



Believe

A Season of Advent

Advent – All Year Long

By: Sandi King

When Christians talk of advent, we automatically think of the celebration of Advent leading up to the birth of Christ. This time of prayer and fasting begins the fourth Sunday before Christmas and continues until Christmas Eve. Notice that the word “Advent”, when talking about this celebration, begins with a capital “A” because in this use it is a proper noun. However, the word advent can also be used in other contexts.

The word advent comes from the Latin term “adventus”, meaning arrival, coming, or new beginning. Our Bible talks about this type of advent in numerous verses, both in the Old and New Testaments. This is the advent that describes our “new beginning” in Christ as Christians.

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come!
- 2 Corinthians 5:17

I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. - Ezekiel 36:26

This is also the advent that describes the “arrival” of God’s compassion and faithfulness.

Do not despise these small beginnings, for the Lord rejoices to see the work begin, to see the plumb line in Zerubbabel’s hand. - Zechariah 4:10

Through the Lord’s mercies we are not consumed, because His compassions fail not. They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness. - Lamentations 3:22-23

How wonderful that we can celebrate the birth of Christ during the Advent season and also celebrate the advent of God’s love and mercies for us throughout the year.

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Hope



The Light Still Comes On

by Kristy Robb

Staring at the strand of Christmas lights in my hand, I felt defeated. The knotted mess I worked so hard to untangle no longer twinkled cheerfully. I stood there wiggling each tiny bulb, hoping one spark of light would return the whole strand to life. Nothing. Not even a blink. After several minutes, I gave up and tossed them aside. Useless, I thought.

Later that evening, with all the decorations placed about and the tree lit and shiny, I walked back over to the discarded lights and tried one last time. All hope was not lost! One little bulb flickered and the whole strand of lights came on. Faint at first, but slowly there it was. I stood there smiling. It was just lights, but it felt like something deeper. Those little lights reminded me of a story I heard a long time ago. Zacharias went through years of praying, waiting, and longing for a child. No answer. Zacharias had stopped hoping. He was a good man, a faithful priest, going through the motions. He still lit the incense, said the prayers, and fulfilled his duties as priest. But hope? Hope was buried with the years of waiting and the silence.

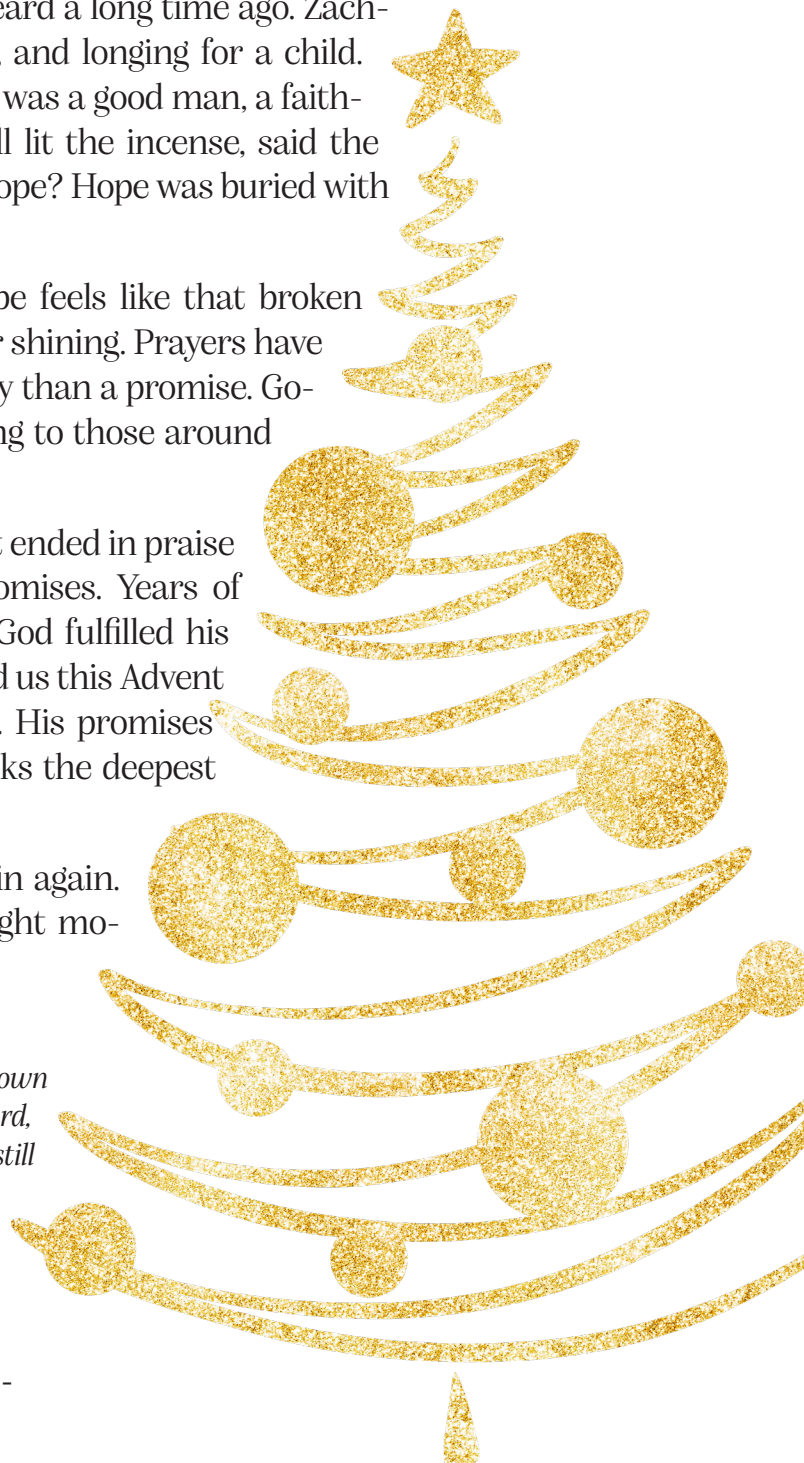
That may be where you are, too. Maybe hope feels like that broken strand of Christmas lights, dark and no longer shining. Prayers have gone quiet, and hope feels more like a memory than a promise. Going through the motions of the season, smiling to those around us. But even if we have given up, God hasn't.

You see, Zacharias' story didn't end in doubt, it ended in praise and the fulfillment of the hope in God's promises. Years of silence were broken with the cry of a child. God fulfilled his promise, yet again. Let Zacharias' story remind us this Advent season that God doesn't forget; He prepares. His promises still shine and even the smallest of light breaks the deepest of dark.

Hope is not dead, it is waiting to be believed in again. Hope is not gone. It is just waiting for the right moment to shine.

Prayer:

Lord, there are places in my heart where hope has grown dim. Where disappointment has dulled my faith. Lord, light a spark in me again. Help me believe that you are still working, still moving, still hearing, even the ones I have stopped praying. Thank You for working in me and preparing me for the fullness of Your promises. Amen.





Hope Defeats the Worry Bug

Painting and writing by Presleigh Dunagan (17 years old)

"Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a longing fulfilled is a tree of life." - Proverbs 13:12 (NIV)

Hope is a strange and confusing feeling.

You may say: "I hope we eat pizza for dinner!"

Or "I hope we get a new puppy!"

Or you could say: "I hope that we are able to pay for food."

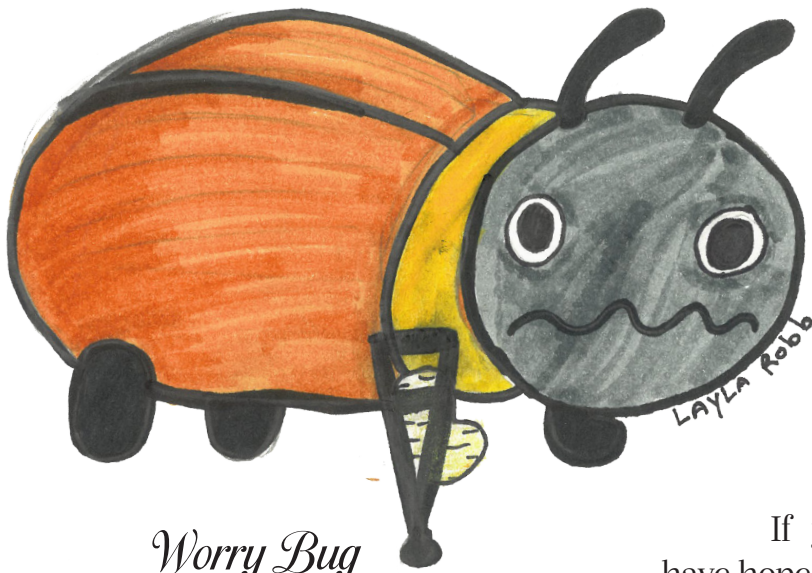
Or maybe you experience car troubles, and are hoping that you don't have to buy a new car.

And sometimes hope leads to worry. Like what if we can't buy a car, then how will I get to my job, then how will I make money, then how will we be able to eat!

What do we do?!

The Bible talks about what to do when you worry! Matthew 6:25 says: "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes?."

Now what I said before was just an example! You could also worry about a big test you have that you didn't study for and now you're hoping you don't fail and worrying, worrying, worrying! Matthew 6:27 also says: "Can anyone of you by worrying, add a single hour to your life?"

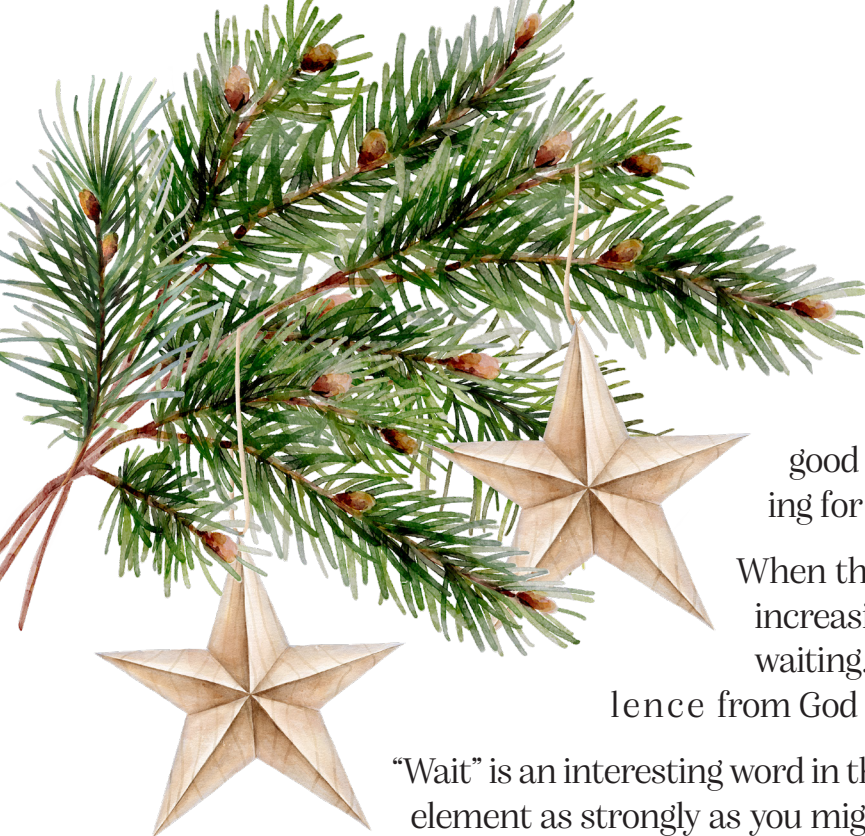


Worry Bug

Drawing by Layla Robb (15 years old)

In Luke, Zechariah was told by Gabriel, an angel of the Lord, that his prayer had been answered and that he would have a child! Instead of having hope in the Lord, he was busy worrying about whether he and his wife could truly have a child because they were so old! So the angel made it to where Zechariah couldn't speak until the child was born.

If you're worried, just pray! And always have hope in the Lord!



Hope

by Pastor Luther Stanford

Hope is usually about waiting. The deeper and stronger your hope is, the better you are at waiting. If we are not good at waiting, maybe it's because we're hoping for the wrong thing.

When the 1st century dawned, Israel was growing increasingly impatient. They were weary of their waiting. Four hundred years of what felt like silence from God can do that to you.

"Wait" is an interesting word in the Old Testament. It doesn't have the time element as strongly as you might expect. We typically think of waiting in line, waiting on our pizza, waiting at the DMV. We think waiting is what you do while nothing is happening. But that's not the idea.

In terms of our faith, we think waiting on God means God is doing nothing right now, but He will. We're just waiting. We do nothing while God does nothing. But that's not what "waiting on the Lord" means.

Isaiah 40 says, "those who wait on the Lord" will renew their strength. They will mount up with wings like eagles. They will run and not get tired. They will walk and not grow faint.

In the language of the ancient Israel, waiting means trusting. It means you've set your heart upon something. In Psalm 40, when David said "I waited patiently for the Lord" he was declaring he couldn't get himself out of the pit. His trust and his hope was in God. It was a confession of weakness and a confession of trust.

Maybe you are like David...stuck in a pit. But instead of trusting in the Lord, you are still trying to climb out of your pit. You think you are strong enough. You think if you just try hard enough. "He lifted me out of the muck and the mire." It's time to stop trying so hard, and start trusting.

Maybe you are like Israel and you are growing weary in your waiting. Like them, you are struggling to trust God to do what God had promised to do. If there is one thing Christmas teaches us about the ways of God, it teaches us our God is faithful and He is full of surprises! Waiting isn't about inactivity. Waiting is about trusting God in His goodness.

No Room

By Patsy Forrest

The 100-mile journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem took its toll on Mary as the time neared for the birth of her baby. Sometimes riding Athon and sometimes walking, she was tired and prayed for the strength to keep going. Just as she thought she could not go on, she saw the soft glow of firelight in the distance. They were finally approaching Bethlehem, a place to rest.

“No vacancy” signs greeted Joseph and Mary as they entered the city and walked the streets. Door after door was closed with “No Room” and “Filled” signs greeting them. Mary’s time was getting close; soon, she would give birth, but where? There was no room for them in Bethlehem. She prayed, “Please, don’t let my child be born on the street. Please, God, just a warm, quiet place.”

At the end of the street, one more “No Room” sign greeted Joseph. It was then that he remembered his cousin, Aaron, who lived just outside the main streets. He led their donkey, Athon, carrying Mary to the house,

The door was already barred against the night. Still, Joseph knocked and called out, “Aaron, please open the door, it’s your cousin Joseph from Nazareth. Please open the door.”

Well, you know the rest of the story. Since Aaron’s house was already full of guests, the only private place he had to offer the couple was the stable.

“And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.” - Luke 2:7

Jesus says, “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him and he with Me.” - Revelation 3:20

As He knocks, what sign will He see on the door of my heart?

“Please Come In” or “No Room”

Dear God, I pray that there will always be room in my heart for Jesus.



Releasing Pain Into the Presence of God

By: Debbie Williams

We are afflicted in every way but not crushed; we are perplexed but not in despair; we are persecuted but not abandoned; we are struck down but not destroyed. 2 Corinthians 4:8-9

Let me introduce you to Mia. She was abandoned by her mother as an infant and was abused by a half-brother as a child. She landed in foster care when she was 10 and cycled through a maze of group homes and temporary foster homes until she was 13. Then the inexplicable happened. She was found by a forever family who was eager to love her, adopt her, and introduce her to Jesus. She was astonished to learn that there were people – a mom and a dad and siblings who would treasure her and help her grow in grace and love. When she was just about to celebrate her 15th birthday in 2020, as she was really learning to trust and believe that the world was safe, the inexplicable happened again. Her adopted mom got COVID and died suddenly without an opportunity for any of the family to say goodbye. Mia was overwhelmed with grief. To have suffered so deeply as a child that she had all but given up hope of finding anything good – and then to have a gut punch of grief and loss was staggering to this young teenager. She was lost and overwhelmed, disoriented, and unable to function. Things that were just congealing into something solid under her feet were suddenly suspect and unreliable. Every breath felt exhausting. Every moment felt interminable. How do you hold on to hope when the injustice of it all is suffocating?

Mia is not alone. While her story is unique, her suffering has been played out repeatedly for many before her and is a current reality for others, even in this season. The questions she faced were faced by believers in the early church, too – even though the pain was created by different details. The Apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthian church about the struggle they were having in trying to hold on to hope. He reminded them that there is a difference between being afflicted and being crushed. He knew it was possible to be perplexed without getting caught in despair. He had experienced persecution, but he was never abandoned. We will all likely experience some level of trauma and face some tragedy of loss – no one escapes pain. But we will not be destroyed because resurrection is what Jesus promises it is.

This is God's promise to us. There will be a day when our lives will be completely resurrected. A day when trauma and tragedy are resolved. There will be a day when Jesus settles all that has afflicted us and our hope will become our deepest reality. Joy will reign in that hope fulfilled!

When you pass through the waters I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; where you walk through the fire, you shall not be burned and the flame shall not consume you. Isaiah 43:2 (emphasis added)

(Mia is a mixture of several real-life people from several different locations. The pain was real, and the Lord brought real hope through the trauma.)

Nowhere Little Town

Song by Cory Dunagan

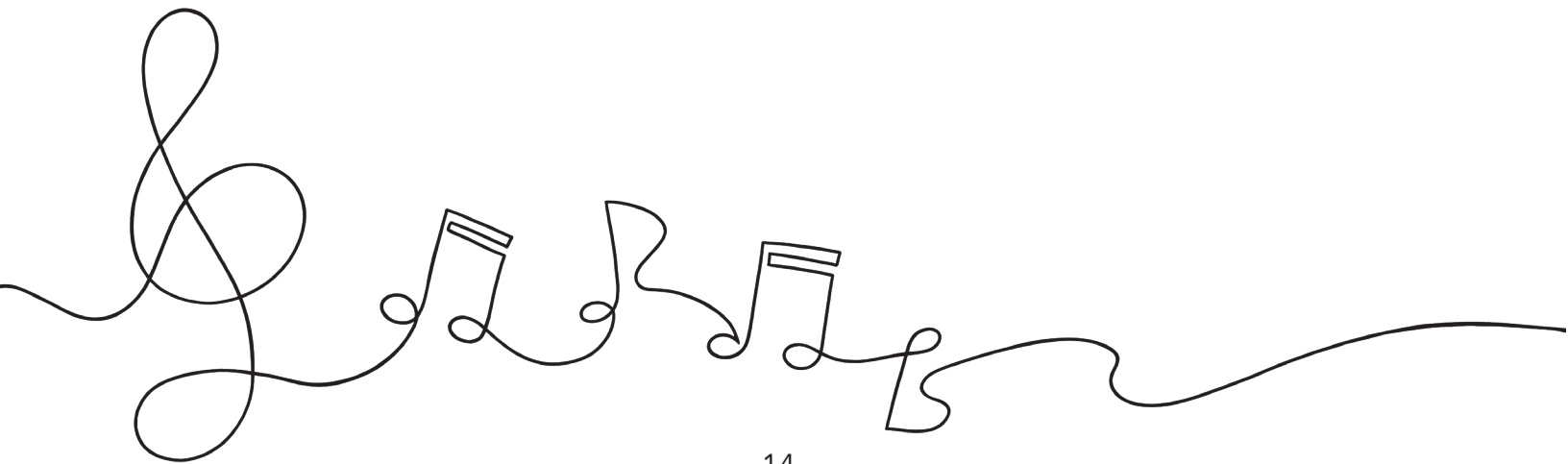
2,000 years of history
Forever changed in just one night
Hope for all humanity
Scarlet stains turn to white
In a little town so unassuming
In a dirty trough made for hay
Hope incarnate was blooming
Light of the world there He lay

Darkness felt the coming end to its night
Overwhelmed by the dawning of new light
God sent the hope of a savior down
Through the birth of a baby in a nowhere little town

The truth came in the flesh
The word was made man
Evil shaken to its core
Under the star of Bethlehem
No one could've guessed
A king laid so low
Through such meekness
The fullness of His mercy shown

Born to a virgin In a manger
In the middle of nowhere
Our hope our Savior
No other could compare
King Jesus He stepped down
To a cradle in the dust
He chose to leave the throne
All for the sake of us

Oh little town of Bethlehem
How still we see thee lie:
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep
The silent stars go by;
Yet in thy dark streets shineth
The Everlasting Light;
The hopes and fears of all the years
Are met in thee tonight.



Zechariah, A Happy Dad

A Monologue based on Luke 1:18-25

By: David Williams

I know it's hard to believe that a priest, a fellow like me, can go nine months without a word. Trust me when I tell you, it was hard. But what I've learned through it all has strengthened my faith and my Love for the Lord Most High.

It was already an emotional time, as I was called up to do priestly duties. For a man in my tribe, the Levites, that is a highlight in our lives, as we often are allowed this honor maybe once in a lifetime.

I was busy carrying out these blessed duties when he appeared. Gabriel, an angel directly from God. This Archangel, a General in the Angel Army of God Almighty, identified his glorious self, and spoke to me, delivering a message from God. My heart pounded, my head was spinning, and I was shaking in awe and wonder at the sight of such a creature who knows and serves God so closely. I thought it best not to bow, because we should only bow to God Himself. My knees knocked and it was all I could do to remain upright. My chin dropped but my eyes could not be diverted from his brilliance and splendor.

His message was straight forward, my wife Elizabeth and I would have a son. His proclamation was difficult to understand. How could this be? At our age, these things just don't happen. We had prayed, hoped and longed to have a family. We had accepted this was not to be our path in life. Elizabeth took her barrenness personally; it hurt her deeply. I wanted a son, but mostly I wanted her not to carry this pain. When Gabriel stated this message from God, I know it was wrong, but as much as I love God, want to serve God, and trust Him, my mind could not wrap itself around this as true. I laughed. I thought, 'that's a good one God, you do have a sense of humor.' Gabriel wasn't amused, and this mighty being taught me a lesson. Since I doubted the Word from God, he made me deaf and mute until our son, John was born. John, the name God picked out for our son who would be a modern-day Elijah, calling people to clean up their lives and get ready for the coming King, our Messiah.

My little hiatus from talking and hearing made me listen to God and talk to Him. I have been blessed as He walked with me, spoke His Word to me through the Law and the Prophets, and helped me to see how truly blessed Elizabeth and I are to be part of His master plan to save His people.

And now, now I can speak, hear, preach, and sing! I want everyone to know what God is up to, not to bring any glory to Elizabeth and myself, but to bring Glory to the Father and The One He is sending to save His people.

I'm sorry to be so wordy. I've been so full so long and now I can tell everyone who will listen. My son will help prepare the way for His Son! I've got to let everyone know. I hope you will let everyone know. The Kingdom of God is here!

Toy



Unspeakable Joy

By: Debbie Williams

Count it all joy my brothers when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of our faith produces steadfastness. James 1:2

When David and I lived in Rochester, New York, our son Joel was a student at Mississippi College in Jackson, Mississippi. As a 20-year-old, he was offered a chance to go to South Sudan on a mission trip for six weeks of the summer. He would be working with tribes in the newly created country, which had just officially separated from the country of Sudan a few months earlier.

Technology being less advanced 14 years ago, there would be no direct contact with him except for periodic group emails from him to supporters and supervisors. We knew enough to know there was still violence and unrest in many areas, and received word that the team had to be moved to safer locations after their original placement. Joel shared after the fact that nearby gunfire was a frequent reality.

So when he returned to the states at the end of the summer, we rejoiced in God's protection and provision and eagerly waited for the chance to see him and hear his stories in person at the next semester break. About 10 days after his return to Mississippi, we got a late-night call from his best friend Thomas who reported that Joel was very sick and was currently in the emergency room. Yes, the doctors knew he had been to Sudan, and malaria was already ruled out. They were about to do a spinal tap to test for meningitis. It was a restless night for us as parents having a son 1,186.2 miles away who was in severe pain without a medical explanation! We prayed and waited.

David was scheduled to participate in a church planting conference in Baltimore, but when Joel didn't get better, he started the 1000-mile drive from Baltimore to Jackson. While on that drive, God brought to his mind a connection. In our previous church in central Florida, we had a friend whose sister was a doctor in Jackson, MS! Our friend no longer lived in Florida, however, and had moved to Colorado. Thankfully, we were able to locate her in Colorado, and she shared that her sister was actually an infectious disease specialist in Jackson. She was not in Jackson currently, but in Minnesota visiting other family.

Calls were made, and the situation was shared. This sister of a friend responded immediately and knew there were other forms of malaria that didn't show up in standard testing. She contacted Joel's doctor personally, prescribed the exact test that would need to be administered, and began the process of locating the specific medication he would likely need.

Although she had never met us, she took steps that may have saved his life. A cousin came and stayed with him in the ICU; an aunt came and provided the transportation to pick up the medicine. And when David arrived two days later, he found our son had already begun the process of recovery.

Prayers had gone out to people in five states, and God heard and answered. What unspeakable joy there was when we were finally reunited and able to celebrate how God had shown Himself able to provide. I had been faced with the reality of my helplessness on my own, but my soul was strengthened by the evidence of His provision. My confidence became grounded in knowing that there was no distance that God cannot cover and no distress His steadfast love cannot answer. Joy comes in the morning!

My God shall supply all your need according to His riches in Christ Jesus. Philippians 4:19



Ruth's Joy

by Chaise Logan

Wandering again another night with no sleep
“We are almost there” lost, tired and weak
The sand is silent, the night air cool and dry.
When everyone's sleeping that's when my soul cries.
Our hearts once filled with laughter, the days were so long.
Hope faded fast; she lost both her sons.
We packed in the dark, it was time she go home.

A joy filled smile replaced by the weight of her pain.
Her husband, her children, nothing left but her shame.
A daughter inherited, and a new broken name.
“Naomi no more she has entered the tomb,
Mara now lives,
The bitterness, the anger, it's all that I have.”
She was broken and tattered her soul ravaged and torn.
As we entered her home her own people did scorn.

Mara by name, by story... maybe
but she was still there, something only I could see.
“Where you go, I will go.” A stranger no more.
Can love heal the sorrow? Can love truly restore?

As we walked in to town, it was the first she looked up.
We locked eyes for a moment, there was a tenderness there.
It had long been forgotten, hidden beneath fear.
Behind the tears, she reached out for my hand and it touched MY pain.
It was the then that I realized, it was I who needed the friend.

God's love reached deeply into MY brokenness,
Spaces ravaged by grief had been quieted.
Joy doesn't shout or make a show of itself,
Rather, its quiet soft steady and strong.
Two widows once Mara, now worship through song.
What had begun in the desert, has now ended in Praise.
Bitterness to Joy, was the promise that started

Imagination

By: Patsy Forrest

Lift up your eyes on high, And see who has created these things, Who brings out their host by number; He calls them all by name, By the greatness of His might And the strength of His power; Not one is missing. Isaiah 40:26 (NKJV)

Sometimes, my mind, eyes, and heart focus on circumstances. I am overwhelmed, tired, and feel out of control. I lose my joy. The tears come, and words of hopelessness escape my mouth. I search for a way out of the darkness surrounding me, but my imagination is lost. I am unable to see God, the Father, who wants to embrace me with His love and give me rest.

Isaiah 40:26 reminds me to look up and see the stars, to imagine the living God who created them, who knows each one by name, and can account for the whereabouts of every individual star. In the following verses, Isaiah reminds me that God is mighty and powerful, active and alive. He assures me that God gives power to the weak and increases strength to those who have no might (v.29). With these words, Isaiah reminds me of God's promise of renewal:

But those who wait on 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 (NKJV)

When I am overwhelmed, tired, and weary, the solution is to stop, engage my imagination, and see the living God who created the stars and knows them all by name; listen to the God who wants me to "Be still and know that He is God" (Psalm 46:10); and remember the loving God who wants me to wait on Him and allow Him to renew my strength and restore my joy.



Everlasting Praise

"Quick! Let's see if anyone's in the hall," said Georgie. The boys chocked the hall, the elevator, and the ground floor of the building. There was no sign of anyone or any jacket. They ran back up to Dr. Toth's office.

"I guess I better get my mom to come get us," Peter o o "It's too cold to walk home."

The next morning, when he had to wear his old coat to school, he met the kids that morning in the yard, he had a long face.

"I feel really bad, Peter," said Mortimer. "If you hadn't gone with me to the dentist, you would still have your coat."

"It's not your fault," said Peter.

Everyone felt a bit better. They stood in silence, waiting for the bell to ring. Suddenly, Polly o o "Peter, Sam-

my's wearing new Padres start jackets," pointed to Sammy Sage o o "standing on the other side of the playground." "I know," Sammy wanted to stare.

Everlasting Praise

Picture by Brinley Estes
(14 years old)

Joy

By Pastor Luther Stanford

There are two kinds of people at Christmas. You can observe them at Christmas parties, at church, in the grocery store, and even in your family: Jingle Bells people & Silent Night people.

Which are you? How do you celebrate the birth of Jesus?

How do you best absorb the magnificent proclamation that “unto us a child is born, a Son is given?” Do you shout, and dance, and sing? Turn up the music! When’s the next party? Let’s go caroling! Where’s my ugly Christmas sweater?

Light-up Christmas bulb necklace? A Jingle Bells person has got one. They can go full Buddy the Elf with 5 minutes notice. Jingle Bells people have multi-colored lights on their house, an 8’ blow up Grinch on the front lawn, and they start buying Dirty Santa gifts in the summer. They high 5 the Salvation Army bell ringers as they walk into the grocery store.

If that’s you...you are a Jingle Bells person.

Or are you a turn the lights down, just ambient lighting of the tree, fire up the old crooners’ Christmas album or the Trans-Siberian Orchestra on Spotify? Give me Nat King Cole or Michael Bublé with a fire in the fireplace and hot cocoa on the couch.

Silent Night people love and appreciate Christmas just as much as Jingle Bells people, they just express it differently. Christmas means something different to them. Not less, just different. Silent Night people buy a new Christmas devotional every year. Their Christmas clothes are really tasteful...green sweater, red scarf, a Christmas plaid tie. On their house, only white lights. Nativity scenes are all over the house...living room, foyer, bathroom. They feel guilty every time they walk past a Salvation Army bell ringer and don’t have any cash on them.

If that’s you...you are a Silent Night person.

Even though your heart might incline more to one or the other, most of us say, “It depends...I am both! I have moments of quiet and moments of uncontrollable laughter.”

There are times when my spirit is more Jingle Bells and the jubilant carols: Joy to the World, Deck The Halls, Jingle Bell Rock, Rockin’ Around the Christmas Tree, Feliz Navidad.

And there are times when my heart needs Silent Night and the contemplative melodies of O Holy Night, Away in a Manger, What Child Is This?, O Come, O Come Immanuel.

And if this is how you feel, I think that’s how you are supposed to feel. We see both even in the Christmas story.

¹³ Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

¹⁴ “Glory to God in the highest heaven,

and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.” - Luke 2:13-14

Don't you love the juxtaposition? Glory and peace. Not one or the other.

Glory...Heavenly hosts praising God! The sky filled with singing angels! Wow! Think of the extravagant party the Father throws when the prodigal son comes home! The music and celebration can be heard by neighbors all around! Glory! Play Jingle bells again!

Peace...the quiet and profound assurance of salvation. Be still and know. Think of the sinful woman sitting silently at the feet Jesus, washing her feet with her tears...overwhelmed by the beauty and magnitude of His love and forgiveness. Silent Night.

The Christmas story is both! It is glory and it is peace. It beckons us to both feast and fast, to sing and listen—to dance between crescendo and silence, between the ringing bells of celebration and the hushed wonder of a starlit manger. All of it is joy.



The Gift to Open this Year

by Lendy Willis

The coming of Jesus, the Savior of the World, brought wonder, awe, and love as never before experienced. He was born into diapers, snotty noses, colds, and all of the things being a child brings. There was no thought of his teachings, his death on a cross, or resurrection mornings, all of which would come later. He brought with Him the LOVE and JOY that we experience as His followers.

God demonstrated His unfathomable LOVE for us by sending Jesus to be born as a baby, one that would grow into His gift of Grace for us, while we were still sinners (Romans 5:8). Jesus would teach us to return God's LOVE with all that we are and to walk in the unique identity that He has given to each of us. All of us need to know that nothing (NO-thing) we ever do will make God LOVE us more, or less, than He already does. He gave His only Son as a "Christmas" LOVE gift, what more could He offer? As Isaiah 43 tells us, we are precious in His sight and He loves us! Learning to live in that LOVE is the work of a lifetime.

As Believers, we need to work at getting our hearts back from the idolatry promoted by our culture and anchor our life in His free gift of LOVE because we are the Beloved of God! Look in the mirror daily and say, "I am the Beloved!" Say it like you mean it out loud until you do. Write it on a 3x5 card to take out when you are tempted by the enemy, when your flesh wants to lash out in anger, or when you are afraid, alone, anxious. Do whatever it takes to live in the LOVE you have been given. Look around you....God gives "Post-It Notes" of LOVE constantly. You woke this morning to enjoy another day with people you LOVE. You can enjoy the tastes and JOY of conversation with a great meal. All around you is beauty to enjoy so take a walk on the beach or in the woods to thank Him. Open your eyes and focus on the wisdom shared by others. Read a great book! There are so many "notes" of His LOVE all around you.

His great gifts of LOVE, JOY, PEACE, HOPE.....why don't you open His present to you this year? And share it with others since we are called to be a reflection of His LOVE and JOY. He gave the gift of a stinky, snotty baby who grew into the Savior of the World to one day die and set you free. He rose again so that you could live in His LOVE and victory every day until He returns. Open your presents and enjoy your gifts!



The Gift

Painting by Lendy Willis

Included

By: David Williams

Dozing in shadows, in a field outside of town,
Dust-covered faces, ragged blankets on the ground.
Dismissed by society, unclean, cast aside,
Daily unnoticed, no need to hide.

Words, merely whispers, their stories untold.
Woolen rags on hillsides, stone pillows for their heads.
Whisked away from life's table, no chair set aside.
Walking in silence, inward screams and lonely cries.

Dark skies burst open, God's Glory arrives.
Dreams become real, the sky explodes alive.
"Don't Fear, Good news is for you!"
Delivered by God, His promises true."

Highly exalted leaders were not the ones called.
Humble Shepherds were summoned to visit the stall.
Hearts poor in spirit, weak made strong.
His story's new chapter, God's righting sin's wrong.

Traveling, still trembling, their hearts, beating drums.
Toward a small-town inn's barn, they run.
Taking turns by the manger, adoring the Child
Touched by God's presence in the infant, meek and mild.

In earthy stillness, they knew they belonged,
Irredeemable made welcome, the weak made strong.
Included in the circle, surrounding Divinity.
Incarnate, God's Son, One in Trinity.

Remember the shepherds, excluded no more,
Received and welcomed, God broke down the door.
Regal purpose unfolds for those who believe,
Royalty's witnesses, go tell what you see!

Christmas Puppy

Drawing by Layla Robb
(15 years old)



Love Lives Here

Poem by Patsy Forrest & Painting by Bob Forrest

On this cold winter night,
The glow of warmth is in sight,
A home, with firelight bright.

Inside a family that knows
The love of God who shows
Where Jesus lives, His love grows.



Peace



Peace

by Austin Rhodes

We often refer to Jesus as the Prince of Peace. He is called that in Isaiah 9:6 when the prophet is telling of the coming Messiah hundreds of years later. “For a child is born to us, a son is given to us. The government will rest on his shoulders. And he will be called: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”

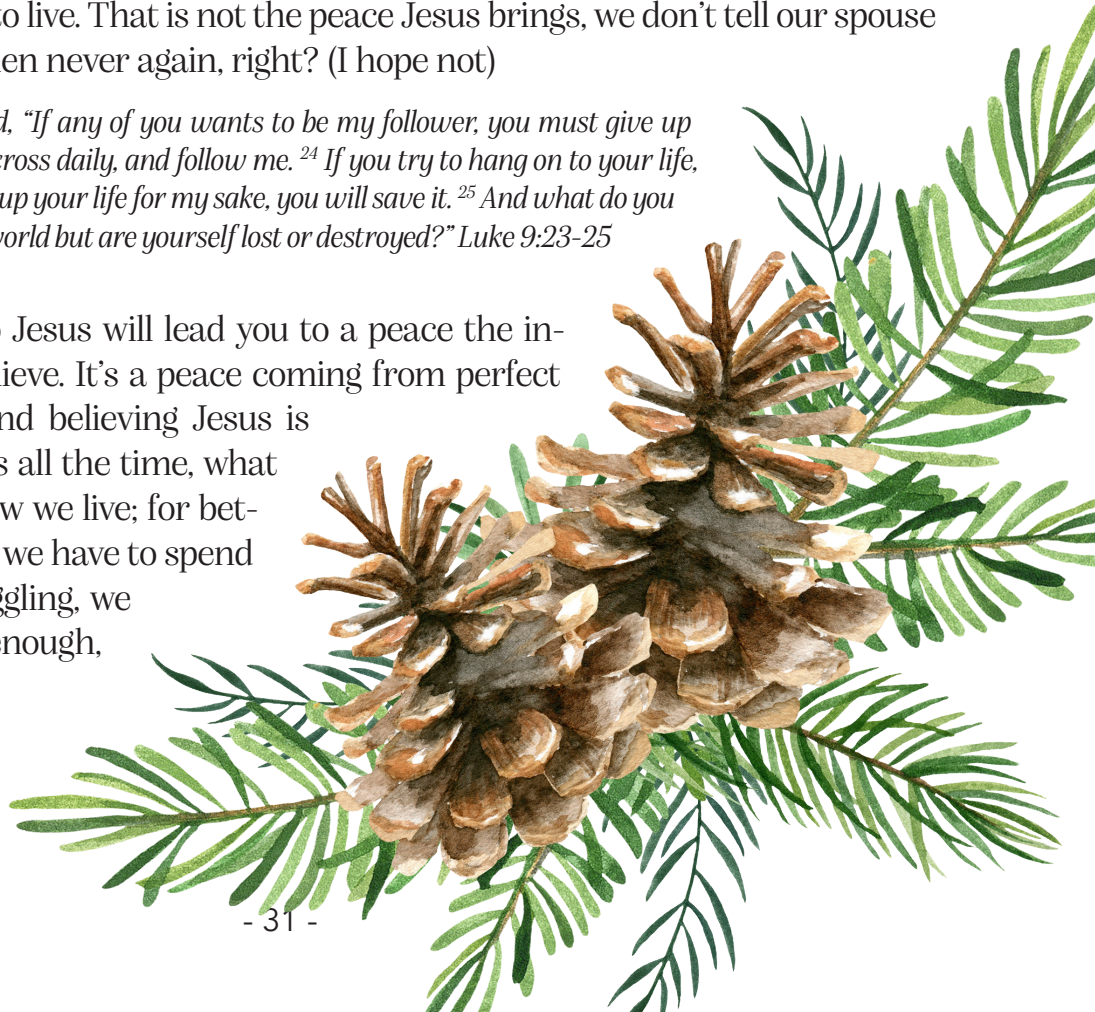
When is the last time we felt at peace? Not peace as in we have no problems; that kind of peace doesn't exist here and now. When is the last time we felt perfectly content; not chasing or longing for anything? The truth is many of us are waging internal war where the only end is exhaustion or surrender. It is being fought on the battle grounds of our schedules, our relationships (at home and with others), our careers, our addictions, and in endless striving to satisfy the opinions of others. All of these battlegrounds come back to our heart. What gets our utmost attention and affection?

We attempt to compartmentalize the different areas of our lives; marriage, parenting/ grand parenting, careers, hobbies, church, friends, etc. We divide our lives into smaller, seemingly more manageable segments and then spend our lives juggling all of them in hopes of satisfaction and success. If you didn't already know, this is exhausting. Each segment will always be fighting with the others for more of our attention and affection that we don't have to give; the tank is empty. There is no peace, always tension and stress. That is no way for a child of God to live. That is not the peace Jesus brings, we don't tell our spouse we love them once and then never again, right? (I hope not)

“²³ Then he said to the crowd, “If any of you wants to be my follower, you must give up your own way, take up your cross daily, and follow me. ²⁴ If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake, you will save it. ²⁵ And what do you benefit if you gain the whole world but are yourself lost or destroyed?” Luke 9:23-25 (NLT)

Choosing to surrender to Jesus will lead you to a peace the internal war can never achieve. It's a peace coming from perfect contentment, knowing and believing Jesus is enough. I tell our CityKids all the time, what we believe determines how we live; for better or worse. If we believe we have to spend our life juggling and struggling, we will. If we believe Jesus is enough, He will be.

End the war. Choose to surrender. You were made for Peace.



Striving for Perfection

By: Kristy Robb

Oh, the Pinterest boards I have. "Holidays", "Food", "Crafting", "Sayings", "Sewing", "My Dream House", and even one titled "Workouts I probably won't do". Social Media makes it easy to imagine a picture-perfect Christmas season with flawless decorations, beautifully wrapped gifts, meals without burnt edges, and all in matching pajamas and smiles.

But here is the thing. Striving for "Pinterest perfect" often leaves us restless and anxious.

Why is that? When we see that perfectly set house in the picture, everyone seems so... well, perfect. So, when we reach that level of flawless with white couches and pets that mind, won't we be at peace? Can we then sit back, relax, and finally sigh with peace? The truth is, no, picture perfect will not bring us peace, because behind the pristine photo is the dirty dishes, the laundry hamper overflowing, the stuffed closets, and the real life that no one posts. The real-life mess that needs Jesus. Now I am not saying that I don't want a beautifully dressed table and my kids not to squabble, but continually striving for perfection will tie us in knots and leave us in an empty cycle of always needing to do more.

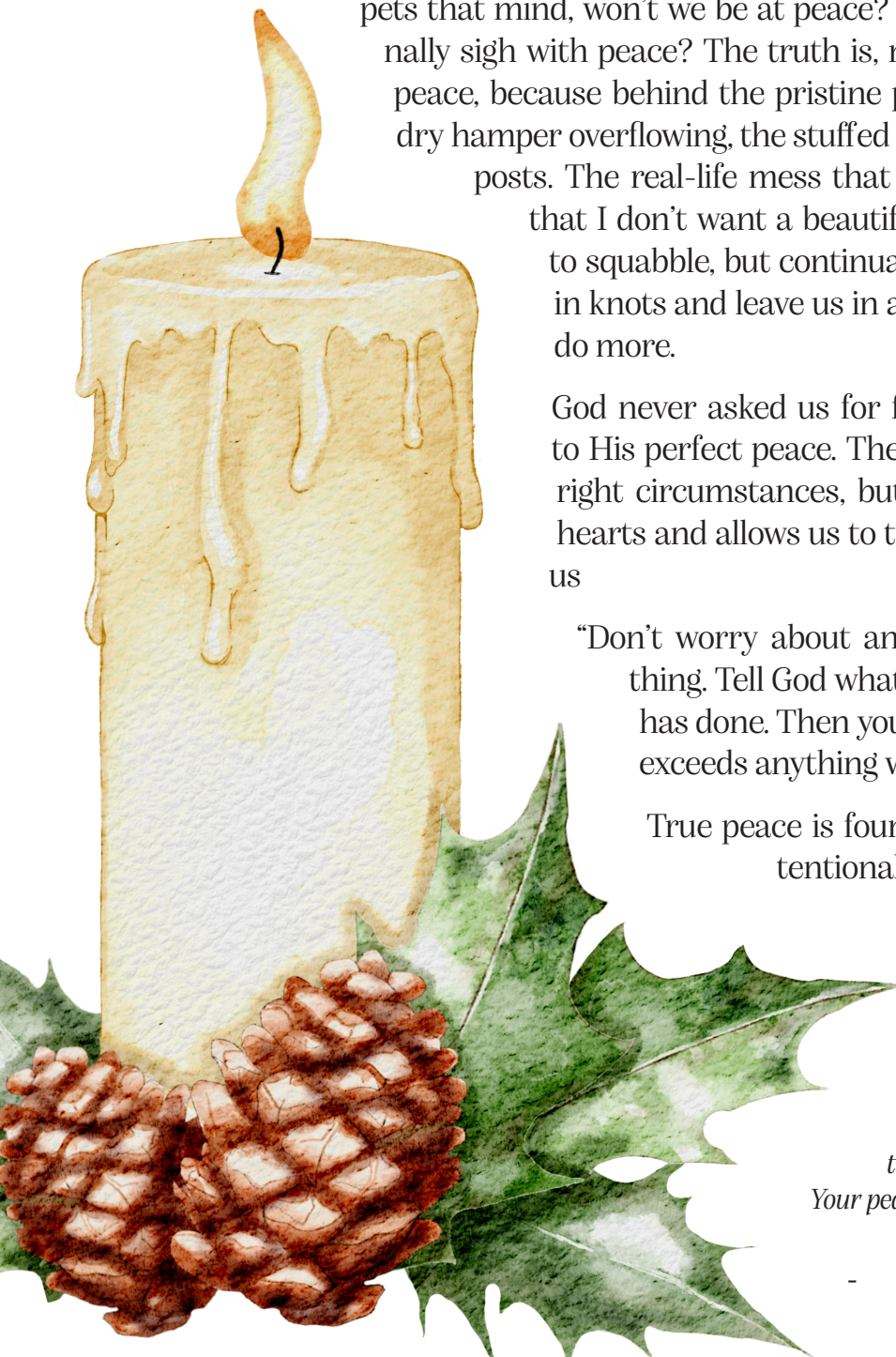
God never asked us for flawlessness. Instead, He invites us to His perfect peace. The world's peace depends on just the right circumstances, but His peace stands guard over our hearts and allows us to truly rest. Philippians 4:6-7 reminds us

"Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done. Then you will experience God's peace, which exceeds anything we can understand."

True peace is found in Him. Let's slow down and intentionally pray for Christ-filled peace that will allow this Advent season to shine with His perfect peace.

Prayer:

Lord, help me release my anxious striving for perfection and worrying about what others may see. Teach me to turn my stress into prayers and rest in Your peace. Amen.





Light

This little light of mine, I'm gonna to let it shine...

Painting by Gail Teagarden

Mary, Did You Know?

By David Williams

As Mark Lowry's words asking this question play every Christmas season, in settings of worship and aisles of commerce, performed by those deemed as saints and sinners. In moods of solemnness and celebration, I find myself contemplating, Mary – What Did You Know? In examining this question, I am convinced Mary, the blessed Mother of Jesus, is someone not to be worshipped as some might be drawn to do; instead, she is someone to admire, an example to follow.

Mary indeed, knew some things we need to know:

Mary knew God promises are true. He never leaves us or forsakes us. He is at work in all things, even the things evil men do, to bring about good for His children.

Mary knew faithfulness can bring pain. He doesn't promise all things will be easy. Battles come, wounds are inflicted, but ultimately the war is won through God's loving and gracious redemptive plan.

Mary knew, ultimately, that God's blessings, come to us and through us. Mary saw herself as blessed by God's grace. She didn't feel superior or worthy of God's call or blessing. She didn't know this, undoubtedly, that the miraculous God did in her life wasn't just for her benefit. As God's servant, she knew she was blessed to bless others and that the child God gave her was truly a gift to all peoples.

No, Mary didn't comprehend the depth of pain she would experience seeing God's plan unfold, watching her beloved son be accused of blasphemy, humiliated at the hands of religious leaders, and be tortured and physically abused by men taught to make others suffer. She could not have known the details of how God's love would unfurl across all ages through the redemptive work of the cross, but she knew, without a doubt, God loves us and has given us a Savior, we must love with all our heart and trust to bring us abundant and eternal life. She knew the heart of God and that she was His servant.

Mary answered, "I am the Lord's servant. Let everything you've said happen to me." Luke 1:28

Follow Jesus

By: Patsy Forrest

"Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid." John 14:27

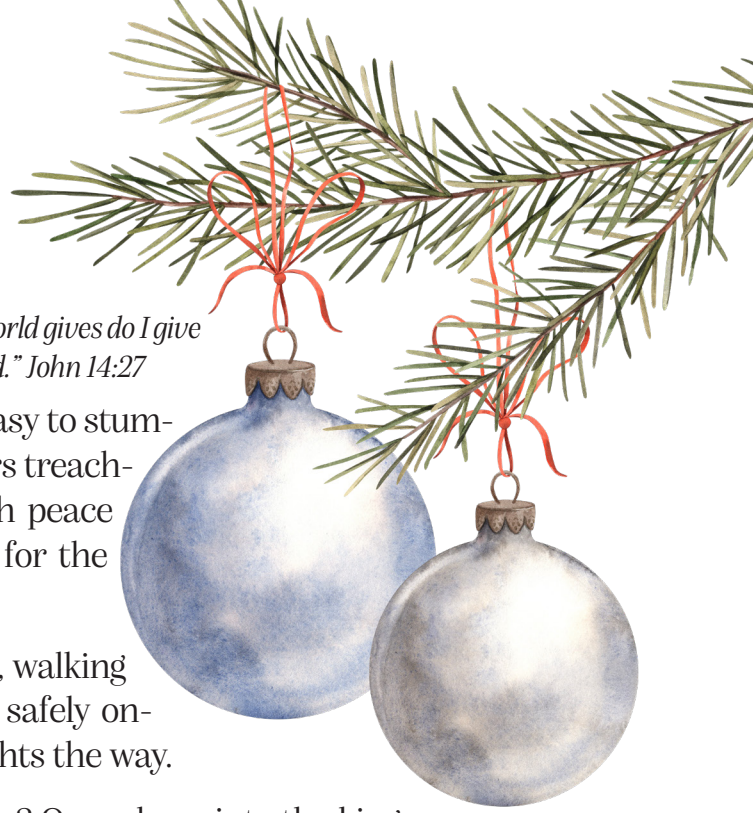
Chaos reigns as if it were a mandate of life. It is easy to stumble as we try to find safe footing. The path appears treacherous, with ruts and potholes. It feels as though peace evades us. But look into the chaos, and search for the Light. There we will see Jesus.

We must keep our eyes on Him, following closely, walking in His footsteps. We can rely on Him to lead us safely onward. Even in the darkness, follow Him for He lights the way.

Where is He leading, perhaps to a future kingdom? Or perhaps into the kingdom way of living in the present. We follow in faith as the enemy throws obstacles in our path. The Father allows hardships along the way to strengthen our faith. So we keep moving and stop to rest only when He says, "Be still and know," for we find strength, power, and peace in the stillness. And it is in the stillness that we hear the voice of God and know the inner calm and tranquility, gifts from Him. This peace is beyond our comprehension, is illogical, and without human explanation.

In the midst of chaos, the still, small voice of God speaks peace, and we experience serenity and hope despite the chaos. So, we must keep walking, following Jesus on the path that the Father has prepared for each of us and enjoying the peace that passes all understanding.

Dear Father God, Thank you for the light of Jesus that guides us through the chaos of life and into His peace. Please help us listen for the still, small voice along the way and stay on the path You have prepared for each of us. Amen





The Sabbath Peace

By: Debbie Williams

So there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God. For whoever enters God's rest also rests from his own work just as God did from His. Hebrews 4:9-10

As a little boy, Rowan was never still. He would rush from one activity to the next- from riding his bike to chasing lizards. His imagination and energy knew no bounds. Although he was mischievous, he wasn't rebellious or rude. But he seemed driven to race through life. As a young adult, he learned to blend in with adult expectations, but in his heart, he still felt the pressure to pursue the possibility and the promise of something new. And so at the startling age of 27 years old, he felt exhausted. He was suddenly disappointed in the lack of substance in all the places his frenetic searches had led him. In a moment of pause, he heard himself ask the question, "Is this all there is?" The list of his accomplishments looked initially impressive, but felt empty. Rowan needed peace. His soul was empty.

What Rowan needed was more than physical rest; the rhythm of his entire life needed a reset. Rowan needed the peace that the Sabbath offers. It's the Sabbath that redirects our attention to the bigger picture of who we are and who God is. It's the reminder that God knew we would need to pause and see His provision for us. It's no accident that Scripture tells us to "Remember the Sabbath;" He knew we would forget! The Sabbath rest is not just physical downtime; it's the structure that helps us rest spiritually and reconnect with the peace of God. In honoring God's Sabbath, we release God's peace, we rest in His rhythm, and we rely on His provision.

In this season of busyness, the Sabbath takes on an even greater meaning, for it is because of the birth of Jesus that we have an eternity of Sabbath rest awaiting us. What we enjoy now in the Sabbath is just a preview of what will be the fullness of our communion with God in eternity. In that day, our rest in God will be the source of peace without sin or struggle. Peace that has no end and no restraint!

God is Near

by Rosalyn Long

Christmas is the promise: God is with us.

"All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: 'Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel' (which means, God with us)." Matthew 1:22-23 (ESV)

Matthew, writing to a Jewish audience longing for a Messiah, pauses to remind them that the birth of Jesus wasn't random. It was the direct fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy spoken hundreds of years earlier. God's plan was always to draw near, not to remain distant. Immanuel—God with us—isn't just a name; it's the heartbeat of the gospel.

And that truth changes everything.

Because God with us means that on the hardest of days and in the darkest of months, we are never alone.

Is your grief overwhelming right now? Beneath all the ways you're trying to make this season special for others—the shopping, the decorating, the smiling for family photos—are you quietly holding back tears?

God is near.

Maybe this is your first Christmas without a loved one at the table. God is near.

Maybe you thought you'd be holding a baby in your arms, but instead your arms are heavy with longing.

God is near.

Maybe your marriage has unraveled and the road ahead feels impossible to face. God is near.

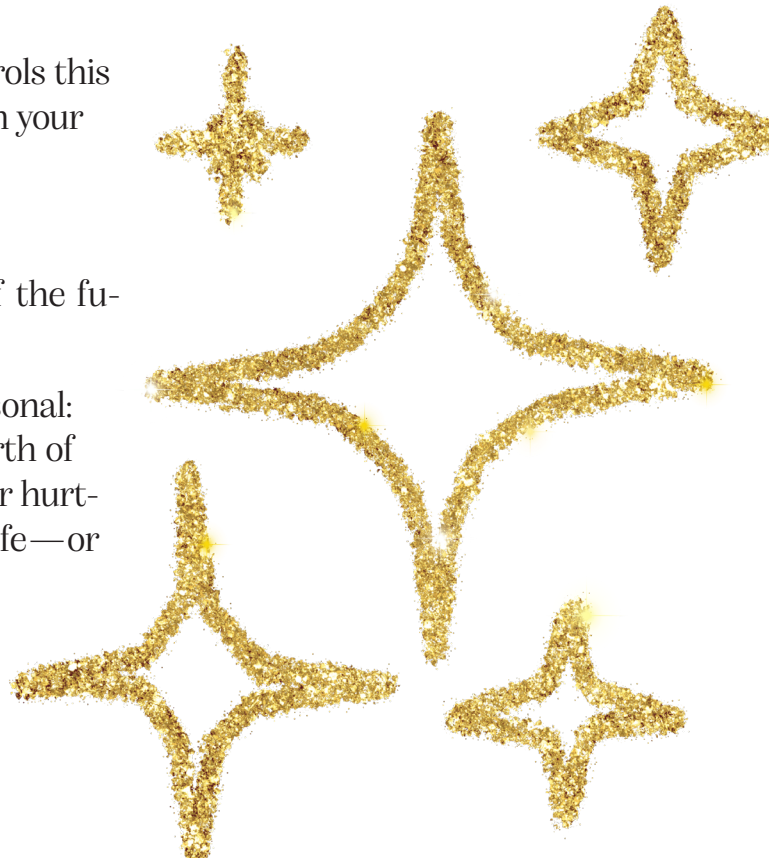
Maybe unanswered prayers feel louder than carols this season, or a child's drifting faith weighs heavy on your heart.

God is near.

Or maybe financial strain leaves you unsure of the future. God is near.

The promise of Christmas is profoundly personal: God's presence in the midst of our pain. The birth of Christ means hope for weary souls and peace for hurting hearts. He came so we would never face life—or death—alone.

Grieving is not a weakness; it's part of being human. Even as you grieve, may you know



the real comfort of the Prince of Peace who continues to draw near, seeking and finding you in your sorrow.

So grieve with hope. Hold your sadness in one hand, but also hold onto this truth in the other: you are not abandoned. You are not unseen.

God is near.

Takeaway: This Advent, as you light the candle of Peace, let it remind you that Christ's presence is not a seasonal sentiment but a steady reality. You are never alone.



Peace

By Pastor Luther Stanford

Recently, my grandson, Parker, was playing with his toy trains. On this particular day, he chose his plastic, battery-operated trains instead of his usual wooden trains. I was not paying attention when all of a sudden Parker turned into a T-Rex and attacked our train station. He dropped his plastic train and it broke into several pieces.

“Can you fix it, Bubba?”

“Are you kidding? Bubba can fix anything!”

Even with his trusty Gorilla Glue, Bubba could not fix it.

That’s the question many of us are asking about our broken world, aren’t we? Can it be fixed? From the opening pages of Scripture, we learn the world is not as God intended. It is not good as God created it. It is cursed. It is broken, marred, and mangled.

But God did not give up on His world. This is His world. And He has promised to redeem and renew it. The gospel is the good news that God’s massive project to restore creation, and restore humanity, and restore the relationship between God and humanity, has begun in the person of Jesus. God has promised to fix it all. Including us!

In that great messianic prophecy in Isaiah 9, we read these words:

⁵ Every warrior’s boot used in battle and every garment rolled in blood will be destined for burning, will be fuel for the fire. - Isaiah 9: 5

Isaiah says one day God will do away with all wars! Not just the weapons of battle, but even the clothing of battle. The instruments of war will no longer be needed. We thank God for brave and faithful men and women who serve in our armed forces. We thank God for dedicated police officers, fire fighters, and first responders. But one day...praise God...we won’t need them to serve in God’s world this way any longer!

God promises that one day His world will be put back together. It will have shalom; it will have peace.

Isaiah’s very next verse tells us not HOW this will be accomplished but by WHO:

For a Child will be born to us, a Son will be given to us;

And the government will rest on His shoulders;

And His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,

Eternal Father, Prince of Peace.

And so we join the angels in declaring, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to those on whom His favor rests!”

Love

Joseph: A Father's Love

By: David Williams

The concept was great. Sort of a Christmas Festival with local school children providing music and vendors set up around the festival area which was set up in the parking lot of a local restaurant near a Marina. Separate from the Vendors were several tents set up with Bible Characters, in costume, to help communicate the real Good News of the Christmas story.

My attention was drawn to the gentleman with a scraggly beard dressed in a simple robe and head covering, the kind you might expect from a first-century Judean farmer. The card on the table identified him simply as Joseph. Along with some items to give to children as part of a Bible-based scavenger hunt, there was a sheet of paper available for those who wanted it, which shared the basics about Joseph, the earthly “stepdad” of Jesus.

I walked up to the table and told the fellow I had a question for him, really for Joseph. He looked at me a little bit wary as I stated bluntly, and simply, “Joseph, tell me, where did you go? What happened to you after taking Jesus to the Temple at age 12?” Part of me was really hoping this portrayal of Joseph would answer that baffling question. Did he die? Was he a deadbeat dad that skipped town? Did he leave home one day to work on a project and fell in some desert hole?

Joseph was surprised by my question, but his answer was truthful. He simply answered, “I don’t know what happened.” Truth is, nobody does. I knew that when I asked, but I thought I would take a chance.

After I left old Joe a little bit befuddled, I felt a little guilty. I probably should not have put him on the spot like that. Sometimes questions aren’t answered for us in the Bible simply because they don’t need to be. Our curiosity is not a solid reason for God to oblige and answer as to why He inspired Saints of old to write the story down without a clear conclusion. We have all the details that really matter about Joseph.

Joseph was a man of faith. Even the hurt and confusion he had over the announced pregnancy of his betrothed (fiancé) did not drive him away from believing in God. It did not put hatred in his heart as he contemplated ending the arrangement for marriage privately. This faithful man had enough connection to God that when God sent him a message through an angel in a dream, Joseph believed the Angel’s proclamation that this miraculous conception and birth was fully in line with the prophetic Word of God.

Joseph, from all the Bible tells us, was a Godly father and husband. Despite the whispers and accusing glances, he loved and cared for Mary, and accepted the responsibility of loving, and nurturing the very Son of God. Some faith traditions go overboard in their thoughts and teachings about Mary, but really Joseph deserves a shout out. He did a good job, remained obedient to his heavenly Father under difficult circumstances, because God

told him to. I imagine, through his fatherly example, Joseph taught Jesus, the young Messiah, a lot about God's love, grace, and mercy.

Joseph clearly modeled for The Son of God, something immeasurable, something that could never get lost or forgotten, that is, the reality, power and eternal presence of The Father's love.

"Then Joseph, being aroused from his sleep, did as the angel of the Lord commanded him and took him his wife and did not know her till she had brought forth her firstborn Son. And he called His name JESUS." Matthew 1: 24-25



God's Love Never Melts

By: Kristy Robb

This past winter, we got to experience something that few in Florida ever do... a SNOW DAY! The kids were out of school, the neighbors all came out to play, and in true Florida style, we rode around in a kiddie pool pulled by a riding lawnmower. A spontaneous snowball fight between the adults and teenagers on the block topped off the day. No one was immune to the laughter and simple pleasure of playing in the snow. The beauty of God's creation shone brightly in the powder of white covering everything, and everyone was smiling.

The snow on the ground sparkled for those few days, but it soon began to melt. Days later, as I stood on my porch with a warm coffee in my hand, I was sad. The happiness we found in the snow was slowly being replaced with the dirty slush of melting ice and boots caked in mud. But as I sipped, my heart was reminded that God's love isn't like that snow. Instead of being sad

over something that was created to melt, I can find joy in the gift of His Love because it doesn't fade with the season or vanish when things get hot. His love remains firm even when life changes, and it becomes hard to smile. He sent His Son to earth to show His unfailing love for all humanity, which includes me and you! God's love never melts.

*"Give thanks to the Lord, for he is Good!
His faithful love endures forever." -
Psalm 136:1*

Prayer:

*Lord, thank you for the moments
of joy that remind us of you.
Help me remember that Your
love doesn't fade or melt.
Teach me to rest in Your love
that endures through every
season. Amen.*

Melted Snowman

Drawing by Layla Robb (15 years old)

MERRY
CHRISTMAS!

True Christmas Spirit

by Presleigh Dunagan (17 years old)

My favorite part of Christmas morning is not when I wake up and see the presents. It's not when I find the Elf on our tree. It's when Dad reads the Christmas story. That used to be my least favorite.

Every single year, he would read it, or Aunts and Uncles would read it. And I would just be sitting with all my presents waiting for them to finish this loooooonnnngggg story that I didn't care about or understand.

But now I do understand. Christmas isn't about getting, it's about giving! God gave us his Son, so that we will not perish but have eternal life!

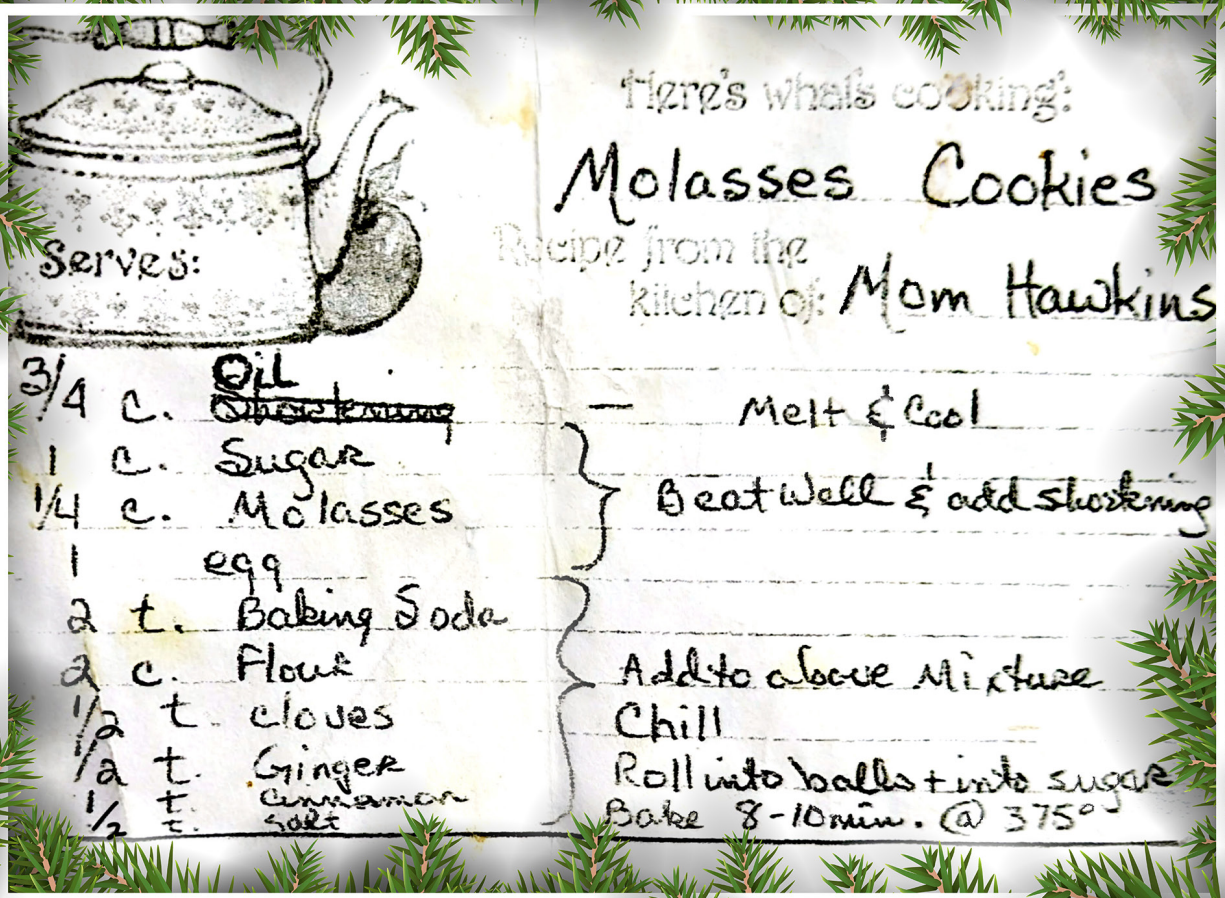
Every year on Christmas, I paint pictures for people. They tell me what they want and I make it! That's my second-most-favorite thing to do during Christmas.

Just giving. It makes me feel awesome! And it makes me feel like God's looking over my shoulder, smiling down at me, and saying, "Good job, Presleigh. Good job."





Family Christmas
Drawing by Presleigh Dunagan



Grandma's Family Love

by Paige Dunagan (15 years old)

These recipes hold a very special place in my heart and in my home. These are my great Grandma's handwritten recipes that were gifted to my mom after my Grandma passed away. It was a tradition where every Christmas, Molasses cookies and Dilly bread were made. Now that mom has the recipes it has become a tradition for my family as well. I'm so grateful that my mom has been able to pass this tradition down to her own family and I hope that my siblings and I can pass it on to our kids and Grandkids. I hope these recipes bring you and your family joy through this holiday season! Merry Christmas!

Dilly Bread

1 pkg. yeast
 1/4 c. warm water *
 1 c. lg cottage cheese (lukewarm)
 2 tble. sugar
 1 tble instant minced onion.
 2 double dill onion
 1 tble. butter
 2 teas. dill seeds
 1 teas. salt
 1/4 teas soda
 1 egg
 2 1/4 - 2 1/2 c. flour

Sprinkle yeast over water, stir to dissolve.
 Heat cottage cheese until lukewarm; combine
 in mixing bowl with sugar, onion, butter,
 dill seeds, salt, baking soda, egg & yeast

Add flour, a little at a time, to make
 a stiff batter, beating well after
 each addition. Turn dough onto floured
 counter, knead, then place in bowl
 to rise until double in bulk. Punch
 down, shape for one loaf in bread
 pan. Let rise until double.

Bake 40 to 50 min. in 350° oven.
 makes one loaf.

Recipes by Jesse Hawkins

(Paige Dunagan's Great-Grandmother)

Love in the Middle of Walmart

By: Patsy Forrest

Recently, I was at Walmart picking up a few grocery items. Honestly, I only needed sour cream, but as usual, other items in my cart were not on my shopping list. When I finally reached the dairy section to pick up the sour cream, I looked toward the lunch meat case. I noticed a beautiful little girl in a shopping cart, cuddling a bologna package.

I was so taken by her affection for the bologna that I had to tell her that I love bologna, too. I never loved it enough to cuddle it, but I occasionally enjoy a good bologna sandwich. The little girl, eyes shining brightly, flashed a beautiful smile at me. I waved at her as I rounded the corner and headed down the coffee aisle to pick up my favorite International Coffee, French Vanilla sugar-free decaf.

When I finished shopping and was heading up the center aisle toward check-out, I noticed the little girl waiting patiently as her grandmother and another lady were in conversation. I waved at her again and stopped to say hello as I came alongside her cart.

Then the most wonderful thing happened, she spread her arms wide as though asking for a hug. My heart melted, and I moved into her embrace. How warm it felt to experience pure love from this little girl. She wanted nothing more than a hug. As I stepped back and smiled at her grandmother, hoping she understood that this stranger just wanted to feel the loving embrace of this sweet three-year-old, the little girl reached out her hand toward me. I was unsure what she wanted, but her grandmother, quick to interpret said “she wants to pray”.

How could I refuse to pray with this little girl there in the middle of Walmart? That wasn't going to happen, so I reached for her little hand and then felt the grandmother's hand take my other hand, and we formed a prayer circle. I closed my eyes and listened intently as that sweet little girl began to pray. Now, I didn't understand a word, and her grandmother said, “I don't know what she is saying,” but I knew that God understood every word. In a few moments, I heard her say amen and opened my eyes. This time, I stretched out my arms for a hug.

As I said goodbye and made my way to the check-out counter, I couldn't stop smiling, and I felt as if my heart would burst with joy. I had just experienced the pure love of God in the form of a three-year-old girl who asked a stranger to pray with her. I wonder how much joy there would be if we were uninhibited enough to share God's love with a stranger in the middle of Walmart, or for that matter, any place.

God's greatest gift is love. Love is meant to be shared, both given and received. First Corinthians 13:4-8 describes love this way;

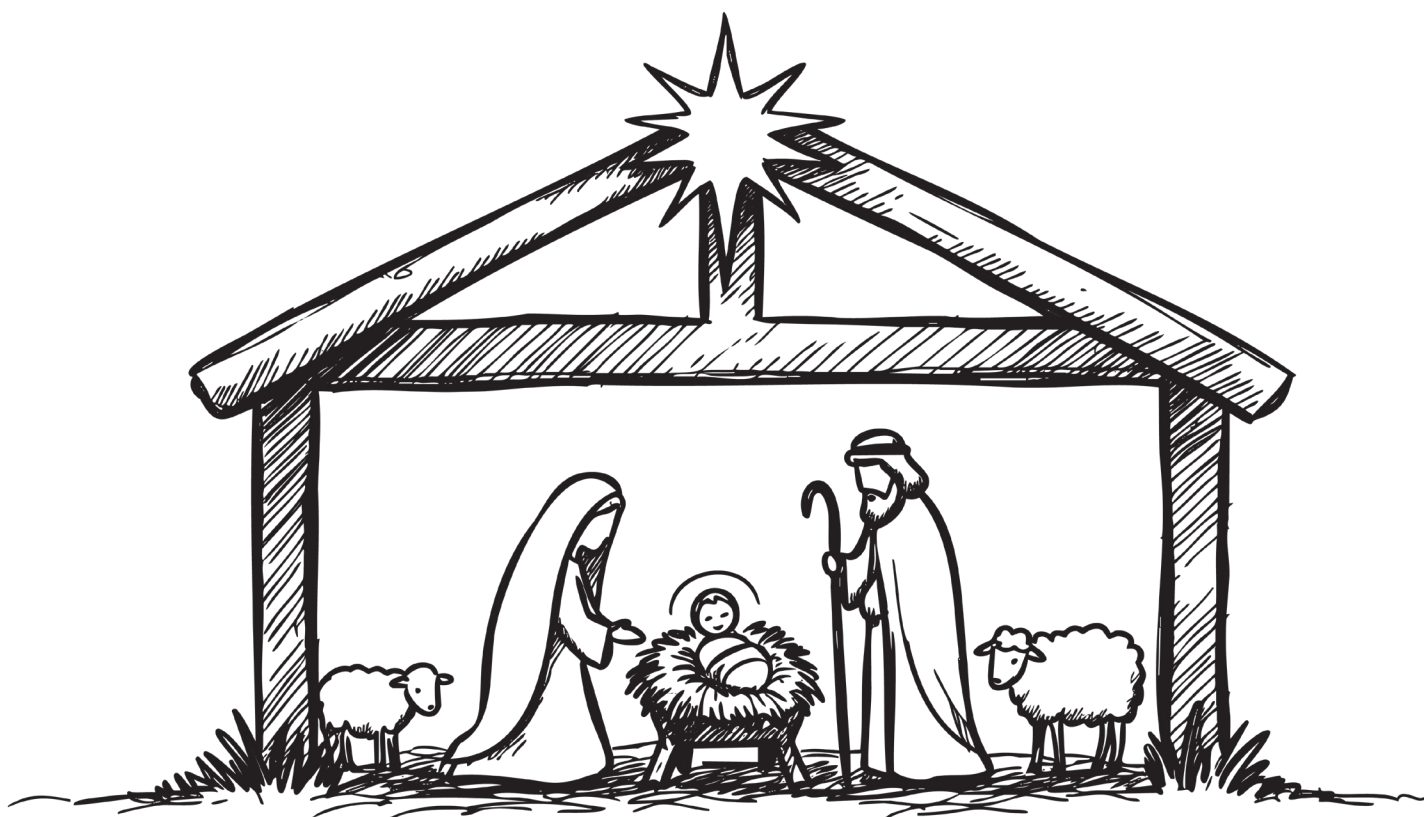
Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes always perseveres. Love never fails.

The Bible tells us that the source of love is God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. ~1 John 4:8 (emphasis mine). The description of love in 1st Corinthians 13 is a description of God and can be read like this:

God is patient, God is kind. He does not envy, He does not boast, He is not proud. He is not rude, He is not self-seeking, He is not easily angered, He keeps no record of wrongs. God does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. He always protects, always trusts, always hopes always perseveres. God never fails.

I pray that God will give me that kind of love and a willingness to share it with everyone as He leads. I know that there have been times when I felt God prompting me to speak to someone, but I was too inhibited to take the step. I guess that is selfish, as my concern is how I would be seen rather than the possible needs of the other person.

God's love was sent to our world in the person of Jesus Christ. His love was so strong that He gave His life for me. Not only that, but He conquered death and is preparing a place for me to be with Him. This kind of selfless love is mine, a gift freely given by God, and it is meant to be shared selflessly with all the people in the world. My prayer is that I will remove myself and replace it with God's love.



Love

by Pastor Luther Stanford

Have you ever been rejected by someone who should have loved you? If so, then you have experienced one of the deepest and sharpest pains a person can experience. We can be let down by our parents. We can be betrayed by a life-long friend. We can be forsaken and left alone by a spouse who promised to stay by our side in good times and bad.

And sometimes we can feel as if we are the only people on God's planet to ever hurt this way. Naively, we believe our pain is more profound than everyone else's. This isn't because we are evil people; rather, deep hurt has a way of blinding us, even deceiving us. The truth is most people have experienced this sort of wound in their life. And if they haven't yet, they will.

So much of our emotional energy is spent trying to heal and recover from these experiences. And not only our emotional energy, but so much of our lives are spent trying to fill the broken places of our fractured hearts. Our sidewalks and city streets are filled with people who walk with a relational limp.

Is there any hope for healing? Is it possible for someone to experience such penetrating rejection or hurt and recover? I think there is hope and it's found in the healing power of God's love. Here's a question: What if the medicine for rejection by someone who should have loved you is being loved by someone who should have rejected you? What if the answer to unwarranted pain is undeserved love?

Let me ask it another way: Have you ever been loved by someone who should have rejected you? You were the perpetrator of the pain. You broke the promises and violated your word. The actions you took were selfish and unrighteous. And yet, in the overflow of God's grace and mercy, they loved you still. They did not take from you an eye for an eye. From the depth of their pain, they offered you grace instead of anger. They loved you despite you.

This kind of love truly has the power to transform your life. And this is the kind of love God has loved us with on an infinite level. Philippians 2 tells us the Christmas story from a cosmic perspective.

⁵ *In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:*

⁶ *Who, being in very nature God,*

did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;

⁷ *rather, he made himself nothing*

by taking the very nature of a servant,

being made in human likeness.

⁸ *And being found in appearance as a man,*

he humbled himself

by becoming obedient to death—

even death on a cross!

*⁹ Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,*

*¹⁰ that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,*

*¹¹ and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father. - Philippians 2:5-11*

This is the love of God made visible and available to us in the Christmas story! The love of God which can heal what everyone else has hurt. The love of God which can put the broken pieces back together.



The Truth of God's Love

by Debbie Williams

We love because He first loved us. I John 4:19

I've often thought of love as a mutually reactive event. Two people meet, sparks begin to fly, and a googly-eyed couple reacts to each other like a couple of magnets. But God's love isn't reactive – it's an example of a God-driven initiative. He decided first that He loved me even before I knew Him. He didn't wait for me to see how good He is or how gracious and merciful He's been. He had a heart of love toward me before I was ever introduced to Him. He called me Beloved and pursued me so that He could draw me close.

But there is more to this Truth. This Truth calls us to stretch beyond our humanity and pattern our interactions on His example. Since God loves us in this way, we should strive to love others this way. Our position toward others is not to hold back and offer love only to those who reciprocate, but to initiate loving actions. We are called to act, not to wait to react, but to carry God's love like a banner. We don't do this in our own strength of course. But we are able to do it because The Spirit lives in us and is providing the exact resources we need.

So there's the challenge – to expect to find God's image in those you interact with on a daily basis and to anticipate loving them as a result of that truth that they are loved by God. God loved you first so you can love others first. It's an outlandishly supernatural circle that will have ripple effects beyond your imagination!

*"Beloved, let us love one another. For love is of God and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God."
- I John 4:7*



Jesus



Jesus

By Pastor Luther Stanford

When Dr. Luke tells us the story of Jesus' birth, he sets the stage by naming the political movers and shakers on the world's stage: Caesar Augustus, Emperor of the Roman Empire. Quirinius, Governor of Syria. Herod, King of Judea. Men of power.

From the very outset, we see that Jesus birth creates a political crisis. Jesus was born during the reign of Herod. You cannot mention Herod's name without moral scandal being attached to it. Herod came into power by crushing all his opponents with the help of Roman forces. All Rome wanted was for Herod to keep Judea quiet. In exchange for his duties, he got to live like a king. Keep in mind, he's not Jewish; he's not a legitimate king. He's a POLITICAL king with political power.

The older Herod got, the more unstable and paranoid he became. And when a crafty and cruel monarch becomes paranoid, that's a recipe for disaster. When he was suspicious that his throne might be threatened, he murdered his wife and three of his sons. Augustus said, "it was safer to be Herod's pig than Herod's son."

Matthew tells us that when the news of Jesus's birth began to spread King Herod was "disturbed" and all of Jerusalem was disturbed with him. Quite simply, when the king is not happy, no one is happy. Jerusalem was afraid of Herod's reaction.

The birth of Jesus was political dynamite. Matthew is saying the TRUE king of the Jews has been born and that means, the old king, Herod, is a false king, an imposter.

So we have two kings in that moment. Herod, a ruler with brute power & dominant force. Jesus, a powerless and defenseless Child and his mother.

Matthew does something sneaky, He calls Herod "King Herod" until the Magi worship Jesus. After this worship, Herod is never again called King. He has been de-throned.

Today, no one celebrates Augustus, or Quirinius, or Herod. Most people wouldn't even know who they are. And yet, it's amazing to think how all over the world people are celebrating the birth of the Galilean peasant baby they called "king" who ruled not with might and position, but with sacrificial love and grace.

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this season!

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