Messiah. And I hope that you will do so as well. One way to prepare is to make sure that connection between your ears and your heart is working, which means taking the time to pause and being open to His Spirit. We need to be mindful of the messages of hope, love, peace, and joy that can be found in them, and the beauty of the melodies and harmonies. And we need to add our voices to those choruses and carols.

From my perspective, the gift of music becomes the first of the Christmas gifts during the season, preparing the way of the Lord, and gives each of us opportunities to hear the story again, of shepherds, and angels singing "Glory to God in the highest." God is with us!

Phil Moss

Sing Praises to God, sing praises; sing to Him a psalm of praise.

PSALM 47:6

### KEEP YOUR EYES OPEN

### December 11

he day started with a devotional from the First Baptist Advent Devotional Guide. The devotional was titled *The Cobbler and His Guest*. The last paragraph encouraged finding ways to experience the true "gift giving" by giving to someone who is truly in need.

About an hour later I got a phone call from a grandmother desperate to find a way to give her grandsons something for Christmas. The grandmother had always been able to buy and provide something for the children at Christmas but due to health issues related to cancer she could not shop for the boys.

The single mother of the boys was faced with unplanned expenses due to the recent ice storm. As she told her story I began to feel that God had provided this family for Scott and I to help. When I told the grandmother that someone would be able to help, she was very grateful. That would be a great place for the story to end but the story doesn't end there

A staff Christmas lunch was planned that day and after eating, the staff played a game. Everyone chose a gift card from a stack of cards that was passed around. There were gift cards from a variety of restaurants and stores in Norman. We were warned that we might not end up with the card that we started out with.

I started out with a gift card to Salt Grass Restaurant and ended up with a gift card to Penny's. When I got back to my office I started to realize what God had provided. God had inspired through the devotional, provided the family, and provided the means to buy for the family.

An article, a phone call, and a gift card, who knew they would be connected? God did!

Keep your eyes open for the blessings God has for you and the ways he has planned for you to be a blessing to others.

Deborah Linn

But my God shall supply all your need according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus.

PHILIPPIANS 4:19

### A SPECIAL GIFT

### December 12

We never been one to fret about an upcoming birthday. Neither do I particularly like to celebrate my birthday. I'm more at ease celebrating others. However, in 2010 I was turning 50, and decided to fulfill a longstanding goal of completing a 5k race by my birthday.

I practiced several times each week, following a plan I'd found online. I'd never been so determined to master something as I was this goal.

In late February 2010, I was diagnosed with breast cancer, which began a whirlwind of tests, scans, visits with doctors, all of which ultimately led to my having a double mastectomy on April 5 of that year. Ridiculous as though it may seem, realizing I wouldn't get to run a 5k by my 50th birthday was one of the biggest disappointments of my cancer diagnosis.

I wasn't scared of cancer, after all, I'd been a cancer and hospice nurse for many years. Nor was I afraid of dying, as I told my children when I informed them of my cancer diagnosis - cancer for a Christian is a win-win situation - either my treatments are successful and I live many, many more years, or I die and go to Heaven, and live for eternity with Jesus, where I'd be reunited with them some day.

Of course, my preference was to live. As a strong believer in prayer, I spent hour upon hour praying for complete healing. Friends put me on every prayer list they could. I was being prayed for by hundreds of people I didn't know.

For the first time in my Christian life, I experienced a clear vision. I saw a cross on a hillside with a huge pink ribbon draped around it. I heard a familiar hymn playing and I heard the voice of God tell me to lay my cancer burden at the cross.

Instantly I felt a sense of peace like none I'd ever felt in my life. Though the next five months were filled with many surgeries, unexpected problems, or "opportunities" as I liked to call them, I still had an amazing sense of peace, without worry.

Christmas was especially important to me that year. I decked my tree and my entire house in every pink Christmas ornament I could find. I found incredible joy and hope in celebrating the birth of Jesus that year. It was clear to me I'd never really celebrated Jesus birth and the true meaning of Christmas, though I thought I had.

My gifts that year were life, my love, my family, the slow but steady return of my health, and most of all, my newfound peace, hope and joy that can only come from Christ, my Savior. My cancer diagnosis *Prepared the Way* for a lifetime of Christmas joy and celebration, and an appreciation for every day I have with those I love.

Kat Roberts

Lord my God, I cried to you for help, and you healed me.

## JOY, JOY, JOY Wecember 13

he season of Advent is a very special time for me and my family. The anticipation of the birth of our Savior brings us much joy. Joy is defined as a feeling of great pleasure and happiness. Joy, joy, joy...lt's hard to say the word without smiling. Joy also reminds me of my favorite Christmas song.

One of my favorite memories, as a child, was gathering with my family, in my grandparent's living room, singing Christmas carols. As we sat around the Christmas tree, my granddad would sit on the sofa and strum his guitar. He would lead and we would all chime in: *Joy to the world, the Lord is come. Let earth receive her king.* We had a blast singing for what seemed like hours.

Things will be a little different this year. My granddad is no longer with us. But we still plan to gather and sing Joy to the World. Sure, I miss my granddad. Sure, there will be times this holiday season that I will think of him and be sad, and probably even mourn him not being there. But there will also be joy! The joy of knowing we will be together again someday and in my heart, he has never left.

May God give us all comfort, peace, and love this Christmas. But most importantly, remember the joy he brings to our lives.

Clint Taylor

When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy.

MATTHEW 2:10

### THE BEST TEACHERS

### December 14

ometimes, children are our best teachers.
The Advent season, the coming of Christ's birth, is a joyous time. Or, at least it should be.

For many, work, family, obligations...the pressures of everyday life often prioritize the urgent over what is truly important, but children do not have that problem. The excitement and pure joy of a child when the promise of Christmas Day is fulfilled is infectious.

Who among us has not felt vicarious joy watching a child tear into a beautifully wrapped package to find exactly the gift she was hoping for? For most, the Christmas season is the most joyous time of year. But what if somehow we missed that joy?

The birth of Jesus began the fulfillment of over 300 Old Testament prophecies, but the Jews missed it. Life was hard 2,000 years ago. Under the subjugation of the Roman occupation, and with benefit of 20/20 hindsight, we can almost understand how the Jews expected their Messiah to be an earthly king sent to free them from their oppressors. But Jesus was no earthly king. John the Baptist knew this.

God sent John to prepare the way for Jesus. Preaching the coming Messiah, John set the stage for the fulfillment of God's promises. But John paid a price for his faith.

In Matthew 11:2-3 we find John in prison, vilified by his own people and beginning to question his faith. John sent messengers to Jesus asking Are you the Expected One, or shall we look for someone else? Look for someone else? Really? This is John, Jesus' cousin, the baptizer of the Messiah yet still, John's faith faltered.

Jesus answered in Matthew 11:4-11, telling John of the wonders of Jesus' ministry and assuring him He was truly the Messiah. What joy John must have felt knowing his life's work was validated.

But Jesus did not stop there. He authenticated John the Baptist as the prophesized messenger of the coming Messiah, and in verse 11 said ...there has not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist. Can you imagine John's joy? Yet there was more.

Jesus said Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. (John). Herein lies our joy. As Christians, Jesus promised our place in heaven will be greater than that of the most righteous of men. What an eternity to look forward to!

As we celebrate the birth of our Savior, remember the trials of this world are temporary. Our eternal joy with Jesus will be as that of a child and every day is Christmas Day.

Steve Scott

# THE JOY OF GIVING

### Necember 15

he excitement in the room is contagious, and the silence is deafening. There are teenagers and piles of gifts, which in my experience means only one thing - chaos is eminent!

Ribbons will be ripped off, wrapping paper will be shredded, and the student center at Bridges will be in shambles. Little did I know that God is about to show me a much more meaningful aspect of giving.

Bridges has been in my life and in my heart for many years. It is a program that serves high school students in family crisis and enables them to pursue their education without obstacles. Bridges' residents live independent of their families and are given support in numerous ways. One of the many goals of this life-changing program is to give each of its residents a memorable Christmas.

Two months before Christmas, each teenager is asked to make a wish list. The Bridges' kids have spent much of their lives trying to survive, so a wish list is not exactly in their realm of possibility. One young boy asks only for underwear. A single dad with a newborn baby asks for toys and diapers for his son. A common request is nice shoes for job interviews as well as warm coats because many of the kids walk or ride bikes to work.

Volunteers take the lists and lovingly begin to fill the requests. Christmas finally arrives for these young survivors. Although they are excited, it is not only awkward to be "fussed over" but also threatening. Long buried emotions and disappointments can unexpectedly rise to the surface. If tears start to flow, there is the fear that they may not stop.

The room is very quiet with some nervous laughter. Several months of preparation assures that no one will be disappointed. Watching the opening of gifts is a revelation for me. I see the act of giving in its purest form, much as God intended. The kids take pictures of their stack of gifts and silently absorb the moment. Gifts are unwrapped and appreciated one at a time. Paper is folded and ribbon is saved. The room is overflowing with smiles and disbelief. If there are tears, they are quickly wiped away.

As a volunteer who helps to fill the wish lists, God has given me the opportunity to experience the joy of giving. This simple act provides struggling teenagers hope in times of despair and the blessing of experiencing unconditional love. God understands this message of hope and love. He has modeled it for us when in the simplicity of a baby in a manger, he gave us the greatest gift of all.

Nancy Roley

It is more blessed to give than to receive.

ACTS 20:35

# RESOLUTELY FIRM IN ANTICIPATION

### December 16

ake 1:38 – So Mary said, "Yes, I am a servant of the Lord; let this happen to me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

And with this, Mary stood steely eyed in the face of an uncertain future. It is said that the outcome of your life will be determined by your outlook on life. What are you looking for this Christmas?

If we are always looking behind us, how can we see what is in front of us, how can we receive the gifts and joys that lay ahead?

When my brother and I were young, I would slip into his bed and we would whisper as two little boys do, discussing what we wanted, what we thought we might get, anticipating the "wonder" of Christmas Day.

I remember one particular time my brother went into my mom/dads room and asked *Can we open presents now?* My mom told him we were not getting up before 5:30 a.m. (another three hours to go).

So, we whispered, giggled and watched the clock inch ever so slowly. Not for one second did we think there were no presents for us under the tree, no eggnog, no goodies - it was unfathomable.

However, as he and I got older, as we all get older, it becomes so easy to lose the unflagging belief that God has a plan for us, a brighter future, a new beginning, that there are "gifts" for us from the Almighty King.

It is easy to want only the rainbows, but despise the rain. Why so, as I am sure we all did as children we waited patiently through the long dark night, as I am sure Mary did when she found herself carrying th *Messiah*.

We must remain firm this holiday season in our anticipation of the birthday of our Savior never forgetting, irrespective of our stage in life, or our circumstances - nothing happens to us, it happens for us, God didn't allow it to happen if he didn't have a purpose for it in our lives.

Let's be like little giggling kids waiting for what is in store for us this Christmas season.

David Fields

# TRADITIONS

#### December 17

hen I was very young, preparing for Christmas was always exciting around our home in Ardmore.

We would go with dad right after Thanksgiving to get a Christmas tree. It seems like our family was one of the first in the neighborhood to decorate a tree but mother always reminded us that Christmas is not just about opening gifts on Christmas morning, but preparing our minds and hearts weeks in advance. Of course to a 5- or 6-year-old, it was more about what would be in that gift wrapped package

One day, mother took me shopping to find Christmas gifts for my friends. I got a few items for them, but picked up a toy ambulance that I really wanted for myself. Mother allowed me to purchase the ambulance, afterward informing me that it would be a gift to someone and not for me to keep. I was very upset not only at mother but at the friend that I gave it to.

on Christmas morning.

Christmas morning, I opened a gift from a sister, and behold, a toy ambulance identical to the one that mother made me give away. An early lesson that has stuck over the years.

As Christmas got closer, mother, or dad, would read passages from the KJV of Matthew trying to enforce hope, peace, joy and love, convincing us that it really is better to give than to receive. She would even read from the OT (Isaiah 7:14 and Micah 5:2) about foretelling about the place and birth of Jesus.

Once Judy and I had children, we began some of the same Advent traditions that were taught to us. Early tree decoration and a children's Advent calendar became part of our annual routine. Of course we would always read the Christmas Story, but not directly from the Bible.

We had, and still have, a book that told the story of Jesus' birth using lay terms but always making reference to the Bible. Of course all of the bedtime books were a Christmas theme, some secular but they addressed hope, peace, joy, love, and giving over receiving.

Today, our children, and their families, have continued in their faith journey by carrying on some of the preparing-the-way early traditions and adding some new ones.

Jim Spearman

# PREPARE FOR Love



# Family DEVOTION

# Necember 18 to Necember 24

st of the children I know want to please people. They want to make their parents, family, and friends proud of them. They want to make people smile, they want to give to others, and they want people to get along. They do their best to follow the rules, to be respectful and to be kind.

When asked which is the greatest of all the commandments, Jesus says it is to LOVE God with all your heart, soul and mind, and to LOVE your neighbor as yourself (Matthew 22:36-40.) If I could sum up the life of Christ with one word, it would be LOVE. All of His life, Jesus showed LOVE to the weak, the outcast, the sick, to those who no one else seemed to want to LOVE. He asks us to LOVE as He loved. Loving others is something I struggle with everyday, to LOVE as Jesus loved. It is difficult to LOVE everyone. Some people are mean or make me feel sad. Some people get on my nerves, and some people I just don't want to be around. But Jesus has asked each of us to LOVE.

It is my belief that the greatest act we can teach our children is how to **LOVE** God and to **LOVE** others, how to receive **LOVE** and how to give **LOVE**. When we are without LOVE, God does not shine through us. When we are without **LOVE**, the world and humanity suffers. Our children learn the ways of **LOVE** through our actions, through our examples, and through our guidance. So my question for you and your family this Advent is how will you show **LOVE**? How will you make sure the world experiences God's **LOVE** this Advent season?

#### FAMILY ACTIVITY

Share the **LOVE** of God through homeless care packages. You will need large reusable bags, wet wipes, large Band-Aids, deodorant, ChapStick, lotion, sunscreen, Kleenex, toothbrush with travel cover, toothpaste, a comb/brush, gloves, thermal socks, small water bottles, beef jerky, tuna/chicken salad cracker kits, and peanut butter crackers. One medium sized blanket placed in each bag would be a nice addition as well. Place all items in a bag. Hopefully you have enough supplies to create three or four care packages. Keep these bags in your trunk. As you go about this winter season, remember the homeless and look out for them. This care package is a great opportunity for your family to share the HOPE, PEACE, JOY and LOVE of this season with someone in need.

# PREPARE FOR Love

The birth of Jesus took place like this. His mother, Mary, was engaged to be married to Joseph. Before they came to the marriage bed, Joseph discovered she was pregnant. (It was by the Holy Spirit, but he didn't know that.) Joseph, chagrined but noble, determined to take care of things quietly so Mary would not be disgraced.

While he was trying to figure a way out, he had a dream. God's angel spoke in the dream: "Joseph, son of David, don't hesitate to get married. Mary's pregnancy is Spirit-conceived. God's Holy Spirit has made her pregnant. She will bring a son to birth, and when she does, you, Joseph, will name him Jesus—'God saves'—because he will save his people from their sins." This would bring the prophet's embryonic sermon to full term:

Watch for this—a virgin will
get pregnant and bear a son;
They will name him Immanuel
(Hebrew for "God is with us").
Then Joseph woke up. He did exactly what God's
angel commanded in the dream:
He married Mary.

Matthew 1:18-25

# PREPARING THE WAY FOR CHILDREN

### Necember 18

fter Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem <sup>2</sup> and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."

<sup>3</sup> When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. <sup>4</sup> When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. <sup>5</sup> "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written:

<sup>6</sup> "But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel."

Matthew 2:1-12

This may be the earliest recorded instance of reading the Christmas story. Micah had written it down some 700 years previously, and the priests and teachers told it to Herod. In reading the passage, they were preparing the way of His coming, announcing his arrival on earth to Herod and all others who heard.

In our family, we have had a tradition that helps *Prepare the Way* for our grandchildren to know that Jesus is the center of Christmas: reading the Christmas story before our Christmas family meal.

When I started this a few years ago I didn't think of it as being for our grandchildren, but when Bethany, our oldest granddaughter learned to read, she and I began doing the reading together, taking turns with the passages. Grandfather and granddaughter could share it with the whole family.

This year, Carissa, Bethany's sister, and Sam, her cousin, will be able to join in the reading. Soon, Bethany's other cousins, Colin and Miles, will help do part of this family worship time.

I believe that it is deeply important for our grandchildren to know Jesus now, and in their future lives as they grow. What better experience for helping *Prepare the Way* for them than reading the story together? What greater joy than to join together to tell each other the Good News?

Mike Wilson

# IT FEELS LIKE CHRISTMAS

### December 19

ben the air begins to have a crisp feeling with the smell of log fires, and the streets possess a humming of a certain enthusiasm; that's when I begin to truly prepare for celebrating the birth of Christ.

Each year, it is a tradition that my family gathers on Christmas Eve to have a meal together, laugh together, and exchange gifts together. I get so excited to think about what to prepare and contribute to our meal; always trying to change things up while sticking with the classics we love. Some recipes are great and some... I may never attempt again! None of these things matter, though, I know. The family, our unity, and the love we share in celebrating Christ is all that matters.

After Thanksgiving, I immediately plunge head-first into decorating our home with glistening, radiant reds, greens, and golds as my 3-year-old son smiles in amazement. This year, I think, he will even be able to help me assemble my nativity scene that was handed down to me by my mother years ago.

I truly believe that even his young mind can comprehend the special feeling of adoration during this time of year. How can we explain it? As human-beings that want to control it all and be able to explain or define everything; we simply cannot.

The joy we feel in the celebration of Christmas goes hand-in-hand with the unexplainable endlessness of God's love. We are not meant to understand or comprehend the power of His love, but we can certainly say that we feel it.

Christmas time and this indescribable sensation reminds me of the verse, Zephaniah 3:17: The Lord your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save; he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing.

This time of year can cause us to feel so loved that we are speechless. However, isn't it such a joy to sing loudly at Christmas time and rejoice throughout the year?

God loved us so, that He sent us his son. I believe celebrating the birth of Christ and the preparation of Christmas is the special time that so many can share in feeling closer to God. God's love cannot be explained, but I can simply say that it sure does feel like Christmas.

Haley Price

## WHAT IF IT HAD BEEN ME?

### Necember 20

ave you ever considered what it would have been like to receive the very first news of the Birth of Jesus? Have you ever considered being one of the Shepherds out on the hillside when the angel came to announce the birth? For me the reality of scripture is always brought closer if I consider, what if it had been me...

The Gospel of Luke records these words. In the same region there were some shepherds staying out in the fields and keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord suddenly stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them; and they were terribly frightened. But the angel said to them, Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all the people; for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.

Luke 2 8-11

I have been fortunate (some may say unfortunate) enough to be out in the fields with sheep at night and I can assure you that kind of announcement would have been the last thing on my mind. Getting the sheep to rest peacefully, certainly; watching for predators to come attack the flock, that was the job; making sure you made it through the night with the sheep you started with, that was expected! But an announcement of Jesus being born, what do you do?

"The First Nowell" offers a reminder to me about some of the activities surrounding the announcement of the night. Shepherds and sheep. Dark and cold. Angels and bright stars. Announcement and directions. Promise of the past, hope for the future! And what if it would have been me? Or what if it had been you? Even in this season of Advent can you imagine if it was the first time to hear the story, what would we do?

Maybe this Christmas the best thing we can do is experience it again as if it was new to us. Would it return some joy and excitement that we are missing? Would it make a difference to you and those with whom you celebrate with? Maybe it is just worth trying it again! Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all the people!

Roy Joe Ham

# CELEBRATE JOY

### December 21

hristmas is always a special time for most of us. Because of our recent trip to the Holy Land, which included Bethlehem, The Nazareth Village, The Place of the Crucifixion, and The Garden Tomb, the birth, death and resurrection of Christ has taken on a much more personal meaning.

One morning as I was thanking God for the awesome privilege of walking where Jesus walked, He spoke to my heart and said, "I'm still here. I'm walking with you right now."

My heart was warmed and filled with joy as I was reminded that God is always with us if we are born again believers and that this joyous fellowship is always available if and when we avail ourselves to Him.

Among the highlights of our trip were the times of praise and fellowship we had along the way. Pastor Wade always had an appropriate scripture which made the places of interest even more special.

Some evenings allowed our group of 37 to get together after dinner and share how the events of the day impacted our lives. It was evident that the Holy Spirit was drawing us closer to Him and closer to each other. It was a Sweet, Sweet Spirit.

If anyone reading this has not yet experienced the overflowing rivers of joy that are found in Christ, it is our prayer that the pages of this devotional will help *Prepare the Way* for you to open the door of your heart to Christ.

Naomi Nakamura

Here I am. I stand at the door and knock.
If anyone hears my voice and opens the door,
I will come in and eat with him and he with me.

REV. 3:21

## INTENTIONAL COMMUNITY

### December 22

very year as the weather starts getting colder, my sister, parents, and I drag out our calendars to plan our annual shopping day. For as long as I can remember, except for maybe a few years during college, we have shopped for Christmas together. It was a given as a child, but now as an adult it is an annual tradition.

We block off one day before the holidays begin, meet at some location in the metro area, and spend the day together. Some years my children have participated, especially when they were younger and not in school yet. This year I made it a point to try to schedule our time together when they could join us to extend the tradition to another generation.

The pragmatic aspect of the tradition is the chance to find presents for each other and our extended family, but we could do that on our own. What makes this something to repeat each year is the time together – working together as a team to prepare for Christmas celebrations and looking for something special for each member of our family.

We eat lunch together (and maybe even a snack). We have more time to talk to each other and just be together. All of this is in preparation of the Christmas season that is for me a time of togetherness with family and friends, celebrations, worship, shared meals, and extra space in our days to talk and just be together. It is a time to be more intentional about community and leaving space for others, and a nudge to do this year round.

May this Christmas season be a reminder for you that this is how God wants our lives to be, leaving more space in our days to focus on Him and being there for others, sharing in community and His love.

Angela Atkins

Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people.

And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved

ACTS 2:43-47

# BREAKING THROUGH THE DARKNESS

## Necember 23

The fascinated by the contrast between light and darkness.

Those who know me well can testify that I attempt to bring light to my part of the world. At least to my home on the west side of Norman. How does light impact the darkness around it?

As I reflect back to the chronological sequence of God's activity in this world, I am reminded of the historic 400 years of silence, prior to Christ. A period when God grew eerily uninvolved, it seemed. Where was the Almighty? What was happening, or not happening?

It's hard to fathom 400 years of anything. No distinct voice from God. No major spiritual direction. To illustrate this vacuum in spiritual revelation, I am reminded of a report from Mission Control during the flight of Apollo 13. The spacecraft, some 200,000 miles from earth and closing in on the moon, noticed a low-pressure warning signal on board. For re-entry into the earth's atmosphere, there would be a blackout period, lasting a few minutes.

A few minutes? Is that even significant, you ask? Well, it was to the spacecraft crew, a dramatization of what life without power could feel like. Now let us just imagine a different kind of darkness lasting not hours, days, weeks, months or even years, but four centuries! This metaphor, comparing the Apollo 13 experience with four centuries of spiritual silence, places light and darkness in a new perspective.

I spread lights all over my lawn and home at Christmas. Set to a timer, they come on, then hours later, go off. As they do, it reminds me that light always trumps darkness. John writes in his gospel, *The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.* 2000 years ago, in the coming of a baby Messiah, darkness would forever give way to light.

Shepherds were blinded by the intense light of angelic presence. Wise men began their journey to honor and respect the Child-King, guided by an ever-so-bright star in the heavens. Light began informing, guiding, and illuminating us all. That much will never change.

It's clear that as you pass by my light display at 4104 Beechwood Dr., the very first thing you will notice is the illuminated manger scene, because that's where it begins. I realize that not everyone shares my interest in light displays, but if your biggest hurdle to overcome this season is a personal life or circumstances tainted with intimidating darkness, then "lighten up" with the Stewart family, even if just for a moment! May you break through the darkness again this Christmas.

Jim Stewart

# GOD IS WITH US

### December 24

house has always prepared for the birth of The Christ by gathering; parents, siblings, cousins, aunts, uncles, grandparents, and friends. We feel a pull, we hear the call of the Advent season to gather into two deeper types of communion; outward communion with our family and neighbors, and upward communion with our God.

As Christians we distinctively understand that gathering, celebrating, and waiting on the Lord's birth together is right and just. It is our duty and our salvation to give the Lord thanks and we do so together.

Some years we gather at my mother's house, other years we gather at the house of an aunt and uncle. We gather at the table to have meals together, extravagant meals that we don't have at any other time of the year. Why is that? It is for celebration in another year of running the race, to celebrate another year of straining forward, and persevering in faith. It is celebration for loved ones who have gone before us who are now experiencing the fullness of God's joy in heaven. These Advent traditions are to say thank you to the Lord who has come and who is to come. Our prayers are said a little softer in this season. Why is that? It is because innately we know that in this season we have entered into sacred time. This time of year is enhanced with grace, *Immanuel, God is with us*.

At this time of the year more than any other I recognize how very blessed I am by the Lord to have this family and this group of friends gathered together. I think to C.S. Lewis, who reminds us that outside of the body and blood of Jesus, another human person is the holiest thing we will ever come into contact with. The Lord provides me with a preview of Heaven in this gathering of my loved ones. All I can do is say thank you by the life that I live.

Advent gently takes us by the hand, jogging our memory, reminding us that the same God who hung the stars in the sky has entered into human history with us. I recognize it in the stillness of Christmas morning, in the joy infused into children's laughter as they open the gifts they've received. I recognize it in the sincere conversation of father and son gathered around a television to watch a football game.

The Lord may provide all of us with different ways of recognizing that he is near us in this season, but there is only one image, there is only one event that the Lord aims to point us to through all of these Advent traditions.

Immanuel, God is with us.

Nick Papac

# CHRIST IS BORN!

bout that time Caesar Augustus ordered a census to be taken throughout the Empire. This was the first census when Quirinius was governor of Syria.

Everyone had to travel to his own ancestral hometown to be accounted for. So Joseph went from the Galilean town of Nazareth up to Bethlehem in Judah, David's town, for the census. As a descendant of David, he had to go there. He went with Mary, his fiancée, who was pregnant.

While they were there, the time came for her to give birth. She gave birth to a son, her firstborn. She wrapped him in a blanket and laid him in a manger, because there was no room in the hostel.

There were sheepherders camping in the neighborhood. They had set night watches over their sheep. Suddenly, God's angel stood among them and God's glory blazed around them. They were terrified. The angel said, Don't be afraid. I'm here to announce a great and joyful event that is meant for everybody, worldwide: A Savior has just been born in David's town, a Savior who is Messiah and Master. This is what you're looking for: A baby wrapped in a blanket and lying in a manger.

At once the angel was joined by a huge angelic choir singing God's praises:

# Glory to God in the heavenly heights, Peace to all men and women on earth who please him.

As the angel choir withdrew into heaven, the sheepherders talked it over. Let's get over to Bethlehem as fast as we can and see for ourselves what God has revealed to us. They left, running, and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in the manger. Seeing was believing. They told everyone they met what the angels had said about the child. All who heard these sheepherders were impressed.

Mary kept all these things to herself, holding them dear, deep within herself. The sheepherders returned and let loose, glorifying and praising God for everything they had heard and seen. It turned out exactly the way they'd been told.

## PONDERING

## December 25

Ithough it was nine years ago, I remember it like it was yesterday – the feeling I had as we left the hospital to drive home with our newborn girl.

We had definitely prepared the way for her arrival – boy had we ever! From the moment I learned I was pregnant, I had read every book I could get my hands on to learn how to care for a newborn.

We painted and decorated a nursery. We registered for gifts and were blessed to receive everything from highchairs to strollers to baby blankets.

We attended child birthing classes and seminars on how to care for a newborn. We decided on a name and had clothes, pillows, and picture frames with her monogram. To say we were prepared is an understatement, and I'm sure there are many who have similar stories of preparing for their first child.

But I remember feeling during those last couple weeks leading up to my due date that we were doing a lot of waiting. We were ready and waiting. And then she came somewhat unexpectedly a few days early! And just like that, the waiting was over. We'd been blessed with a beautiful baby girl, and now we were headed home to start our life as a family of three. And I pondered.

I thought about the whirlwind of the last few days, and how we went to the hospital as a family of two and came out a family of three! I questioned whether we'd be good parents, whether we'd know what to do when she started crying in the middle of the night, whether we were really equipped to care for this fragile little one! I felt overwhelmed and thankful and happy and scared all at the same time.

I can't even pretend to understand what Mary was pondering after the miracle she had just experienced. I'd guess she was treasuring the memories already made, feeling thankful for the way the Lord had watched over her as she birthed baby Jesus. And I'd guess she had plenty to ponder, knowing her son would be the Savior of the World.

May we all find time this Christmas season to treasure up these memories and feelings of thankfulness in our hearts and to ponder the miracle birth of our Savior.

Joy Robinson

But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.

**LUKE 2:19** 

# PREPARE ALL YEAR

### Necember 26

rseems that every December is a hectic and busy month in the Hixon family. We are planning and preparing for the Christmas season.

However, in my family, no one spends more time preparing than both of my grandmas. In fact, they are preparing and working all year long. One of them sews throughout the year to create beautiful crocheted gifts for all the family members. When Christmas rolls around, a large box of crocheted towels, washcloths, hot pads, and decorative pieces are passed around for everyone to choose.

My other grandma would create a unique, hand-sewn stocking for everyone who joined our family that year, whether a new grandchild, a new marriage, or even a new pet dog.

At her funeral earlier this year, all that had received a stocking, brought them, and it was a beautiful sight to see all of her hard work displayed in one place, and served as a great symbol of bringing our family together.

What amazes me the most about my grandmas is that these gifts were not made last minute, but rather, they had been preparing these gifts all year long, every year, for many years.

Preparing ourselves for the birth of Christ needs more time than just a few days before December 25. Just as my grandmas dedicated time and effort to making these special gifts all year long, we should also strive to prepare for the birth of Christ all year long.

As one of my grandmothers has passed away this year, I hope to take inspiration from her efforts to prepare myself for the coming of Christ in a way that brings my family together and that motivates me to live each day in preparation for the coming of the Lord.

Stephanie Hixon

"Therefore, stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming."

MATTHEW 24:42 (NIV)

# Advent Worship Hope

NOVEMBER 27 MATTHEW 24:36-44

Peace
DECEMBER 4
MATTHEW 3:1-12

DECEMBER 11 MATTHEW 11:2-11

Love DECEMBER 18 MATTHEW 1:18-25

Birth of Christ DECEMBER 24 LUKE 2:1-20

Gifts
DECEMBER 25
MATTHEW 2:1-12

