

2020

Advent Devotions

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# what is advent?

Dear St. Mark Lutheran Church family,

Advent is a time during the church year when we prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ (at Christmas) and when we anticipate Jesus' return. It can be a meaningful time in both the church and in the home. Here are a few ideas for Advent as you seek to keep Christ at the center of your holiday celebrations:

**Advent Wreath** – Place an advent wreath at the center of your dinner table at home, and light one candle each Sunday before Christmas, until on Christmas, you light the last candle, which is the Christ candle.

**Advent Devotions** – Begin your day with God's Word and devotions in the quiet of the morning or come together with devotions at the dinner table. In our family, we light the Advent candle on our wreath after dinner and then we read from a devotional booklet. This devotional booklet provides unique prompts such as writing the Scripture, prayers, and actions to take each day!

**Create Traditions** – There are plenty of ways to focus your family on Christ during the holidays. Be creative! The week before Christmas, our family drives around in the car at night with hot chocolate and Christmas music to look at Christmas lights. We make it a challenge to find as many nativity scenes or symbols of Jesus' birth as we can! Our family also has a little shepherd that comes to our house during Advent looking for Jesus and appearing in a new place in the house each day, until on Christmas morning, we find the shepherd set up by our nativity scene.

What are your family traditions that help you to focus on Jesus during Advent? However you choose to focus on Christ during this season, I pray that His Word comes alive in your heart and you experience His love, joy, and peace.

Brightest Blessings,  
Pastor Joel and Kristen Beyer

# spoiler alert

SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 29, 2020

BY KRISTEN BEYER



**WRITE:** *"And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel (Genesis 3:15).*

**REFLECT:** I never peek at the back of a book. I hate spoilers! In fact, I'm less likely to read a book if I've already seen the movie or heard the ending. As an avid reader, I live for the drama, the suspense, and the twists I can never see coming!

God writes the story of our lives quite differently than your everyday novel. As His beloved children, He doesn't want us to be anxious about our struggles or wonder if He will ever come to the rescue. He doesn't want us left in the dark about our relationship with Him. So from the very first book of the Bible, Genesis, He lets us in on the ending. After Satan has deceived Adam and Eve, and because God is outside of time, He tells Satan exactly what's coming in his future. Satan is going to strike God's heel (Jesus' death on the cross), but God is going to crush Satan's head once and for all (Jesus' redemption of all mankind and resurrection from the dead). Indeed, Christ has CRUSHED sin, death, and the devil and claimed victory! We will live with Him forever!

Knowing the ending of the drama begun in Genesis doesn't make life less thrilling, however. I find that God has still provided plenty of amazing surprises. He's given me abundant blessings that I couldn't have imagined and the exciting chance to join Him in His mission to change lives in His name. Knowing the ending, are you even more eager to be a part of God's story?

**PRAY:** *Dear God, Because I already know the ending, I can live today with confidence. Give me eyes to see past my current situation to Your ultimate vision. Praise be to Christ for His sacrifice that means our victory! Amen.*

**TAKE ACTION:** Include a cross in your Christmas decor or hang one on your Christmas tree. Crosses aren't just for Easter! This season, let's remember that the manger is meaningful because it leads to the cross!

# sometimes, it's all about the small things

MONDAY, NOVEMBER 30, 2020

BY RACHELLE CRUMRINE



**WRITE:** *For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:6).*

**REFLECT:** What a challenging year 2020 has been! But the Christmas Season is here, and the joy of the season is still found; for unto us a child is born! Every year, we all receive the best present in the world at Christmas – a child was given. This tiny baby born in a manger grew up to be our Mighty God, our Wonderful Counselor and our Everlasting Father.

How often do children look for the greatest gift under the tree? How often do we act like a child with God looking for Him in the BIG MOMENTS, needing His Voice to be loud for us to hear or waiting for a HUGE sign before changing the direction of our life?

How often have we heard that the best things come in the smallest packages? God came to the world in a tiny, innocent, sweet baby. He comes to us daily in quiet ways, in common places, in children's play - just regular life moments that often pass us by. These small gifts of kindness, like a big squeeze hug from a child, or a wave from a neighbor, or just a smile from a stranger is GOD showing up. The Prince of Peace is here with us always.

**PRAY:** *Lord, thank you for the small gifts that end up being the greatest gifts of our lives. Open my eyes to see Your presence in the common, quiet moments of life. Let me hear Your voice amongst the business of the holiday season and let me be reminded of You. Let me take action to share your love in small ways and remember it's not always about the big things. Amen.*

**TAKE ACTION:** Find a small way to show someone God today. Maybe it's giving a hug to a loved one (in your same household of course). Maybe it's dropping a note at someone's doorstep, or maybe you can wrap a small present with a reminder of Jesus inside and put it under the tree for someone.

# dwell with us

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 1, 2020

BY CARRIE DIAMANT



**WRITE:** *And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we say his glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth (John 1:14).*

**REFLECT:** When I think about this verse, I am amazed and in awe that our great God dwells with us! When I consider what heaven might be like, it's clear He really humbled himself!

*Savior of the nations, come; Virgin's Son, make here Thy home!  
Marvel now, O heaven and earth, That the Lord chose such a birth.*

This beautiful Advent song makes me think about God coming to dwell with us, whatever our circumstances. Jesus spent time with tax collectors and prostitutes, the most notorious sinners of the day. And he spends time with me, equally sinful and unworthy. Amazing!

God is not as the 70's rock song describes, the "Spirit in the Sky", but he is Emmanuel, God with us! He is not distant and aloof, but rather, in Christ, He is in our midst and deeply engaged in our world and in the lives we live.

We are not relegated to merely observe and worship from a safe distance, but rather we are urged to "draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Hebrews 4:16). Like Moses in the Old Testament, we get to boldly draw near to God confidently in Christ alone, behold his glory, and find grace in His presence.

The whole world is enduring fear in this time of global pandemic. It's easy to feel depression and dread as we hear about and see so much disease and suffering. That makes it all the more important to be in God's presence and behold his glory!

As we enter this season of Advent, remember God is dwelling with us to strengthen and encourage us. Feel the child-like excitement about the coming of Christmas no matter your age! We have the greatest gift of all! Our God is with us!

**PRAY:** *Thank you, God for sending your son Jesus to fulfill your promise to us. Open our eyes to see your glory in our daily lives and help us mirror this to the world! Amen.*

**TAKE ACTION:** Tell a friend or family member what they mean to you and how their presence in your life helps you see God's glory.

# fly like an eagle

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 2, 2020

BY SANDIE OLSON



**WRITE:** *But those that wait on the Lord will find new strength. They will fly high on wings like eagles. They will run and not grow weary. They will walk and not faint (Isaiah 40:31).*

**REFLECT:** At their top speeds of upwards of 100 mph, eagles fly with minimal effort. They climb to great elevations, sometimes over a mile high. Their flight is majestic and seemingly effortless.

Isaiah gave hope to the Israelites that had suffered through terrible times by reminding them, and us, that those who trust in the Lord can achieve spiritual flight comparable to the lofty soaring eagle.

In parts of the bible, we are referred to (accurately) as sheep, but in today's passage, we see a comparison that can inspire us, something that is only possible if our hope is in the Lord.

The energy we manufacture on our own is not enough to soldier through this life. We need something more. We need the hope of the Lord!

To those who seek it, He gives an ample supply of strength. When we seek Him, spiritually, we can soar like eagles. We can run without fatigue and walk without growing tired - yes, even through all of the demands of this season. Anxious striving drains you of energy; quiet confidence will give you strength.

**PRAY:** *Loving Father, I know that my strength can only be found in Christ. Help me to trust implicitly in the power that I can only receive from You. I pray that I may truly rise above all the difficulties of life, looking unto Jesus during this Advent season, who is my only source of strength and my only means of refreshment. Amen.*

**TAKE ACTION:** During this Advent season, before you lay your head on your pillow, give God your health, your family, your bills, and your career. Every night, go to bed empty so you can wake up full - full of hope, peace, and energy to face the day.

# the Lord will give a sign

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 3, 2020

BY JOHN EVANS



**WRITE:** *Therefore the Lord himself will give you sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel (Isaiah 7:14).*

**REFLECT:** I often find myself searching for elusive clues - little hints that might help in my mundane pursuit to solve a difficult problem at work, enrich a relationship, or improve my daily commute. Other times, my needs are more pressing, like overcoming a difficult disagreement, adhering to a treatment plan for a medical condition, or making good parenting choices such as giving good advice or applying discipline. I feel that if I can just ask all the right questions, I will discover hidden keys that unlock the answers to all things that challenge me.

The Lord tells us throughout the Bible that He will send a Messiah to save us. Jesus' ministry is devoted to showing us how we may be saved, and all of the clues point to the same answer: "so that whoever believes in Him shall have eternal life" (John 3:15). I wonder how much time I have spent searching for answers to what I already knew.

It might only be a bit part, but I am part of the greatest story every told because I am alive in Him.

**PRAY:** *Dear God, I give thanks for the blessing in your creation, for your prodigal love, and the sacrifice of your Son, Jesus Christ, so that I may live in your eternal light. I pray for strength to resist needless distractions and be a light for those that do not yet know Your name. Amen.*

**TAKE ACTION:** Bless someone you meet in God's name every day this Christmas season.

# topsy turvy world

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 4, 2020  
BY CHRIS AND AMY KOSIFAS



**WRITE:** *In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you." Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end" (Luke 1:26–33).*

**REFLECT:** When the angel Gabriel visited Mary and announced that she would bear the Son of God, her world was turned upside down. How would her fiancé, Joseph react? It's likely that they had been happily planning their upcoming wedding. What would her family, relatives and the entire town think when Mary showed up as a pregnant unwed mother-to-be? How would Mary go about raising the Son of God?

Just like Mary, we are living in a Topsy Turvy World. In 2020 we've dealt with the sometimes-deadly COVID virus, adapted to social distancing, experienced multiple closures of businesses, and grieved an end to in-person worship services at our church. We just went through a divisive election. We have been forced to adapt to changing conditions causing unease and even outright fear.

We can learn a lesson from Mary on how to deal with our own Topsy Turvy World. She simply said, "I am the Lord's servant and may your word to me be fulfilled" (Luke 1:38).

Simply by adapting her practice of placing trust in the Lord, we too will find immediate peace. We must trust completely in the Lord and submit ourselves to his guidance and mercy.

"Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight" (Proverbs 3:5-6).

**PRAY:** *Dear Lord, give me strength to trust You fully. Help me to know that even when I don't see it, You are working things out for my good. Let me rest in Your peace and allow Your will to be done in my life.*

**TAKE ACTION:** Watch or read Charles Dickens' "A Christmas Carol". Reflect on how Bob Cratchit's trust in the Lord brings him peace despite difficult and unexpected circumstances. And in whom or what does Scrooge trust? Does it bring him peace?

# when an angel speaks

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 5, 2020

BY CHARLENE HANSON



**WRITE:** *But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:20–21).*

**REFLECT:** Have you ever awakened from a dream and wondered if it really happened? Imagine what Joseph must have thought after an angel appeared with such a strange message: take this pregnant woman to be your wife who was carrying a baby conceived by miraculous means. Name him Jesus because he would be the long-awaited Savior of the world.

I wonder if Joseph rubbed his eyes more than once when he woke up. I know I would have!

Even though we don't learn a whole lot about Joseph from the Bible, we do know this - he was chosen by God to be the earthly father who would raise, protect, provide for, and nurture the Christ Child until his maturity. Joseph's obedience was nothing short of remarkable. Since Jesus was widely known as the "carpenter's son," we can also surmise that Joseph taught Jesus practical skills.

We will probably never have an Angel appear and give us explicit instructions, but God does speak to us still in various ways. He uses the Holy Spirit to inspire our hearts and minds; He uses the Bible to speak truth that is eternal; and He uses other Christians to encourage and comfort us.

**PRAY:** *Dear God, I want to be eager to listen and obey. Thank you for choosing Joseph to care for your precious Son and raising Him to fulfill your purposes for the salvation of the whole world. Amen.*

**TAKE ACTION:** Let us ask God to increase our faith and show us where He wants us to serve in big and small ways each day. Be mindful of the prompting of the Holy Spirit and His presence.

# a gift from God

**SUNDAY, DECEMBER 6, 2020**

**BY SUSIE FAULKNER**



**WRITE:** *For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:6).*

**REFLECT:** One of the happiest days of my life was the day my Doctor told my husband and I that after years of trying, I was pregnant. At first I was afraid that something would go wrong, but, I very soon realized that I should thank God for the viable pregnancy and ask Him for protection going forward. I delivered a healthy son and named him Matthew that translates to "A gift from God". That gift forever changed my life for the better.

Now consider the birth of our Savior Jesus Christ, whose birth began the fulfillment of a promise that he would save our sinful world as a sacrifice of Gods only son. Talk about a gift! By accepting and believing in this Christ Child and His Heavenly Father we can live eternally with him. Jesus was the promised Messiah, but, He was much more. Isaiah gave Him four more names. Wonderful Counselor - Someone we can turn to for guidance and good advice. Mighty God - He is God. Everlasting Father - He is God our Father. He is eternal. Prince of Peace - His government is one of justice and peace. Our lives are forever changed because of this child, a gift from our Heavenly Father. Thanks be to God.

**PRAY:** *Father in Heaven, thank you for the gift of your Son who you love who lived among us and ultimately saved us from our sin. Thank you for loving us and guiding us toward you. We worship you and praise you as we look forward to life with you forever.*

**TAKE ACTION:** In this time of covid 19 and our periods of isolation, reach out to people who could benefit from some extra attention. Share the Christmas story and the true meaning of the holiday with cards or phone calls. Share His love as He first loved us. You can make a difference in the lives of others.

# joy oozes out



**MONDAY, DECEMBER 7, 2020**

**BY MELISSA CLARK**

**WRITE:** *And Mary said: "My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me—holy is his name." (Luke 1:46–49).*

**REFLECT:** There are times in life that joy is so overcoming you just can't keep it bottled up. Without thought or hesitation it comes oozing out. There's no hesitation.

One of those time for me was when I was about four. My family was at church. There were seven of us, so we always got to church early because we filled a whole pew and liked sitting towards the front. The good thing about big families is you have more than just your parents looking out for you. The bad thing about big families is you have more than just your parents looking out for you.

During this particular Sunday, I was very happy and full of joy. The congregation was standing and singing a hymn. I, however, was sing a song that I knew all the words to - "Jesus Loves Me This I Know." I was singing it loud and proud! Then the hymn came to an end, but I didn't. I was probably into my fourth round and loving ever moment. It wasn't till my brother tugged on my dress and said, "Missy, stop singing." At that moment I stopped and sat down. I wasn't embarrassed, but I felt like my moment of oozing joy had definitely stopped.

In the overwhelming moment that Mary sang magnificat, I think she was oozing joy and nothing else around her mattered.

**PRAY:** *Dear God, may we ooze joy this Christmas season. Doing all thing to praise your holy greatness. May our joy let others know our God is an Awesome God. Amen.*

**TAKE ACTION:** When sending out you Christmas cards, print a line from a favorite Christmas song on the bottom of your envelopes and ooze a bit of joy.

# everyone matters to God



**TUESDAY, DECEMBER 8, 2020**

**BY SUSAN ONSGARD**

**WRITE:** *At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear" (Luke 1:39-42)!*

**REFLECT:** Elizabeth and her niece were familiar with what it meant to be social disgraces. Elizabeth was a married woman, advanced in years and had been barren. Mary had just the opposite problem, as she was a very young teenager, unmarried and pregnant. Elizabeth, through a special blessing from God, was finally able to conceive, but she was not carrying just any child; the baby in her womb was none other than John the Baptist, who would take on the important ministry of foretelling others of Christ! Elizabeth felt especially blessed by Mary's presence because she recognized that Mary was carrying the promised Savior of the World. Her baby recognized it, too. I love this part of the story in which her unborn baby leapt for joy, because it points to the power of Jesus Christ - that even an unborn baby was able to recognize and respond to the presence of the Holy One.

These two women, who had little status in the world were elevated by God's special blessing into eternal recognition and favor with God. Why were they so special? Because they were faithful. It is a reminder that no one is too lowly for God to use for His divine purpose. From lowly shepherds and a carpenter to socially disgraced women, God shapes this story from seemingly unimportant people to a magnificent purpose for the greatest story ever told.

**PRAY:** *Lord, thank you that our status is not of this world, but that of what is to come. Open our hearts to all the possibilities in which you can use us for your eternal purpose and glory. Amen.*

**TAKE ACTION:** This week, go out of your way in an act of kindness to a stranger or someone in need. Acknowledge in your heart and mind that everyone matters to God!

# a pagan's part in the Christmas story

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 9, 2020

BY RANDY AND LESLIE HASTINGS



**WRITE:** *"In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. And all went to be registered, each to his own town." (Luke 2:1-3).*

**REFLECT:** Caesar Augustus' decree that the world should be registered came at a key moment for the Christmas story. Joseph's ancestral home was Bethlehem, 90 miles from where they lived in Nazareth. Mary was close to giving birth, and travel would be difficult. Likely, Joseph and Mary were concerned, but their only choice was to obey. Making the journey worked for God's glory to fulfill Micah's prophecy made 700 years earlier - that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem.

Many consider Caesar Augustus to have been the greatest Roman emperor. By ordering a census of his empire, he would show how important he was and gain more money in taxes. His decree pursued a worldly agenda, but it played a part in God's plan to send Jesus as the Redeemer and Savior for all mankind. We can take comfort in knowing that God uses imperfect, unbelieving people to further His purposes.

There are leaders and groups in the world today who promote anti-Christian agendas. Some of our national leaders may have plans that oppose God's will or are harmful for our country. We can pray for God to work all these things together for his good (Romans 8:28). We can also pray that God will direct leaders to behave in a manner that directly advances His kingdom.

**PRAY:** *Dear Lord, we know that you can call and equip the leaders of this world to act in ways that please you. Please also turn our hearts and minds toward our Savior, who came as a baby to Bethlehem and now has power over all. Amen.*

**TAKE ACTION:** Read in Isaiah 45:4-5 about how God moves leaders who are not his followers. Take time to enjoy outdoor Christmas lights and holiday decorations. Make special note of the Nativity scenes depicting the holiest of nights, and focus on Jesus, the king of kings.

# an example of faith

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 10, 2020

BY PASTOR JOEL BEYER



**WRITE:** *So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judaea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born (Luke 2:4-6).*

**REFLECT:** Of all the people in the Nativity, I think my heart goes out most to Joseph. I truly think all he was looking for was a cute girl to marry, and he ended up pretty immediately with some cosmic drama! Joseph was given the task of leading a family and a situation that he really had no control over. He had to submit to God in everything, and put aside his own comfort and plan for his own life in order to protect his wife, serve his family, and follow God's will.

It's something all of us can relate to. Jesus command to all of us is: "Deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow me" (Matthew 16:24). If Jesus is our Savior, He'll constantly put us in circumstances where we need set aside our own comfort and plans in order to follow God's will and bless others. It's not easy! But as we look to Jesus, who gave up heaven and laid down his life to save us, we receive the strength and promise that He is with us and will help us as we seek Him.

**PRAY:** *Father, help me to trust You in everything, to put aside my pride and self-interest, and follow Your will. Thank you for doing that for me! Amen.*

**TAKE ACTION:** When a challenge arises today, use it as an opportunity to set aside your own comfort and plans and put someone else's needs first. Give someone the gift of quality time or an act of service to relieve someone else's stress. Even if it doesn't feel natural, how about offering an encouraging word? Perhaps you could stand up for someone who needs you in their court.

# the importance of a small town



FRIDAY, DECEMBER 11, 2020

BY RANDY AND LESLIE HASTINGS

**WRITE:** *But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times (Micah 5:2).*

**REFLECT:** Micah wrote this passage for the Jews in exile. They were living in a turbulent, uncertain, and violent period. The prophecy promises that God will provide Israel with their own ruler. But there is a surprise—the king will come from a small town, not from Jerusalem as one might expect. God does not need magnificent settings to make wonderful things happen. He picked a young shepherd boy from Bethlehem to be King David and later He sent Jesus to earth as a baby born in a stable in Bethlehem.

The work of God's hand often appears in unexpected forms:

*For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways (Isaiah 55:8-9).*

This verse from Micah appealed to us as we are approaching this Christmas season. 2020 has been a year of uncertainty and frustration. Micah reminds us that God has a plan and that He cares for us. This Christmas will not have the usual festivities and gatherings we have come to expect. Maybe this year looks less significant, but we can find joy and a new, quiet beauty in celebrating the birth of our Savior.

**PRAY:** *Thank you for sending Jesus as our Savior. Please help us celebrate His birth this season in spite of the pandemic, and give us the awareness to recognize Your presence in our lives while we are sheltering in place. We ask this in Jesus name, Amen.*

**TAKE ACTION:** Read about the unusual way that Elijah met God in 1 Kings 19:11-13. Enjoy an Advent calendar with Bible verses this year. God may be waiting to connect with you behind the calendar windows.

# the best news ever



**SATURDAY, DECEMBER 12, 2020**

**BY TOM AHRENDT**

**WRITE:** *All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: “The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel”—which means, “God with us” (Matthew 1:22–23).*

**REFLECT:** What does it mean that God is with us? Glorious tidings of joy, peace, and goodwill for all who believe in Him. Knowing that God is with us grants me ultimate freedom! I have freedom to choose a better life-path of service to others. I have freedom to ask for God’s help to fight my selfish impulses and know that He will grant me both the strength to fight and offer His forgiveness when I fail. I have freedom to know that God is always with me, has a good plan for me, and that nothing can stand against God.

I know truth when I hear it but, am I listening? Am I looking up, realizing the blessings I have received, and giving thanks for what went well this week? Or, am I letting the world, my sinful nature, or evil distract me, deceive me, and destroy my main purpose in this life? My choice.

Freely choose to make time every day to read and listen to God’s word. This is the best investment I can do for my daily well-being.

Faith comes through hearing and hearing through the Word. It takes no more faith for us to believe than it did for Joseph. In fact, we have the evidence of Joseph’s testimony to help us. Joseph saw and believed that God would do what He promised.

**PRAY:** *O Holy Spirit, strengthen my faith, and fill me with joy as I reflect on the miracle of Jesus Christ’s immaculate conception, birth, teachings, death and resurrection which fulfilled God’s promise to deliver all who believe from sin to life everlasting. Amen.*

**TAKE ACTION:** Purposely share the Gospel with people. Every day, you make the world a better place through a generous smile, encouraging words, a helpful hand, and neighborly friendship forged with dignity and respect. Read John 13:35.

# repeat offender

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 13, 2020

BY JEFF HINRICHS



**WRITE:** *For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life (John 3:16).*

**REFLECT:** This passage from John is probably one of the most referenced in all of Scripture, and for good reason. In just 26 words, it conveys the central message of the Christian faith, in that:

- 1) Humanity is broken (is destined to “perish” without intervention).
- 2) God’s sole motivation is to love that which He created out of nothing.
- 3) Jesus sacrificed himself on our behalf, which we do not deserve.
- 4) We have a restored relationship with our Lord now and forever.

One of the most difficult things to comprehend is the infinite mercy we are afforded through Christ’s sacrifice. We are forgiven for the things we wish we hadn’t done today and yet will probably do again in the future!

Recall the parable of the prodigal son, who took off with half of the wealth his father had accumulated in his lifetime and thoroughly wasted it in a small fraction of time. In the parable, the father welcomes home his son with open arms and doesn’t even let him finish apologizing before ordering a celebration to commence.

What would the father’s reaction have been if the son had subsequently left home again and returned in even worse shape a second or third time? An earthly father might have given up at that point and left his son to his own devices. It is truly a miracle that our Lord will always welcome us back no matter how many times we stray if we have faith and “believe in Him.” A verse from Romans comes to mind that is fitting in this context:

*But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us (Romans 5:8).*

John tells us that no matter what crazy things are yet to come in the year 2020 and beyond, we have assurance that Christ Jesus has already done the hard work, and everything will all turn out well in the end. It is a very comforting thought these days.

**PRAY:** *Dear Lord, I am amazed and in awe of your boundless mercy. Please impart a little of that skill in my life so that I may be a worthy example of your love to a broken world and inspire others to follow suit. Amen.*

**TAKE ACTION:** Try to be an unusually forgiving driver today! Refrain from honking at the person who is sitting motionless at a green traffic light staring at their new iPhone 12.

joy to the world!



**MONDAY, DECEMBER 14, 2020**

**BY DUSTIN DIRKS**

**WRITE:** *And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth (Luke 1:14), Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice (Philippians 4:4)!*

**REFLECT:** Life is full of ups and downs. We experience joy and celebrate when things are going well, yet we often lack joy and become distracted when facing trials and tribulations. Consider all of the different phrases we are provided to embrace this cycle; ebbs and flows, peaks and valleys, highs and lows. Just a normal part of life right?

We would be foolish to believe there won't be difficulties and times of sadness here on Earth. But as Christians, we have hope and that beautiful, true peace. We have faith that grounds us in gratefulness when things are going well, and our testimonies lift us in times of sadness.

We have a loving God that desires our default state be joy. Not too high or too low, not bouncing between the two, and free from dependency. Just joyful, rejoicing, and projecting our peace to those around us. How simple and beautiful is that design!

**PRAY:** *Lord, we can live peacefully and joyfully due to the simplicity of Your design. Help us draw closer to You when we are distracted by the highs and lows. You are good, and it is well. Amen.*

**TAKE ACTION:** Is your default state joy today? Are you working a little harder to get to a joyful version of yourself each morning? Is your joy dependent on something? Spend some time with the Lord reflecting on what you are thankful for, and if you find yourself in a constant battle for joy, find a growth group to be part of that can encourage you.

# how to wrap a Christmas present



TUESDAY, DECEMBER 15, 2020

BY SUSAN ONSGARD

**WRITE:** *And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn (Luke 2:7).*

**REFLECT:** An angel appears, surprising the shepherds who were watching over their sheep in the fields. The heavenly being had good news for them - their long-awaited Savior would be born that very day, and the sign to them would be a baby swaddled in cloths and lying in a manger.

The angel was giving the shepherds a sign that, as shepherds, they could relate to. Levitical Shepherds had an important job to do. They were to provide the temple with perfect lambs for sacrifice to fulfill God's requirement for atonement. They would come down from their watchtower when a ewe was to give birth. When the lamb was born, it was carefully examined, because they were looking for a perfect, unblemished lamb to raise to become the temple sacrifice. Every lambkin would be wrapped in strips of cloths to keep it warm and put in a manger to rest until they gave it to the mother.

In the stable, Mary's perfect baby Jesus was cleaned, washed, rubbed with salt, and wrapped in strips of cloths to keep Him warm. All that was available for a bed was a feeding trough for animals, but it would do. Little did she know at the time, she would be fulfilling the sign that was given to the shepherds by the angel.

How do you wrap the finest gift there ever was? Mary's baby no doubt was carefully swaddled, but as parents, they "wrapped" him his entire childhood with more than cloths. He was wrapped in love, because that would be the core of the Savior's message to the world. He was wrapped in the Word of God, so others would be able to recognize His message from ancient prophecy. He was wrapped in prayer, for God to be with Him and to do His will. Jesus became a gift with all the attributes of God, so we could know him more fully.

Mary and Joseph did a fine job wrapping their baby boy, which they knew was a gift, but not just for them. Whose name is on that lovingly wrapped gift? It's yours! We can enjoy unwrapping all the blessings of that gift, which will reveal to us just what we need - a Savior, that is for all people.

**PRAY:** *Dear Heavenly Father, thank you for remembering your children with an everlasting gift. Thank you for including us in your gift exchange, in which you give us our salvation and all we give back is our faith. Show us others who are in need of this gift, and through the Holy Spirit, give us the words to tell The Christmas Story. Amen.*

**TAKE ACTION:** On a smooth rock, draw a cross. Cut a paper towel in three strips and write "Salvation" on the first, "Love" on the second and "Faith" on the third. Wrap your rock with the strips and place it in a box. Wrap the box in your favorite Christmas paper and adorn it. The tag for the gift should say, "To: You, From: God". Place your gift where you can be reminded that Jesus is our solid Rock because we can rely on Him, we are "swaddled" in salvation, love, and faith, and He truly is the Greatest Gift of All...and don't forget to unwrap it on Christmas!

# perfect peace

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 16, 2020

BY CRYSTAL DIRKS



**WRITE:** *"You will keep in perfect peace him whose mind is steadfast, because he trusts in you (Isaiah 26:3)."*

**REFLECT:** I love hiking. I love adventure. I remember hiking on a trail years ago. I remember feeling my feet uncomfortable in my shoes and worrying if I would get blisters. I remember seeing sheer drop offs and having a fear of falling. I remember being caught in a severe thunderstorm and being anxious for the storm to pass quickly. But I also remember trusting the Lord to see us through. I remember the storm passing and the most beautiful rainbow appearing. I knew the Lord was with us and He would take care of us. Viewing His creation overtook me, and His peace invaded my heart. I saw all the effort and thoughtfulness He had to bring together the vast beauty in front of me even when I had discomforts along the way.

This is just like our lives. We walk along experiencing good and bad. We may experience worry, fear, and anxiety. But when we trust Him to carry us through life, we experience His peace and His beauty. We see His promises before us, and our eyes are opened to His creation. Do you trust the Lord? Do you trust him enough to carry you though? Turn all fear, anxiety, and control over to Him. He will invade your life with peace and freedom.

**PRAY:** *Dear Lord, open our eyes to your creation and your beauty. Remove all worry, fear and anxiety from our hearts. Invade our lives with your perfect peace. You are mighty, God, creator of Heaven and Earth! We love you, Lord! Amen.*

**TAKE ACTION:** When you get up this morning, pick something in your life you have been struggling to give to the Lord. In prayer, give this to the Lord and trust that He will take care of it. Keep your eyes open to His action.

# God's love conquers any fear



THURSDAY, DECEMBER 17, 2020

BY JILL COOK

**WRITE:** *And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear (Luke 2:8–9).*

**REFLECT:** “People in the Bible, who were confronted by God or his angels all had one consistent response...fear” (Life Application Study Bible; NIV). In an unexpected situation such as this, one can assume that the shepherds were grateful that they had decided to wait and listen to what God would reveal to them next.

**PRAY:** *Father God, there have been many unexpected situations this year, that have caused us to be filled with fear. Thank you Father, that when fear grips us, we too can choose to wait, listen, and rely on you... trusting in your adequate provisions and perfect plan. We surrender our fears to you now and ask for your peace to fill us to overflowing. In your precious name Jesus, we pray. Amen.*

**TAKE ACTION:** Today, thank God for his provisions that are completely adequate for our needs, and be intentional in placing all your fears, worries, and concerns at His feet, and then wait, be still, and remain in Him. God's awe-inspiring power is accessible to you today. During this Advent season, keep your eyes open for those around you who may be walking in fear and darkness, and shine the light of the good news about Jesus upon them. Jesus loves you today and always.

# fear not

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 18, 2020

BY MICHAEL AND MARIANA REYNER



**WRITE:** *And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord (Luke 2:10-11).*

**REFLECT:** If you feel overwhelmed or stressed out during the holiday season, I am sure the shepherds outside of Bethlehem could relate. Herding sheep would have been hard enough already, without people from all over coming into town and filling up all the inns, and add to that an angel appearing and terrifying you and your flock.

But the angel brought good news of the promised Messiah that all of Israel was waiting for, and when the shepherds heard of this, their fear disappeared and they went with joy to see what they had been told.

We should take this to heart, and remember that none of the stress and fear in our everyday lives can compare to the comfort and joy of the good news of Jesus Christ. The angel's command to fear not applies to us as well. God would want us to be calm and focus on His Son, just like He did with those shepherds, and our fears will disappear.

**PRAY:** *Dear Lord, thank you for the good news of your Son Jesus Christ. Please help us to remember during this difficult time that you have sent us a Savior, and we have nothing to be afraid of. Grant us calm and peace and help us to share the good news with all people, as you have shared it with us. Amen.*

**TAKE ACTION:** Take a short walk and reflect on the good news of Jesus' birth, and don't allow thoughts of work or stress to distract you.



SATURDAY, DECEMBER 19, 2020

BY RICH AND GERI COOK

**WRITE:** *Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this (Isaiah 9:7)*

**REFLECT:** Wow – could anything be a more perfectly timed message for us here today in this place at this time than this word from Isaiah? If you're like most of us, you've probably spent some energy worrying about who will be "in charge" here in our country. This part of Isaiah's prophecy reminds us Who is really in control, and Whose government we should be most concerned with. Our earthly rulers come and go, but our Eternal Ruler is just that – eternal. "Before Abraham was, I AM" says Jesus (John 8:58).

When Jesus did come in fulfillment of the prophecy (read the whole Isaiah 9 chapter), He at once became the government and brought peace on earth, and He in fact does uphold the kingdom with justice both now and forever. As false prophets come and go, it's easy for us to lose sight of the kingdom and the peace that is inherent in it. We choose to take hold of that peace as beloved children of the kingdom!

**PRAY:** *Dear God – we know Who is in control, and Who works all things for the good for those who love Him. Help us take firm hold of Your Word, and to live out your call in our lives according to your purpose. Amen.*

**TAKE ACTION:** Take a holiday from the TV news, commentary and social media and spend some time reading your Bible – and maybe the next day, send a note to someone about an insight you gained from doing it.

# a slice of heaven

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 20, 2020

BY ELENA DEFRANCESCO



**WRITE:** *Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests" (Luke 2:13-14 NIV)*

**REFLECT:** Jesus was a peacemaker, and He brought the glory of God to Earth. How are we bringing heaven to Earth in our modern society today?

What a blessing it is that we get to go through this life in peace knowing our God brings hope to all mankind and not just a selected few. By bringing God's kingdom to Earth like Jesus did, we can significantly change the world! Are we accepting oGod's free and wonderful gifts that bring us endless amounts of joy, love, comfort, grace and peace? By accepting these offerings, we can then hand pick a particular area in our lives where we have the capacity to offer our time, special gifts, finances and support.

**PRAY:** *God help me to remember to bring your heavenly kingdom to Earth and to lose sight of my human flesh desires. God, help me to remember that this walk with You is nothing close to ordinary - it's a gift, it's an honor to receive Your favor. God, show me ways to share Your fruits and gifts in our local community, to strangers, family and friends so Your loving word spreads throughout our entire world. Amen.*

**TAKE ACTION:** Give yourself a week to look into a local non-profit, donation service, or any organization. If it speaks directly to your heart , perhaps that's God nodding "yes" with approval. Devote your time to the cause, have meaningful conversations, put forth the special gifts God has placed just for you, and use those gifts while working with an outside organization. Maybe your gift from God is creating community within a certain organization, or maybe you are a wonderful writer, and you begin to write letters with love and Scripture. These are just a few examples.

# majesty in the midst of mundane



**MONDAY, DECEMBER 21, 2020**

**BY LINDY MUNOZ**

**WRITE:** *When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us" (Luke 2:15).*

**REFLECT:** The sky became dark again, the night quiet again like the sudden end of a fireworks show. Did the shepherds then turn to each other and ask, "What was that?" Were they asking each other, "Who can we find to come and watch the sheep while we go and check this out"? or, "Who are we to deserve such an honor?" NO!

Scripture tells us the shepherds immediately said to each other, "LET US GO and SEE this thing, which THE LORD has made known to us." Like the fishermen who left their boats and the tax collector who left his booth, they left their sheep and went. They did not consider their lowly positions. They SAW the angels and the light, they HEARD the message and the singing of praises, and they WENT to see their Savior in the flesh. No questions asked!

**PRAY:** *Father, grant us with the humility and enthusiasm of the shepherds who heard and saw Your message of salvation. Help us not to keep this message to ourselves, but, like the shepherds, to hear, see, and then go to do Your will. Amen.*

**TAKE ACTION:** Ask each family member to think of a time when they received some really good news, like the birth of a child – news that was so exciting, it had to be shared! Take time as a family to thank God for those wonderful messages and for the wonderful message of His Son.

# joy and zeal for the Lord

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 22, 2020

BY JIM JOHNSENBAUGH



**WRITE:** *When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told (Luke 2:17–20 NIV).*

**REFLECT:** This child who lay in the manger is God almighty in human flesh. The humility our God has by humbling Himself, and being born into His own creation is inconceivable. But thanks be to God for the faith He's bestowed on us who believe, and in that promise which was realized in Bethlehem.

**PRAY:** *Oh Lord, thank you for your promises. Thank you for speaking your word through the prophets of old, and now in these last days through your Son as Hebrews tells us. May we cling daily to your Word, trusting in your promises and through faith bearing our crosses daily.*

**TAKE ACTION:** These verses in Luke seem to show the faith given to the shepherds who had the visitation by the angel of the Lord. May it be that we have the same joy and zeal for our Lord Jesus as these shepherds did.

# Jesus is our peace

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 23, 2020

BY PAULA SAMSON



**WRITE:** *"Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel" (Luke 2:29-32 ESV).*

**REFLECT:** What a strange time we are living in with the Covid-19 pandemic, weird weather patterns, crazy elections, and social/economic crises. No matter what season we are in, Jesus IS the reason for the season. Bing dictionary says that peace is "freedom from disturbance; quiet and tranquility." As Christians, we have the gift to experience God's peace that surpasses all understanding.

The Bible passage Luke 2:29-32 states that Simeon was righteous before the Lord with honorable character. The Holy Spirit was upon him and spoke through him! The baptism of the Holy Spirit had not even taken place yet (Acts). Scripture states that "The Lord shall share his secrets with those who revere him; and he shall show his covenant to them" (Psalm 25:14).

Simeon was in the Holy Spirit when he entered the temple at the same time Jesus entered and proclaimed: "Lord, now you are letting your servant (Simeon) depart in PEACE, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation..." (Luke 2:29-32). Only the Holy Spirit could have revealed this! Simeon's heart's desire was satiated. Jesus is our peace and creates a way for EVERYONE to experience the salvation of God.

**PRAY:** *Father God, we rejoice that our eyes have seen Your salvation! Thank you for your perfect peace! Help us to trust you in all circumstances. Fill us and those around us with your peace and the power of the Holy Spirit. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.*

**TAKE ACTION:** 1. Forgive any offense and ask the Lord to bless everyone with His peace. 2. Jot down a Scripture about peace and meditate on it. 3. Do something nice for someone. 4. Give God thanks and praise for His peace.

never forget

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 24, 2020

BY CHRIS CORDUA



**WRITE:** *But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name (John 20:31 NIV).*

**REFLECT:** What this passage in the Book of John is saying to me, and his purpose in writing this Book, was so that we would not forget about Jesus Christ. He is our Messiah, the Son of God! God the Father sent Him to us, that He might take upon His broad shoulders the sins of the world, all of our sins, and that by believing in Him, we would be given by our faith, the gift of everlasting life, the greatest gift mankind has ever received.

What a sacrifice it was, the ultimate sacrifice. It often makes me think of my own son, and how impossible it would be for me to ever give him up so that others might be saved, and yet this is what our Father did for us by making this ultimate sacrifice. We are so blessed to have such a loving God.

**PRAY:** *Thank you, God, for the greatness of Your love for us, and for making the ultimate sacrifice for us and sending Your Son, Jesus Christ, to bear the burden of all of our sins, so that we might, by faith alone, someday know Your Kingdom - the Kingdom of Heaven.*

*Please help us to know You more each day by being in the Word. Help us to serve You each day by loving our neighbors and those in need, as you have loved us. In Christ's name we pray, Amen.*

**TAKE ACTION:** John wrote this Book so that you would never forget that Jesus is your Messiah, and in a world with so many distractions, I suspect that his hope was that you would refer back to the Book of John again and again. The Word is there to remind you, to bring you back when the adventures and distractions of life turn you away from God and your relationship with Him. Find time to read the Bible and to be in the Word. It will give you a whole new perspective on your life.

# growing in wisdom

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 25, 2020

BY RACHEL THOMPSON



**WRITE:** *And the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom. And the favor of God was upon him (Luke 2:40 ESV).*

**REFLECT:** Not much is written about Jesus's childhood and adolescence, but what is important for us to know is mentioned—"he grew in strength, with wisdom"( Luke 2:52). Jesus is fully God and fully man. He was born from Mary without sin, and yet He was tasked to develop and grow as we all do. Wisdom is a gift from God and hard-won over many maturing years for most of us. The rare story of Jesus as a boy being left behind in the temple during a trip to Jerusalem illustrates His godly wisdom on knowing His purpose when He replies to his bewildered parents, "Why were you searching for me? Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house" (Luke 2:45)? With that wisdom, He was able to walk faithfully on the long road to the cross for our salvation.

**PRAY:** *God, may You grow us in strength and wisdom as Your Word guides us on our life's journey. Thank you, Jesus, for living the perfect life that we never could and willingly giving Your life as the perfect sacrifice to redeem us. Amen.*

**TAKE ACTION:** No matter where you find yourself on the journey of your life, let God's Word bring wisdom and hope to renew you today for the purpose He has set before you. He is faithful in His promise: "If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you"(James 1:5).

# This December at St. Mark:

Sundays:

Sunday school (9:00 AM)

Livestream Worship (10:00 AM)

Drive-through Communion (11:00 AM)

12/9: Family Advent Night - Christmas Light Scavenger Hunt (6:00 PM)

12/16: Family Advent Night - Zoom Christmas Concert (6:00 PM)

12/20: Drive-Through Nativity (5:00 PM)

12/24: Christmas Eve Outdoor Worship and Livestream Worship (Times TBD)

Sign-ups are required for ALL in-person activities, and some events may be limited. Please register to receive our weekly e-news for details and registration by e-mailing Paula Samson at [stmark@stmarkchurch.net](mailto:stmark@stmarkchurch.net).

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