



ADVENT DEVOTIONS

Meditations and Prayers for 2011
St. Paul's United Church of Christ

Written by the Pastor and People of St. Paul's UCC

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I wish to express my deepest thanks to the many people who contributed to this year's devotional, and to the congregation for giving me the time to work on this project which is a labor of love.

I invite you to use this devotional as a way of preparing your heart for the birth of Christ. You might read it alone, as a personal practice, or you might read it with family members or friends, using it as a guide for discussion and learning. However you decide to use it, "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope." (Romans 15:13)

— Pastor Jonathan

NOVEMBER 27

'But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. Therefore, keep awake – for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.' (Mark 13:32-37)

When I was fourteen I had a regular babysitting gig taking care of three well-behaved children. One night the children were reluctant to settle down at bedtime, however, and they kept sneaking downstairs long after I had read them stories and tucked them in, making it impossible for me to relax in front of the TV. (Little did I know that in twenty years every evening would be like that!) At first I responded calmly and patiently, but after a while I ran out of ideas and resorted to making desperate threats: "If you guys don't go to sleep, I'm going to tell your mom and dad and you'll be in BIG trouble!" It wasn't exactly a *bad* thing to do, but it was terribly immature, and I knew it. And right in the middle of one of my proclamations I detected movement in the corner of my eye and realized that their parents were peering into the room.

Some would say that this is a perfect illustration of Jesus' warning to "beware" and "keep awake." But this would require us to believe that God desires us to stay stuck in one stage of spiritual development – the teenage years, no less! – our whole life long. It would also suggest that shame is God's best motivational tool. This will not do. Jesus does not teach his disciples to be afraid. He calls them to become holy, and to worry about nothing, and to abide in God's perfect love. The disciple of Jesus does not look anxiously over her shoulder; she strives hopefully for the kingdom of God.

When we seek to understand these cautionary scriptures of Advent we must keep our hearts tuned to the great mercy of God, lest we forget that we are waiting for something good. This does not change the sense of urgency in Jesus' tone: it is true that life is too short to delay in answering God's call to faithfulness. But it is also true that God desires our wholeness. If our hearts are filled with fear, all the righteous actions in the world will not guard against our brokenness. Instead we must strive for unity of heart, intention, and action. We must make of ourselves a prayer. And we cannot do it alone. Only by the grace of God, only by the grace of God.

Holy God, drive all fear from my heart. Awaken me to the joy that you are already in my midst, and unite my being that I may abide in love and abound in hope. Amen.

-Jonathan Hauze

NOVEMBER 28

*In days to come
the mountain of the Lord's house
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,
and shall be raised up above the hills.
Peoples shall stream to it,
and many nations shall come and say:
'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord,
to the house of the God of Jacob;
that he may teach us his ways
and that we may walk in his paths.'
For out of Zion shall go forth instruction,
and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.
He shall judge between many peoples,
and shall arbitrate between strong nations far away;
they shall beat their swords into ploughshares,
and their spears into pruning-hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more;
but they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees,
and no one shall make them afraid;
for the mouth of the Lord of hosts has spoken. (Micah 4:1-4)*

Several weeks ago, Jesse and I had a discussion regarding the nature of mankind. I think Jesse was a little surprised to find that although I tend to want to find the good in people, I nevertheless think that mankind is essentially warlike in nature. Maybe it's not a need specifically, for war and killing, but there is a thirst for dominance over others that, when carried to its ultimate end, results in war. And, unfortunately, mankind also seems to be able to come up with better and better weapons for waging war.

But what happens when we use cooperation rather than force to dismantle those weapons of destruction for the good of mankind?

When an 18 year civil war in Mozambique ended in 1992, United Nations forces attempted to disarm both sides of the bitter conflict. They failed to find most of the weapons in the country because many had been hidden by former combatants who were afraid to be reported by the government. Ten years later, the Christian Council of Mozambique decided to try to collect the weapons another way. The group proceeded to collect more than 100,000 weapons, and in return, former soldiers were given bicycles, plows, sewing machines, tools needed to help them rebuild and take control of their lives. And, the weapons of war? First, they were

rendered useless in public ceremonies so that everyone could see that they could no longer be used for their original purpose. Then, the metal was given to local artists who, in turn, created sculptures, chairs, coffee tables, transforming violence and ugliness into beautiful works of art.

Do I think that mankind is lost? No, because with God, anything is possible.

The Prayer of St. Francis of Assisi

Lord,

Make me an instrument of your peace.

Where there is hatred, let me sow love;

where there is injury, pardon;

where there is doubt, faith;

where there is despair, hope;

where there is darkness, light;

and where there is sadness, joy.

Muslim Daily Prayer

Oh God, You are Peace

From You comes Peace

To You returns Peace

Revive us with a salutation of Peace

and lead us to Your abode of Peace.

– Diane Battilana

NOVEMBER 29

*On that day, says the Lord,
I will assemble the lame
and gather those who have been driven away,
and those whom I have afflicted.
The lame I will make the remnant,
and those who were cast off, a strong nation;
and the Lord will reign over them in Mount Zion
now and for evermore. (Micah 4:6-7)*

When I read this passage I thought of the saying from the Gospel: The first shall be last and the last shall be first. This saying has always given me trouble as I am very competitive. I don't like to lose. When I play sports, I go all out and try to win. Not necessarily win at all costs, but looking to win as often as possible. I have many injuries over the years from sacrificing my body in an attempt to gain an advantage over my competition. That is the whole reason to compete, right? So we can win. It feels good to finish first. Everyone wants to take a victory lap or do the touchdown dance.

I don't think this Bible verse is telling us to throw an event. God isn't looking for us to slow down or let the ball go into the net so the other team scores. This isn't about competing.

This is about being the best person you can be. God loves every person, whether you win the race or not. The goal in the Lord's view is not to be the winner. It is, however, all about being a good sportsman. If you win, great. And if you lose, it is OK too. You just need to do your best. Sometimes doing your best is helping someone else so they can do better.

Maybe we should focus our energies on helping everyone succeed. The world would be a better place if everyone worked together towards a common goal. We would all be made the remnant and the Lord would reign over all of us at Mount Zion.

Lord, please hear my prayer. I know you want me to do my best. But that is not the ultimate goal. Please help me see that I can be a winner without someone being the loser. When we all do well, we all will be a strong nation. Amen.

-Greg Allen

NOVEMBER 30

*'Come, let us return to the Lord;
for it is he who has torn, and he will heal us;
he has struck down, and he will bind us up.
After two days he will revive us;
on the third day he will raise us up,
that we may live before him.
Let us know, let us press on to know the Lord;
his appearing is as sure as the dawn;
he will come to us like the showers,
like the spring rains that water the earth.'* (Hosea 6:1-3)

Some background* reading pointed out Hosea's key word "return" and God's availability, both of which are pronounced in this scripture. Hosea was a Hebrew prophet who lived in the 8th century, B.C. He was a citizen of the northern kingdom where the king of Samaria was known as "our king". Hosea's unhappy marriage and its results are noted. Hosea's personal life was tragic with his wife, Gomer, whom he loved very much, but she proved to be a wanton wife and left him for other lovers. At last, she became a slave and her husband, Hosea, bought her back to protect her. Even though, he could not have her now as his wife, he would not marry again. Out of this bitter experience, he learned the lesson of Divine love and recorded it. As poet, teacher and minister, Hosea presents man's weak and wanton ways. He identifies himself with God and people in a way that gives dramatic power to his words.

* Nave Topical Bible and Encyclopedia Americana

*God of our being, let us keep in mind Your ready availability to us.
Help our understanding to know that Your timing is for our good.
In Your name we pray. Amen.*

-Marg Perina

DECEMBER 1

Now the word of the Lord came to me saying, 'Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.' Then I said, 'Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.' But the Lord said to me, 'Do not say, "I am only a boy"; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord.' Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth; and the Lord said to me, 'Now I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.' (Jeremiah 1:4-10)

Liza recently received a juror summons notice in the mail from the District Court in Philadelphia, and I was most interested to see that there are seven official categories of persons who may be excused from service as a juror: (1) 70 + years of age; (2) physician; (3) lawyer; (4) primary caregiver for children under 10; (5) clergy; (6) essential to business; and (7) medical or fire volunteer or personnel. A strange list, but there it is.

Jeremiah is hoping that God will have a similar list for potential prophets: (1) no long grey beard; (2) bad at public speaking; (3) no academic degree; (4) day job; (5) previous engagement; (6) thin skin; (7) procrastinator. He wishfully pleads numbers 1 and 2, hoping that God will realize his mistake and call someone else, but no luck. God does not dial wrong numbers.

There is good news here, for prophets and regular folks too. First we see that the summons of God also comes with a promise to provide whatever is needed for the job at hand. The power of God's word to create new possibilities for human life can never be nullified by the imperfection of those who are called to be bearers of the word. As we read in Isaiah, "so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it" (55:10).

This is not the only assurance that God speaks in this wonderful text. Consider the way that God begins his conversation with the boy who had never imagined that he could do such great things: "I have known you from the beginning, even before you were a sparkle in your mother's eye, and I shaped you with my own hands, and I made you holy, so that you might share my word with the world." Like Jeremiah, we were made for holy work. We were made to pull down walls of exclusion, and to overthrow systems of oppression, and to plant the seeds of peace. We were created for goodness. And no matter our feelings of insecurity or insufficiency, no matter the limits our feeble imaginations or faulty self-knowledge place on our lives, by the grace of God we already have everything we need — we already *are* the people we need to be — in order to answer the summons of our God.

Lord, help me to trust in your affirming judgment of my life and vocation, that I may answer your call to serve faithfully and wholeheartedly, rising to the challenge of serving you even when it takes me beyond where I am comfortable or confident. Amen.

-Jonathan Hauze

DECEMBER 2

Again they came to Jerusalem. As he was walking in the temple, the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders came to him and said, 'By what authority are you doing these things? Who gave you this authority to do them?' Jesus said to them, 'I will ask you one question; answer me, and I will tell you by what authority I do these things. Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin? Answer me.' They argued with one another, 'If we say, "From heaven", he will say, "Why then did you not believe him?" But shall we say, "Of human origin"?' – they were afraid of the crowd, for all regarded John as truly a prophet. So they answered Jesus, 'We do not know.' And Jesus said to them, 'Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.' (Mark 11:27-33)

How deftly Jesus avoids the traps his opponents set for him! Part of me reads this text with envy, wishing that my mind was this nimble, thinking of all those times when I stood there mute and flustered in the wake of a mean-spirited remark. Props to Jesus for sending his antagonists away limping.

But wait, that's not right. That's me, not Jesus. That's my selfish desire and emotional frailty filling the frame of my imagination, not the Christ who claimed nothing for himself but lived wholly for others, not the Christ who "emptied himself, taking the form of a slave . . . [who] humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death" (Philippians 2:7-8). No, this text must be about more than cleverness, more than an intellectual contest, more than winning.

Later in the Gospel of Mark, when Jesus is questioned by the Roman authority, the one with the power to put him to death, he still refuses to claim a divine right. He knows as Pilate does not that God's reign of peace has already been established. It was heralded to shepherds keeping watch over their flocks by night thirty-three years earlier. It was announced when the blind received their sight, and the hungry were fed, and the poor had good news brought to them. It will be revealed yet again on the cross, when death will claim no victory. Jesus keeps silence, because there is no contest. The sovereign does not need to explain himself to the deposed.

Neither will Jesus give any answer to the religious authorities, who fail to perceive that the foundations of the earth are shaking, that a new realm is breaking forth. The signs are all around them, but they do not have eyes to see or ears to hear. If we can get past the idea that Jesus is trying to outwit his opponents, we may begin to see that this scene is full of pathos. The religious elite are so bound to one understanding of how God operates in the world that they do not recognize the Word of God even when he stands before them in the flesh. The text is a sad commentary on the narrowness of human understanding, and it raises a powerful Advent question to us: What are the preconceptions that prevent us from seeing the glory of God? Will we dare to let them go, that we may see Christ and rejoice when he is revealed to us?

Illumine the eyes of my heart, O God, and enable me to receive the good news that comes from your loving and generous heart. Let my thoughts be unburdened, and my spirit be unbound, that all my questions may be turned to hallelujahs. Amen.

-Jonathan Hauze

DECEMBER 3

*Get you up to a high mountain,
O Zion, herald of good tidings;
lift up your voice with strength,
O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings,
lift it up, do not fear;
say to the cities of Judah,
'Here is your God!'
See, the Lord God comes with might,
and his arm rules for him;
his reward is with him,
and his recompense before him.
He will feed his flock like a shepherd;
he will gather the lambs in his arms,
and carry them in his bosom,
and gently lead the mother sheep. (Isaiah 40:9-11)*

	Spread the news
	from the Mountain Tops.
Restored	Look! Who is coming!
with strength.	A Baby
Guiding mothers	A Savior
shepherding the dear sheep.	Here is your God!
Here is your God...	Shepherding the dear sheep,
A Savior	guiding mothers.
A Baby	With strength
Look, who is coming	Restored.
from the Mountain Tops?	
Spread the news.	

–Lauren Alexandro

DECEMBER 4

*The Lord is my light and my salvation;
whom shall I fear?
The Lord is the stronghold of my life;
of whom shall I be afraid?*

*When evildoers assail me
to devour my flesh –
my adversaries and foes –
they shall stumble and fall.*

*Though an army encamp against me,
my heart shall not fear;
though war rise up against me,
yet I will be confident. (Psalm 27:1-3)*

When I studied Buddhism as a college student, I was honored to be a regular guest at a Thai Buddhist temple north of Philadelphia. In addition to spending time together in meditation, we said many chants together. Unfortunately I have forgotten most of the words, which were in the Pali language. But one chant still stays with me after all these years:

Buddham saranam gacchāmi
Dhammam saranam gacchāmi
Sangham saranam gacchāmi

"I take refuge in the Buddha, I take refuge in the Dhamma, I take refuge in the Sangha." These are the words by which monks and laypersons affirm their intention to be guided by the teachings of the Buddha in their struggle to overcome the pervasive poisons of greed, delusion, and anger.

My encounter with Buddhism gives me a new insight into the psalms of refuge. I used to feel as though these stanzas had nothing to do with me, as I could not picture myself surrounded by dangerous adversaries and foes waiting to pounce. But now I see another dimension to these texts, where a person "takes refuge" in God as the only one strong enough to disarm the spiritual powers that threaten one's humanity: "The LORD is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?"

When a person takes refuge in God, he does not turn to God for help in a passive sense, renouncing responsibility for his own life, but instead he commits himself to turn his own heart into a dwelling place for the Holy Spirit. In this way there is a close kinship between

the Buddhist idea of refuge and the New Testament concept of *metanoia*, which is often translated as "conversion" or "repentance" but can also be described as a "turning" toward God.

God will shelter us from the powers that be, so that hatred, violence, jealousy, greed, and fear will have no hold over us, but we must be active partners in God's redeeming work. It is not enough to pray for God's help; we must also commit our whole heart and mind to God's love. In the language of Advent, we must do our own part to prepare the way for the coming of our Lord. What better place to begin than with our own desires, intentions, and actions? And what better time than now?

Holy God, save me from the dangers that threaten to distance me from you and from my neighbor. Make me a dwelling place for your Spirit, so that I may reach perfection in love by serving you without fear. Amen.

—Jonathan Hauze

DECEMBER 5

*One thing I asked of the Lord,
that will I seek after:
to live in the house of the Lord
all the days of my life,
to behold the beauty of the Lord,
and to inquire in his temple.*

*For he will hide me in his shelter
in the day of trouble;
he will conceal me under the cover of his tent;
he will set me high on a rock.*

*Now my head is lifted up
above my enemies all around me,
and I will offer in his tent
sacrifices with shouts of joy;
I will sing and make melody to the Lord. (Psalm 27:4-6)*

David wanted to dwell in the house of the Lord, to be in the presence of God. David was so sure that the Lord would be there in troubled times. He looked forward to overcoming obstacles with the Lord's help and shouting for joy.

How comforting to know that it isn't just David that can seek to dwell with the Lord. I often have to take a very conscious step to look at the face of others and see Christ. That by recognizing Christ in humanity, He can dwell in my heart. Over time, I've become better able to look at the person waiting for the bus by the side of the road, or helping me with a car repair and to see Christ in them. I often sing or hum "open my eyes Lord, I want to see Jesus" and look around me. God has never failed to show me that he dwells on Earth today.

Advent is such a precious time to reflect on the joys that await us at Christmas and to savor the journey. God's gift to us is the time to stop and sing a melody, to see Christ in the face of others. In doing so, we will always have a place for the Lord to dwell in us.

Dear Lord, thank you for this season of Advent and for those around us who help guide and enlighten the Advent journey. Help me to be mindful of Your face in the others I see and to make a joyful noise in Your name.

-Cynthia Harrison

DECEMBER 6

*Hear, O Lord, when I cry aloud,
be gracious to me and answer me!
'Come,' my heart says, 'seek his face!'
Your face, Lord, do I seek.
Do not hide your face from me.*

*Do not turn your servant away in anger,
you who have been my help.
Do not cast me off, do not forsake me,
O God of my salvation!
If my father and mother forsake me,
the Lord will take me up. (Psalm 27:7-10)*

“Hear, O Lord, when I cry aloud.” These words are so strong and so plaintive. I imagine David with his arms raised, reaching out to the Lord. In my mind’s eye, David has tears on his face.

Advent is a time for us to reach out our arms and seek the Lord. Like David, we can have faith that even when others fail to meet our expectations, the Lord will be there to take us up. From a lowly manger in Bethlehem, we can see the promises of God being fulfilled. God is steadfast. God is true. God is here among us today.

Holy Jesus, it feels good to raise my arms to You and cry out. Thank you for this psalm of David that reminds me that I can know for sure that You are the great I Am. You can always be trusted. Help me to live a life that reflects Your love to those around me.

-Cynthia Harrison

DECEMBER 7

Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. (Philippians 3:7-11)

Paul's intricate theological treatises on law are often emphasized, leading some to wonder if he never really left behind his Pharisaic past. Not that this could be counted against him. For one thing, Pharisaic Judaism was far from a monolith — there is ample evidence to suggest that Jesus' own teachings reflected one stream of Pharisaic thought. But that's another reflection for another day. Here we have a downright weird text that demonstrates well us the futility of trying to pin Paul down: his thought has a living, dynamic, even unpredictable character.

Would anyone have expected Paul to compare "all things" in his life to excrement? Rubbish is a euphemistic translation for a very earthy Greek word. A more precise English translation — and I am not exaggerating here — would read "for his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as s**t, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him." It is clear from Paul's other writings that he does not devalue the physical dimension of God's creation. Quite the contrary, his foundational hope is in the *renewal* of all created things and the *redemption* of the body (see Romans 8). Paul, like Jesus, is undeniably Jewish in his affirmation that the creation is good (see Genesis 1). All this talk of rubbish, therefore, should not be mistaken with the Gnostic idea that the creation is worthless or that the body is a prison. What, then?

I can't believe I am writing this, but I think we are seeing a mystical side to Paul's theology here. This text reminds me of the writings of the German mystic Meister Eckhart, who argued that the soul can only receive God when it has been totally emptied through detachment:

"True detachment is nothing else than for the spirit to stand as immovable against whatever may chance to it of joy and sorrow, honor, shame and disgrace, as a mountain of lead stands before a little breath of wind. This immovable detachment brings a man into the greatest equality with God, because God has it from his immovable detachment that he is God, and it is from his detachment that he has his purity and his simplicity and his unchangeability."

Paul writes his letter from prison. He has lost all of the things that might bring him joy, honor, security, and hope. For some this would be the end, but for Paul it is the beginning.

His spirit is unmoved by the dire circumstances of his life, because he knows that none of these things, blessed though they are, can compare with the blessedness of Christ's life that is given to him through the Holy Spirit, given to him most of all when his life is counted as least of all. In his poverty he comes to know the riches of the kingdom of heaven.

God of my being and all being, we thank you for the mystery of abundance, for the promise of your presence in trial and rejoicing, and for the peace that passes all understanding. Grant that my spirit may be unmoved by the rise and fall of the tides of life, so that come what may I will stand upright and never stop singing your praises. Amen.

-Jonathan Hauze

DECEMBER 8

Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus. Let those of us then who are mature be of the same mind; and if you think differently about anything, this too God will reveal to you. Only let us hold fast to what we have attained. (Philippians 3:12-16)

As the oft-quoted John Lennon lyric goes, "Life is what happens to you while you're busy making other plans."

Lennon may or may not have intended to say that God made each of us for a specific purpose, and we are not always ready or willing to fulfill it. Now that I'm in my late 20s, some of my peers have discovered that the career goals they set for themselves earlier in life don't seem so fulfilling now. Like several friends of mine, I've recently figured out that pressing toward the purpose God designed me for, by giving me specific talents and aptitudes, means following a different path than the one I have pursued.

As Christians we are called to impact the world in the manner for which we were created – and we have to be open to discovering what it is.

–Becky VanderMeulen

DECEMBER 9

'What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, "Son, go and work in the vineyard today." He answered, "I will not"; but later he changed his mind and went. The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, "I go, sir"; but he did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?' They said, 'The first.' Jesus said to them, 'Truly I tell you, the tax-collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax-collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.

(Matthew 21:28-32)

I am the father of two boys, so I think I know how this dad felt when he asked both his sons to work in the vineyard that day. Fact of the matter is I guess that both his sons hurt the father that day. What hurts more, the rejection, or the lie? Those who lived before and in the days of John the Baptist had John and others as messengers foretelling of Gods ways. Later they were blessed to have Jesus live among them. Some of them listened; a few of them learned and changed their ways, but most just went on with their lives. Today we have churches, mosques and synagogues. Most of us have the freedom and the time to worship as we choose. We have the scriptures, and the stories. We are blessed to have gifted ministers, priests, rabbis, and laypeople among us to help us better understand what these teachings mean on many levels. Some of us get it and change. Some of us forget it as soon as we walk out of church. All of us know right from wrong, but very few of us live each day of our daily lives, as God really wants us to live. Thank the Creator for understanding his creation, such that he sent us his only Son to do what it is that we cannot.

Holy One, in this Advent time let me come to better know your ways. Help me to change by reflecting on your magnificence and my littleness. Allow me to so order my life such that it brings grace and honor to your holy name. Christmas is to be treasured, for it brings the gift of Jesus.

-Louis Franconi

DECEMBER 10

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

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

(John 1:19-28)

I am haunted by the thought that John the Baptist is speaking not only to the priests and Levites but also to us when he says "Among you stands one whom you do not know. Throughout the gospels there is a painful disconnect between the good news of the kingdom revealed in Jesus and the human failure to understand. Even when Jesus' own disciples know enough to identify him as the Christ – the Greek word for Messiah – they do not perceive what this means. A conqueror who takes children into his arms and blesses them? A king who keeps company with tax collectors and prostitutes? A holy man who breaks the sabbath? A revolutionary who refuses to put up a fight? Even as they sit at his feet, Jesus remains a mystery. So too with us.

At the beginning of the Gospel of John we read that "He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him" (1:10). Again we see the tension between divine goodness and human unknowing, but also a promise that the creation and the Christ are not irreconcilable. On the contrary, we find that Christ stands at the center of our being, at the source of our lives and all life. Christ is a mystery, yes, but not a secret. When we open our hearts to God in prayer, when we take up a life of loving service to others, we find ourselves in communion with this mystery that is a gift from God. And in this communion we will not only find the true Christ; we will find our true selves.

Christ, whose ways are not our ways, and whose thoughts are not our thoughts, grant that we may come to know you in prayer and in lovingkindness this Advent. By your grace, may our lives merge with your mystery. Amen.

-Jonathan Hauze

DECEMBER 11

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

(Ephesians 6:10-17)

The letter from Paul to his followers in Ephesus reminds us that before becoming an evangelist, he was a soldier. With images of armor and shield, helmet and sword, he encourages the Ephesians to do battle against the powers of darkness and evil. The weapons he recommends are truth, righteousness, the gospel of peace, faith, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

The images of war create a dissonance with Jesus' gospel of love and compassion, but they remind us that each day we labor continuously and personally to live as Jesus taught. To be a follower of Jesus requires us to take up the whole armor of God, living truthfully, with love and compassion for all those we meet. Evil will only be overcome with love, and war with peace – a lesson we sometimes struggle to remember in our still broken and too often hostile world.

Prince of Peace – lead us in our battles against darkness in this world, and arm us with your great love for each and every one of your children.

–Barb Schneller

DECEMBER 12

When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, 'Tell me what I may do for you, before I am taken from you.' Elisha said, 'Please let me inherit a double share of your spirit.' He responded, 'You have asked a hard thing; yet, if you see me as I am being taken from you, it will be granted you; if not, it will not.' As they continued walking and talking, a chariot of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them, and Elijah ascended in a whirlwind into heaven. Elisha kept watching and crying out, 'Father, father! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen!' But when he could no longer see him, he grasped his own clothes and tore them in two pieces. (2 Kings 2:9-12)

My Grandma was one of the most formidable people I have ever known. If there was a dirty job to do, she was in favor of doing it quickly, and with no complaining. As the owner of a sheep farm and property on Long Island Sound, there were plenty of dirty jobs. Barnacles and seaweed encrusting the bottom of a boat? "Somebody find me a chisel." Gooney mess of sheep manure and mud with an old bathtub stuck in the middle? "Let me get my boots on, and has anyone seen the mop?" Somebody wants to go fishing and needs fiddler crabs for bait? There's Grandma, knee deep in salt marsh mud, with a bucket full of angry, scrabbling crabs. I often felt the sting of her impatience when we kids were squeamish about getting dirty, or when we wanted to run and play before the chores were done. As an adult, I see the wisdom in her attitude. Won't we enjoy our swim so much more, knowing we've finished weeding the green beans?

Elisha wants to inherit a double share of Elijah's spirit, but Elijah warns him that he has asked for a hard thing. He must be willing to face the terrifying spectacle of watching his mentor being taken up to heaven. He must not look away, not flinch. Now, muddy barnacles and snapping fiddler crabs have nothing on the chariots of Israel and its horsemen, but I think there's a parallel to be drawn to our lives today. It's Advent. I want to sit and drink hot cocoa and eat Christmas cookies while listening to Mel Torme and Bing Crosby. I want to put up the tree, sing carols, look at the pretty lights. But there's work to be done. There are children starving, not just in Africa, but right here in our own backyard. Before I can sit back and enjoy the Christmas season, I need to do the Advent work. I need to prepare the way for the baby who was born in a lowly stable. I need to inherit a prophetic spirit, by giving my life to the work of Christ, right up until the day of his coming.

God, help me to face the difficult truths this Advent season. Turn my thoughts to those who need my help and attention. Help me remember that my fulfillment and joy will come through loving and caring for others.

-Liza Hauze

DECEMBER 13

As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead. So they kept the matter to themselves, questioning what this rising from the dead could mean. Then they asked him, 'Why do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?' He said to them, 'Elijah is indeed coming first to restore all things. How then is it written about the Son of Man, that he is to go through many sufferings and be treated with contempt? But I tell you that Elijah has come, and they did to him whatever they pleased, as it is written about him.'

(Mark 9:9-13)

The disciples have beheld countless wonders that do not harmonize with what Jesus keeps telling them about the inevitability of suffering and contempt. They have seen firsthand a divine power to heal the incurable, to turn a few morsels into a feast, to command sea and sky. And now they have seen — on a mountaintop, no less — the light of God's glory on a human face. They must be forgiven for failing to understand that such a presence would participate in the sufferings of the world. It makes no earthly sense.

I can only imagine how perplexed they must have been when Jesus suggested that John the Baptist was Elijah. The ancient scriptures suggested that Elijah would return to bring reconciliation (Malachi 3:22-23), but John's death has brought nothing but sorrow. Now the disciples will have to wrestle not only with the meaning of the resurrection, but also with the more intimate and immediate question of how they are called to participate in God's renewal of the creation. Must they suffer too?

This is the probably the most scandalous part of the gospel, because it goes against the most cherished human convictions about what it means to be saved. We all want to be kept from all evil, not cast into the fire. But the gospel tells us that God comes into the world in the body of a suffering servant who takes the brokenness of the world into himself. From the stable to the cross, God shares the darkness of the despised in order to shine a light from within. Perplexing though it is, we are called to do no less.

When every tree is draped in gold and silver tinsel, and every house is aglow with happy Christmas preparations, do not let me forget, O God, that you will be born among the poor and lowly, and live among the outcast and the afflicted, and die among the shamed and the despised. Let me find you in these places, so that my joy may come not from an avoidance of the world's hurt but from my sharing in your deep love revealed in the midst of these troubles.

-Jonathan Hauze

DECEMBER 14

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs. (Hebrews 1:1-4)

Try to wrap your mind around this one: The child who was born in Bethlehem is the Son through whom God created the worlds. Go ahead, try.

For many people who are not inclined to faith, this kind of claim is cited as proof of the ridiculousness of religion. Sometimes it is not only a stumbling block but also an offense, because it is seen as a rejection of scientific claims about the cosmos. But I think that there is often a sad misunderstanding about the nature of biblical testimony. We are so used to thinking in one dimension — call it the empirical way — that we close our minds to the possibility that there are multiple dimensions of truth, multiple ways of seeing human life that are not mutually exclusive.

The cosmic view of this text does not explain the processes of the universe any more than the poet William Carlos Williams explained exactly how it is that

so much depends
upon

a red wheel
barrow

glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens.

In his book *The Poetry of William Carlos Williams of Rutherford*, Wendell Berry notes that some readers may respond flippantly to this poem by asking, "So much of *what* depends upon . . .?" "But," Berry writes, "don't we know that difficult and painful lives have been made livable by just such comely small visions as this poem gives us, and by somebody's ability to say such graceful things about them?"

I have no idea *how* Christ sustains all things by his powerful word, and how exactly that might relate to the study of quantum mechanics. But don't we know that broken lives have been restored by just such majestic grand visions as this scripture gives us? Don't we know that our lives are sustained by a love greater than the angels, higher than the stars?

Thanks be to you, Lord Jesus, for the peace that passes all understanding, for the love that is beyond all knowing, for your word that sustains all things in mercy. Amen.

-Jonathan Hauze

DECEMBER 15

*For to which of the angels did God ever say,
'You are my Son;
today I have begotten you'?*
*Or again,
'I will be his Father,
and he will be my Son'?*
*And again, when he brings the firstborn into the world, he says,
'Let all God's angels worship him.'*
*Of the angels he says,
'He makes his angels winds,
and his servants flames of fire.'*
*But of the Son he says,
'Your throne, O God, is for ever and ever,
and the righteous scepter is the scepter of your kingdom.
You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness;
therefore God, your God, has anointed you
with the oil of gladness beyond your companions.'* (Hebrews 1:5-9)

This text shows us that the popular fascination with angels is nothing new. I gather from these verses that this became a problem for some early Christians. That the author should begin his epistle with a barrage of scripture quotations demonstrating the superiority of Christ over the angels tells me that this was much more than a minor problem. Apparently this religious community had made angels such a central part of its devotional life that it had begun to endanger their communion with Christ. He writes to remind them of the primacy of Christ, whom the angels were sent to serve.

Even if angels are not a part of our own religious imagination, this text still has the power to speak to our own lives and faith. The New Testament scholar James Edwards, in a commentary on Hebrews, says that this text addresses not only the human fascination with spiritual creatures but also the human desire for spiritual *experiences*. Now it hits closer to home. I have never prayed to be visited by an angel, or even worried all that much about whether angels still visit the earth these days, but I have certainly longed for an experience that would bring me closer to heaven. Who among us has not secretly hoped for some visible sign of the invisible God, some unearthly voice to confirm our heavenly hope?

Most of the time these feelings come and go quite innocently, without doing any harm. But if we let them become the center of our faith, setting our hearts on the hope of having an extraordinary experience, the real presence of Christ in our midst may be obscured. James Edwards again: "Making spiritual experience one's primary objective is like being in love with marriage instead of one's spouse. A good marriage results from loving and serving

one's spouse; a healthy spiritual life results from glorifying Christ. Being in love with spiritual experience is not the same as loving and serving Christ and can even eclipse Christ."

There is good news here, especially for those who worry that they are not spiritual enough or gifted enough to have a real relationship with God. Jesus has told us, "I will be with you always, even to the end of the age." Christ is already present in our daily experience. His life stands at the very center of our lives. We need not look for him in another dimension, for he has already come to us, and he is born to us again each day, that we might love and serve him with joyful hearts.

Praise be to you, O God, that you have given us the presence of Christ in the midst of our everyday lives, that you have brought heaven to earth and made your home among us. Save us from restlessness and feelings of spiritual inadequacy, that we may be thankful for that which we have already been given, this incomparable gift of your peace in Christ. Amen.

-Jonathan Hauze

December 16

When they heard these words, some in the crowd said, 'This is really the prophet.' Others said, 'This is the Messiah.' But some asked, 'Surely the Messiah does not come from Galilee, does he? Has not the scripture said that the Messiah is descended from David and comes from Bethlehem, the village where David lived?' So there was a division in the crowd because of him. Some of them wanted to arrest him, but no one laid hands on him.

(John 7:40-44)

I've been doing genealogy for quite a few years now. I enjoy the thrill of the chase figuring out the next set of ancestors in my chart, discovering who they were as people, where they fit into the society of their time. One of my biggest challenges is deciding which information is "fact" or even "likely" and which information is just a story embroidered with each telling. For example, I have one ancestor who was either: 1) a poor soul who was captured by German troops and sold to the British to fight in the American uprising, but escaped after reaching America or, 2) was a German mercenary soldier who came to America to fight on the side of the British, and when he got here he deserted. Surely the first story paints my ancestor in far better light! As a genealogist, it's my job to gather facts and present a case for this man's place in history.

In the Bible passage above, we have a crowd who needs to decide what is the truth? Who is this man? Facts are in short supply. Few people can read and fewer still would have access to written documentation. In today's world, we'd have people searching via their various handheld devices to google the correct scripture, to search twitter for other's opinions, and examine Youtube for photo evidence. But even today it would come down to each individual needing to take the facts as they know them and give thoughtful consideration. They would still need to find the answer within themselves.

Stuart Chase, an economist, is (sometimes questionably) considered the author of the quote: "For those who believe, no proof is necessary. For those who don't, no proof is enough." My faith comes from my ancestors, instilled into each successive generation. Like everyone, there are times that I question but for me the questions pass and again I just know. It is a blessing we have been given to be able to question, to be able to thoughtfully consider, and to be able to faithfully believe.

Dear God, Help our questions and thoughts, our readings and observations, to bring us closer to You. Amen.

-Nancy Greger

DECEMBER 17

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

(Luke 1:26-38)

We are all servants of the Lord. Most of us will not be called upon to carry the Holy Child, the Son of God. But that doesn't make us any less important. We are all special in the eyes of the Lord. Our tasks are just different from Mary's monumental task.

I am not aware that I have received my task yet. Maybe I have and I just don't know it. But I am not aware I have been visited by an angel. There have been times when it seemed like a miracle had occurred so maybe my visitation happened and I just didn't realize it. However I think my turn is yet to come. Some day I will receive my task. I don't know if I will be ready or not. If I put myself in Mary's shoes and wonder if I could have been so brave. I am not so sure.

I trust however, that the Lord will carry me. "For Nothing is impossible with God". This is a very powerful statement. It says nothing is impossible. That also means everything is possible. One of the guiding principles I live my life by is that I am not afraid to try things. I recently climbed on a ladder to the top of the sanctuary to change the battery in the smoke detector. Most people will probably say I was crazy. But with the right equipment and safety precautions (and a little trust in my helpers) it was a task that I was able to get done.

But changing the battery was nothing like the task Mary received. If and when I receive that visit, I hope I am up to the task. I will need to remember not to be afraid. I just hope I have the strength.

Lord, please show me that I have the ability to do your work. Remind me that nothing is impossible with God. Amen.

-Greg Allen

DECEMBER 18

*And Mary said,
'My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants for ever.'* (Luke 1:46-55)

The song of Mary echoes the song of Hannah (1 Samuel 2:1-10), who is greatly troubled by her failure to bear a child. Hannah prays that God might look upon her in mercy by giving her the son of her longing. God remembers Hannah, and she conceives and bears a son. His name is Samuel, and he will become the first great prophet of Israel since the days of Moses. Rejoicing in God's blessing, Hannah sings:

My heart exults in the LORD;
my strength is exalted in my God.
My mouth derides my enemies,
because I rejoice in my victory . . .
The bows of the mighty are broken,
but the feeble gird on strength.
Those who were full have hired
themselves out for bread,
but those who were hungry are fat
with spoil . . . (vv. 1, 4-5a)

Both songs celebrate the faithfulness of God who intervenes mercifully on behalf of the poor and the oppressed. Both songs imagine a new world in which social disparities have been radically overturned by the strength of God. But there is something strange about Mary's singing, something that makes it much more than an echo. Consider the timing. While Hannah's lifelong prayers have been answered, Mary's pregnancy comes at a troubling time, placing her young life in jeopardy. And while Hannah's song comes *after* the child has been

born and weaned, Mary raises her voice when the child has only just begun to grow in her womb – she speaks of God's saving work as a done deal even before the Christ is born.

What can we say about this surprising testimony? How can we account for the fact that Mary should sing a joyful song of victory at this precarious moment in her life, when the future of God's people is undetermined and her own life hangs in the balance? Do not think that you are unworthy of a faith so deep and bold. This is not about Mary's perfection, but about the greatness of the Holy Spirit who puts a new song into her heart. God has given this same Spirit to us, and God has made the same promise to us and to the whole creation, that "God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Thessalonians 5:9). This is the hope in which we live. This is the reason why we sing!

Lord God, help me to walk with a confidence born not of pride but of hope, that I may live to serve you by doing the good works of Christ, by singing your praises with all my heart. Amen.

-Jonathan Hauze

DECEMBER 19

*Say among the nations, 'The Lord is king!
The world is firmly established; it shall never be moved.
He will judge the peoples with equity.'
Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice;
let the sea roar, and all that fills it;
let the field exult, and everything in it.
Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy
before the Lord; for he is coming,
for he is coming to judge the earth.
He will judge the world with righteousness,
and the peoples with his truth. (Psalm 96:10-13)*

For little children, Christmastime really is the most wonderful time of the year! Being too young, they are unable to grasp the true Christmas meaning and take delight in all the events and activities surrounding them: houses bright with colorful lights; real live fir trees brought into the house and decorated with blinking lights and garland; children and parents singing Jingle Bells and Here Comes Santa Claus, movies delighting them with visions of dancing snowmen and flying reindeer; and the commercials of the many toys that can be found under the tree Christmas morning. The culmination of all these events, of course, is children looking in awe to the heavens as Santa makes his way to their homes as he flies all the way from the North Pole!

There will come a time when all people look to the heavens in awe, not for Santa Claus, but God as He comes to claim His place as the true leader of the world. Throughout the earth voices of resounding joy will be heard all over the hills, the seas, and the forests. People will stand shoulder to shoulder as the rich and the poor, the old and the young, the powerful and the weak, the thief and the victim, and the believer and the non-believer are judged equally. Material wealth will have no meaning as God's promise of a new heaven and earth is fulfilled.

Dear Lord, Let us all keep looking to the heavens and waiting, for one day a joy that the earth has yet to see, the coming of God, will be here. Amen.

-Mary Lou Esposito

DECEMBER 20

*Therefore wait for me, says the Lord,
for the day when I arise as a witness.
For my decision is to gather nations,
to assemble kingdoms,
to pour out upon them my indignation,
all the heat of my anger;
for in the fire of my passion
all the earth shall be consumed.*

*At that time I will change the speech of the peoples
to a pure speech,
that all of them may call on the name of the Lord
and serve him with one accord.
From beyond the rivers of Ethiopia
my suppliants, my scattered ones,
shall bring my offering. (Zephaniah 3:8-10)*

Most days I am a pacifist. At least, I try. I try to stay rooted in the gentleness of Jesus. I try to learn his love, and to practice his forgiveness. I try to delight in his teaching, so that I might be like a tree planted by streams of water, yielding the fruits of the Spirit. But sometimes I feel more like the tree in Seamus Heaney's poem:

Wind shakes the big poplar, quicksilvering
The whole tree in a single sweep.
What bright scale fell and left this needle quivering?
What loaded balances have come to grief?

Sometimes I am overwhelmed by the wanton violence and pervasive injustice of the world to the point that I cannot envision a peace that brings justice. Instead, brought down by a wind of indignation, I say, "peace will come later; let justice be done first." You know the feeling. You know the thoughts: "Let the dictators be killed." "Let the armies be crushed." "Let our enemies pay for what they have done to us." "Let the evil ones be consumed with fire."

But this is not God's way. Consider this prophetic text, where at first it sounds like God shares our indignation and justifies our righteous anger: "in the fire of my passion all the earth shall be consumed." The second stanza elaborates in a most surprising way, as the grace of God breaks through: "At that time I will change the speech of the peoples to a pure speech, that *all of them* may call on the name of the Lord and serve him with one accord." God promises to bring not recompense but reunion, not destruction but transformation.

Instead of sweeping away the nations in anger, God gathers them in with a redeeming love, purifying their speech and their lives so that they might glorify God together.

This is a stunning movement from anger to grace. and a radiant vision to inspire us in these days when human speech, political and otherwise, is so often used to divide rather than unite. It is a vision to take into our own bodies, into our own mouths and hearts, so that we might help to build up the body of Christ in the world, serving the God who does not seek to destroy his opponents but to gather them under his wing.

Help me, Merciful One, to withstand the winds of anger and impatience. Nourish my roots with the living water of your love, and abide with me, that I may be an instrument of your peace. Amen.

-Jonathan Hauze

DECEMBER 21

*On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem:
Do not fear, O Zion;
do not let your hands grow weak.
The Lord, your God, is in your midst,
a warrior who gives victory;
he will rejoice over you with gladness,
he will renew you in his love . . .
And I will save the lame
and gather the outcast,
and I will change their shame into praise
and renown in all the earth.
At that time I will bring you home,
at the time when I gather you;
for I will make you renowned and praised
among all the peoples of the earth,
when I restore your fortunes
before your eyes, says the Lord. (Zephaniah 3:16-17a, 19b-20)*

Recently I have been following a heart-rending series of articles in the *New York Times* about the treatment of the developmentally disabled in New York State. One article left me devastated. It told the stories of men and women who died as the result of abuse and neglect while in the care of the state. One man, James Michael Taylor, a 41 year old, "had little more ability than a newborn baby to lift his head." He was born with profound disabilities, confined to a wheelchair, and never learned to walk or talk. But he could smile. One night in 2005, James was left alone in a tub with the water running as a staff member left him to check on another resident. Before the staff person remembered him, James had drowned.

Sometimes the night is too dark, and the wind is too cold, and our sorrow is too great, and all we can do is weep in silence – for the lost, for ourselves, for what is broken between us.

But this is the night into which the Christ child is born. And he is born unto the lost. And he is born unto us. And his birth is the beginning of the healing of the world. And the promise of God resounds in the stillness:

" . . . I will save the lame
and gather the outcast,
and I will change their shame into praise
and renown in all the earth . . ."

And we will all come home together, renewed by the tender love of Christ. All of God's people, rejoicing in each other, gathered for a new life of gladness. Keep your candle burning, for he is coming.

Loving Christ, mend our broken hearts and our broken communities, and teach us to care for the most vulnerable among us, without whom we cannot rejoice. Amen.

-Jonathan Hauze

DECEMBER 22

Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarrelling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires. (Romans 13:11-14)

I am currently battling to quit smoking. I have been battling to quit smoking, and losing this battle, for about a month now. I feel it stunting my creativity, my ability to live fully in the moment and to share the love of God, but until now have not summoned the willpower to give it up and reawaken myself. I believe we all face battles like this, where we know what needs to be done, which course is the right one, and yet struggle to take it. The comforts of our flesh and gratification of our personal desires overtake the compulsion to look outward, to do good for others.

Just as I hit snooze on the alarm clock in the morning, reluctant to leave my comfortable bed although I know it serves no greater good, I find myself trying to hit snooze on my battle with nicotine. But my life is waiting; salvation grows nearer each moment, and I let the valuable moments slip by, snoozing on my duty to live fully, honorably, with love and compassion. I can have no honor when I actively choose something which stunts my ability to create, to be present, to love. But now I choose to awake, to put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and to better serve others instead of remaining wrapped up in gratifying my own unhealthy desires.

-Kelcie Hillard

DECEMBER 23

*In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.' And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,
'Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!' (Luke 2:8-14)*

When I was a little girl, my Uncle Frank, who lived in the country, decided to raise some lambs for harvest—a nice way of saying he was planning on roast lamb. Uncle Frank invited my sister and me to come and see the lambs shortly after they arrived. This is what I learned about lambs:

1. Lambs are not white and fluffy like in story books. They are actually grayish and dirty with leaves and sticks and worse stuck in their wool, and they smell bad—way worse than a wet dog!
2. If one's grandmother wants a picture, and one picks up a lamb to pose as requested, that lamb will pee all over one. Anyone who spends time with lambs will definitely smell bad, too.
3. I did not want a future as a shepherd.
4. Roast lamb is delicious.

In Jesus' time shepherding was a despised occupation. They were considered to be lazy and dishonest. Since they were hanging out with sheep, and they didn't have an Aunt Madge to clean them up and give them cookies, they probably smelled and felt pretty bad, too.

And yet, Luke tells us that God sent angels to the shepherds to tell the news of Jesus' birth. Yes, he sent messages to kings, scholars, and lawyers—all educated and wealthy men, but with the exception of the Magi, they mostly didn't understand or feared anything that might change their status. It was these uneducated and smelly men, living at the bottom of society who got to see and hear the angels sing! Perhaps, today, it is our job to be the angels and bring the message of love and joy to those who might be lost, uneducated or even smelly.

Heavenly Father, so often we need to hear your message of love and joy, again. As in the time of Jesus' coming, so many of us live in despair and poverty. Grant that we may see and hear the angels sing and, filled with joy that we may join with you to bring your kingdom to earth. If you wanted to make lambs a little less smelly, it would be OK, too. Amen.

-Beth Kirschner

DECEMBER 24

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.' So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them. (Luke 2:15-20)

Well here it is. Amidst the shopping, wrapping, and 99.5 FM blaring Eartha Kitt's "Santa Baby" for the umpteenth time since November 15, enter the shepherds, angels, stars and a baby. THE baby. I can't help being won over by our culture's sweet complacency towards this scene, with the animals and shepherds surrounding this new small family in their secure, if rough-hewn, birth place.

What pierces through my serenity is Mary. The shepherds reported to Mary and Joseph that the baby Jesus is God's son, the Messiah, news that Mary heard nine months prior, according to Luke's gospel (1:26-38). And now, "... Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart." So it's true, I imagine her contemplating, the angel said I would bear God's son, and here he is. What an awe-some responsibility!

Have you ever had an experience unfold in your life like the one Mary is going through? Has an unexpected gift to bear diverted your course, one incomprehensible at first but yours nonetheless? I can't say I've had angels appear telling me I will bear one who saves, but perhaps, just maybe one day, some sort of angel will deliver news at once frightening yet filled with great hope. I pray I have the grace to treasure the words, and ponder them in my heart.

—Frances Chester