

West Vancouver United Church
Advent Devotional Guide
2012



Sunday, December 2nd, 2012

"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the temple of the God of Jacob."

Please read Isaiah 2: 1-5

You never know who's going to show up at church. Just this morning I was working away in the office and out of the blue Joseph, Mary and baby Jesus showed up - literally. Bob Gunn has been working over the last year in his workshop creating a beautiful nativity scene to grace the front stairs of our church entrance at the corner of 21st Street and Esquimalt Avenue. Why? Advent and Christmas 'tis the season" when many folks feel that gentle nudge of the Holy Spirit to return or visit our church family for the first time. Instead of saying with Isaiah of old "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord" they are more likely to say, "Let's go to that church I've heard so much about." Through your positive faith sharing in the broader community (we call that evangelism!) God's reputation has been enhanced and more and more people are finding their way to our church family. The greatest joy in this season of welcoming newcomers and practicing hospitality is found in Isaiah's testimony in the second half of verse 3. Why does God draw people into a faith family? "He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths." I deeply, deeply believe that the church exists to make disciples for Jesus and that simply means that through participation in the church family God's Spirit changes lives for good. I can't wait to see people streaming into church for worship in the next few weeks as we work our way through Advent and Christmas. My prayer is that as newcomers pass the Holy Family on the front steps of our church they might glimpse something of incredible, self-giving love of God's family - Father, Son, Spirit in our church family here in West Vancouver. After all, you never know who's going to show up at church.

Prayer: *Gracious God, you are full of amazing grace and abiding love for all creatures great and small. As we walk together towards the stable in Bethlehem this Advent, help us to live for others and practice Christ-centred hospitality so that our hearts may sing with one accord, "Joy to the World! The Lord is come. Let earth receive her King. Let every heart prepare Him room." Every heart. May it be so. Amen*

Rev. Dr. Ross Lockhart

Monday, December 3rd, 2012

Please read Psalm 122

*I was glad when they said to me,
“Let us go to the house of the LORD!”
Our feet are standing within your gates,
O Jerusalem.
Jerusalem – built as a city that is bound firmly together.
To it the tribes go up,
The tribes of the LORD, as was decreed for Israel,
To give thanks to the name of the LORD.
For there the thrones for judgment were set up,
The thrones of the house of David.
Pray for the peace of Jerusalem:
“May they prosper who love you.
Peace be within your walls, and security within your towers.”
For the sake of my relatives and friends
I will say, “Peace be within you.”
For the sake of the house of the LORD our God,
I will seek your good.*

No longer just reading or singing about it, along with almost seventy others from West Vancouver United Church, I'm going to Jerusalem! By the time you read this, we will have experienced the sights, sounds and smells of this city first hand. It may even be that one of the group has tucked the prayer request that you wrote into the Western Wall, the only remnant of the sacred walls that David sings about in this psalm.

The faithful of David's time, made a ritual of the pilgrimage to the Holy City. It united the tribes and renewed their Covenant with God. Still today, “peace within (these) walls and security within (these) citadels” remains a distant hope.

For those who believe that the “Prince of Peace” atoned for **all** of us for **all** time, rendering pilgrimages an unnecessary rite of faith in a living God, Jesus has brought peace into our hearts. His fulfillment of the prophecies of Isaiah bring us to trust God alone as much as in the minor day-to-day annoyances as in the great imponderables of living. 2012 has been a particularly strife-torn year, with wild weather, wars, and world-wide woes of staggering proportions. How much we need peace!

“The Lord be with you!” the ministers announce every time we get together as the Church. Take time to bring all the concerns this season brings to the forefront of your mind (perhaps writing them will help you to acknowledge them openly) and entrust them to the Lord of Peace who alone can provide. “Priceless!” as they say in the credit card ads.

Prayer: *Jehovah Shalom, in whom all power resides, I praise you for your gift of peace. Help me to be a Peace-Bearer as I go about my daily routines, trusting You in the events that test my resources. In the name of the Prince of Peace, Amen*

Liz B.

Tuesday, December 4th , 2012

Please read Romans 13: 11-14

“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 quarreling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.”

What does it mean to be truly awake?

Since our children moved from a crib to a bed, we have had a rule that they are not to “get up” until they see the 7 on their clocks. They are to stay in their beds, look at a book or play quietly. There have been times when we have heard them lying there singing to themselves until the moment when the clock changes from 6:59 to 7:00 and they come bouncing out of their rooms.

There is no exception to this rule on Christmas morning. However, there have been years when the children have been awake for some time when the clock turns to 7:00. In contrast, I am hardly what you would consider truly awake at the magic 7:00. Usually, I have been up late on Christmas Eve trying to get a head start on preparation of the Christmas dinner, putting the final touches on some gift wrapping or simply sitting in our living room with all the lights off, except for the Christmas tree, watching the fire and listening to the beautiful music that is such an important part of Christmas Eve for me.

“The hour has already come for you to wake up from your slumber...” (vs. 11) In other words, get up and get going! Why? Because we have some choices we need to make about how we are going to live our lives. Are we going to “put aside the deeds of darkness”? Are we going to “put on the armour of light”? In order to make these choices, we need to be truly awake. These are intentional calls to action. Have you ever tried to make a decision when still in the fog of sleep? Generally, that is difficult to do and certainly you would not want to be making important, life-changing decisions in that state of mind.

So what does it mean to be truly awake?

I think it means that we need to be paying attention to the world around us and how we are in the world. I think it means that we need to consider all the choices we make in the context of what it means to be a follower of Jesus. Thankfully, we can “clothe [ourselves] with the Lord Jesus Christ” and so do not travel this road alone.

I am glad to say that on Christmas morning, my sleepy state disappears very quickly as I am swept up in the joy and enthusiasm that emanates from our children. So to it can be in our walk of faith. We can be truly awake in the joy of God's gift to us in His Son, Jesus Christ.

Prayer: *Gracious and loving God, thank you for the gift of your Son. In this busy Christmas season, help us to be truly awake to the world around us so that we can make choices that reflect the lives we are called to live as followers of Jesus. Amen.*

Fiona & Brian W.

Wednesday, December 5th , 2012

Please read Matthew 24:36-44

“... Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.”

For as long as I can remember, with perhaps one or two exceptions, my mom has hosted Christmas dinner. The biggest “problem” is finding a turkey big enough to feed up to 12, 16, 18 people, while still fitting in the oven. My mom has told us of Christmas dinners at her house as a child; with so many people in attendance they had to set up a table in the basement. There was never a question of hosting friends who had no dinner to go to. “No problem, there’s plenty for everyone!” Unexpected guests are always welcomed with open arms. There is always room at the table, always a gift under the tree. When we open our homes to near-strangers, we open our hearts; love flowing both ways. We must keep our hearts and our minds open always, to receive unexpected guests during the Christmas season and throughout the year.

***Prayer:** Heavenly Father, during this busy Christmas season, help us to prepare ourselves to welcome you into our hearts and our homes. Amen.*

Debbie C.

Thursday, December 6th, 2012

Please read Isaiah 11: 1-10

*"...the wolf will live with the lamb,
...the leopard will lie down with the goat,
The infant will play near the cobra's den, and the young child will put its hand into the viper's nest.*

*They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain,
for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord
as the waters cover the sea".*

Years and years ago, when I was a girl in England, it snowed one Christmas like no other. Snow was deep and lay in heaps everywhere like wet laundry. Snow on snow on snow....

No one came out of their houses except the man across the street, dragging a sack of coal home to his wife. Nothing moved except the tiny yellow Blue Tits, who flitted about from door step to door step, chipping at the silver tops of the milk bottles for the frozen cream. During the days, the clouds dissolved and the sun warmed the frozen Hertfordshire countryside. The snow softened like wet meringue; icicles dripped and the thorny tips of the black hawthorn poked through the snow on the hedgerows. Repeatedly every night, snow would fall and the temperatures would collapse. Over and over this happened until the frozen landscape became like a formless glossy confection.

One frigid night, the sky was clear and the moon was a brilliant orange. My father got up from his chair by the kitchen fire, put on his boots and his scratchy wool jacket and tuque, and said quietly, "Come on Mare. Let's go out."

We stepped out of the gate and into an unknown land. The mounds of iced snow were like whipped bowls, overflowing with shiny batter. It was impossible to tell where the road ended and the path began. The snow glistened, gold and orange and the frozen fields were heaped with Sticky Toffee Pudding. We trudged up the crisp car tracks to the top of the first field and looked down on our cottage below, buried like gingerbread under whipped cream and toffee sauce. I wondered, is this place home or have we stumbled into Heaven? Had the twigs and branches we gather nightly for firewood turned to white chocolate? Were the summer pastures now piled high with fluffy scones and clotted cream? Was the brook now frozen barley sugar? The world was inside out: suddenly filled with sugarplums - what was soft was hard, what was dark was light; what was bitter was sweet.

My father said, Come on Mare, and he took my mittened hand. Together we stepped over the hardened brook and up onto the three foot deep, ice-glazed field of snow. We stood amazed on top, neither of us breaking through the crust! And then, like taking a spoon to a glassy crème brûlée, I raised one boot and stomped down, heel first, shattering the crisp glaze, my foot sinking into the fluffy snow below. Laughing we both did this, and took another step, and another and another, until we looked back at the path of our deep tracks. It was like writing on a huge white Christmas cake. We both knew what to do next and, as we stomped out our message, we sang at the tops of our voices, our steaming breath illuminating the frigid night:

*Good King Wenceslas looked out,
On the Feast of Stephen,
When the snow lay round about,
Deep and crisp and even.
Brightly shone the moon that night,
Though the frost was cruel.
When poor man came in sight,
Gathering winter fuel.*

Later that week, as the snow began to finally melt, my father and I would look up the hill from our cottage window to the top field and smile. No one knew who had left the Word, but we had been to Heaven and back and had shared the message.

Noel! declared the field. Noel! Noel!

Prayer: *Creator God, surprise us with the beauty around us, within us and between us. Help us to bring Heaven to our daily lives on earth. Keep our eyes open to your Grace. Amen.*

Mary B.

Friday, December 7th , 2012

Please read Romans 15:4-13

“May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

In June, Bob and I moved to Halifax. We left three university-aged children in our home in North Vancouver. Grandpa, who had been living with us in North Vancouver was moved to an apartment across the street from Lion’s Gate Hospital so that he could continue to visit Grandma who was an Alzheimer’s patient at Evergreen. Our move had been encouraged by our children, our friends and extended family. They all promised to look after Grandma and Grandpa. Everything was going according to plan and we were looking forward to the three children flying in to Halifax for Christmas on December 14th and staying until New Year’s Eve.

Everything was ready, they arrived in the early morning, we hardly stopped talking, so much to share. The next morning, my dad called “Your Mother has died.” So unexpected. We were so unhappy to be so far away. Yet such a relief for everyone. This once beautiful woman was only a shell of the vibrant person we had all known and loved; finally released from her suffering. What to do? My wonderful Dad said stay where you are, enjoy your family and come home with the children as they had planned. I will be fine. I am tired. I need time to recover, everyone is helping and we will celebrate your mother’s life when you come home.

Romans 15 says “*May you live in harmony with one another in accordance with Christ Jesus*”. Perhaps my Dad did need us immediately, I will never know, but I do know he gave my family and me a great Christmas gift allowing us to enjoy Advent with thanksgiving and love in our hearts.

***Prayer:** Dear Lord, let us enjoy and be thankful for the true blessings of Christmas – family, friends and your love in Jesus. Amen.*

Linda & Bob G.

Saturday , December 8th , 2012

Please read Matthew 3 1-12

“Prepare the way...”

“It was Santa!” my mother still insists, even though more than twenty years have gone by since *that* Christmas. The year was 1989.

For weeks, my brother and I watched with anticipation as my parents prepared the house for our guests. With the aroma of cinnamon and cloves swirling through the halls, decorations went up, beds were prepared, gifts were wrapped, and baked goods were baked. On Christmas Eve, my Uncle and Aunt tumbled up our driveway, their arms full of gifts and restless children. Quickly we were whisked off to bed in our little burgundy plaid pajamas, waiting. Everything was ready. Everything was perfect.

In the French tradition of *Réveillon*, it was close to midnight when we woke up for a first glance at our gifts. Outside, a light snow was falling. And that’s when we saw them: out in the middle of our backyard, far from any footprints, were small deer tracks, framed on each side by what could only be sleigh tracks! We were *astonished*. Santa had really been to our house - and we had proof!

To this day, when I ask my mother how those tracks *really* came to be, she looks at me with that familiar twinkle in her eye and insists, “It was Santa!”

And so, in the midst of preparing yourself and your home for this Royal Celebration, may you take time to rekindle that childlike twinkle and find ways to bring unexpected warmth, joy and love to those around you.

Prayer: *Gracious God, in this season of wonder, may you guide us in our preparations, both external and internal. In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.*

Simon L.

Sunday, December 9th, 2012

Please read Luke 1: 46b-55

*“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....”*

Imagine a remote English Cotswold village in the dead of winter, a very snowy Sunday afternoon just before Christmas... My Mother, nothing daunted, phoned the Rector to see if it would be all right if the girls wore trousers to church since we had to plough through snowdrifts to get there! Needless to say, he was delighted to have anyone who would brave the elements!

The 16th century church was bitterly cold; the poor organist had a tiny heater to stop his hands from going into rigor mortis. But the beautiful service of Evensong made up for everything. The “Magnificat” or “The Song of Mary” is a great hymn of praise, and the opening phrase comes into my mind often on the many occasions when I am thankful for all that is given to me. (A more modern hymn interpretation of the text is “Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord! Unnumbered blessings, give my spirit voice; tender to me the promise of His word; in God my Saviour shall my heart rejoice.”) Singing these words in that setting with my family and the others in the very small congregation set the path for the rest of the journey to the stable in Bethlehem.

The season of Advent is a time of expectant waiting for the renewal which we are given with the birth of Jesus. The great faith which Mary expressed as she waited for her time is something which we, and our “children’s children” can all share: her message is a perpetual gift.

Going back to the village church, I am sure that we had our “moments” during that Christmas season, as families do, but that particular evening is a very special memory from my childhood days. Leaving the church that night, we sang the “Nunc Dimittis”. Perhaps you might like to pray these words when you leave one of our services?

***Prayer:** Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word. For mine eyes have seen thy salvation, which thou hast prepared before the face of all people. To be a light to lighten the Gentiles and to be the glory of thy people Israel.*

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost, as it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.

Rosemary M.

Monday, December 10th, 2012

Please read Isaiah 35: 1-10

*“...And the ransomed of the Lord shall return,
and come to Zion with singing;
Everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;
They shall obtain joy and gladness,
And sorrow and sighing shall flee away.”*

Many of you will remember the songs that come out of the dark days of the Second World War. One in particular, made popular by Vera Lynn, expressed the longing for that day when the war would finally be over and the world would be at peace.

*“ There’ll be blue birds over the white cliffs of Dover
Tomorrow, just you wait and see,
There’ll be love and laughter and peace for ever after
Tomorrow, when the world is free.”*

Long before, during the dark days of their exile, the Hebrew people, too dreamed of better days. A time when God would intervene in a new way and finally bring His kingdom of peace and righteousness.

Their prophets spoke of that new day when the Messiah would come to save and redeem His people. Some saw the coming Messiah as a Warrior King – like David who would come again and restore Israel to its former power and glory. That was the popular belief of those times.

But one of the greatest of their prophets – Isaiah- understood that God’s kingdom would be established not through the sword, but through the power of love.

The Messiah would come, he said, not with the pomp and circumstance of earthly power, but as a Servant and Healer and One, who through the sacrifice of his own life, would save his people from the bondage of their sin.

It is surely God’s will that all people should be set free from oppression and injustice – but Isaiah knew so well that people could be politically free and still be in bondage. That true freedom peace and justice begins within the minds and spirits of men and women.

He knew that if the world is to be reborn, then men and women must be born again and made new in the image of God. And so, in the fullness of time, the ancient prophecy is fulfilled and a child is born, in a stable in Bethlehem, in the days of Herod the King.

Today, we look forward to the coming of God’s kingdom, when love will triumph over hatred and prejudice; righteousness over evil and justice over oppression.

This is, after all the prayer our Lord taught us:

“Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven”

But as we pray and work for the coming of the kingdom, let us remember that our God is one who comes in the every-day events of our lives- in the unexpected- He is there at the crossroads

of choice and decision – in the dark hours of grief and despair. In our moments of joy and celebration God is closer than we think.

For this Advent meditation, we would like to share a poem by a contemporary Author, Ann Weens.

The Coming of God.

Our God is one who comes to us in a burning bush, in an angel's song in a newborn child.

Our God is the one who cannot be found locked in the Church, not even in the Sanctuary.

Our God will be where God will be with no restraints, no predictability.

Our God lives where Our God lives. And destruction has no power and even death cannot stop the Living.

Our God will be born when God will be born. But there is no place to look for the one who comes to us. When God is ready God will come. Even to a God-forsaken place like a stable in Bethlehem.

WATCH For you do not know WHEN God comes.

Watch that you might be found WHENEVER, WHEREVER God comes. EVEN TO A GOD FORSAKEN PLACE LIKE A STABLE IN BETHLEHEM. WATCH, for you do not know when God comes. WATCH THAT YOU MIGHT BE FOUND, WHENEVER, WHEREVER God COMES.

Prayer: *Guide us, O God by your word and the Holy Spirit that in your light we may see light; in your truth find freedom; and in your will discover our peace and joy, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Rev. John & Joan G.

Tuesday, December 11th , 2012

Please read Ecclesiastes 3: 1-8

*“There is a time for everything,
and a season for every activity under heaven...”*

I don't know how to say “traffic Congestion” in Spanish but Mexico City is famous for the most congested streets on earth. It was Christmas week and we were in a cab for what was going to be a two hour ride through Mexico City to my mother-in-Laws home and we would have to stop enroute for flowers and a bottle of wine .

Our driver had stopped for a red light when I looked over and saw that poor little guy. His twisted, disfigured little body somehow balanced upright between two crutches begging at the curb. It was like someone slapped and shook me at the same time . I was literally overcome with pity and as quickly as my eyes welled up with tears the light turned green so in broken voice I called to our driver to stop. “Please stop now!” I ran back between the cars and placed what cash I had in his pocket then quickly back through the angry blocked cars and busy alleyways.

I don't know why that particular beggar had such a profound impact on me. I just couldn't get his image out of my mind. The cab driver stopped by a large shopping mall where we could get the flowers and wine. We ran in and after a short while found what we needed but when I went to pay I realized my wallet was still in the cab alone with the driver. My wife said “OH NO” I bet he's gone by now. We ran back to where we left the cab and there was the driver standing outside his cab with my wallet in his hand waiting to give it to me.

For everything there is a season and a time for everything under heaven ... That little guy at the red light showed me and a cab driver the season of humanity and the time for giving.

***Prayer:** God of compassion, in this Christmas season keep our eyes open for the need of others and our hearts open to your gentle surprises. In Jesus name...Amen.*

Michael M.

Wednesday, December 12th, 2012

Please read: James 5: 7-10

“Be patient therefore, brethren, unto the coming of the Lord. Behold, the husbandman waiteth for the precious fruit of the earth, and hath long patience for it, until he receive the early and latter rain. Be ye also patient; make firm your hearts, for the coming of the Lord draweth nigh. Grudge not one against another, brethren, lest ye be condemned. Behold, the Judge standeth before the door! My brethren, take the prophets, who have spoken in the name of the Lord, as an example of suffering affliction and of patience.”

As we think about this verse and a Christmas themed story to accompany it, I couldn't help but think of Santa Claus! Each year, children around the world put their complete trust into Santa Claus in the hope that he will fulfill their wishes on Christmas morning. This exhibits a level of patience and faith that is often unmatched in any other aspect of our lives.

Our family tradition is to hang our stocking at the fireplace, along with the obligatory milk and cookies, when we go to bed on Christmas Eve. Upon waking in the morning, we would find our bulging stocking placed magically at the end of our bed. I always marveled at how Santa could sneak into my room without waking me.

I can recall one Christmas Eve when I was very young, perhaps 4 years old. I awoke in the night to go to the bathroom that was across the hall from my room. Upon returning to my bed, I saw my stocking at the end of my bed! I could absolutely not believe it. How had Santa snuck by me? How had I missed him? Thank goodness I had missed him for I believed that I must NEVER see Santa or he would never return again! So, I dived quickly into my bed and forced myself back to sleep.

Over the years, friends tried to instill doubts about Santa in me. But I would not listen to them. I *knew* that Santa had been to my room and placed my stocking at my bed. I *knew* that Santa was real and worked all year to make my wishes come true. I was resolute in my belief. I considered that fateful night in my early childhood to be absolute proof.

Don't you wish that we could all experience this incredible faith? That our belief would never waiver? That we would never be swayed by the doubt of others? That we would be offered what would appear to be absolute proof of everything we believe?

Prayer: *Dear God, please help us to find the innocent and uncomplicated faith of childhood. Amen.*

Heather & Conal W.

Thursday, December 13th, 2012

Please read: Matthew 11:2-11

“The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. “

The fire crackles as our little ones dive into their Christmas stockings, eagerly and reverently pulling out each treasure, one at a time. Our friends and family gather in the living room, full of chatting and laughter. Dylan makes waffles for brunch, while Katie serves up mimosas, and everyone snacks on roasted chestnuts... that's how Christmas is supposed to go, right? We're just starting to figure this out. We look forward to the day that we will tell nostalgic stories of our holidays. This being our first married Christmas, we're beginning to piece together some of our family traditions, along with some brand new ones of our own. Hopefully we'll find a meaningful way to celebrate this beautiful holy day together.

This season is a special one of new beginnings. The anticipation of Jesus' birth, the coming of the One who brought hope and fixed what was broken, mirrors the hope that we feel as we think ahead to the future. Jesus, the baby in a manger, grew up to be a divine man who spent his days restoring lost vision and raising people from the dead. As we're dreaming of adventures, careers, children, and many memorable Christmases to come, we look to Jesus. We are filled with the hope and inspiration he ushered into this world and hope to live a life in his miraculous footsteps. Maybe with waffles and mimosas too.

***Prayer:** Father of light, may you open our eyes to see with the vision of your hope and show us more of how good you are. Amen.*

Katie & Dylan N.

Friday, December 14th, 2012

Please read Isaiah 7: 10-16

“Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz, saying, ‘Ask a sign of the Lord your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven’. But Ahaz said, ‘I will not ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test.’ Then Isaiah said: ‘Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel. He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted.’”

Hope, Excitement and Gratitude

Recently I was being given a tour of beautiful Prince Edward Island by a budding soul-friend who will deliver her first child in November. As she drove along her baby had just kicked within her womb. She asked me “Gary and I have not decided on names .Would you suggest some names for me?” What an honour bestowed on me by a new found soul-friend. Paula will become the mother of her first child early in November. Here in West Vancouver our minister Laura will deliver her third child by the time most of you read this. Two of my granddaughters are pregnant as I write. For each of these families there is hope, excitement and gratitude.

Advent is a season in which to ponder the situation in which these mothers, couples and families find themselves. Will the name they choose for their newborn make an impact on the life-journey of their child? How much of a dent for good will she or he make on this planet over the course of that journey?

The prophet Isaiah appears to have caught the hope and excitement of all families centuries later where pregnancy is a major factor in their lives. Today every one of us can express our gratitude for the fulfillment of Isaiah’s promise realized through the birth and life of Jesus.

***Prayer:** Eternal God as we prepare for the birth of the Christ child we ask for your blessings on those mothers, couples and families where the coming birth of their baby is at the forefront of their family expectations. In the name of the Christ child. Amen.*

Rev. Dr. John S.

Saturday, December 15th, 2012

Please read Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19

*Let your hand rest on the man at your right hand,
the son of man you have raised up for yourself.
Then we will not turn away from you;
revive us, and we will call on your name.
Restore us, LORD God Almighty;
make your face shine on us,
that we may be saved.*

There is an exercise often performed at choir workshops in which participants are invited to place their right hand on the left shoulder of the singer next to them as a song is being sung. A beautiful living chain of sound is thus physically connected. Through your right hand you become wonderfully aware of the breathing, the sound vibrations, and the positive energy you receive from the singer beside you, while through your left shoulder you are equally aware of the passing on of this musical/physical experience to the person on your left. As well, placing one's hand on another's shoulder is akin to giving a blessing: the passing on of God's richness and gift of unconditional love to the person on your right, while simultaneously receiving the same gift from the person on your left.

Perhaps, the Psalmist in the words "the son of man" is referring to the promised arrival of Jesus into the world, the very arrival we are awaiting in ten days time with such great anticipation at the celebration of Christ's mass.

Either way, there is such hope in these words for we who endure the rain-soaked, light-deprived days of December here the Lower Mainland. What a comfort it is to hear words such as "revive", "restore" and even "shine". Rather than overwhelm us, perhaps this year the busy-ness of the season with its message of sharing, blessing, and the irremovable presence of God might resonate through us as we stand and sing those wonderful carols together.

Prayer: *May the love that God expressed through the gift of his Son, Jesus Christ, revive, restore and shine on us all. Amen.*

Cora & Gerry vanW.

Sunday December 16th, 2012

Please read Romans 1: 1-7

To all who are beloved of God in Rome, called as saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God...

“I’ve Got Good News, Good News,....” was being belted out by our six year old son Craig in the Advent play at church. I wish I could remember the next lines; something about the good news of God’s sending His son Jesus to be the saviour of our sins and happy are they who hear the news. The words of this Christmas song needed to be understood and Craig asked many questions about God and how you can find Him and how people can hear the good news and what happens if you don’t.

We were fairly new to the suburban area of Montreal but because of children’s activities, church and school we had come to know many of our neighbours. Craig took it upon himself to visit with new neighbours three houses away whom we had not yet met. Over the dinner table, he announced that he had been visiting these neighbours and he was worried about them because of the message he interpreted from “Good News, Good News”. His questions ran along the lines of “What happens if people don’t know about Peace on Earth and if they have never heard the Christmas story.” We could not even imagine what the introduction and conversations had been about with our neighbours so we thought a plate of goodies and a knock on the door would be in order. The new neighbours were gracious and laughed at our concern about Craig’s evangelism. They invited us back as a family shortly after to have a meal with them. We traded stories on Christmas customs and on theirs. At one point they took Craig over to a small table and there was a beautiful little crèche from their home in Nigeria. It was all laid out with finely crafted figures and beautiful little animals. They explained to Craig how glad they were for his visits as they had anticipated a very isolated and strange Christmas and had not even unpacked the box holding the crèche.

Only but through a six year old reaching out, we would have missed out on a very memorable Christmas of combined family and friends, old and new.

***Prayer:** Lord, thank you for your light and for your word. Give us the knowledge to know your grace. May we be more compassionate of others and may we remember to share the Good News of your Grace, Love and Peace. In your name we pray. Amen.*

Madelyne M.

Monday, December 17th, 2012

Please read Matthew 1: 18-25

*"Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel"
(which means, God with us).*

After ordination, we were transferred to rural Manitoba and settled in a 5-church pastoral charge. Married for only 9 months, we had travelled across the prairies in her mustard coloured 240Z sports car with our house plants carefully stored in the back; all else had been sent on ahead by moving van.

Arriving in Kenton Manitoba, ten miles north of the #1 Highway, 45 miles northwest of Brandon, we explored the manse, noting that our stuff had not arrived. After unloading the plants we set off to visit relatives in Toronto. Upon our return to Kenton a huge mound of boxes had been piled high in the living room. What had we done? Willingly left family behind and journeyed to what seemed a very strange and lonely place. No mountains, no ocean, no family, no friends but warm weather, although we were told that would drastically change, soon.

We felt alone, not quite abandoned but isolated from everything we had known. The evening stillness and deathly quiet, except for the distant moaning of cattle intensified our lonesome feelings. While unpacking and meeting some of our new neighbours the sense of desertion diminished somewhat. A good friend, a senior elder and mentor from our home church and his wife who were passing through stayed with us for a few days, as did my father who had come for my Labour Day birthday. We still were remembered and therefore connected.

With their departure, that sense of separation returned as we contemplated the prospect of Thanksgiving and Christmas, without family. How would we survive this ordeal? I had felt the call to ministry since my youth but hadn't really grasped the pain of moving far from my home congregation where I had been nurtured and coddled.

Preparation for worship, meetings in all five congregations, weddings, funerals, civic events and pastoral care filled my days and nights. Helen was beginning to cope with her pregnancy, without the support of family and friends, save through the occasional letter or telephone call. (Oh the phone number was Kenton 3; this was a small town, 180 people to be exact) Then, the chair of the local manse committee came into our lives. Everyday Mary would drop by to see our progress of settling in. She taught Helen how to make farm bread and buns. Was there anything she or we needed? Did Dal know how to light and care for a coal-fired furnace? Did she want us to throw out the manse furniture and get something shiny like arborite and chrome? Christmas morning, the ring of the phone awaked us extremely early. There had been a death in the larger town to the north; could I come? Before getting dressed for the blowing snow, that phone had rung another 4 times with the news of death; five in total. I spent the day moving from farmhouse to farmhouse to meet the grieving people who sat around their tables with their Christmas lunch, parcels for one, still strewn under the tree. Close to seven that night I arrived at Mary's daughter's house in Virden, 30 miles away. They had finished dinner and she hustled to the kitchen to make a plate. I lied down on their living room floor and fell asleep. No one wakened me. They let me rest. We were no longer alone. Mary and her family had embraced us and had been caring for us for some time! Later after some my Christmas supper I was reminded

how God is with us even when we don't realize it. In ways we never expect; in saints we hardly know. For me that is what Christmas is about - to remind us that we are never alone.

***Prayer:** Thank you God for coming to us in Jesus, so that we can know that we are always in your care, under your watchful presence. We bless You for the saints of the church who enable us to be somewhat what You've hoped for. Amen.*

Rev. Dal and Helen M.

Tuesday, December 18th, 2012

Please read Isaiah 63: 7-9

"I will mention the loving kindnesses of the Lord and the praises of the Lord, according to all that the Lord has bestowed upon us..."

Growing up in Edmonton, Christmas in our house was nothing short of magical. I was always the first of us 5 kids to wake up and go see what Santa had left for us. Not knowing that my parents had most likely just gone to bed within an hour of me getting up, the house was dark but our tree was always lit up to greet me. I would survey the scene for a minute before going to wake up my brother and sisters. Santa had always set everything up so beautifully. Presents were overflowing from under the tree and surrounding the living room. Stockings were full to the brim. Sometimes a bike or skis would be there with a bow on it. The five of us would sit anxiously waiting for our parents to wake up so we could start unwrapping our treasures. After, we would have breakfast together and spend the day in our pajamas setting up the new Barbie house or playing board games. The extended family would arrive late afternoon for a fun filled night of carols, laughter and a wonderful turkey dinner. These are special memories that I hold dear in my heart.

I remember when I was about 8 years old my Dad told us that we were going to spend a Saturday before Christmas delivering food hampers. I had no idea what that meant, but I piled into the car with the gang and off we went. We made a stop at a warehouse where the adults filled the car with boxes and bags and looked at maps discussing directions. Our first couple of stops were at apartment buildings where we were most often greeted by a woman with young child or two. Their homes were cozy with small, sparsely decorated trees. Not a lot of conversation, usually just "thank you" and were off to our next drop off. After each stop I had more questions for my Dad "What are we doing?" "Don't they have any food?" "Why can't they buy their own groceries?" From a child's perspective, it was hard to grasp such a big topic. One question led to many more. And then came our last stop. It was a house and I remember thinking that if they lived in a house, surely they must have their own food! As if our arrival had been anticipated the front door was open but we still knocked. No one came to greet us, yet Dad seemed to know we should enter. Never mind no Christmas decorations, there was no furniture except a small torn up couch. Empty walls. The carpets were dirty with burn marks in them. I remember saying, "I think we are at the wrong house, no one lives here". Dad said we were at the right house and we were supposed to leave everything in the kitchen. Surveying the kitchen, it looked like the rest of the house, empty except for a few dishes in the sink. We seemed to all know not to ask any questions or say anything, we left the boxes of food and parcels on the counter and left.

Although we had been asking questions all day, that last house finally brought the meaning of the day into our head and our hearts. At that young age, how could we know that not everyone had the life that we had. It had never occurred to me that not everyone woke up in a bed or had food in the fridge, forget about waking up to a house full of presents. I have never forgotten that day... it was my first lesson in being grateful for all the blessings we have in life. Blessings that seem obvious at Christmas, but really, that we have all year long.

***Prayer:** Thank you Father for the many blessings you have bestowed upon us. Not only at this time of year, but every-day of the year. Amen.*

Sarah B.

Wednesday, December 19th, 2012

Please read: Luke 1: 26-38

*“In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. And he came to her and said,
“Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.”*

I cannot imagine a more creative testimony in support of Jesus as Son of God than the one in Luke’s Gospel. We celebrate the birth of Jesus through the unique experience of Luke’s background as a physician. In his account Israel’s guardian angel, Gabriel, tells Mary that by marriage to Joseph she will have the honour to bear a new king of David’s line. Throughout Jewish history, prophets, priests and kings, and especially David, were recognized as sons of God by their faithful service of God’s Spirit. Consequently, as servant of God’s will, Jesus qualifies as Son of God. Luke’s reference to Elizabeth’s unexpected pregnancy signals the beginning of the physician’s story.

We are reminded that the Apostle Paul, as Luke’s mentor, did not recognize Jesus as Son of God until his spiritual confrontation with the resurrected Jesus on the Damascus road. By way of contrast, we are reminded that in Matthew’s account of the birth (Ch. 1:18), the Holy Spirit is literally the father of Jesus (as in Greek mythology!). This support for Jesus as Son of God denies Luke’s emphasis of Jesus Messiah Son of God a descendant of David. Luke knows that David’s line comes through Joseph as father.

The discrepancies that we note confirm the human interest and bias of the witness. It is the testimony of each contributor that challenges us today to express the belief today, of Jesus as the Christ (Messiah), Son of God in a way that approaches the loyalty, devotion and dedication of the New Testament witnesses and the saints of the Church.

***Prayer:** Help us rightly to remember the birth of Jesus. Close the door of hate and open the door of love all over the world. Let kindness come with every gift and good desires with every greeting. Deliver us from evil by the blessing that Christ brings, and teach us to be merry with clear hearts, forgiving and forgiven, for Jesus’ sake. Amen.*

Robert Louis Stevenson

Rev. Dr. Paul M.

Thursday, December 20th, 2012

Please read Psalm 148

*“Praise the Lord!
Praise the Lord from the heavens;
Praise him in the heights!
Praise him, all his angels;
Praise him, all his host!
Praise him, sun and moon;
Praise him, all you shining stars!
Praise him, you highest heavens,
And you waters above the heavens!”*

“Joy to the world! The Lord is come: let earth receive her King! Let every heart prepare him room, and heaven and nature sing...”

Joy to the World, VU#59

When I read Psalm 148, I was struck at the sense of joy and jubilation in this passage. There is energy to this psalm that is reminiscent of the energy, joy and jubilation of Christmastime. However, I also pondered how this passage relates to the coming of the baby Jesus. I discovered that psalm 148 is similar to psalm 29; the praise of heavenly beings is accompanied by a prayer for, or the affirmation of, God’s strengthening or blessing of God’s people. The same movement is also found in Luke where heavenly beings proclaim both God’s glory and peace on earth. Wait a minute, there are a lot of Christmas carols that proclaim God’s glory and peace on earth! Ah, ha! One of my favourite Christmas carols is “Joy to the World”. It has a wonderful energy and joy to it and it is a paraphrase of psalm 98, another hymn that proclaims God’s reign and invites universal recognition in praise.

At Christmastime, it is easy to get bogged down in trying to get the house decorated, buying the appropriate gifts, accommodating everyone’s needs and expectations. This passage reminds us that we need to pause, praise God and proclaim God’s love through the birth of his only begotten Son, Jesus. Some find Christmas a difficult time for a variety of reasons. However, if we focus on the true spirit of the season (not the perfect turkey, everyone in the family being happy, happy, reflecting on how challenging your life is) and instead experience “the wonders of his love”, no matter how we find ourselves this Advent and Christmas, we can be filled with energy, joy and jubilation.

***Prayer:** Loving God, let us prepare room in our hearts for your Son this season. Let us clear sins, sorrows and thorns that infest our minds and hearts. May all we do this season proclaim your love for all that you’ve created. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen*

Rev. Laura Lockhart

Friday, December 21st , 2012

Please read: Hebrews 2: 10-18

“Since, therefore, the children share flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared the same things, so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death. For it is clear that he did not come to help angels, but the descendants of Abraham.”

In this reading Paul reminds the Hebrews that God sent Jesus into the world as flesh and blood to live with us as family. In the contemporary New Testament, The Message, part of this reading says "Since the One who saves and those who are saved have a common origin, Jesus doesn't hesitate to treat them as family saying "I'll tell all my good friends, my brothers and sisters, all I know about You; I'll join them in worship and praise You." God sent Jesus into the world as our brother. To rescue us with his love. His guidance is filled with how to live with one another as family.

As Christmas Day draws closer and the holiday season is in full swing, I am sure I'm not alone in feeling a little frazzled. There are some many things to be done; presents to purchase or make, parties to attend and plan for...you know the story. It's so easy to get caught up in the frenzy.

Last year I was feeling the same way. To top things off I was also directing 200 elementary students in our annual school musical Christmas play. This is a big deal. Countless hours go into rehearsal, sewing costumes, set design and construction, We fill Centennial Theatre to capacity for our performance. I have been doing this for 8 years. In all that time, for various reasons, my own family has never been in attendance.

The play went beautifully last year. The children rose to the occasion and really put on a beautiful show. It was glorious to share our story of the birth of Jesus with their families and friends. The best part, however, was when I looked out at the audience at the end of the show to see my husband and children giving us a standing ovation with big smiles on their faces. In that moment my heart was filled to overflowing. Our daughter, Devon, had planned the surprise. The love and support of family is a precious thing. I am amazed to think that God loves us and supports us even more than our earthly families can. With all our faults and imperfections we are still precious to Him. It's why he sent us Jesus and His love is filled with grace and mercy.

Prayer: *Heavenly Father, how grateful we are to be your children. Thank you for the gift of Jesus our brother. As we go about our lives today help us to see on another as our sisters and brothers in You and to act with grace and mercy. Amen.*

Debbie S.

Saturday, December 22nd , 2012

Please read Matthew 2: 13 – 23

An angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.” Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod.”

When small children are in the house, Christmas is amazing. They ooze excitement, joy and laughter. It fills the room like a bright shining star. It can be a great distraction for adults. Christmas is a very happy time and yet it can be sad, complicated and lonely as well.

One year, a member of our family was not at the Christmas dinner. I had been very busy in the days leading up to Christmas with food preparations, events and present wrapping. A great distraction from having to think about the upcoming absence at dinner.

The big day arrived and during all the hustle and bustle of sitting down to our meal, our youngest daughter insisted on wearing her big purple fairy wings to the table. At first, I wasn't too keen as I thought “it won't look right in the pictures”! And then I took one look at her and saw the cutest 2 year old beaming up at me with her big blue eyes and blonde hair and her big wings and I thought, “you look like an angel”. So off to the table she skipped so happily.

And so it was during the height of the dinner, with all the chatter and laughter, I felt the presence of someone missing. It felt sad and disappointed that a member of our family was not at the family dinner. I then looked down the long table, past the yummy turkey, cranberry sauce and candles to see our “Angel” at the end of table overseeing all of us and shining like a star. She filled me with hope. To not give up on things that are broken, the world is not perfect. Hope allows us to carry on.

I was so grateful our daughter wore her wings to the dinner table that night.

Prayer: *Lord, help us to carry on in a world that is not perfect and support us when we are weak. Encourage us to feel the fullness of your love and the hope of the Christmas story. Amen.*

Andrea & Allan L.

Sunday, December 23rd , 2012

Please read Luke 1: 39 – 45, 56

“In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the child leaped in her womb. Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.... And Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home.”

The Relatives Are Coming!

During the days of my first two pregnancies, we spent many weekends and all holidays with family members often sleeping three or four to a guest room. It could take four whole hugs in payment to access the washroom on the other side of the house, especially being with child! Then a cross country move took us far away from relatives.

As a young mother of two precious daughters, I felt unsettled as I found myself pregnant with a third child so far from loved ones. There was entirely too much room at birthday dinner tables and uneaten dark meat at Thanksgiving. When miracles happen, being with the relatives is just the best way to grab the moment!

For our third pregnancy, we discovered a new Church Family. To this day, they are as much our relatives as the blood ones.

The Lord provided Elizabeth and Zechariah with a son so late in life, and provided their relative, Mary, the blessing of bearing the Fruit for the World. What better way to seal their faith than being together not only as blood-family, but as Divine Family. To be at their dinner table or to see them hugging with boys leaping in their wombs on their way through the house would be an experience to behold. Mary found three months of faith-filled time with her relative and the Holy Spirit, time to seal her covenant with God, and for Elizabeth to declare her the most blessed of all women. May our homes be blessed this Christmas with opportunities to share the joy of The Greatest Gift of all. Praise be to God!

***Prayer:** Dear Lord, make me a faithful steward of all you have given to me, my home, my family, my time and my opportunities. Call me and equip me to serve you where and how you want me to serve you, and keep me faithful to that direction. I thank you for the gifts of my relatives, my friends, and my Church family, with whom all blessings great and small are gladly shared.
Amen*

Gwen & Bill C.

Monday, December 24th, 2012

Please read John 1: 1-18

“And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.... From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.”

UNTO US A CHILD IS BORN!

Tonight we will all gather and worship the Christ Child born in Bethlehem . As the world came to learn, he was no ordinary child wrapped in swaddling clothes. John tells us that he revealed the love with which God so loved the world. He was a gift, an indescribable gift. A gift, when unwrapped, revealing to humankind, a gift of many dimensions.

In God's gift of Love, there is the gift of forgiveness. Thou shalt call his name Jesus for he shall save his people from their sins (Isaiah 53 : 5). It took the Cross and Resurrection to bring this about. This truly was a gift of Love.

There is also within this gift, the dimension of Grace. We are told that he brought life, light and healing in his wings. A gift of Grace which embraced forgiveness to all creation.

In God's gift of the baby Jesus, is the gift of Peace. The announcement rang out loud and clear that first Christmas which is still relevant today, "Glory to God in the highest heaven and peace on earth!" Seneca wrote, "what the world needs is a hand let down from heaven to lift us up!" When we gather at the manger, we see the hand of God let down in the Christ child to lift us all. It happened when, "He became flesh and dwelt among us!"

What an indescribable gift to the world! Let us all make our pilgrimage to Bethlehem this Christmas Eve and give thanks at the manger to God.

Prayer: *Almighty God, with deep gratitude we kneel at the manger and ponder upon the gift of the Christ Child to the world.*

Amen

"Great civilizations pass away, but still remembered -- is Christ's birthday!" Betty Whitsell.

Rev. Cliff & Ann H.

Tuesday, December 25th, 2012

Please read Matthew 1: 1-17

*A record of the genealogy of Jesus Christ the son of David, the son of Abraham...
...And Jacob the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus, who is called
Christ.*

Like most people, Christmas has always been a favourite time in my family. As the youngest of three children very close in age, I had a hard time sleeping on Christmas Eve and was always the first one awake on Christmas morning. I was so excited when morning finally broke and could hardly wait to jump out of bed and run downstairs. The surprises under the tree lit up our faces and those of mom and dad. A Barbie airplane, new aquarium, or cross-country skis remain fond memories from my childhood Christmas gifts.

My mom loved to have something special for Christmas morning breakfast – cinnamon buns as kids then stollen or apple strudel as we got older, a reflection of living in Southwestern Ontario, home of Oktoberfest and delicious German bakeries.

After our own family celebrations, we were off to my grandparent's farm, which was like my second home. Walking into the farmhouse kitchen, we were greeted by the glorious aromas of Christmas dinner and my grandma in her apron with arms open to greet us. Even though all my family lived close by, I loved getting together with my cousins and always loved Grandma's feast of roast goose or duck, her hand mashed potatoes and cabbage salad dressed with fresh cream from the dairy. I treasure grandma's Mennonite Community Cookbook which I inherited after her passing, including her handwritten recipe of our favourite Christmas cookie, her rolled oatmeal date cookies. It continues as a family favourite today.

Our Christmas gathering always included singing. Before opening gifts, grandpa liked to sing Christmas carols as a family. As kids, we didn't particularly care for this tradition yet looking back, it holds special memories.

I give thanks for my family and the traditions of my Mennonite heritage. Even though I live miles from them now, we share in the joy of Christmas celebrations by phone and anticipate our next visit together.

***Prayer:** Dear God, We celebrate and give thanks for the new life in Jesus, born on this day. And for the hope and light He brings to our world. Joy to the World, the Lord has come! Our hearts burst with songs of praise and adoration. We pray for blessings on our families as we travel and gather to celebrate. Amen.*

Jennifer B.

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