



*\*Cover art is a composite of images from the kids of WVUC*

**West Vancouver United Church  
Advent Devotions 2013**

**Sunday, December 1<sup>st</sup>, 2013**

*"Praise the Lord, you his angels, you mighty ones who do his bidding..."*

Please read Psalm 103.

Growing up, my family home was always a cheerful place, especially around Christmas. Every year my Mum and Dad would go all out decorating our home with a bright and cheerful tree, stockings hung with care and Christmas angels dotting our little house in west Winnipeg. I still remember one Christmas, however, when I was a teenager when the Christmas Angels were hard to spot. It was six months after my Father's sudden death and while the ice rutted street outside our house twinkled with Christmas lights, a winking Frosty and a smiling Santa across the road...our house sat in darkness. We just didn't have the heart to go all out that first Christmas.

We also didn't have the money. We came home from the Christmas Eve service at the church and sat in the living room for a while trying to decide how to spend the holiday. We heard a rustle by the door and the sound of the mailbox opening and closing. I made my way lazily to the front door to investigate but, by the time I opened the door, there was no one there. A crisp, white envelope jutted out of the mailbox with a simple message, "Merry Christmas - Jesus is the light in our darkness." Inside was a roll of bills that helped solve our financial pinch at Christmas! For the next two Christmases that same crisp white envelope appeared from an "angel unaware." And then it stopped. The message was clear. By that point we had reordered our lives, by God's grace, and were in the position to be the Christmas angel for someone else.

And so we did. Who might you be a Christmas angel for this year? Who might you share Christ's love with, in a real and tangible way, as we walk towards Bethlehem in the weeks to come?

***Prayer:** Gracious Father, We thank you for all those "mighty ones" who have heard your call and acted by acts of grace and mercy in the world. Help us to serve with eyes wide open that we too might see or be a messenger of good news for Christ's sake. Amen*

Rev. Dr. Ross Lockhart

**Monday, December 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2013**

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

Today's reading is a lament written during a time of war when God's people have turned away from their faith. The author cries out for salvation. Three times he repeats the refrain "Restore us O God; make thy face shine upon us that we may be saved." As we look toward the coming of Christmas, we are looking forward to celebrating the greatest gift that God could bestow upon us. Not only did he shine His face upon us in the hour of His birth in Bethlehem, He gave us the light of the world. Just as that ancient author of the Psalm longed for, God sent His son, the light of the world, that we may be restored to God and saved through him.

The repeated phrase in the psalm is a reference to a well known prayer of the day. It is found in Numbers 6:24-26. When I was growing up in Michigan, I was blessed to be part of a wonderful youth group. At the close of each meeting we would gather with our arms around each other and say this prayer: "May The Lord bless thee and keep thee. May The Lord make his face to shine upon thee and be gracious unto thee. May The Lord lift up his countenance and give you peace, amen." Years later, after marriage and many moves, we settled down in West Van. Soon our daughter came along and she was baptized at the Presbyterian church. I was surprised and delighted to hear this prayer sung to her. A few years later we joined West Van United. Again, I was in a place where we sing this prayer to our children at baptism.

How fitting that this prayer is answered through the birth of our Saviour. How wonderful are his gifts of Peace, Hope, Joy and Love!

***Prayer:** Heavenly Father, I pray that today I will see your light shining in this world. May I share this light with others in my words and through my actions. Help me to be a blessing in someone else's life. Through your son Jesus Christ, Amen*

Debby S.

**Tuesday, December 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2013**

Please read 1 Corinthians 1: 7-9

*"so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ; who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ."*

Christmas Eve is a happy time in our household. Sounds of laughter, delicious smells fill the hallway. Family and friends sing Christmas carols with delight.

Since our first grandchild was born 10 years ago (we now have four) everyone plays an instrument. We have bongo drums, a hand drum, a washboard, jingle bells, maracas and this year a saxophone. A cacophony of sound fills our backroom. Now that the grandchildren sing in Pacific Spirit Children's Choir, they can harmonize.

For many years we had four generations as my mom would come from Victoria to celebrate Christmas with us. She loved Christmas Eve the best. Why I would ask? "Oh my dear, it's because of the anticipation of the birth of Jesus and God's promise to us and of course Santa Clause for all the little ones." Mom passed away on Thanksgiving Sunday this year while we were in the Sacred Valley of the Incas. She told us that if she died while we were away, she'd be with us in Peru. We felt her spiritually as we explored Machu Picchu. This Christmas Eve is the first one without her. Rest in Peace Mom. You taught us how to live and how to love and for that we are very thankful. This Christmas we'll sing "Silent Night" with thanksgiving for a life well lived. She would have been 96 on December 1<sup>st</sup>.

***Prayer:** Dear Heavenly Father, Thank you for the birth of your son Jesus Christ, whose presence fills our heart with Thanksgiving. Thank you for the wonderful life of Ethel Anderson. She was loving, generous and kind. Amen*

Judy G.

**Wednesday, December 4<sup>th</sup>, 2013**

Please read Mark 13: 24-37

*“If he does come suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping ... Keep awake! Keep awake!”*

This sounds familiar. Only this time, it wasn't for the Father, it was for Jolly Ol' Saint Nick. Yes indeed, this brings back blissful memories of sleeping in the basement with my sisters and cousins, desperately fighting the overwhelming urge to sleep and trying our best to keep awake until Santa arrived. We never did manage, but perhaps that is a good thing, so as to keep our innocent beliefs alive.

No matter what had occurred that calendar year, be it tragic illness or sudden death, we always looked forward to the bountiful joy of Christmas morning. Once we'd jolted awake from our slumbers, we'd rally one another and scurry our way into our parents' bedroom. My Dad would make his way down to the living room before the rest of us had rallied the troops and, without a moment's hesitation, would blast the stereo with a choral “We wish you a Merry Christmas!” The jubilant sounds would fill the house. Oh the joy of that song. Oh the joy of wondering what the day might behold. That song makes me tingle when I think of the sheer exultation and excitement that ran through my veins when I heard it start.

Now, as a parent myself, I hope to recreate those memories and traditions for my own children. Even when loved ones are missing, and our hearts ache for their presence, we will remember to focus on the joy. We will focus on the here and now. I, too, will be sure to advise them to “keep awake”. “Heaven and earth will pass away but my words will never pass away.”

***Prayer:*** *Loving and abundant Lord,  
Give us the strength to move past the hurt  
Give us the strength to work through the pain.  
Allow us to focus on the joy.  
Allow us to focus on the here and now.  
Allow us to revel in the marvel of Christmas,  
And count our many blessings.  
In peace and grace, Amen.*

Chris and Alex C.

**Thursday, December 5<sup>th</sup>, 2013**

Please read Romans 1: 1-7

I loved Christmas as a child - and still do! I have wonderful memories of a well-established pattern of the celebration of Christmas. There were stockings bulging with odd shaped parcels along with an apple, an orange and a sixpence in the toe. My two brothers, my sister and I would open these around our parents' bed - always in the same spot! Then later in the morning we all went to the chapel in the nearby TB hospital where our father was medical superintendent. The service was for staff and patients well enough to attend and following that special celebration of Christmas, we went with our father to visit some of the wards - especially the children's ward where Dad's caring concern for staff and patients was so evident. Christmas lunch followed at home with turkey and all the trimmings and plum pudding with silver threepence pieces hidden inside. Our beloved grandparents joined us for the meal - a rather stern grandfather who would never work on his farm on a Sunday or allow his barley to be used for beer making and a grandmother who quietly and graciously endeared herself to all. In the evening we would join members of the extended family on a neighbouring farm for more food and lots of games and laughter till late. I always hated when the day came to an end!

As the years have passed I realize how much I owe my family. Just as Paul pointed back to Christ coming from David's line, I am aware how much I owe to the faithful prayers of our grandparents, the practical outworking of faith of my father and the love and caring of my Mum who made the much loved pattern of celebration of Christmas possible in our home. And now it is up to us to pass on the lessons learnt of Christ's love for us and to share His grace and peace in the coming days.

***Prayer:** Dear Lord Jesus, as Christmas approaches we thank you for those who have gone before. Help us to remember in the days ahead to share Christ's love, grace and truth with others Amen.*

Ally M.

**Friday, December 6<sup>th</sup>, 2013**

Please read Luke 1: 26-38

God has a mission for us all ...

Christmas is a time to be spent with family. Historically, this has always been the case for us with traditions of Aunt Betty's meatballs and Christmas pavlova. Unfortunately, our move to the west coast and the sale of the family home in Ontario wreaked havoc on those traditions. We returned to Ontario for Christmas only to discover that, for a variety of reasons, we were to be alone on Christmas morning - the most significant morning in the year. Needless to say, Jayne shed many a tear.

Since we had planned to travel south to Orlando on the 26<sup>th</sup>, we thought why wait and maybe Jayne would stop crying! We hit the road at 4am with two of our children, heading to the Windsor/Detroit border crossing. Having made this trip many times before, it was somewhat surreal as we had the very busy Hwy 401 to ourselves – no cars, no trucks, no other travellers. There was an eerie calm as we approached the US border crossing, being the only car in sight.

As we inched toward the booth, I could see that the attendant seemed to be in the usual guarded disposition. “Citizenship?” he asked firmly. “Passports Please” he demanded. “Destination?” he asked sternly. When Greig responded “Orlando Sir”, he paused and asked “Don’t you folks have any family to be with this Christmas Morning?” Spontaneously the car erupted with the chorus “Please, don’t get Mom going again!” At that point, Greig could not help but notice a slight smile forming. After a brief exchange, we bid him a Merry Christmas and off we drove. As we pulled away, a quick glance in the rear view mirror revealed the attendant with an obvious smile on his face, likely thankful to be joining his family when his shift ends. Maybe in that moment, God’s mission was to provide that attendant with a little Christmas cheer that year.

How about you? What is your mission? Will you be ready when the Angel comes calling?

***Prayer:** Almighty God in heaven, may you help us be willing and ready to accept your mission when called by you, as the Virgin Mary was ready in her preparation for the original Christmas. Amen.*

Jayne and Greig G.

**Saturday, December 7<sup>th</sup>, 2013**

Please read Hebrews 2: 10-18

*“I will declare your name to my brothers and sisters; in the assembly I will sing your praises.”*

Around the time when I got my driver’s license, my parents had an opportunity to buy a second car. And so a bright orange, 1973 VW Beetle, close in age to me, joined the station wagon in our driveway. The “bug” was like a small tank; so solid, a great car!

Growing up in Richmond, we very seldom experienced a white Christmas. Usually it was raining and relatively mild. One year, however, we woke up on Christmas Day to a blanket of snow. Everything was quiet and the roads were deserted.

We always attended the Christmas Day service at our church. It was a much smaller service than the one we went to on Christmas Eve. It was always magical to worship in a church filled to the rafters on Christmas Eve but it was equally wonderful to worship as a smaller group on Christmas Day. On both occasions, the church rang with the voices of the people singing praises to God to welcome the baby Jesus who came to dwell among us “fully human in every way” (vs. 17).

On that snowy Christmas Day, my sisters and I wondered if we would make it to the Christmas Day service. However, snow was not going to deter us. After all, we had spent our first

Christmas in Canada in Winnipeg. My dad decided that the bug was a better bet for driving in the snow so the five of us piled in.

We arrived at the church and unloaded, much like clowns at a circus who seem to keep appearing out of a car that surely must be too small to have room for yet another passenger. We had made it and were able to celebrate, with our brothers and sisters in Christ, that God sent His Son to live among people like us.

***Prayer:** Gracious God, Thank you for sending your Son Jesus to live among us. Fill our Christmas time with praise and thanksgiving. In Jesus name we pray, Amen.*

Fiona W.

**Sunday, December 8<sup>th</sup>, 2013**

Please read Isaiah 40: 1-11

There was great anticipation in our house for Christmas of 1968. We had been living in Halifax for just over a year with our young family. Our children were age- 8 years, 6 years and 5 years- and to add to the excitement we were expecting a new baby on Dec. 17<sup>th</sup>. As our first three babies had all arrived about a week before their due date, we assumed that this new family member would be home with us well before the holidays. However, sometimes nature sends us a curve- ball, and on Christmas Eve, Christmas Day and Boxing Day, Mom was still around, looking more like Santa Claus than Santa Claus! Finally, on Dec. 27<sup>th</sup> our 10 lb. baby boy arrived! Of course, one of the problems of those born at that time of year is that their birthday celebrations often get lost in the celebrations surrounding Christmas. Our little boy was no different in that respect- left-over turkey for dinner, no kids around for a birthday party.

After a few moves from Halifax to Ottawa to Winnipeg to Edmonton, we began attending St. Paul's United Church. By then, our baby was 7 years old. The first Christmas Eve that we lived in Edmonton, off we went to Church for the early "Family" service. How our son's eyes lit up when the Minister asked everyone who had a "Christmas" birthday to come forward and participate in lighting the Christmas candles. As the years went by, our family was one of the first to arrive for the Christmas Eve service so that our son could light those candles. We all crave to feel "special" and for him, the youngest of 4 children with a Christmas birthday, the Church reinforced that for him.

***Prayer:** Dear Lord, Prepare us to escape the wilderness in our lives as we prepare to celebrate your birth. The wonder of human birth helps us to understand the wonder of your arrival to show us how God's love surrounds us in our everyday lives, how God comforts us in our times of need. Amen.*

Heather and Reg G.

**Monday, December 9<sup>th</sup>, 2013**

Please read Psalm 85: 1-2, 8-13

*"...You have forgiven the guilt of your people- yes, you have covered all their sins..."*

Psalm 85 is a prayer of thanksgiving, promise and love. God's "unfailing love that has met together." Righteousness and peace will kiss each other. Verse 12 says that "righteousness goes as a herald before him, preparing the way for his steps." There are such beautiful images in verses 8-13, words such as peace, glory, love, faithfulness and grace.

Last November 2012, my daughter and I were part of our congregational trip to Israel in the footsteps of Jesus. While in Jerusalem, after a tour day, we decided to make our way back to the old walled city. We wandered through various quarters of the old city turning down several different cobbled alleyways. It had become dark, everything was shutting down and we found ourselves quite alone in the Muslim quarter. There was a lot of unrest and unease in Israel at that time and we were feeling a little nervous. A Muslim man stepped out of a market shop and whether he thought we were Jewish and he was being respectful, or this was the word that came to his mind, he looked into our eyes and said simply *Shalom*. Using the beautiful Hebrew word *Shalom* meant so much more than peace to us. It was such a grace-filled word to hear. The barriers were lowered, as if we were his community. His gentle *Shalom* was so harmonious and welcome that it eased our agitation and we left him with a smile of gratitude for his gift and also hand sign directions to wind our way back out through the labyrinth.

I wish you peace, grace, love and community at this time.

***Prayer:** Gracious God, we thank you for your blessings and grace. We listen to your guiding voice speaking shalom, peace and love to all people. Amen.*

Madelyne MacKenzie

**Tuesday, December 10<sup>th</sup>, 2013**

Please read 2 Peter 3: 8-15a

*"A day is like a thousand years to the Lord, and a thousand years is like a day"*

The Lords' timetable is not the same as ours, and sometimes we need to slow our lives down and enjoy the moment, instead of trying to fast forward to what we think is the perfect plan for our future!

When our family of 4 arrived here in Vancouver almost 3 years ago, 4 suitcases in hand, for our "2 year plan", we certainly didn't expect to be spending our 4th Christmas here this year!

Coming from South Africa, and from large families, we have only ever known HUGE family gatherings at Christmas time, usually with extended tables set outside, overlooking the ocean on Christmas Eve. Roasts and "braai's" (BBQ's), delicious salads, followed by a selection of ice-

cream, and fresh fruit desserts! All washed down with chilled wine with ice in it! An early church service on Christmas morning was followed by presents and then a time to test all those new beach toys in the sun. Lunch was another feast of cold meats and salads! More cold desserts!

How different our table looks here, surrounded by just 4 of us! Fairy lights lighting the dark and cold outside, skis stacked up in the basement, dripping fresh snow from our Christmas morning ski, and the smell of the turkey which has been roasting while we hit the slopes!!

And although we yearn for those sunny Christmases surrounded by family, we are the envy of everyone back home, having a "White Christmas" just like all the Christmas cards show!!!

And so, instead of trying to fast forward our time to head back, we're enjoying what God has blessed us with here! Health, faith, family and new friends.

*Prayer: Lord, Thank you for every blessing that you pour down on us and help us to enjoy each day that you give us, whether sunny, or snowy, with or without extended family! Amen.*

Dawn and Gary B.

**Wednesday, December 11<sup>th</sup>, 2013**

Please read: Mark 1: 1-8

When one has school-aged children, September always feels like the "New Year" – a time to reflect on the past year and look forward to the next. As our family sat in the pews at church this September, we were curious to note a shift in the message that Reverend Ross was sharing from the pulpit.

There seemed to me to be a stronger message encouraging us to grow in our faith, rather than remain stagnant and comfortable in our current state.

As someone quite new to the Church, who is still very much in the "learning stages", I was unsure how to receive this message. Was I still welcome? Could I still "*belong before I believe*"? What was Ross asking of me? Or perhaps more importantly, what was Ross offering me?

In the midst of struggling with these questions, I started to work on writing my reflection for this Advent Devotional Guide. As I read the "John the Baptist Prepares the Way" verse that Ross had provided, the first thing that popped into my mind was, Ross is my John the Baptist! He is challenging me in order to prepare me to receive God into my life. He is truly 'Preparing the way for the Lord...'

I feel self-conscious to write this, but the more I thought about it, the truer this interpretation seemed to me. Ross was offering me the tools and the inspiration to continue to open my heart and my mind to God and to actively participate in my relationship with Him.

As the Christmas season arrives, I will be ready. While I will still enjoy all of the holiday festivities and the wonder that includes, I will also reflect on the journey of Jesus and all those who continue to share his word.

*Prayer: Dear Lord, Thank you for your generosity in loving us at every point in our journey and providing us with those who will guide and encourage us along the way. In your name we pray. Amen.*

Heather & Conal W.

**Thursday, December 12<sup>th</sup>, 2013**

Please read: James 5: 7-10

*“<sup>7</sup> Be patient, then, brothers and sisters, until the Lord’s coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop, patiently waiting for the autumn and spring rains. <sup>8</sup> You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord’s coming is near. <sup>9</sup> Don’t grumble against one another, brothers and sisters, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door!<sup>10</sup> Brothers and sisters, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.”*

*New International Version (NIV)*

Patience and Christmas are not two words that are normally put together. For children, the anticipation can be great as they wait for the days to pass and Christmas to arrive. As an adult, it can seem that there is never enough time to get everything done as we impatiently rush from task to task, checking off the items on the list. But despite the rush, it seems that every year we have one evening or one event where it all slows down and the meaning of the season shines through. Sometimes we have to carve out the time to make it happen and sometimes we are blessed with it happening all on its own. Christmas 1996 was one of those blessings.

Vancouver had experienced snow storm after snow storm leading up to Christmas which left the city blanketed in snow. Christmas Day was bright and crisp and white – a miracle in itself for Vancouver! Christmas dinner was, as usual, at my parents’ home in West Vancouver. It was a loud, large, noisy, boisterous affair with in-laws, cousins, aunts, uncles and friends all in attendance. As we sat down for dinner, my niece, who was 8 years old, proposed tobogganing after dinner in the park next door. Everyone enthusiastically joined in, abandoning the dinner dishes, and borrowing old clothes and footwear to replace their dress clothes. As we walked into the park, we realized the full moon had been the night before and the moonlight on the snow lit the park up like day. We knew this Christmas was special. We spent a long time that night going up and down that hill in the moonlight - kids shrieking, adults laughing. The highlight of the evening was my father-in-law, all 6 foot 2 of him, in dress coat and dress shoes because we couldn’t find any substitutes his size, rocketing down the hill on a child’s three-skied snow racer, with a paper crown from the Christmas cracker perched firmly on his head. As we stood there on that snowy hill in the moonlight the meaning of the season shone clearly around us in the laughing faces of our family – Love, Joy, Peace, Hope.

***Prayer:** Dear Lord, Help us to find time to slow down this season and to grant ourselves and others the blessing of patience. Help us to experience the joy of Christmas and not just “check off the list”. Lord we thank you for the many blessings you have bestowed upon us through your Son, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

Jan and Al L.

**Friday, December 13<sup>th</sup>, 2013**

Please read Isaiah 7: 10-16

The Lord spoke to Ahaz, telling him to ask for a sign from God. Ahaz didn't want to bother the Lord. Sometimes we make the mistake of thinking God doesn't want to be concerned with our problems, so he gave us a sign – in the form of a wee baby whose name was to be called Immanuel.

At this Christmas season may we turn our thoughts to the signs God gives us and not be afraid to ask for guidance. When I was thinking of moving back to West Vancouver I prayed for a sign from God. I put my Langley townhouse on the market and it sold in two weeks. At the same time my daughters found me a lovely apartment with a wonderful ocean view close to West Vancouver United Church. How was that for a sign!

***Prayer:** Dear Heavenly Father, Help us not to be afraid to ask for signs to help us in our everyday life and in doing so we need not be afraid of the dangers around us. Amen.*

May W.

**Saturday, December 14<sup>h</sup>, 2013**

Please read 2 Corinthians: 14-16a

Good old fashioned Christmas Pudding is a big tradition in our family, the blacker and more rum-filled the better. At just the right moment, the lighting is dimmed, the brandy is poured over the glistening, holly-crowned dish and it is set alight before being carried to the table as a glorious end to the annual Christmas Feast.

Although it has to be made well ahead of Advent, it's still an important part of the Season for me. The ingredients need time together in the bowl, releasing their aromas and imparting essential flavours to the mix before it is steamed. During this period, I relish stirring it, inviting others to join in this ritual, smelling the heady spices, which on their own, taste bitter and burn the tongue. Over a couple of days, the mixture reaches its peak and the time has come for cooking.

Our reading today celebrates the “fragrance” of the knowledge of Christ. Not the “babe in the manger”, but the man who walked the streets of Jerusalem, touched the lives of the lame, the leper and the losers of His time, experiencing the bitterness of death on the cross, but bringing

life for all who believe in Him. Likewise, we are to God “the aroma of Christ”; walking among those who ignore His call, as well as those who respond to His invitation to follow Him.

***Prayer:** Dear Father in Heaven, as I celebrate Your Son’s birth with friends and family, may I impart the fragrance of Christ lavishly, bringing glory to Your Name. Amen.*

Liz B.

### **Sunday December 15<sup>th</sup>, 2013**

Please read Isaiah 61: 1-4, 8-11

*So this is Christmas, and what have you done?* ...asks the first line of the classic John Lennon & Yoko Ono song “Happy Xmas (War is Over)”. It’s a good question to reflect on. What have you done with your life this year? In the busyness of our lives, it is all too often that the gift of Christmas, of knowing and sharing God’s love for the world, is forgotten as the last boxes of decorations are packed away for the year. What would it look like to live out Christmas as a lifestyle?

In this Scripture, the first section of verses talks about how, as children of faith, we have God’s Spirit with us to share with people (from all over the world!). It reminds us that life can be different - that mourning can turn to joy, that darkness can turn to beauty...that what is broken *will* be restored. As God’s children, we are called to DO something - to live Christmas - so that the world around us can also know God’s extravagant love.

The second section of verses testifies to God’s relentless faithfulness. God DOES so much. God GIVES so much. God LOVES so much. That’s why God gave us Jesus. It is why we celebrate Christmas, and why the significance of Christmas should flow into the entirety of what we do and who we are.

And so this is Christmas, for EVERYONE, and it is *good* news - life changing news! In your reflecting, ask yourself what it means for you to embody the significance of Christmas. And then do it! Share Christmas!

*War is over. Life is different...if you want it.*

#### ***Prayer time:***

Spend some time talking with God. You can speak out loud. You can speak inside your heart. However you choose! In your prayer time, thank God for His goodness, and ask Him how He’d like to use you to share/live out Christmas this year. Make sure you pause in silence to listen for a response. Perhaps some words, a picture, or an idea will come to mind. Nothing may come at all too, and that’s okay! Try to put yourself in a prayer space that allows you to be open to response...and see what happens!

Meghan and Simon LeSieur

**Monday, December 16<sup>th</sup>, 2013**

Please read Psalm 126

*“The LORD has done great things for us, and we are filled with joy.” (v. 3)*

Only NINE more days until Christmas! Can you feel it in the air? Or perhaps you’ve reached that point in the season where you’re ready for Christmas to get here already and be done! Has that tiredness set in? Has this Christmas season become more work than rest (yet again)?

Take this moment right now as an opportunity to REST. Don’t rush through the devos - REST in God and remember. Yesterday, we discussed the Advent of JOY! JOY is not experienced in the business of Christmas. JOY is experienced in *remembering all that God has done!* We take time every year to share the same Story of Jesus’ birth - not to be monotonous, but to remember the impact of Emmanuel: God with us!

He rules the world with truth and grace  
And makes the nations prove  
The glories of His righteousness  
And wonders of His love  
And wonders of His love  
And wonders, wonders, of His love.

**Joy, unspeakable joy!  
Overflowing well  
No tongue can tell  
Joy, unspeakable joy!  
Rises in my soul  
Never lets me go**

God has done GREAT things for us! The King of the cosmos chose to humble Himself and become vulnerable to mortality! When we take the time to remember the impact of that (that God fully knows our experience, knows our pain and frustration, our joys and sorrows, our pleasures and delights) we will experience the JOY of Christmas!

***Prayer:*** *Gracious God, who blesses us with all that we have. Help me slow down today. To take the time and remember all that You have done. To be thankful, and to experience the true JOY of Christmas - the JOY that comes from You and You alone. Amen.*

Elaine and Curtis Wilson

**Tuesday, December 17<sup>th</sup>, 2013**

Please read Luke 1: 46b-55

*“His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation.” Luke 1: 50*

As the church youth group, we were handing out Christmas cards and poinsettias, singing carols, and wishing the folks at numerous local retirement homes and hospitals a Merry Christmas. We split up so that we could have more time to talk to each individual.

*“Are you excited for Christmas?”* I asked the fragile woman, tucked tightly under the covers.

*“Well, dear, you will be my only visitor this year, so I try to forget that it’s Christmas at all, lest I lapse back into mourning.”*

*“What are you mourning?”*

*“My life, as I watch it come to the end.”*

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Words tumbled together as they spoke over each other.

*“Why should we call it a Christmas dance, when no one at this school even believes??”*

*“Christmas doesn’t even mean Jesus anymore; it means trees, red and green, presents!”*

There was discomfort in the classroom, with the mixture of religion and secular life. The students weren’t fighting over which word to use, but rather expressing a discomfort, an absence of a strong centre, a feeling of being lost. Are they welcome to partake in Christmas without believing? Do they want to be included in Christmas? What does it mean to take part, what does it mean to refuse to?

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We all know images of Christmas joy: candy canes; families gathered around the tree; candle light services; hope. But we must not forget images of Christmas fear: the widow, fearing a Christmas alone; the struggling parent, fearing his inability to provide the presents; the tension between wanting to believe, but not quite feeling God’s presence; the emptiness of a silent house; the disappointment of a carefully chosen present unrequited.

This Christmas, whether you find yourself joyful or fearful, no matter which generation you belong to, *His mercy* and our love, support, and warmth extends to you.

***Prayer:*** *Lord, Help us to create joy and happiness, but also to face our fear and loneliness as a community which transcends generation in this season of togetherness Amen.*

AJ I.

**Wednesday, December 18<sup>th</sup>, 2013**

Please read: 1 Thess. 5: 16-24

*"Hold fast to what is good"....*

When I was 6 weeks old my Father, a United Church Minister, said to my Mother, "I think the baby is old enough for me to enlist in the Canadian Army as a Chaplain". What were the thoughts of a Christian mother facing a war taking place thousands of miles away? 1 Thessalonians tells us "to rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances". Soon the orders arrived from Rev. Col. Fallis and my father left for Holland leaving Britannia United Church for ever. Our family was living in a manse which meant we now had no place to live, no furniture, only our faith. "The one who calls you is faithful". My Grandparents opened their home to us, my mother, my brother and me, and they moved to the basement suite in order to give us the main floor of the house.

Four long years our family lived with the war, "praying without ceasing". God please bring my Daddy home safely. Finally the news; he would be home for Christmas. Faithfully my mother prepared. Presents were bought, cakes and shortbread were baked and the tree was decorated. We were ready. Advent began, the excitement mounted. We celebrated the Birth of The Baby, but still no homecoming. January came and went and the Christmas tree and presents gathered dust in the living room. My mother's faith never wavered. Her church family continued to support us.

Into Epiphany we went. Finally the news, he would be home the middle of February. How many cultures, religions and races were on that train bringing troops home across Canada, all of them having done their part to make sure that all of the world "abstain from every form of evil"? Imagine the look on his face when he saw that Christmas was waiting for him.

To this day I am thankful for my Mother's faith, never doubting that her husband would return safely.

***Prayer:** Heavenly Father, as we approach the turning of a New Year, there are so many possibilities for life changes and events that could take place for good or for bad in our lives. We ask you to give us the faith of men and women who lived through difficult times, but were able to keep trusting in You. It may not seem good at the time, but You told us that Your plan is for us to prosper and not suffer harm. You plan to give us hope and a future. Thank you for Your trustworthiness. Amen.*

Linda and Bob G.

**Thursday, December 19<sup>th</sup>, 2013**

Please read Romans 16: 25-27

The excitement was palpable: the children stood in more or less neat rows, dressed in their concert white and blacks, neat hair competing with polished shoes for a shiny gloss. The odd chorister was bouncing up and down with uncontainable energy, boys were poking at each other across the rows. We had just finished warming up in the upstairs room, the audience was in their place, and we were ready to begin the processional that would open our annual Christmas show. Suddenly I felt a little girl tugging at my sleeve. I was about to urge her back into place when she looked into my face with intense eyes and asked, “Gerry, what’s a show?”

I was taken aback: we’d been rehearsing and memorizing our repertoire for months, had talked about how to sing and how we should look when we perform, and had great fun in rehearsals, always with the awareness that we were preparing for our Christmas “show”. How could she not know what a show was? But I’d never actually described a show, and this new member needed to know.

Just like the reading in Romans, her question was in fact a doxology: a “saying” that summarized all that had gone before. In our church services, we always sing a doxology at the presentation of the offerings: it offers praise, glory and love to God, as we present our gifts to God in an expression of gratitude. My chorister’s question challenged me to summarize three months of weekly activity that had led to this point.

Paul’s “doxology” that closes his entire 16-chapter Letter to the Romans, connects the writings of the Old Testament prophets to his own; it mixes tradition with revelation; it combines the old with the new. He refers as well to the Mystery of Jesus Christ’s appearance on earth: God made Man, God amongst us. The lines are connected vertically to God, and horizontally across all peoples (Gentiles), a beautiful kind of metaphor of the Cross itself.

I looked into the large brown eyes of this excited, worried singer and said that a “show” was an opportunity for us to “show” our audience (mostly parents and friends) how much we loved singing together, how much we loved the music, and how much we loved the people we were singing for. “Just find your parents and friends in the audience, sing to them, and love them”. She smiled, turned away and returned to her place in the line.

May these days of Advent, and our Christmas celebrations in Church and amongst our family be a doxology as rich as Paul’s: a song of praise to God’s love amongst us, a celebration of traditions old and new, a thanksgiving to God.

*Prayer: Praise God from whom all blessings flow;  
Praise him, all creatures here below;  
Praise him above, ye heavenly host;  
Praise Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen*

Cora and Gerry Van Wyck

**Friday, December 20<sup>th</sup>, 2013**

Please read: John 1: 6-8, 19-28

*"There was a man, sent from God, whose name was John...He was not the light, but came to bear witness of the light."*

These are remembrances of an event as a teenager that I experienced one summer at a boys' camp which support the Apostle John's beautiful verses for living our lives fully as God's Christian children in a righteous way, praying, talking and walking that talk daily.

Although I was an advanced canoeist, I disobeyed the camp aquatic rules of taking out a canoe, albeit alone, on the neighbouring lake - at dusk. There was still light, but the evening shadows and dark heavy clouds were around me. I said a brief prayer to God to guide me safely before entering the canoe and setting off. What a wonderful feeling! I remember the joy of paddling about one mile from the shoreline. The dusk was getting darker, but I went on.

All of a sudden, it became very cloudy, dark and rain started to fall "in buckets". Soon the canoe was full of water. I panicked, but remembered to put the paddle inside the canoe, turn it upside down and hold fast to the stern. I turned it towards the shore and prayed to God,

"God help me! Lord forgive my transgression, my disobedience. Please, please help me to get safely to the landing dock. God, you are my everything; help me! help me!"(I was using a frog kick while holding onto the stern, to keep pushing the canoe forward.)

As I write this memoir, the Season of Advent approaches I think of the great fear that I had, that moment in the water. Perhaps it is like many folks around us that choose to walk in a direction that is not "God's way of pure light". Their choice often leads into darkness or sin and disappointment, by causing them to be even more lost. Our daily path should lead us away from sin into repentance with the light. In a sense, the darkness is like being lost and God's Word is a light, guiding us back to the correct path.

I firmly believe God heard my prayers that night and I managed - swamped canoe and all- to get back to the dock safely. Thank you God for your guidance and help that day...and today. As I lay exhausted on the dock, I said a "thank you prayer" to God, then went to report my actions to the aquatic supervisor who scolded me initially, but eventually gave me a warm hug. Through Jesus we can become righteous in our daily living and in our standing with God, today and whenever He calls us in the next life.

"Your Word, dear Lord is a lamp to my feet and a light to my pathway."

***Prayer:** Father God, thank you for the Advent message at this dark time of the year, that You are light and in You there is no darkness. We thank You that you lead us out of the darkness and into Your everlasting light. Help us not to deceive ourselves by claiming that we have no sin, because we know that we are lying and the truth is not in us. Help us walk in the light, as You are in the light and draw us into close fellowship with You and one another and the blood of Jesus Christ, Your Son, will cleanse us from sin. Amen*

George F.

### **Saturday, December 21<sup>st</sup>, 2013**

Please read Matthew 3: 1 - 12

Though God is often depicted as loving and forgiving, he is described in Matthew 3: 1-12, as preparing to remove all that is sinful through his judgment, while leaving only those who have turned to God and have repented for their sins. John the Baptist exclaims to the Pharisees and Sadducees the importance of living a life that follows the path of God and the importance of true acknowledgement and repentance of sins, in order to escape God's wrath. The description of God's wrath, in burning the wheat chaffs and tidying the area where the wheat was threshed, provides an image of cleansing and renewal. Though this passage is not directly related to Christmas, I often feel Christmas is also a time of renewal. During the Christmas season, as time is spent with family and friends, I frequently sense that I am being provided with the chance to renew my feelings of faith, and to reflect on positive changes that can be made as we approach the New Year. Christmas is a time of year where I am always thankful for God's presence and for his sacrifice in hoping to bring renewal to mankind.

***Prayer:** Though there may often be times of sadness and despair, may God bring hope this season and allow joy to be found in all things Amen.*

Teya S.

### **Sunday, December 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2013**

Please read 2 Samuel: 7: 1-11

*“God is with you.”*

This season is full of hope, expectation, and even some promises. We look forward to time spent with family and friends, and all that comes with that. Of course, everyone knows this- including marketers. So advertising is on overload, and we're inundated with claims and promises that persuasively convince us that we need a newer and shinier version, a magic face cream, or a cell phone that will make you more attractive.

It seems safe to say that we've all been disappointed by products with false claims. Like the Christmas Katie got her Oopsie Daisy doll that was supposed to crawl, fall and get back up. One moment of her brother pushing Daisy down and that doll was done for.

Today's passage talks about God's promises to King David- they're crazy and elaborate and even bigger than what David had asked of God. But the cool part is that God actually did what He said He was going to do! Just as Nathan tells David at the beginning of the passage, God promises all of us that He will always be with us wherever we go. We see this pop up all over the Bible. God had lots to say to the big bible characters like Moses, Abraham, and David and this very same God still wants to speak to all of us today. In these last few days before Christmas, take a moment to pause and be silent in all of the noise around you. What might our loving God, who is walking beside you, want to say to you? Keep listening.

***Prayer:** Father, thank you for the promise that You are with us always. May You keep teaching us to trust that You are walking with us, even when we're not so sure. Please help us to hear whatever it is that You might be trying to say to us, whether it's a feeling inside, words from a friend, a sign, or however you might choose to show up. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen*

Katie and Dylon Nofziger

**Monday, December 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2013**

Please read Psalm 89 1-4, 19-26

The start of this psalm speaks about singing, and David's singing of God's love forever. One of my favourite aspects of Advent is hearing Christmas music. I have such fond memories of my parents pulling out the cassette tapes that were packed away with our Christmas decorations and tree. Every year, I excitedly opened the cassette case and slipped the cassette into the tape deck and looked forward to hearing Anne Murray sing "I Saw Mommy Kissing Santa Claus". Admittedly, when I was a child and teenager, I preferred more pop Christmas music, like "Rockin Around the Christmas Tree". Now I see that that kind of music is more "holiday" music, rather than Christmas music. As I grow in my Christian faith, and I come to know more deeply of God's love for humanity, I now search out Christmas music that "proclaims (God's) faithfulness to all generations." I'm not saying that I will never listen to Brenda Lee's "Rockin' Around the Christmas Tree" again – but what I am saying is that God is so faithful, loves us so much, and as a result came in the form of baby Jesus – I want to listen to music that honours this act of benevolent love as I prepare for Christ's birth on Christmas day.

***Prayer:** O come, o come, Emmanuel. Come into our hearts, our minds and our souls as we prepare for your arrival. We praise you for coming into our dark world and binding all peoples in one heart and mind, o bid our sad divisions cease, and be for us the Prince of Peace. Amen.*

Rev. Laura Lockhart

**Tuesday, December 24<sup>th</sup>, 2013**

Please read Luke 1: 26-38

*[Gabriel said] "Good Morning! You're beautiful with God's beauty, Beautiful inside and out! God be with you."*

*Luke 1: 28, The Message*

My mother was a pastor's wife. In her generation, it was as much her career as my father's to care for parishioners. The duties she assumed were never asked of her, but assumed without a paycheck none the less. My mother was perfect in her role as the nurturing spouse and mother, but also as a woman who understood her role to love every member of her church family and make our home a place that always welcomed anyone in God's family. I remember two Sundays when we did **not** have visitors at our Sunday dinner table. Once when Mom was having minor surgery, and once when we came home to find the pot roast in the oven was on fire so we had to eat at a Denny's Restaurant. During a recent trip to Dayton to visit my Mom, I was able to talk with one of the people who frequented our old Sunday dinner table. Karen has not had an easy life; she struggles with mental illness and poverty. Karen shared that she knows that God loves her because she knows my mother, Dorla, loves her, too. My mother has always been Karen's angel, the one in her life who reminds her that God loves her and finds her beautiful no matter what.

The messenger of the Lord, Gabriel, gave this beautiful greeting to young Mary, and Mary's heart was able to hear and accept it to be true. His greeting is one of unconditional love and adoration from God, "Good Morning, you beautiful child of mine." Before there was a Christmas, Mary already knew God's love for her and had the faith to do as her Heavenly Father asked. She was one special faith-filled woman. Now that Christmas has come, now that Jesus is alive with us always, can we also awaken to that clear message of Christmas love and can we be faithful to believe it to be true as Mary did? What if we live every day knowing God loves us so much that he gave us Jesus to walk beside us forever? Merry Christmas! He is born and lives here every single day. May God's love, given to us at Christmas, be so real in our hearts every single day, that the Karens in our lives might also know the love of God to be true for them.

***Prayer:** Loving God, I come to you this holy night with an open heart, ready to hear your message of the Greatest Love you give to me, to my family, and to your world. Help me to remember this greeting every day. Make me eager to respond to you and others in love, through my words, and deeds, faithful with a heart's desire to live in Christmas Love. Amen.*

Gwen C.

**Wednesday, December 25<sup>th</sup>, 2013**

Please read: Matthew 1: 18-25

*"And he gave him the name Jesus."*

Who knew over 2000 years ago, that the birth of a tiny baby in an obscure town would become the most celebrated event in human history. Today, Jesus Christ remains the most popular person who ever lived, and the Bible, the most popular book ever sold. Who knew?

If you have faith, you just need to trust that every outcome is meant to be, and every event is part of the tapestry of your life. You might not know this until sometime later. But think about this:

Should you find it hard to sleep tonight: Just remember the homeless family who has no bed to lie in.

Should you find yourself stuck in traffic, don't despair: There are people in this world for whom driving is an unheard of privilege.

Should you have a bad day at work: Think of the person who has been out of work for months.

Should you despair over a relationship gone bad: Think of the person who has never known what it's like to love and be loved in return.

Should you grieve the passing of another weekend: Think of those in dire straits, working twelve hours a day, seven days a week, for \$15.00 to feed a family.

Should your car break down, leaving you miles away from assistance: Think of the disabled person who would love the opportunity to take a walk.

Should you notice a new gray hair in the mirror: Think of the cancer patient in chemo who wishes for a full head of hair.

Should you find yourself at a loss and pondering what life is all about, asking "what's my purpose," be thankful. There are those who don't live long enough to get the opportunity.

Should you find yourself the victim of other people's bitterness, ignorance, and smallness: Remember things could be worse. You could be them!

Even though things are not always what they seem, the Christmas message of Christ's birth remains a constant, shining beacon to light our way.

***Prayer*** *Loving God, help us to count our blessings and to name the presence of Jesus in our lives so our light can shine for others. Amen.*

Caroline S.

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