



CHRISTMAS MEANS...



CHRISTMAS MEANS...

Today in the town of David
a Savior has been born to you;
he is Christ the Lord.
Luke 2:11

2015 ADVENT DEVOTIONAL GUIDE

GOD FACE TO FACE

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth (John 1:14 NKJV).

Christmas is the time of year when we pause to reflect on the reality that God took on the form of a human being and came to earth to interact with people in a face-to-face manner. John describes this incarnation event as the Word becoming flesh. Prior to Jesus “becoming flesh,” the human race only had the Word, or the Holy Scriptures, as a means to know the truths of God. The entry of God into human history in the form of a person revealed to people a distinctly new, and very personal, dimension of God. The incarnation of God is a means of showing humans how to have a personal relationship with Him, rather than just knowing *about* the God of the universe.

Christmas is also a time of year to celebrate the gathering together of family and friends, mirroring this “up close and personal” visit God made to earth. Sometimes in recent years, at family gatherings, large quantities of time can be spent on tablets or cell phones in place of face-to-face conversations. While technology is extremely valuable in daily life, it has limits relationally. At Christmas, emails, texts, and tweets should take a back seat to face-to-face interaction with our loved ones, as we renew treasured bonds. Thus we reflect to those we cherish Jesus’ personal visit to earth.

Carol Matthews, the wife of Doug Matthews, moved to Kentucky in 2012. Carol works as a consultant for higher education.

Scripture: Isaiah 55:8-9

November 30, 2015

KNOWN DESTINY

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the Lord. “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts” (Isaiah 55:8-9).

Occasionally, God gives us a glimpse into our future according to His plan. Most of the time, He simply reveals the next step in this journey of life. In all of history there has only been one person who had a clear picture of what His ultimate destiny was. His name was Jesus. He came as a baby, helpless and dependent on mere mortals who, from a human standpoint, let Him down by nailing Him to a wooden cross for crimes He did not commit.

However, He knew this would happen; it was part of the Father’s plan to provide us humans with a means of forgiveness for the sin we are born into and continue to commit.

So often we become impatient, wanting to know what is ahead, while at the same time expressing, “...if I had known ‘a,’ I probably would (would not) have done ‘b.’”

God in His infinite wisdom knows what is ahead and what is best for us.

During this Advent season, and in the coming year, resolve to daily seek to make God’s ways and thoughts yours, as Mary did when she responded, “I am the Lord’s servant,...May it be to me as you have said” (Luke 1:38).

Rebekah Saunders is blessed to be wife to Craig, and mom to Josiah (14) and Nathan (12), who often keep her guessing as to what the future holds!

Scripture: Luke 2:7 ESV

December 25, 2015

TREASURE IN A BLANKET

“...and [she] wrapped Him in swaddling cloths...” (Luke 2:7 ESV).

Never had such an amazing treasure come in such an ordinary package. We can only imagine what went through Joseph’s mind as he knelt in the straw, cradling the child in his rough and calloused hands. What an astonishing moment, that a humble carpenter should hold God in his hands!

Alone, sheltered from prying eyes and wagging tongues of skeptics, Joseph tenderly lays the child on Mary’s breast. Her fears and tears are soon forgotten in the glory of her treasure. After pausing to give God thanks, she takes the small blanket she had brought, wrapping Him in swaddling cloth. Never was there such an extraordinary treasure wrapped in an ordinary blanket.

John one gives a fuller understanding of this treasure. John says He was The Logos, the very Word of God. That is, all the Divine Energy that had spoken creation into existence was in that blanket. He was also the source of all Life. The genius Michelangelo carved a lifelike figure of David from a block of marble. We can even see the veins in his muscles, but the master sculptor could not give David life. However, this treasure in a blanket not only designed David but made him walk and talk, sing and use a sling.

John also says that He was the Light of mankind: a light so powerful and so penetrating that no person or circumstance could ever put it out. Darkness tried when it crucified Him, but Luke says there was darkness only from the 6th to the 9th hour. What happened? The Light overcame the darkness! This extraordinary treasure in a blanket did it again! Hallelujah, what a Savior!

Dean Cook: Ordinary pastor, chaplain and teacher, who was blessed to discover this Extraordinary Treasure.

KAIROS—JUST IN TIME

...Jesus went into Galilee, where he preached God's Good News. "The time promised by God has come at last!" he announced. "The Kingdom of God is near! Repent of your sins and believe the Good News!" (Mark 1:14b-15 NLT)

I think it was German sociologist Max Weber who was most intrigued by the New Testament idea of *Kairos*—the *fullness of time*. "There was no more perfect time in history for Jesus to arrive on the scene," he said. Rome had built an infrastructure supporting travel, government, finance and security. The promised gospel could catch fire.

They are revealed only in retrospect— those moments when our lives turn. A chance comment from a respected mentor or an opportunity for which we are perfectly prepared reveals the hand of Providence.

It happened just that way one windy December on the sidewalks of Brevard, NC. I was probably 12 and filled with seasonal cheer. Dad was seldom in a hurry, particularly if someone wanted to talk. Suddenly, a young man stepped from Varner's Drug Store into our path. His face lit in recognition and he greeted Dad with a hardy hand and me with gleaming eyes. "Merry Christmas," he cheered and was off with his packages. Something welled in me—that bloom of emotion teetering between tears and joy. In retrospect, it was for me the fullness of time, a *kairos* moment. I belonged to the world of men, and they liked me.

Kairos is awareness. It is part knowledge, part suddenly knowing as we are known. Jesus came just in time to bring hope to a lost world and to every child who longs to belong.

Ed Bryson is an ordained elder stationed at WFMC where he directs the Adult Bible Fellowship. He is husband to Sharon, father to Anna and "papa" to Hayden and Jake.

GOVERNMENT AND PEACE

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders....Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end (Isaiah 9:6-7).

Driving into the academy we approached the entry gate which opened automatically. A little boy watched, wide-eyed, and exclaimed, "God did it!" While that gate was designed and built to work automatically, there is a greater gate of entrance into heaven and God's presence, which has been carefully designed.

Isaiah declares, "God did it. A son is given."

Jesus fulfilled his mission as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Thus He opened the way into the holiest presence of the Lord. Now comes the process of establishing His governance and true peace.

In 1949 the Communists took control of mainland China and spent 30 years trying to destroy the church and reeducate the next generations in atheism. I was privileged to observe firsthand what has happened. After 30 years the government conceded defeat by reopening and at government expense rebuilding churches, assuming they would remain under government restrictions. Forty million Christians worship freely in that Three Self Church, largely ignoring government restrictions. Approximately another 60 million Christians worship Christ outside the Three Self churches. This is but one example of God's design and preparation for the day when "...at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord..." (Philippians 2:10-11).

Lowell Williamson and his devoted wife Naomi served under One Mission Society in Japan, Taiwan, and China from 1951 to 2013. They have two children, Rod and Renae.

WILD AND SWEET

And His name will be called . . . Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:6b NASB).

This final phrase of Isaiah's prophetic announcement of Christ's birth describes in essence His mission to the world. This peace, offered through the authority of God's Son, suggests not only an inner peace within one's heart, accepting salvation by grace and a peace with God through forgiveness of sins, but also an exterior peace with one's fellowman. And throughout scripture, many other passages express this important theme: "Seek peace and pursue it" (Psalm 34:14); "My peace I give to you" (John 14:27); "And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts" (Colossians 3:15).

Peace is an inner calmness of mind and spirit evidenced outwardly by good will to those with whom we are acquainted. Expanding on this thought, in the first stanza of Longfellow's poem "Christmas Bells," he wrote during the American Civil War about hearing the bells on Christmas Day playing their old, familiar carols, "And wild and sweet, the words repeat, of peace on earth, good-will to men!" Peace is sweet when it is apparent through an inner absence of conflict. But it is also wild when we are freely obliged to offer grace to those who do not deserve it. Furthermore, rather than acquiescing to wrong and injustice, we are to be salt and light to the world, speaking the truth in love from the inner source of Christ's peace.

Let us daily accept inner tranquility from the great Prince of Peace, so that we may offer forgiveness and reconciliation to men.

Donald A. Zent is professor of piano at Asbury University.

CHRISTMAS IN KENYA

"To give light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace" (Luke 1:79 NKJV).

I grew up in Kenya, Africa, where my parents were missionaries to the Kipsigis people. Christmas in the tropics can be very different from that in the "winter" climates, but of course the Christmas message is always the same. One particular Christmas stands out in my memory. The African churches in the area gathered annually at the Tenwek mission station for a service of carol singing, messages and skits, retelling the Christmas story.

Another part of the celebration was the wedding ceremonies for couples who had been married before they heard the Gospel, but had recently found the Lord and wanted to have a Christian ceremony thus witnessing to their new-found faith. That particular day there were eleven couples who wanted to make this definite stand. What a joy it was for my father to perform this meaningful ceremony as each couple pledged their vows to each other, couple by couple. Many of them had young children accompanying their parents.

Later the congregation walked down the hill to the riverside where several people were baptized showing their love for their Lord, and acknowledging their faith. Zacharias' prophecy in Luke 1:79 was being fulfilled. I had the privilege of witnessing the early growth of the Africa Gospel Church.

Several decades have passed since those early days of the fledgling church and now many hundreds of Kenyans meet together to celebrate the birth of Christ.

Barbara A. Barker and her husband, Richard, have attended WFMC since 2003 and have been members since 2008. They have five children, two of whom also live at Wilmore.

TRUE GREATNESS

Jesus continued to learn more and more and to grow physically. People liked him, and he pleased God (Luke 2:52 ICB).

Have you ever found USA to be a land of superlatives? I have. Almost always! Everyone talks about the biggest, the fastest, and the weirdest! Everything over here appears to be about being or doing something great. People call each other “the best,” “awesome,” “adorable.” Who really is the adorable? And what truly is the best? These questions are very important for us as Christians celebrating Christmas.

In north India Christmas is called “Bada-Din.” This Hindi term means “the Great Day.” The true greatness of Christmas derives unmistakably from the uniqueness and greatness of the Lord Jesus Christ. It cannot be about anything else! Sorry, neither Santa, nor the Tree. In Jesus alone we find the greatest example of doing the will of God. Luke tells that Jesus increased in wisdom and years. Most of us increase only in years. He also says that Jesus received both divine and human favor. Most of us receive hardly one, or almost none. Why so? Maybe there is something wrong in the way we do Christianity and Christmas.

The true greatness of Christmas is found not in the spectacle of materialism that sidetracks us from people and from God. The true greatness of Christmas is found in its shared message of hope and peace to those who are underprivileged or challenged. The true greatness of Christians is not found in thoughtless superlatives and praises, but in the Christ-like growth that ensures every possible contribution to the Kingdom of God.

Shivraj Mahendra is a first-generation follower of Jesus Christ from north India. The author of *A Christian Response to Pornography*, and a PhD student at Asbury Seminary, he lives with his wife Anita and daughter Smriti in Wilmore.

I MISSED CHRISTMAS—OR DID I?

. . . Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering . . . (Romans 12:1 MSG).

December 26 I awake with an empty feeling. Christmas has passed and I missed it! How can this be? I’ve planned and worked all year toward this happy, holy day celebrating our Lord’s birth.

I always start early, tucking away several family gifts purchased at sales prior to Christmas. Early September I update our mail list. Sending and receiving greetings is a joyful part of our celebration of Jesus’ first coming. What fun for Wes and me to put up the tree, exclaiming over ornaments from Christmases past, as if we’d never seen them.

I plan menus and make shopping lists, followed by baking traditional family goodies. This reminds me it’s time to share with those in need, through our church, God’s Pantry, Salvation Army.

The family arrives in time for the candle lighting service at our church. Christmas dinner is ready, our traditional African meal. Worshipping, eating, exchanging gifts are all a part of our family celebration.

Why do I feel on December 26th that I missed Christmas? “Heavenly Father, may every thought and action throughout the year be dedicated to you, and done as unto you. May I never again awake on December 26 with the disappointed feeling that I missed Christmas.” Immanuel! He is with me and I celebrate His coming every day of the year.

June Eisemann and husband, Wes, graduates of Asbury University and Asbury Seminary, respectively, served 19 years with Mission Aviation Fellowship and 36 years with Evangelism Resources.

FINDING A PLACE

And she gave birth to her firstborn son; and she wrapped Him in cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn (Luke 2:7 NASB).

On the day of Jesus' birth, the streets and inn of Bethlehem were crowded with people. Though the provision for Joseph and Mary was only a stable, still there was a place, and Jesus came to us. Today perhaps the overcrowding isn't as much the inn, as it is our schedules and commitments that have no room for Him. Perhaps, as in Bethlehem, we could find a place where, though not what we expected, would still offer space for His coming.

When He comes, He brings peace. He enables us to sort through the many voices we hear, to know wisdom. He quiets us when troubled. He speaks truth into complex situations. He challenges us when our response to people or situations does not reflect a heart of love. He accepts us in our deepest person and listens to our heart. He guides and empowers intercessions for others. It matters that He comes.

Our most important preparation for the days ahead is to know Him and walk with Him every day, to develop our understanding and attentiveness to His presence in our lives, and to learn beyond doubt that He can be trusted. There is no shortcut to learning to know Him. If your heart is hungry for more of His presence, ask Him to help you find, or form, a place in your life for Him. The Holy Spirit is quietly creative and life-giving in helping us recognize ways and means to find space, even if it's in a stable, to welcome Him into our world.

Karen Koehn is enjoying retirement and the privilege of continuing to learn and grow. She is married to Donavon. They have three adult children, Don, Daniel, and Anna.

GOD'S CHRISTMAS DAY

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about (Luke 2:15).

On an evening so many centuries ago, Joseph and Mary were overnighing in a humble stable in Bethlehem. The glorious star-filled sky seemed to harbor news of a most special event. Shepherds were watching their sheep when a great song burst forth from the heavens. Angel voices proclaimed the birth of the promised Christ Child. This Gift to the world would give mankind opportunities to give gifts back to Him.

Multitudes have given the Lord the gift of their hearts. By doing so, God's desire to have a people called by His name has been realized (2 Chronicles 7:14). The Gift of Salvation.

Multitudes have given the Lord the joyful gift of asking Him to do His work in them, "perfecting holiness out of reverence for God" (2 Corinthians 7:1). The Gift of Sanctification.

Multitudes have accepted His offer of eternal life. "They will be his people and God himself will be with them and be their God" (Revelation 21:3). The Gift of Glorification.

There is coming a day when all eternal gifts will be opened. Can you imagine? Our God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—opening gifts, gifts that God Himself bought with a price. And we are opening our gifts. What an Eternal Christmas Day that will be. Therefore, watch for, listen for, and accept with all your heart and soul and voice the wonderful gift of Christ.

Nancy Johns is a farmer's daughter, graduate of Houghton and SUNY@Cortland. **Ronald Johns** is a graduate of Houghton, of SUNY@Brockport and Asbury Seminary. They married in 1963. Both are retired teachers. Ron has also been a pastor.

SIGNIFICANT IN THE BACKGROUND

... an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph...do not be afraid to take to you Mary your wife....Then Joseph...did as the angel of the Lord commanded him...(Matthew 1:19-25 NKJV).

Joseph is usually seen as an insignificant part of the background in the Advent drama. For sure, Jesus the Baby and Mary the mother deserve to be "front and center" on the Advent stage. But consider how different the Advent drama would have been without Joseph's critical and significant role, even while played in the background. On four occasions Joseph receives direct instructions from God in a dream: to take the pregnant Mary as his wife, even when he was not the father of the Child; to take Mary and Jesus to Egypt to avoid the "slaughter of the innocents" by Herod; to return to Israel; and to make their home in Nazareth of Galilee. In each occasion, Joseph does not argue or debate his instructions. Rather, he simply, immediately, and fully obeys the specific directions. Joseph is a "facilitator" who enables a family and earthly care for the Christ child, even when his actions are in the background of the primary drama.

Consider our personal situations. Not many of us have the opportunity to be "front and center" in the events of everyday life and the organizations with which we interact on a daily basis. Rather, we typically find ourselves in the background, with someone else "up front." But that does not mean that our role is less important. Rather, when we follow the Holy Spirit's leading in the daily events of our lives, we have a significant role in God's Kingdom coming to earth. We can be significant in the Kingdom while still in the background of everyday life.

Charlie Fiskeaux served as the chief business officer at Asbury University for 31 years, retiring June 30, 2015.

CAN I WAIT?

But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ (Philippians 3:20).

One early December, twenty-plus years ago, our oldest daughter, all of four years old, walked into the kitchen and matter-of-factly stated, "Christmas is coming. Some say I can't wait." And then she very loudly proclaimed, "I CAN WAIT!"

I suppose she was tired of so many adults commenting to her about how excited she must be about Christmas approaching, and what presents she might be receiving. Expressing her annoyance, and affirming her maturity, she wanted her parents to know that indeed she COULD wait.

The expression "I can't wait" means that we are excited and eagerly anticipating an upcoming event, but not that we are incapable of waiting for it.

In regard to our Lord's coming again—His Second Advent—which is it? Can we wait, or can't we? Certainly, it should be both.

We live in joyful expectation of His coming again. Yet we need to patiently wait, resting in His grace, knowing that in this world we will endure hardships until the day of His appearing.

In the meantime, "morning by morning new mercies we see." Whenever we feel we have achieved a new spiritual height and a new closeness to God, there is always more of Him to know. We "can't wait" to see what He will teach us next! Yet still we do actively wait on Him, entrusting all we are into His care, looking forward to the day when He makes all things new.

Steve Toadvine, happily married to Ann, is grateful for six wonderful children. He is Chief Medical Officer, Baptist Health Medical Group, Louisville, Kentucky.

Scripture: Luke 2:10-11

December 6, 2015

THE SHOT HEARD 'ROUND THE UNIVERSE

But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord” (Luke 2:10-11).

Growing up in Equatorial Africa, we seldom experienced the traditional White Christmas; it was more of a greenish-brown. But this didn't in any way subtract from our yuletide cheer. I remember one year with particular fondness. We kids loved to play cowboys, but we had never had access to toy guns; rather, we depended on well-shaped branches. So imagine our joy when there, under the tree, were beautiful, brand-new cap-rifles. I'm sure Ralphie from *A Christmas Story* felt no greater excitement opening his Red-Ryder BB gun than we did that day. Perhaps our parents regretted the decision, as they were awakened before dawn to the sound of “skirmishing” in the living room. We couldn't have been happier.

Now, consider the elation we should feel at the coming of Christ. Our forefathers had to rely on sacrifices, priests, and the Law—“well-shaped branches,” if you will—to know God. But we have Christ Himself. The real deal. The Red Ryder carbine action, two-hundred shot range model air rifle. God with us. We of course know this. But let us not just know it. Let us celebrate it. Let us stay up all night with excitement over it. Let us leave out milk and cookies for it. Let us hang up stockings for it. Let us, simply put, be children on Christmas morning over the birth of Jesus Christ. And may others be awakened from their slumber as they hear and witness our joy and love.

Jonathan Liversedge has attended WFMC since 2003. He is the son of Stephen and Lorrie Liversedge and is currently a freshman at Wheaton College.

Scripture: Luke 2:7 KJV

December 19, 2015

UNDRESSED FOR THE HOLIDAYS

And she brought forth her first-born son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn. (Luke 2:7 KJV).

Stephanie and Julie were coming for Christmas! We'd moved back to the freezing Upper Peninsula of Michigan so I was happy knowing the fun the two girls would bring with them. They arrived! “Where is your luggage?” I asked. The two shook their heads forlornly. “The airline lost it.” “Well, I'm sure it will be here soon,” I said. We hugged and laughed and settled in. The next day came but no luggage. The girls borrowed their sisters' underwear, large sweatshirts and warm sweatpants. Still no luggage.

Christmas Eve: “What are we going to wear?” The girls and I began to search for festive clothing that would fit. Unfortunately our sizes, including shoe sizes, didn't match up. Julie squeezed into a pair of shoes that would fit because there was no back in them. Stephanie donned my most youthful dress. They looked a little odd, but they would pass. We giggled as we walked gingerly from church back home in ill-fitting outfits, tight hose and backless shoes.

The luggage never did come but I had my girls and a house full of joy and laughter to warm our Christmas season.

Jesus did not come into the world with luggage, no clothing, not even a comfortable place in which to be born. But what joy He brought to us. Let us remember during this Advent season: it is not who we are, or what we wear, or what we bring. It is becoming the person God wants us to be through His Son Jesus.

Nancy McConnell is a wife, mother of 15, organist, pianist, and lives in Nicholasville.

WAITING IN FAITH

Anna, a prophet, was also there in the Temple....Her husband died when they had been married only seven years. Then she lived as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the Temple but stayed there day and night, worshiping God with fasting and prayer (Luke 2:36-37 NLT).

Some people begin a countdown 100 days before Christmas. My family opened the 24 windows of an Advent Calendar, and sometimes the anticipation was too great, and we peeked ahead. Do you eagerly wait through Christmas Eve for Christmas morning presents? With Christmas and the season of Advent come favorite holiday traditions: decorating trees, wearing ugly sweaters, going to big movie premieres, attending candle light services, and giving gifts. Many of us participate in the four major elf food groups (candy, candy-canes, candy-corn and syrup!), and we celebrate loudly by singing for all to hear.

These activities of Christmas are what we do in preparation for the celebration of the birth of Jesus. But what are we doing now in preparation during this time of Advent as we wait for Jesus' second coming? Our focus at Christmas tends to be on the experience of the shepherds, wise men, angels, and Mary and Joseph. But there were others who were faithfully waiting for the coming of the Messiah. Anna, a widow in her eighties, spent most of her life alone dedicated to serving God. When she saw Mary, Joseph, Simeon, and Jesus, she praised God and shared the good news. While the activities of Christmas are fun and exciting, it is necessary to live by Anna's example so we don't miss out when Jesus returns.

Katherine Fitch is a recent graduate of Indiana Wesleyan University with a B.S. in International Relations and History. In March she will travel to Ukraine to serve with the Peace Corps.

WOW! MORE WOW!

The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen...(Luke 2:20).

When our first grandson was a toddler, we were driving around at night looking at the beautiful Christmas lights. Each time we would come to a brilliantly-lit home, Maxwell would exclaim, "Wow!" If there were no lights, he would beg, "More Wow, Grandpa!"

When the angel proclaimed to the Virgin Mary about the baby to whom she would give birth, I can only imagine the sense of awe and "wow" that she felt as she struggled to understand the message. She answered, "I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said" (Luke 1:38).

The shepherds on the Judean hillside were definitely wowed by the glory of the Lord that appeared in the sky with the angelic proclamation of the Savior's birth in Bethlehem's humble manger. They wasted no time in hurrying to see the newborn babe, then spread the exciting news of all they had seen and heard.

The Magi from the east were obviously wowed by the bright star which they saw and followed for such a long distance. "When they saw the star, they were overjoyed." (Matthew 2:10).

During this Advent season may we be wowed by Christ's coming to earth, submit to Him, worship Him, and share this good news with those around us. Let's be wowed anew with the promise of what is still ahead—His Second Coming. In glorious hope we remember that "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him" (1 Corinthians 2:9). Wow! And more wow!

Priscilla Probst and her husband, Dennis, served in Japan for nearly 39 years with World Gospel Mission. They have 4 children and 6 grandchildren.

Scripture: John 1:4-5, 9

December 8, 2015

LOOKING BACK—AND FORWARD

In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it....The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world (John 1:4-5, 9).

One morning at church as I talked with a woman from my neighborhood, she said, “Oh, you’re the Jesus house!” I smiled because, while I had heard this before, I liked the way she phrased it. Let me explain. At Christmas, we decorate our house with simple, white lights outlining the roof but the main decorations are a star and the word “Jesus.” Many people like to drive around looking at all the houses shining brightly in the night and when they see our home, I want them to remember WHO we are celebrating this season.

Most of us probably know John 3:16. It was the first verse I memorized in my public elementary school. But do you know the verse that follows? “For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.” Paul wrote to Timothy, “...a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners ...” (1Timothy 1:15). Without Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem, there would not be His crucifixion on the cross. I live because Jesus was born, died, buried and raised again on the third day. He ascended into heaven and one day, He will come again.

As I celebrate this advent season, I not only look back and remember His first coming but also look forward to His second coming at a time that only God the Father knows (Matthew 24:36). “Amen. Come, Lord Jesus....Amen” (Revelation 22:20b-21).

Kristina Livesay: wife to Bobby, homeschooling mom to Libby, walking companion to our comfort retriever Bella, but most importantly, adopted daughter in God’s forever family.

Scripture: John 1:14 NLT

December 17, 2015

WALKING AS JESUS WALKED

So the Word became human and made his home among us. He was full of unfailing love and faithfulness. And we have seen his glory, the glory of the Father’s one and only Son (John 1:14 NLT).

In September, 2007 we took my parents to Israel for the first time. My mom would turn 90 in January, so we decided to move more slowly and not join a packaged tour.

We were a part of never to be forgotten experiences almost every day — entering Bethlehem by the “back door” because the normal entrance was blocked by political instability, sailing with a group of evangelicals from Ecuador on Galilee as they worshipped, preached and commissioned a missionary, and imagining ourselves in the very place where Jesus may have given the Sermon on the Mount.

One event stands out among all the rest. We were nearly ready to land in Tel Aviv. Sylvia, who had been sitting in a window seat, said to my Mom, “Wouldn’t you like to sit over here where you can see the Holy Land as we land?” It was a beautiful morning and you could see for miles. My Mom said what many of us might, “It’s almost like I can see Jesus walking down there.”

That vision can be true anywhere, anytime because of God’s work at Christmas. God himself came as a man and showed us how to live, sacrificed his life for our salvation, and sent his Holy Spirit so that we can do even greater works than he did. Because of Christmas we can not only see where Jesus walked, but we can— through his power—walk as Jesus walked.

Art Brown and his wife Sylvia moved back to Wilmore in 2012. In their “first retirement” they serve as Pastor to Free Methodist missionaries in Africa and for a few months Art is serving as Transitional Superintendent of our New South Conference of the FMCUSA.

GOD'S NEW PERSPECTIVE

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort (2 Corinthians 1:3).

From the time I was a little girl, all I ever remember wanting to be when I grew up was married. I absolutely expected that I would get married, have children, and be a stay-at-home mom. I believed that God had somehow promised me a spouse.

The first time I had any inkling that marriage might not be in my future, I had just ended a relationship with a man who I thought was “the one.” We met through a series of coincidences that my romantic heart was sure God had coordinated. The end of the relationship broke my heart, not only because I was in love, but also because I felt like God was withholding from me the only thing I ever wanted.

Christmas that year was difficult. I felt abandoned by God, while those around me were celebrating God’s love. Then, a friend said, “God can handle your anger and hurt. Tell Him.” So, I did. I cried and prayed and even yelled a little. And, while I was being brutally honest with God, I felt Him wrap His arms around me and speak peace to my heart.

I wish I could say that I have never again struggled with hurt or anger or feeling abandoned when it comes to not being married, but I can’t. I can say, though, that God continues to give me a new perspective that allows me to appreciate the wonderful parts of being single. Also, when the sadness overwhelms me, I cry and pray and even yell a little until I feel God wrap His arms around me and speak peace to my heart.

Deanna Simpson is a special education teacher at West Jessamine Middle School. She loves to laugh, cook, fix things, play softball, and be “Auntie D” to her friends’ kids.

THE WARRIOR KING IS COMING

“Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword” (Matthew 10:34).

A sword flashes, springing from its owner's waist as a cat might pounce upon a ball of string, dismembering its target with an urgency and ferocity appropriate for such a life or death situation.

For those of you reading this before breakfast, your stomach is probably suitably churned. We don't like to think about gross things like fighting and death and blood and gore ever, much less in this, our friendly Christmas devotional book. This is a time of joy, of peace and goodwill towards men, and of the innocence of a child. We give presents, sing carols, and eat turkey. Those are all parts of Christmas, but perhaps we need to look at Jesus' true purpose, even if it isn't fulfilled immediately in the small babe in the manger.

As Jesus says in Matthew 10:34, we are not to assume purely peaceful motives for His visit. His purpose wasn't to reconcile the devil with God's will. He came to fight, and to win. We, as His followers, are called to imitate him, taking up arms against our enemy, the devil.

This Christmas, look at Jesus not only as the reason for the joy of our holiday season, but also as the Warrior that He is. He is our Warrior King, our leader in the battle against the devil and his snares. To ignore that purpose of His is to miss the important reality that the devil is alive, prowling around actively, searching for prey. We must draw our swords, and with urgent and ferocious action, prevent him from wreaking havoc on our lives. The devil is real, but our Warrior King is coming. Fight the battle.

David Madill is a senior at West Jessamine High School. His passions include Bible Quizzing and writing. He is first of all a Christian, and as a close second, a big brother.

TIDINGS OF COMFORT AND JOY

When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear!...As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy" (Luke 1:41-42, 44).

Ever considered Elizabeth's gift to the Christmas story? Just prior to this beautiful exchange recorded in Luke 1, Mary received word from the angel Gabriel that she would give birth to the Messiah. Gabriel concluded with the news of Elizabeth's pregnancy. That to which Mary hurried in Luke 1:39ff. was the confirmation of this great news. Yet, besides confirmation, Mary receives comfort regarding the declaration of her own offspring. From Elizabeth come tidings of comfort and joy.

Isn't it interesting that it's not until after this exchange between Elizabeth and her young relative that Mary expresses herself in song to God (see Luke 1:46-55). Elizabeth's joy has become Mary's joy. Elizabeth's comfort of familial provision has become Mary's comfort of societal provision. "He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever" (vv. 54-55a). Tidings of comfort and joy!

Indeed, Elizabeth's role within the narrative of Christ's first coming is of utmost importance! Through her lips, witness, and expectant condition, God provides confirmation to Mary that she will bring forth the long-expected Messiah. Tidings of comfort and joy...for Elizabeth and Mary, for Israel, for the world!

Joy Ireland is married to John and has attended WFMC since August 2007.

GOD'S PERFECT TIMING

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons (Galatians 4:4-5 ESV).

Time...I was recently sitting at my desk wishing I had more time for the countless demands that fill my day. Like many of us, it seems my hours are consumed with email, phone calls, voicemails, texts, and other "interruptions" that must be responded to almost immediately. I often feel I am controlled by such occurrences rather than being in control of my daily activities.

To those of us in Christ, we have the reassurance that God's timing is always perfect. Galatians tells us that in the fullness of time, God sent Jesus to a lost and lonely world. Based upon God's will, Jesus arrived when He was supposed to. He was not early, nor was He late. Rather, He arrived at exactly the moment in history to fulfill prophesies and through His death and resurrection He provided salvation. Nothing ordained by the Lord occurs by chance or at the wrong time. Christ's arrival was perfectly planned and occurred when humanity needed Him most.

Advent season reminds us to slow down and savor the season and its true meaning. We should be intentional in resting in the Lord and in pondering the miraculous way His will was revealed through Jesus. Lord, quiet our hearts and draw us back to you, the Source of all good and perfect blessings. Jesus, help us to take comfort in knowing that You are in control, that your timing is infallible, and that You have a purpose and plan for all our days.

Scott Wells is a native of Jessamine County and principal of West Jessamine High School, Nicholasville. Scott is married to Julie. Their son, Grant, is a senior at Lipscomb University, Nashville, Tennessee.

Scripture: Psalm 46:10

December 14, 2015

BE STILL AND KNOW

“Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth” (Psalm 46:10).

Be Still! Oh my, how important that is to me. With the hectic schedule of the holidays, it seems that I just run from one thing to the next. It is so easy to fall into the trap that I need to push myself harder and add one more thing into my schedule. How nice to hear God’s voice say, “Be still, and know that I am God.” He is in charge and I don’t need to fret.

Not too long ago, twice I woke up in a sweat with my heart beating fast thinking that I had missed a deadline. Each time I sent up one of those pleading prayers immediately asking for help. Amazingly, the Lord calmed me each time and reminded me of the actual facts and showed me once again that He is in charge, not me.

Why cannot that “simple” lesson stick with me? Instead I must learn it over and over again. God is in control and to Him will go the glory for a job well done. Peace is His gift to me and I just need to accept it. He also gives me the strength for any task that He appoints. I need to be still and know that God is in control.

How thankful I am for a God who can slow me down and lighten my load because He is God.

Kimberly I. Barnard, JD, LLM, Bob & Evie Barnard’s daughter, Krista & Todd Padgett’s sister, and Seth, Ryan, Chase and Emma Padgett’s aunt.

Scripture: Zechariah 12:8-10, 13:1

December 11, 2015

GOD’S TIME, OUR TIME

“On that day the Lord will shield those who live in Jerusalem, so that the feeblest among them will be like David....They will look on me, the one they have pierced, and mourn for him as one mourns for an only child...”(Zechariah 12:8, 10).

Lewis Mumford comments in his book, *Technics and Civilization*, that nothing has more separated man from God than the invention of the clock. Its breaking down of human experience into units of seconds, minutes and hours pushes humanity into a realm of existence that is unlike God, who lives in a permanent present. The ancient past lived in a world of “seasons,” which much like our seasonal calendar, carried them through a cycle both permanent and changing. The ancient church, wanting the Christian faith to share this pattern, created a Christian liturgical calendar where the Christian believer would travel through the year focused on the birth, life, death and resurrection of Christ.

This reading from Zechariah is a traditional Advent reading in the church. In Advent, as we remember the people of Israel waiting in expectant hope for the coming Messiah, we rejoice in the fulfillment of that promise. We are also reminded of the price this Messiah would pay to reconcile us with God and then, like the people of Israel, we wait in hope for His return to restore all things. Jesus was not the Messiah the people of Israel were expecting. Jesus did not come to conquer Rome or to bring earthly gifts. He came to conquer sin and death.

To live in Advent is to live in God’s time. We, like the ancients, wait in hope for a coming Messiah who will, as back then, surprise us.

Rev. William M. Jamison is a member of the New South Conference, attends WFCM and teaches at Lexington Christian Academy.

Scripture: Titus 3:4-5

December 12, 2015

OUR SAVIOR APPEARED

But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy (Titus 3:4-5).

Just before this scripture, Paul mentions the states of brokenness in which Christians dwelt before being saved by Jesus' appearing and ministering. These include foolishness, disobedience, enslavement to the passions and pleasures of self-gratification, malice, envy, and hatred. Have any of these been a part of your past? Which can you say that you were saved from? What journey has separated you from living in sin? Are you reborn and remade?

Since the 2012-2013 season of Bible quizzing, this quote has entirely resonated with my life. I'm saved by God's mercy rather than my righteous acts. These acts can be too easily misguided, some with humorous results, others not so much.

Regardless, the Lord saved us from sin and brokenness; each of us has the opportunity to take a posture of renewal each day. Each aspect of life that is flawed, damaged, or inoperative is changed into something new purely because God loved and sacrificed. Jesus' appearance on earth was the revival of God's purpose in us, His created beings. Advent is the time for us to submit to God's purpose in us as we anticipate a new heaven and earth built by Jesus' coming. Let us take time to celebrate and retrace Jesus' appearing to save the whole world—even you, even me—so that others can perceive our rebirth and renewal. How are you witnessing to this great mercy?

Grace Wilson is in her second year of studying social work and Spanish majors at Asbury University. She grew up in Greenville, IL. She loves spending time with family and friends, singing, learning, and traveling with the Bible quiz team.

Scripture: Matthew 2:8

December 13, 2015

IN MY HEART

[Herod] sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him" (Matthew 2:8).

After the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, Mikhail Gorbachev reportedly said, "In my heart, I have never been a communist." This statement was surprising given the fact that Gorbachev had been a seemingly loyal communist since his youth. He had been a member of the Communist Party since 1950 and worked his way up the leadership of the party since. He later became the general secretary of the Communist Party and even the president of the communist country. Apparently, he was only a good and loyal communist in appearance during those years without truly being a communist.

The same thing happened in the story of Herod and the Magi on the first Christmas. Herod, who was trying to kill baby Jesus, deceived the Magi by saying that he intended to go and worship the newborn Jesus. Herod looked excited with the birth of Jesus, but in his heart he had never welcomed Him. Herod's unwelcoming heart became evident when he killed all the babies under two years old only to make sure that one of them was Jesus.

Those two stories about Gorbachev and Herod remind us that the same thing could happen to those who call themselves followers of Christ. Doing and saying Christian things do not make one a genuine Christian; having Jesus in the heart does. When preparing for this coming Christmas, let us remember that true Christians are the ones with Christ in their hearts. Even more, let our lives reflect the Christ in our hearts so that we may sincerely say, "In my heart, I have always been a Christian."

Chelcent Fuad is a student at Asbury Theological Seminary. He is married to Devina Filia, and they have one son, Brycent E. Fuad.