

An  
Advent  
Devotional  
2015



Bethany Presbyterian Church  
Sacramento, California

*“Advent” means “coming” or “arrival.”* During the season of Advent, we celebrate Christ’s coming into the world and watch with expectant hope for his coming again. In its historical origins, the season of Advent was patterned after the season of Lent, a six-week period of penitence and preparation for Easter. Similarly, the four weeks of Advent present an opportunity for communal discernment and personal examination, as the church prepares to celebrate the Nativity of the Lord and looks with hope for Christ’s return.

There’s no such thing as “Advent” in the Bible, and there certainly isn’t anything about lighting different colored candles. In the ancient world, however, various peoples lit fires to mark the turning of the light into winter’s season and to pray for the return of the light. The church has Christianized that practice in the lighting of the Advent wreath. To us, these candles are signs of the growing light of Christ who is coming again in all fullness into the darkness of our world.

Until the dawning of that Great Day, we watch and wait in Holy Spirit for Christ’s coming into the darkness



of our world, lighting candles of hope, peace, joy, and love; and remembering the promises of God with prayer.

Our Advent wreath consists of five unlit candles. Each successive week, we light an additional candle as follows:

- 1st Sunday: Hope
- 2nd Sunday: Peace
- 3rd Sunday: Joy
- 4th Sunday: Love

And on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day, we light the fifth candle: the Christ Child Candle

In Advent we expectantly wait for the One who has already come. We anticipate the promised justice of God’s new world ... we strive toward the restoration of the afflicted, the tormented, and the grieving ... we rededicate ourselves to the beating of swords into plowshares ... we pledge ourselves to bringing new life to the barren deserts of our cities. We rejoice that the Prince of Peace has appeared. We acclaim the child born to lead us into the promised land. We are renewed in Hope, Peace, Joy, Love and in the promise of the Christ Child whose birth we celebrate. <sup>1</sup>

Bethany Presbyterian Church  
Sacramento, California  
Spiritual Formation Commission  
& Hospitality Commission  
Winter 2015

<sup>1</sup> Presbyterian Church (USA) Mission Agency

*And the King will answer them, "Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me."*—Matthew 25: 40

Day 1

## The Shelter

How many of you live in a house or an apartment?

When you woke up this morning, did you know someone you love was nearby?

A lot of kids today woke up alone. They may have spent the night under a bridge, in the cold or maybe with nothing more than a blanket to cover them.

Many of those children live here in Sacramento. And all they want for themselves and their family is a solid roof over their heads to stop the rain, four walls to block the wind and maybe a soft bed in which to sleep.

During the next four weeks of Advent, we are going to visit a very special place—a place where the greatest miracle in mankind occurred. Very soon, a man and woman will visit this place. But for right now, it is nothing more than a room, protection from the wind and rain.

Our church is blessed to be able to help people like those I described—people who have no place to stay and no food to eat. With our money, we help provide the shelter that is necessary for people to continue living. Many members of the church also lend their hands to preparing and serving these people, just as Christ commanded us to feed the hungry.

Let's say thank you today to God for the walls and the roof that protect us—for they are like His love, which is with us always to protect us from evil. May we remember that all gifts come from God and that these gifts should be shared with those in need. Amen.

*Jim Guida*



Day 2

*They who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint. —Isaiah 40: 31*

## The Christmas Spirit

The stores are full of Christmas decorations before Halloween. The shopping frenzy has begun, and many who love Christmas are excited to begin the celebration. They see Christmas as a time of having fun shopping, receiving and giving gifts, baking and eating delicious food, providing elaborate decorations, and visiting with friends and family.

Others feel that the early start and the secular excitement diminish the true spirit of Christmas. They experience Christmas as a time of celebrating the birth of Jesus, helping and serving others, reflecting on the forgiveness of the Savior, and spending more time with the Lord while still enjoying many of the celebrations of the secular world.

During Advent season there is a spirit of celebration for most people, and God welcomes all who recognize him as the Divine Creator, regardless of the way we celebrate Christmas. He is powerful and can recognize the Christian celebration of Christ's birth amidst the secular celebration. He knows that however we celebrate Christmas, it is with a spirit that reflects our devotion to Him and that reflects our joyfulness that our Savior Jesus was born as a baby and came to save us from our sins.

The Christmas spirit is in all who love Jesus and who praise the Lord for providing salvation through Him. The Christmas spirit is with us throughout the year as we worship the Lord and serve Him.

*Faye Bundesen Christensen*



*The text of Handel's Messiah was written in 1742 by Charles Jennens, who used as his narrative specially chosen Old Testament and New Testament passages foretelling the birth and reign of Christ.*

Day 3

## Messiah, A Sacred Oratorio (1742)

Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God. Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned. The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness; prepare ye the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. (Isaiah 40: 1-3)

Ev'ry valley shall be exalted, and ev'ry mountain and hill made low; the crooked straight and the rough places plain. (Isaiah 40: 4)

And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together: for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it. (Isaiah 40: 5)

Thus saith the Lord, the Lord of hosts: Yet once a little while and I will shake the heavens and the earth, the sea and the dry land. And I will shake all nations; and the desire of all nations shall come. (Haggai 2: 6-7)

The Lord, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to His temple, even the messenger of the Covenant, whom you delight in; behold, He shall come, saith the Lord of hosts. (Malachi 3: 1)

But who may abide the day of His coming, and who shall stand when He appeareth? For He is like a refiner's fire. (Malachi 3: 2)

And He shall purify the sons of Levi, that they may offer unto the Lord an offering in righteousness. (Malachi 3: 3)

Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call His name Emmanuel, God with us. (Isaiah 7: 14; Matthew 1: 23)

O thou that tellest good tidings to Zion, get thee up into the high mountain. O thou that tellest good tidings to Jerusalem, lift up thy voice with strength; lift it up, be not afraid; say unto the cities of Judah, behold your god! (Isaiah 40: 9)

Arise, shine, for thy light is come, and the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee. (Isaiah 60: 1)

For behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and gross darkness the people; but the Lord shall arise upon thee, and His glory shall be seen upon thee. And the Gentiles shall come to thy light, and kings to the brightness of thy rising. (Isaiah 60: 2-3)

## Day 4

*George Frideric Handel wrote the majority of his magnificent "Messiah" in just 24 days. Imagine what YOU can do in the 28 days of Advent to prepare your heart for Jesus!*

The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light; and they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined. (Isaiah 9: 2)

For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given, and the government shall be upon His shoulder; and His name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, the mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace. (Isaiah 9: 6)

There were shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flocks by night. And lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them, and they were sore afraid. (Luke 2: 8-9)

And the angel said unto them: "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord." (Luke 2: 10-11)

And suddenly there was with the angel, a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God, and saying: "Glory to God in the highest, and peace on earth, good will towards men." (Luke 2: 13-14)

Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion; shout, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, thy King cometh unto thee; He is the righteous Saviour, and He shall speak peace unto the heathen. (Zechariah 9: 9-10)

Then shall the eyes of the blind be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then shall the lame man leap as an hart, and the tongue of the dumb shall sing. (Isaiah 35: 5-6)

He shall feed His flock like a shepherd; and He shall gather the lambs with His arm, and carry them in His bosom, and gently lead those that are with young. (Isaiah 40: 11)

Come unto Him, all ye that labour, come unto Him that are heavy laden, and He will give you rest. Take his yoke upon you, and learn of Him, for He is meek and lowly of heart, and ye shall find rest unto your souls. (Matthew 11: 28-29)

His yoke is easy, and His burden is light. (Matthew 11: 30)

Behold the Lamb of God, that taketh away the sin of the world. (John 1: 29)

Hallelujah: for the Lord God Omnipotent reigneth. (Revelation 19: 6)



## Fear Not

I wonder what it was like  
for Mary  
to be told she'd have a baby

We rejoice in the majesty  
of the angel  
appearing to her one day

We celebrate the promise  
made long ago  
now to be fulfilled

Yet what of the poor girl  
not yet wed  
dazed at unexpected news?

I can see her now pondering  
about what  
her dad and mom would say

And thinking of her  
fiancé Joseph:  
would he now put her aside?

That she needn't be concerned,  
that sweet teen  
cheated of her dreams,

would soon occur to her  
as family love  
and knowing trust surpassed

all doubt and shock  
and worry over  
neighbors' narrow views

Fear not, we say:  
greatness is upon us  
watch for it, wait for it

be at one with it  
when it comes  
Christmas Day.

*Cathy Sapunor*



## The Time is Right

I used to get really peeved when Christmas stuff started appearing before Thanksgiving. In fact, nowadays stores start putting out Christmas goods before Halloween.

Nobody knows the real date of Jesus’ birth. December 25 is just an arbitrary date selected to celebrate the fact of his birth. And his birth is the important part, not the date.

Merchants are not responsible for the “commercialism” of Christmas. That happens when we fail to realize that Christmas is a season of the heart, not a day on the calendar.

You can be grouchy about Christmas decorations and ads in October. Or you can choose to let them remind you of the true meaning of Christmas.

“Behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.” (Luke 2: 10, 11)

When I see Christmas decorations in October or any other time of year I smile, glad of the reminder of what the season—what my entire life as a Christian—is all about. A gift from God, a tiny baby who is my Saviour—and yours, too.

*Christine Sackey*





## God Speaking Through Us

I find it rather hard to witness the Good News to the people I meet. Most of the time I just forget or focus on the immediate issues in conversation or worry I might offend. Many verses exhort us to use actual words to let God's light shine out through us.

Though not being a preacher myself (though I know a very good one), I still feel called to witness to the faith God has given me. How can I do this? First, I'm still working on it! There are opportunities that come to me but sometimes I am not staying focused on Jesus and do not recognize them. The starting point for me is being open to the chances that come my way.

It may be as simple as responding using that scary word, "God," in a sentence. Breaking MY ice is usually my first step. If I get a positive response, if the person I am speaking to does not recoil in horror or immediately change the subject, I might have the courage to follow up and say something about what God has meant for my life.

Most of us have had at least one difficult period in our life when holding onto Jesus meant staying above water spiritually—and perhaps keeping us from harm's way by poor decisions. If telling of your own hard times is too daunting, a less intimate comment can also be encouraging, such as expressing the wish "God be with you" or "God give you..." strength—or courage—or whatever need the person has expressed. Most people will respond positively to your stating you will pray for them.

I realize I have not used these or other statements to the extent that I might have to tell others of God's power and support in my life. But, perhaps like you, I do intend to do so more fully. Good intentions may not always flower to good deeds, but can certainly direct us to take the right road. Let us encourage one another to good deeds—telling of God's love and grace! Especially in this Advent season as we celebrate the coming of Christ, may our hearts be open to spreading the word.

## Day 8

*Keep open house; be generous with your lives. By opening up to others, you'll prompt people to open up with God, this generous Father in heaven. —Matthew 5: 16*

### Mary and Joseph

Mary and Joseph came to Bethlehem looking for a place to stay and all they needed was a shelter to protect them.

Everybody said they had no room and dismissed them. Everybody, that is, except for one person who had no rooms to let them stay in. However, he realized that Joseph and Mary needed a place to stay. He chose to do something out of the ordinary—maybe because he knew that these were extraordinary circumstances.

I like to think that the stable he gave them was the best shelter he had available. Perhaps he told his stable boy to go clear out the building where the animals were kept. Maybe he had the floors swept clean and fresh hay put down to soften the floor for them. Seeing that Mary was about to give birth, I would guess that his wife helped clean out the manger, which is usually used as a trough to feed the animals, and maybe she put in strips of cloth that would be used for swaddling or wrapping up the baby to come.

We really don't know anything about the folks who gave shelter to Mary, Joseph and, eventually, their son Jesus. But we can believe that, even though these people were strangers to them, they gave the best they could—nothing fancy or great but just what they had.

During this time of year we are especially reminded to share with strangers the many blessings you and I have. Let's say "thank you" to God for all these wonderful gifts and to all the good people here who bring them to us to share.

*Jim Guida*

*[www.shortsermonsforchildren.com](http://www.shortsermonsforchildren.com)*



*And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name Jesus: for he shall save his people from their sins. —Matthew 1: 21*

Day 9

## Because of Him



My faith is my belief in Christ  
because of what he did on the cross.  
He died and suffered for me.  
I look at life happier.  
I walk in victory now  
not when I die  
but from now on  
and he  
does not have suffering  
or sickness  
or worry or any of those things for me  
and when there is something that in  
this world is hard to deal with  
he sustains me and makes it a lot easier,  
and that's why I confide in him  
because I know what he did for me  
on the cross.

And I'm forever grateful  
and thanking him every day  
because he shows me every day  
and I talk with him every day  
and I thank you, my Lord and Savior.  
I love you and thou be the glory.  
Amen.

*A Bethany Church Member*

*What no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, and what no human mind has conceived the things God has prepared for those who love him. —1 Corinthians 2: 9*

Seen On a Sign While Driving:  
“Jesus Had Two Fathers.”

The two of us who spotted it had different interpretations.

“Of course He had two fathers: His father in heaven (God) and the earthly father (Joseph) who was chosen to nurture him.”

“No, it’s a statement supporting same-sex parents.”

Marriage. Divorce. Step-parenting. Gay parenting. Topics that bring zest and charge to daily conversation. And become excuses to exclude and to hate. It seems impossible to achieve reconciliation.

But these issues are nowhere near as profound and earth-shaking as Isaiah’s centuries-ago declaration:

“Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.”

What more radical a thought can there—even today—be?

The signs, said Isaiah, were clear. Coming would be one who’d challenge and comfort a distressed world. Hear me, he cried, telling his listeners ... telling us still ... to be ready for change ... to expect the unexpected, and to embrace it. To not disavow the mysterious and heretofore unknown, but to try to understand it, and to strive for peace between all of our brothers and sisters.

But today’s signs, we protest, point us in crisscross ways. What are we to believe?

And yet ... why are we worried? The child of God is coming, again, to open wary eyes and to strengthen weak hearts and minds. With Him, we again rise in courage to try new paths, or new ways of traveling the old.

With Him, we again are compelled to empty ourselves of frustration and anger, distrust and fear.

With him, again, we must prepare for miracles. We must look, and see.

*But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!"—Luke 10: 40*

## The Helper

Martha was focused on her “to do” list. Mary was fully aware of all that had to be done, but she put that aside to spend time with Jesus.

At Christmas time, it's all too easy to become a Martha, caught up in our long “to do” list. Too often, we start focusing on all we want to get done and start resenting that others don't help us.

Many hands may make the work lighter, but they won't solve the underlying problem.

What we need isn't more human help. What we need is more of Jesus. Only he can give us the peace of mind and heart that we crave.

At Christmas, we celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ who came to bring us peace. But he won't force that peace on you—like Mary, you have to seek it out.

Take time this Christmas to sit a while at the manger. Contemplate what Jesus means to you, and listen to what he has to say. Take time to focus on him instead of on your chores and lists.

Chores are temporary. The peace you get from a relationship with Jesus is everlasting.

*Christine Sackey*



## Day 12

*For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. —Jeremiah 29 :11*

### Complete

The older I grow  
The less I know  
But sure I am  
I'm part of God's plan.

His beautiful earth  
Or a baby's birth  
Are signs of His care  
Love for all to share.

God's glory is all around  
Both in sky and on ground.  
We just need to look up  
His love will fill our cup.

*Mary Harbison-Sindle*



*“And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered.  
So don’t be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.”*

*—Matthew 10: 30-31*

Day 13

## Prayers for Small Things

Recovery from a major illness or accident or bankruptcy or divorce can be made more rapidly and more surely with our focus on God. These problems may take a long time to sort out. However, our faith is often more strengthened by the little things that we put before God and see transformed nearly in front of our eyes.

How often do we pray for little things? Especially after a major life change I found myself praying more often and even for small wishes. The more I paid attention the more I was aware that God was fulfilling my requests, sometimes as I spoke and or in a short time—short enough that even with my brief attention span, I could see God at work in my life!

God cares for us in the little things. God never sleeps, is always within our call, and cares for us more than we can imagine, even bringing everyday blessing such as rain on the just and the unjust. Fortunately, he knows what we need even before we ask! He is ever ready to forgive, to instruct, to lead, to comfort. I go along much of the time forgetting that each breath is a gift; every good thing, a blessing from God.

Mindfulness is a popular subject in business and Buddhism. Being aware, raising one’s consciousness, appreciating God and others, living more intentionally, and focusing our mind can show us more of how God loves us and keeps us focused. Jesus went away to quiet places to pray. In our busy world the quiet often may need to come from inside ourselves rather than in a lonely place—with the radio or TV off, the phone silenced, and us alone in our car or kitchen.

In the celebration of Christ’s coming, clean out your worry list and put all the concerns, even the tiny ones, before God. I found I was amazed when doing this to find God always a step ahead and showering blessing on me, until, like counting sheep, I could not count any higher. Though I’m struggling to keep this up, each time I manage it, I am blessed again to see God at work in my life and in the lives of others. As we rejoice that God has come to us in Jesus, let us pray always—even for the little things.

## Shepherds and Kings

Let's talk about some visitors who came to that stable where the baby was born. How many of you remember when you were born? I have some baby books here that talk about first visitors.

(Open book) This one says the first visitors were Grandma, Aunt Alexis, Grandpa and Aunt Clydine.

(Open another book) This one says that sister Margot was there and Tom and Nadine.

Now, here's another baby book of sorts (open Bible). This one says: Mary gave birth to her first child, a son. That night an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared among some shepherds, who were in the fields outside the village, guarding their flocks of sheep. The shepherds were terribly frightened, but the angel reassured them. "Don't be afraid!" he said. "I bring you good news of great joy for everyone! The Savior—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born tonight in Bethlehem, the city of David!" Suddenly, the angel was joined by a vast host of others—the armies of heaven—praising God:

"Glory to God in the highest heaven, and peace on earth  
to all whom God favors."

When the angels had returned to heaven, the shepherds said to each other, "Come on, let's go to Bethlehem! Let's see this wonderful thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about."

How many of you had angels do your birth announcement or shepherds come to see you when you were born?

But wait! There's more!

About the time Jesus was born, some wise men arrived in Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We have come to worship him."

A star appeared to them, guiding them to Bethlehem. It went ahead of them and stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were filled with joy! They entered



the house where the child and his mother, Mary, were, and they fell down before him and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasure chests and gave him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

(Close book) How many of you received gold, frankincense and myrrh when you were born? Me neither.

These stories tell me that, no matter what else you believe, the birth of the baby Jesus must have been a pretty extraordinary thing!

*Jim Guida*

*www.shortsermonsforchildren.com*

*Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God.*

*—1 John 4: 7*

Day 15

## Christmas is About



Christmas is about giving  
both our  
goods  
and our  
Selves  
to those in need.

We share the love of family,  
those of blood  
and those  
chosen  
to be our family.

*Diana Lucas*

*Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. —1 Thessalonians 4: 17*

## Always With Us

Each Christmas season brings with it the memories of past years. I think of the festivities—the food, the laughter, the singing, and, of course, the presents. Oh, the presents! Some Christmases are so memorable that I can still re-live them in my mind ... I smile and think of how blessed I have been over the years.

And while Christmas is a time to rejoice, it is always accompanied by a desperate longing for loved ones who are no longer with us—those who are now our angels, guiding us, guarding us, and helping to shed light through darkness, when we feel we need them most.

Sure, this Christmas may not be the same as it was years ago. But the memories of our angels, who shared this day with us before, will encourage us to stay strong in our faith during this season, and continue to make new memories ... for our God and our angels are always with us, even if we cannot see them.

*Christine Ogata Medina*



## The Wooden Bench

An old fashioned wooden bench looking at the water,  
Arms so strong golden in the wavering light  
Bring memories of precious times.

Other days when gentle, funny chatter  
Surrounded and emanated from this beckoning bench  
Much like the sweet sounds of the birds in the  
branches above.

Times so taken for granted,  
Times that lent such strength and harmony to life.  
These are sunlit remembrances of affection  
That gave birth to a family of years.  
The weather burnished arms of this  
old fashioned wooden bench.

*Diana Bachelor*



## Remember the X

It turns out that the use of the word Xmas is not an attempt to “take Christ out of Christmas.”

In fact, the word actually dates back to the earliest days of the Christian church. Early Greek Christians used the letter X (pronounced chi) as their symbol of faith, standing for the Greek word for Christ, Xristos (pronounced Christos). They marked their places of worship with an X, so it is one of the first symbols of the gospel message for people of all races and backgrounds.

During the early days, X was also the symbol of devotion and sacrifice. Christians often marked the spot where a true believer had given their life with an X.

The word Xmas first appeared in the writings of Catholic clerics and monks during the 16th century, when some clergy taught new converts that X was a symbol for Christ.

As time went on, Xmas was used to point out that Christ’s death and resurrection were what gave real meaning to the Christian faith. The X in Xmas reminds believers of Christ’s birth and of the cross.

In the mid-1800s, some retailers noticed that some Christian groups used Xmas and started using it to save print space and make their ads easier to read. But the term originated with the church, not with retailers.

The word Xmas can remind us of the complete Christian story, not just Christ’s birth. And it can remind us of early Greek believers who could not worship freely and often paid for their faith with their lives. Yet they helped spread the gospel to the far corners of their world—and to ours, where we can freely use the word Xmas to share our faith with others.

*Jesus said, "I am the light of the world. The person who follows me will never live in darkness. He will have the light that gives life."  
—John 8: 12*

Day 19

## The Christmas Spirit

Is that hope  
Which tenaciously clings  
To the hearts of the faithful  
And announces  
In the face  
Of any Herod the world can produce  
And all the inn doors slammed in our faces  
And all the dark nights of our souls  
That with God  
All things are possible,  
That even now  
Unto us  
A child is born!

*Ann Weems  
"Kneeling in Bethlehem" 1987*



## Advent

Advent! A time of waiting!!

Advent! A time of anticipation!!

As a child, I remember the special times I spent with my mother building our family crèche and how much I looked forward to setting out the manger scene and surrounding each figure with straw.

Each Christmas season we would take a trip to the Woolworths 5 and 10 cent store to look for figures to add to our scene. I remember how beautiful those hand-painted papier-mâché figures from Italy looked. Although they were not very expensive we were only able to purchase a few pieces each season.

I wanted this tradition to go on and on, but there came a time when Woolworths decided to change the type of crèche figures they sold.

It was with great surprise that years later, when I was unpacking a package of Christmas ornaments from my husband's family, I found a manger and a set of the same type of figures. Many of these new figures were the same ones that my family had been unable to add to my childhood crèche scene.

And now, it has been with a glad heart that Paul and I have been able to watch how much our son has looked forward to carrying on our family traditions of making each figure into a beautiful Christmas crèche scene.

*Janice Douglas*



*For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. —John 3: 16*

Day 21

## Are You Ready?

Are you ready for Christmas?

People ask me this every year, and I always say, “Yes!”

Because Christmas is not about shopping, baking, parties, carols, presents, frantic house-cleaning and decorations. It’s about one gift, given by a loving God to the entire world—His son. Unlike those come-ons in some ads, this truly is a free gift.

If you know Him, you are always “ready for Christmas.” Indeed, Christmas lives in your heart year round.

No special preparation is needed. This gift is paid for—all you have to do is accept it.

As you go about your holiday preparations, making room in your house for decorations, family and friends, don’t forget to make room in your heart for the best Friend of all, the child for whom this holiday is named.

*Christine Sackey*



## The Baby

When the baby Jesus was born, a lot of people knew he was special somehow. Yet most of the world at that time just thought of him as another baby—a gurgling, poopy, drooling little baby. No one knew that he would go on to be the greatest known person in the history of the world. Even as he was growing up, he seemed special but not to the extreme that he would change the world for the better if people truly followed his way.

When each one of you was born, a lot of people knew you were special somehow. Yet most of the world at that time just thought of you as another baby—a gurgling, poopy, drooling little baby.

But each one of you has the chance to change the world for the better. If you walk in the light of Jesus and show others that you love God with all your heart, body, mind and strength; that you love your neighbor and that you love your enemy; then like the baby Jesus who came before us, you could change the world for the better. And if not the whole world, then the world in which you live. And wouldn't that be a terrific start?

Today let's say thank you to God sending us a child, not unlike ourselves, who is blessed with the knowledge of peace and love. May we take those lessons and apply them to our lives in everything we say and everything we do.

Merry, merry Christmas.

*Jim Guida*

*www.shortsermonsforchildren.com*



*And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. —Colossians 3: 14-15*

## Advent

Although the church I attended during my childhood did not observe Advent as a church season, Advent in its meaning arrived every year. It was the season of anticipation.

As Christians we look forward to the remembrance of the birth of Jesus, and we look forward to his future coming of Christ. As children we looked forward to the birth of the Christ Child for it was the day of Christmas—Jesus in the manger, Santa coming, presents under the tree, mother's best china plates on the table, a feast in the dining room, heaters being lighted all over the freezing cold house, and excitement everywhere. I think nothing was as exciting in my childhood as Christmas morning and finding presents left by Santa.

However, the anticipation leading up to that morning was immense. Anticipation—Christmas. Two events that were so dependent on each other.

Even though my family did not have much money, I never doubted that Santa would come, because he always did. That childhood faith in Santa's love is the quality of faith I pray to bring to the season of Advent. Faith that God's love, the gift of the Christ Child, and the future coming of Christ will be real in my heart.

Advent, a season of waiting. Christmas, a season of a gift of love.

*Rev. Judy Davis*



Day 24

*For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. —Isaiah 9:6*

## A Beginning

The star of Christmas leads us on  
Past the boy in the Temple  
To Calvary's gloom where the cross dims the light  
Followed by the Glory of the empty tomb.  
Father, God, You love us so  
That your Son gave His life  
To save us unworthy sinners  
From Death's sting and eternal strife.  
When we see the star may we remember  
That Easter's glory begins in December.

*Mary Harbison-Sindle*



## What Christmas Means to Me

Growing up in Hong Kong, Christmas was never a commercial event. My parents always taught us the true meaning of the season. And for that I am and will be immensely grateful. I was taught to contemplate the magnitude of the coming of infant Jesus, His ministry, and ultimately His sacrifice. Christmas is the greatest manifestation of God's love to humanity.

Our Christmas tradition in Hong Kong was very different than America's. Trees were purchased on Christmas Eve. Tree trimming (with candles on it) and Christmas decorations were also made on Christmas Eve. A scrumptious dinner was served on Christmas Eve as well. Gifts (no toys, usually books and other meaningful items) were opened at midnight.

Caroling commenced after that. Our church youth group stayed up all night visiting and caroling the elderly members at their homes and they fed us all sorts of goodies. We would drag our tired bodies and full bellies home around 4 or 5 a.m. and would sleep until 1-3 p.m. on Christmas Day.

After we woke we would read the Christmas Biblical story and sing Christmas carols until evening. Christmas was a tremendously meaningful and sacred occasion to my family.

I really miss that spiritual fellowship. I pray that someday more people would spend their Christmas this way. Christmas season remains holy to me even today.

*Dr. May Tuan Tucker*



*So faith comes from hearing the Good News, and people hear the Good News when someone tells them about Christ. —Romans 10: 17*

## 12 Days to Ponder

I have a mission to remind everyone that the Christmas season does not end on December 25. For centuries, the Christmas holidays didn't start until Christmas Eve and lasted until Epiphany, January 6. The "12 days of Christmas" referred to in the popular song are December 25 through January 5.

Many are unaware that the song has a religious meaning. When the Catholic faith was outlawed in 16th century England, clerics composed poems that would sound silly to outsiders but reminded believers of elements of their religion.

The "true love" in the song is code for God.

1st day: A partridge in a pear tree represents Jesus. A mother partridge will die to protect her young.

2nd day: 2 turtledoves – Old and New Testaments

3rd day: 3 French hens – faith, hope and love

4th day: 4 calling birds – the four Gospels

5th day: 5 gold rings – first five books of the New Testament

6th day: 6 geese a-laying – six days of creation when God "hatched" or formed the world

7th day: 7 swans a-swimming – seven gifts of the Holy Spirit: prophecy, ministry, teaching, exhortation, giving, leading and compassion

8th day: 8 maids a-milking – those who accept Christ's word and accept his grace. Milkmaid was about the worst job in England at the time this poem was written; this code conveyed that Jesus cared as much about servants as he did about those of royal blood.

9th day: 9 ladies dancing – the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

10th day: 10 lords a-leaping – 10 Commandments. (Lords were judges and in charge of the law)

11th day: 11 pipers piping – 11 disciples who carried out the gospel message after Judas betrayed Jesus and committed suicide

12th day: 12 drummers drumming: 12 points of doctrine in the Apostles' Creed.

*Christine Sackey*



*May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. —Romans 15: 13*

Day 27

## New Life

This is a time of joy and thankfulness  
for the coming  
of our Lord.

This is the Son of God  
sent to bring us forgiveness  
and peace and joy.

Love and joy fill us  
with new life.

*Donna Roberts*

Day 28

*Remember not the former things, nor consider the things of old. Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. —Isaiah 43: 18-19*

## You Need Only One Resolution

Everyone has wrestled at some time or another with failed resolutions. Even the Apostle Paul. “When I want to do good, I don’t. And when I try not to do wrong, I do it anyway,” he wrote. (Romans 7: 19)

We’ve all been there. And it’s all too easy to let it discourage us.

Even Paul felt it. “Who will save me from this life that is dominated by sin?” he asked. “Thank God!” he answered his own question. “The answer is in Jesus Christ our Lord.”

Because of Christ, we can start anew. In fact, God promises that He doesn’t even remember our wrongdoings once they are forgiven. (Hebrews 10: 17)

This year, make the one resolution that matters, the one that everyone can keep: “For if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.”

*Christine Sackey*



## Decade of the Child Hymn

1. Help us to show your love, O Christ, To children in our care,  
And reach beyond till every child  
Is held in love and prayer.  
For, through neglect, abuse and sin, Some children suffer pain.  
They never learn to live and seek  
A rainbow through the rain.
2. When children need a helping hand To lift or to inspire,  
May we, your church, be present there  
To give what they require.  
For love, our God has made us all, God's children everywhere,  
To live in joyful harmony,  
To be the best we dare.
3. May we learn well what children teach: An open mind and heart,  
An energizing zest for life,  
A willingness to start  
Grant us the grace to be child-like, Approaching all our days  
With eager, playful, lively joy,  
In loving, hope-filled praise.
4. Now we will sing our praise of Christ, Born many years ago,  
A child who grew both wise and strong, God's love for us to show.  
In stories told to people then, Remembered still today,  
Christ shows in every deed and word  
What we should do and say.

*Jane Parker Huber*

*Written in honor of the Presbyterian Church (USA) "Decade of the Child"*





Many thanks to the members and friends of Bethany who contributed to our 2015 Advent devotional. Please read, contemplate and pray your way through the season of Advent by using these writings as your inspiration. The devotionals are undated so that you may use this booklet for many years to come.

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Diana Bachelor  
Faye Bundesen Christensen  
Rev. Judy Davis  
Janice Douglas  
Jim Guida  
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Diana Lucas  
Christine Ogata Medina  
Donna Roberts  
Christine Sackey  
Cathy Sapunor  
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Additional content was selected from works by  
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the Presbyterian Church (USA) Mission Agency

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