

## WELCOME TO ADVENT

Pastor Tim

November 30

I have always loved gardening. It is one of those things that helps to slow me down. I am often reminded that planting and growing and harvesting are things done, not on my schedule or according to my timing, but according to the times and seasons and provisions of God. An accomplished gardener comes to understand those times and seasons. What we learn to do, is to anticipate and appreciate what each season brings.

Waiting isn't easy for most of us. We live in a culture that idolizes speed and efficiency. This is why, the season of Advent provides us such a great opportunity. During the season of Advent, we are invited into the discipline of waiting. Advent is a journey that invites us to step back from all the busyness of life, to quiet ourselves and consider God's greatest gift, the sending of His son Jesus to earth. We are invited to wonder, what it will be like when he comes again. We are invited to put our full trust in Him, even as we wait.

As we begin our journey into Advent once again, we're invited to enter into a journey of hope as we prepare ourselves to celebrate the Savior's coming into our world – knowing that we need his gifts of love, hope, peace, and joy. And we wait with longing hearts for the day when Christ will come again and establish God's kingdom and make all things new.

While waiting isn't easy, there are always signs of hope along the journey. This is why we are inviting you to grow an Amaryllis plant with us this Advent. As you water it and watch it grow, it will create anticipation of the beautiful flower which should bloom around Christmas. It is a metaphor for the waiting we do for Jesus. A reminder of the hope Christ brought when He first came, and the hope we now have of His ultimate return.

I recognize that this is a unique year, but we must never forget that God is at work in this season. As you look at your bulb grow each day, it is a reminder that God is working in your home and in your life, as you seek Him. It is a reminder that God creates beauty out of ashes, and surprises us with His goodness. It is also a reminder that we have a hope that will last; the gift of new life and salvation found in Jesus. A gift that cannot ever be taken from us. A gift whose hope is eternal.

I pray that your hearts will be flooded with light so that you can understand the confident hope he has given to those he called—his holy people who are his rich and glorious inheritance. Ephesians 1:18:18

*How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given,  
So God imparts to human hearts,  
The blessings of His heaven, No ear may hear His coming,  
but in this world of sin, where meek souls  
will receive him still, the dear Christ enters in.*

## A TIME FOR FAMILY

December 1

Mary Jane Downie

Some of my greatest memories growing up are times spent with family. They are pretty simple memories too, nothing extravagant, laying on the beach at the lake, water skiing, tubing, having a sleepover in an old milker's cabin at my grandparent's farm, to name a few. I mean, let's be honest, not all family time was amazing. I had my fair share of wishing I were an only child or being exasperated by siblings, but for the most part, my memories of growing up with siblings and tons of cousins are very happy!

Now, being a parent, I get to witness the other side of things. Being a mom defines who I am in almost every aspect of my life. I have a feeling that I am not alone in my feelings, but nothing hurts me more than when my kids are angry at each other. I just want them all to get along flawlessly all the time! I have faith that despite having some rough moments, one day, they will appreciate each other for who they are despite their differences.

Cousins are important too! Just like I loved the time I got to spend with my own cousins growing up, I love that my kids get to spend time with their cousins. In fact, just this last month we took a trip to Manitoba for a family gathering where we got to spend a weekend with my aunts, uncles, cousins and their kids. It was so amazing how even though we don't see each other very often, the kids all played together like they were long lost besties! What an amazing tie family has.

### **Please read Luke 1:5-25**

This passage focuses on Zechariah and Elizabeth. They were followers of God and longed for a child and family of their own. In those days, it was even more tragic for a couple to be without children as they would have been looked down on by their peers. Others would have looked at them as sinful assuming God was punishing them by not giving them children. Imagine how joyful and thankful they would have been when they were given the news that they would have a child! Let's take it one step further. Mary, the mother of Jesus, was Elizabeth's cousin. After all the dust settled around the scandal of Mary's pregnancy, I would imagine that Elizabeth and Mary, would have been so thrilled to be able to share the birth of their baby boys together! It turns out that Elizabeth's child would be Jesus' cousin! So, Jesus, like you and me, had cousins too! Gabriel was very specific about how Elizabeth and Zechariah would need to raise their son John, just as Gabriel was specific with Mary and Joseph that Jesus was the Son of God. What a fantastic detail God had worked out, that both these mom's, with important jobs to do, would also have each other to rely on for support!

As we prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus it is easy to get caught in the miracle of it all! The Son of God, came to earth for us. Sometimes it seems too unrelatable, doesn't it? I mean, my sons are just regular old kids! I can't relate! That's just the point, Jesus was born into a regular old family, like mine and yours, with siblings and cousins and all the fun and chaos that goes with it! The point is that despite being the Son of God, he CAN relate to us because he also lived it. How amazing is that? He was born into an earthy family, but also to welcome us into his heavenly family!

Spend some time praying for your own family today. Pick a sibling and a cousin to pray for during the week ahead. And, if you are really ambitious, send them a text or give them a call, just to let them know what you prayed for them!

## A TIME FOR GREETINGS

Ken Boschman

December 2

One of the things we have lost during this season of COVID-19 is the opportunity to meet and greet freely. When God created us, he designed us for attachment – both to Him and to others. In response, humans have developed many different greeting rituals. Some folks embrace each other when they meet, while others shake hands. In different parts of the world, people kiss each other freely. Here in Alberta, we are more likely to receive a subtle wave from the driver of a passing pickup or, if on a motorcycle, perhaps a “peace” sign. Whatever our greeting rituals were, COVID-19 has changed everything. These days, we talk mostly about contact tracing, social distancing, and personal protective equipment. We can forget that it was not always so.

### **Please read Luke 1:39-55**

This wonderful account of God coming to us again, is filled with greetings. Mary had been earlier greeted by the angel, Gabriel, with the good news that she would be the mother of Jesus. She sets out to visit her aged aunt Elizabeth. It turns out that Gabriel had made another visit to Uncle Zechariah to announce the good news that he and Elizabeth would be having their own long-awaited first child.

When Mary arrives and greets her aunt, even Elizabeth’s unborn child gets involved and dances inside her with ecstatic joy. Something incredibly special is going on here between the Creator and His favoured creations. Whether through angels, relatives, or unborn children God is reaching out to meet and greet His children who He loves beyond measure.

What is our picture of the God who reaches out to us? Is He the God who says, “Let the children come to me...?” Is He the One who stands at the door and knocks? Do we delight in Him and He delights in us? Or do we picture God as someone who is rather stern and mostly disapproving? What kind of face do we expect when we finally get to meet Him in heaven? Is it the judgemental face of a father who has waited for a child to finally get home well after curfew? Does He have a list? Or will we see the face of a long-waiting parent who will run, embrace, and kiss us when we finally come home?

In my work with students over the years, I have often spoken with kids who are trying very hard to get into a group where they are not welcome. Too often this causes them to try to be someone they are not, in order to gain access to something they think they need. My advice, probably gained from someone I no longer remember, was “If you walk into a room and no one’s eyes light up, find another room.”

The God of advent takes delight in His people. His eyes light up when He sees us. When He meets us, He really greets us. The God on the other side of the door wants to come in and eat with us, but that can only happen if we hear His voice and let Him in.

Over the years, I have come to understand that God created us primarily for relationship. Obedience and duty are important, but God wants my heart more than my activity. It is never too late to take up walking and talking with Someone who loves me and believes in me. I trust that we will allow the God of advent to really meet and greet us during this season.

## A TIME OF MEMORIES

Dwaine & Rebekah Giesbrecht

December 3

It doesn't take much to trigger a memory from a distant moment in time. It could be the sight, sound, or even aroma that floods our mind with a vivid memory. For Dwaine, any time he hears the song *Tonight Is A Wonderful Night To Fall In Love*, he is instantly transported to the summer of '97. It's the end of a 3-day drunken rock fest where he cleaned portable toilets for 16 hours a day in 33 degree weather. Standing in a dusty farmer's field, leaning against the work truck, sewer hose in hand, when the closing band, *April Wine*, takes the stage. For those few minutes, all of the chaos came to a sudden halt as the music washed over the crowd.

Rebekah's memories ignite with the sound of a Kitchen Aid mixer whipping at high speeds. She is brought back to late night chats with her mom in the kitchen, usually with every square inch of counter space used for cooling mass amounts of cookies or the next wedding cakes to be decorated. Whether it was filled with conversation, both serious and lighthearted, or silently watching her mom skillfully work, these were moments she treasures.

Memories are an incredible gift, holding a unique power with the potential to bring us to laughter, personal reflection, and even tears. Sharing memories of the past is one way we strengthen our shared connections and identities. It plays a significant role in who we have become and who we grow to be. Keeping this in mind, it is not surprising to note that God uses the memories of his people, past and present, to point us to his faithfulness.

### **Please read Luke 1:67-80**

So many of the stories written in the Bible are multi-layered – God is doing something big in the individual lives of the people in the story while at the same time doing something big for the people of Israel or the world. We learn earlier in Luke 1 that Zechariah has been praying for a child, but that he and Elizabeth are old and she is barren. An angel appears to Zechariah to tell him that his prayers have been heard. He does not believe the messenger and as a result is muted until this moment. The faithfulness of God to Elizabeth and Zechariah are on full display and Zechariah pens these obedient words, "His name is John". Zechariah is unmuted and permitted to finally speak. Those long mute months gave him time to think and to hear from God. With Zechariah's experience, he is compelled to prophecy.

Zechariah declares now is a time for memories. Do you remember God's promises, His holy covenant, His faithfulness? Now is the time that this is being fulfilled. God has visited, has redeemed his people and has raised up a horn of salvation – He is doing this now! What God is doing now lacks significance without the memories. And even now, it seems that the prophecy may not be what was expected – this redeeming and deliverance from the hand of enemies – brought about beginning with Zechariah's son, pointing to salvation, the forgiveness of sins because of the tender mercy of our God. A different way to peace.

In this advent season, take some time for memories. Recall your stories and how God was faithful even in a different type of outcome. Recall first encountering your Savior, of your first taste of His grace and of the tender mercies of our God. Give thanks. Peace be with you – He is faithful.

## TIME FOR CHARITY

Amy Hiebert

December 4

I take great pleasure in startling people with the comment “When I was in jail...” A raised eyebrow, perhaps an awkward pause, then nervous laughter emits before I explain that both my father and I worked in the prison system for many years. I began ‘going to jail’ when I was a little girl to sing hymns in Sunday Chapel and then worked at a correctional facility in Calgary for several years. I love jail! Or more appropriately, I love THE PEOPLE in jail. Both the inmates and my co-workers. Every person, on either side of the bars, has deep hurts and struggles, and everyone is looking to belong, to be loved, to be valued. And that is where the love of Jesus comes in. Someone once asked me in prison “Why are you so happy? There is something different about you.” What a compliment! Yes, there is something different about me, and I know exactly why I am full of joy! And I’d love to share that with you!

### **Please read Matthew 25:31-40**

It sometimes seems the world takes advantage of the Christmas season as a one-off time of year to be generous to one another. It is well known that charities get an overwhelming influx of people wanting to volunteer during the Christmas season. “This sounds great Amy, what is the problem with that?” While charities are thankful for any and all volunteers and/or donations, they typically need these donations and volunteers year-round. While it is fantastic to serve Christmas dinner to the homeless or ‘adopted a family’ and provide gifts to less fortunate children, there are needs so much bigger than just Christmas, and so much broader than charities. Matthew 25 gives us a glimpse into both how simple and how incredibly vast unselfish love can be.

When Keith and I became foster parents, whilst in the ‘honeymoon’ phase (yes, there is a honeymoon phase, and yes, it fades – sometimes quite quickly!) I was adamant and rather disconcerted with my fellow Christ followers and Bible believers. It says very clearly in Matthew 25 that we should take care of the orphans, so, by my calculations, if every single Christ loving family who had a spare bedroom in their home took in a child then the matter of parentless children would be eradicated – overnight!

It seemed so simple. But as I wrestled with my incredible disappointment in humanity, I was gently reminded that we are all different, and appropriately and amazingly so! Keith and I had the time, the capacity, the love, and the desire, to foster children. I cannot assume that every Christ follower with a spare bedroom has the same capacity. I do know, however, that all Christ followers have the same instruction; to love one another in whatever capacity God has provided you with.

Yes, I have had the incredible privilege of loving people in jail, homeless on the streets, orphans welcomed into our home, and in multiple other ways as addressed in Matthew 25. Just because you don’t work in a jail or charity does not preclude you from showing love to others. Yes, the Christmas season provides us with lots of opportunities to be selfless and generous, but so does the rest of the year.

Look around – at your neighbor, at the senior’s home across town, at the exhausted teacher, at your family doctor. There are limitless possibilities in your sphere, no matter how old or young you are, no matter your ability or situation. Love someone today, and tomorrow, and every day!

## **A TIME FOR VISITING**

Marilyn O'Brien

**December 5**

The little girl hurried to answer the door. It was 'Auntie Ruth and Uncle Bob'. Her parents were expecting close friends to come by for a visit and of her parents' friends, this couple was her favourite. Auntie Ruth always made the little girl feel special. Then a tragedy in the family caused the families to go in different directions.

Fast forward 15 years, the little girl grew up and married. One day the young woman learned that 'Auntie Ruth and Uncle Bob' moved to the town where she now lived. The dear memories of what was long ago moved the young woman to seek them out. That visit led to a deeper richer friendship as the young woman noticed how Auntie Ruth always welcomed her warmly and seemed to really enjoy spending time with her. They shared many things including confidences and recipes.

During that time, the young woman re-dedicated her life to Jesus, her LORD and Savior and she made sure to share her faith with her dear friend. The years passed and one day Auntie Ruth shared the sad news that she had been diagnosed with cancer.

As Auntie Ruth's body weakened and she could no longer do all of the things she once did, the younger woman took it upon herself to make Christmas cake from the recipe that had been passed down from Auntie Ruth's mother and was a favourite of Uncle Bob's. She continued to present Uncle Bob with Christmas cake every Christmas until his passing many years later.

To this day, the now not so young woman remembers those special visits as she makes the Christmas cake and shares it with other special friends.

God used Auntie Ruth to encourage the little girl and later the young woman to encourage the older lady, and He still sends people to visit and encourage. Endurance and encouragement come from God.

**Please read Romans 15:1-7.**

Jesus left His Father's side not to please Himself, but so that we would know we are loved and to bring us salvation.

Will you allow God to use you to bless others as He has blessed us?

## A TIME OF HOPE

Rob Unrau

December 6

### Please read John 14:1-6

As I sit here writing this, I am very aware that finding the right “head space” to do this has been elusive. And maybe that is the point. It is like God is trying to tell me right now. “Do not let your heart be troubled,” when that is exactly what my heart feels like right now. And that is the head space from which I am writing. Troubled.

What do you do when every doorway to a solution, to the core challenge you are facing, has been closed? The type of challenge I am referring to is not a new challenge from a week ago or even a few months ago but rather one that I have been wrestling with for years. One that is with you daily and the weight of it at times is overpowering and always life sucking.

The Message answers “Don’t let this throw you. You trust God, don’t you? Trust me.” “Trust me,” well that feels like a Sunday school answer. True but far more difficult to live out day to day.

At the suggestion of a friend I reached out to an organization that might be able to help. This was over 6 months ago and due to the impact of Covid 19, they have been overwhelmed. I would check in periodically with them only to be disappointed. After a particularly difficult week I reached out again out of sheer desperation. Typically, negative responses would come back a week or two later. This time was different. There was email the next morning and then a phone meeting and a long conversation. Someone understood, someone knew there could be a solution and Hope was rekindled.

Jesus tells his disciples to Trust Him. He has prepared a place for us. That it will all work out. I am not done with this challenge. I haven’t figured out what the solution will be yet. But I have been given enough hope to trust that God’s got this. It will work out.

If you, like me, find yourself at the end of any visible solution to the challenges you face and if you find your heart troubled. Then take heart because this is for you. May my story kindle the hope you need to push on. May you put your trust this Christmas in God’s son Jesus who always be with you in the struggle.

*“Don’t let this throw you. You trust God, don’t you? Trust me. There is plenty of room for you in my Father’s home. If that weren’t so, would I have told you that I’m on my way to get a room ready for you? And if I’m on my way to get your room ready, I’ll come back and get you so you can live where I live. And you already know the road I’m taking.”*

*Thomas said, “Master, we have no idea where you’re going. How do you expect us to know the road?”*

*Jesus said, “I am the Road, also the Truth, also the Life. No one gets to the Father apart from me.”*

*John 14:1-6 from The Message*

## A TIME FOR WAITING

December 7

Lisa Watts

As I sat in my doctor's office the words rang like a gong in my head. Baby. Fluid. Kidneys. We were expecting our second child and an ultrasound had revealed that the baby had fluid in the kidneys. There were possible explanations (including chromosomal defect) and we would monitor it with monthly ultrasounds. And so we waited. Each ultrasound revealed the same result, the fluid on the kidneys was still there and we would likely not know why until the baby was born. Would it be a perfectly healthy baby or a baby perfect for us with unique challenges? We would have to wait and see.

### **Please read Hebrews 6:13-20**

Waiting is not usually easy for anyone and Abraham can testify to that. If you are familiar with his story you will remember that he and his wife Sarah wanted a child. God assured Abraham with a promise that one day he would have many descendants and that his offspring would bless many nations.

In the early stages of waiting, Abraham demonstrated great faith but as time went on his faith wavered and in a lapse of faith a decision was made to take matters into his own hands with great consequences. But eventually Abraham would return to faith and wait.... for a long time. Days turned to weeks, months and years. Abraham continued to wait and watched others receive what he longed for (his brother Nahor had 12 sons!)

But God did fulfill his promise and after 25 years of waiting, at the ripe old age of 100, a son was born to Abraham and Sarah and they named him Isaac (which means 'one who laughs'). And hope was restored. It would be another 62 years before Abraham would see his first grandchild! I am sure Abraham wondered how old he would have to be to have as many descendants as the stars in the sky!

Are you willing to wait for 25 years for God to fulfill a promise? What about 700 years? The people of Israel were promised a messiah, one whose blood would bless the people of every nationality. Entire generations came and went holding onto hope found in the promise of a kingdom that would stand forever.

We know today that the Messiah did come, in the form of a baby, more than 2000 years ago and each Christmas we celebrate the fulfillment of an ancient promise that continues to bring hope and peace in this modern age. As followers of Jesus we continue to wait. We wait for the new promise of Jesus' return. Not unlike the ancient Israelites, we long for Jesus to come and make sense of a chaotic, faithless and often antagonistic world, to restore our world to God's original design.

In the face of life's uncertainty and discouragements we must wait with faith. Storms of life may swirl around us but we have hope that serves as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure.

If you know our family you will be aware that our second child was born perfectly healthy (in fact, she is the one we have placed hope in to support us in our old age!). But as we waited there was fear, anxiety, and concern as we wondered if we were equipped to handle potential challenges coming our way. The waiting wasn't easy but our faith held firm in the one who always fulfills His promises.



## **A TIME OF FAITH, Even when the snow is falling**

**December 8**

Wanda Farr

*“Lord, how long should we wait for an answer from the insurance brokerage? The snow is falling on the tarped roof of our home and we have been fighting for coverage since July. It’s now the middle of October. We have been paying our premiums on our home insurance for years and now they tell us the damages from the microburst windstorm (that blew many shingles off our home) are not covered due to a policy change we were not aware of. The brokerage has taken our appeal to the corporate level but have kept us waiting for so long. Do we try to fix it now on our own, or do we wait longer for a miracle?”*

My husband Chad and I had prayed and asked others to pray for this situation. Was God asking us to trust that he had a plan that we could not see? The Bible has something to say about God’s plan.

### **Please read Isaiah 55:6-11**

When the snow falls before we are ready, or we are backed into a corner in life, we have a chance to exercise our faith. It’s like getting our faith stretched and warmed up to get ready for God to show us that “this plan of mine is not what you would work out, neither are my thoughts the same as yours! For just as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than yours, and my thoughts than yours.” (vs. 8,9) In order to find out what God’s plan is, we need to ask or seek Him in prayer and wait for the answer. “Seek the Lord while you can find him. Call upon him now while he is near.” (vs. 6) If we do not have peace to do something other than wait, we need to keep waiting. Even if the only reason to keep waiting is because we believe God is ASKING US TO WAIT.

People will tell us a miracle will not likely happen. Even people who love us and want what’s best for us will give us advice to strike out on our own. But if we wait for the Lord Jesus to save us in our current situation, He will show how strong He is on our behalf. He’s fighting in our corner and sees us struggling to believe that He’s “got this”. The struggle gets personal when we wonder if we are worth the Lord’s time. Or if we are really forgiven for any part of the situation that is our own fault. But we read in verse 7, “Let them turn to the Lord that he may have mercy upon them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon!” God does not hold our mistakes against us. Admitting and letting go of our mistakes makes room for God’s vast forgiveness and deep love.

God asked Chad and me to wait and gave us His peace. Three days later the insurance brokerage came through with a settlement. “As the rain and snow come down from heaven and stay upon the ground to water the earth, and cause the grain to grow and to produce seed for the farmer and bread for the hungry, so also is my Word. I send it out and it always produces fruit”. (vs. 10, 11a) The snow melted and our roof got new shingles before the next snow fall. God’s power moved that brokerage to offer us the money to fix our roof. That was a miracle in answer to prayer.

This advent season, when the snow falls, will you trust His plan so you can experience his salvation and love for you?

It’s worth the wait.

## A TIME OF PROMISE

December 9

Danny Dodds

Although I've been a Christian all my life, I never really "got" Advent. While I've always loved Christmas (I mean, who doesn't – it's basically a birthday party for Jesus, but we get the presents!), it had become a time of running around for me: running from mall to mall (at the last minute), trying to find that perfect present; running from dinner party to family gathering to school play to church to... ugh. And don't get me started about the Christmas tunes on infinite repeat on the radio! Advent was just a long, painful lead-up to Christmas, and became a time to endure, rather than to celebrate.

Then one year, we started going to Advent Retreat at Gull Lake. Held annually on the first weekend of Advent, this retreat is a time to rest, reflect, and pray, with family and close friends. There is usually a guest speaker, incredible music, and delicious food. There are late-night board games, Christmas crafts, afternoon naps, sleigh rides, Christmas carols, bonfires, and skating on the lake. But the best part, for me, was that it was a time to let go of the fray – a time to put my heart in the right space heading into the season.

At the 2017 Advent Retreat, the guest speaker used art, music and poetry to explore the meaning of Advent (following Steve Bell's "Pilgrim Year – Advent" book). We were given time to write our own poetry about Advent, too. This didn't sit well with me – I'm an accountant, after all. But I wrote the following haiku in my notebook:

Uncomfortable  
In the dark, in the silence  
You are worth the wait

Looking back, I'm not sure this is my own creation. Maybe I stole it from someone (probably Nicole). Regardless, I love that last line – you are worth the wait. This is what is central to Advent: waiting for the promise found in the coming of Jesus Christ.

### **Please read Galatians 3:23-4:7**

God made a promise to Abraham in Genesis – that he would bless Abraham and his seed. Paul explains earlier in Galatians that it was no mistake that God used the singular version of the word "seed". God's seed is Jesus. So, in order to receive the promise of God's blessing – our "Inheritance" - we must turn to Jesus.

While the Jewish people waited for the coming of the Messiah, God gave them the Law, through Moses. Paul describes the Law as a "custodian" or "schoolmaster" for the people of God until Jesus came. The Law is good, of course – it came from God. But while the schoolmaster was good at educating the people about their sinful nature, and provided direction and restraint, that's all it could do – it could not give the Jewish people their inheritance.

It is only through faith in Jesus, not through works under the Law, that we are children of God. And once we are children of God, we can receive our inheritance!

*Heavenly Father, thank you for sending us your son, that we all may receive the inheritance you promised – your rich blessing on us. Help us grow deeper in our faith. You are worth the wait. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.*

PS – I found another poem in my notebook from the 2017 Advent Retreat. This limerick is definitely a Danny Dodds original:

There once was a man named Jesus  
Who came to save each one of us  
He died on a cross  
But he showed who's the boss  
To him all will bend the knee-sus.

## A TIME FOR LIGHTS

Connie Thiessen

December 10

There must be some mistake! The topic I was given was "A Time For Lights" but when I looked up the passage and saw the heading "The death of Lazarus" it did not seem to make sense. What did light have to do with the death of Lazarus??

I dread winter. My favorite season is spring, when the days are warm and new life appears. Winter is cold, and dark! But the saving grace is Christmas. There is beauty in the lights that abound and the glow from a fireplace can make everything feel cozy. Even the snow can look inviting when it sparkles in the sun. Light is very important for those of us that struggle to fight off depression as the days are short and darkness sets in.

### **Please read John 11:1-14**

In this passage Jesus said there is danger of stumbling in the dark and safety in the light. I felt that danger as I experienced one of the darkest days of my life about 6 months ago.

The dreaded phone call came while I was at work. The nurse told me that my Dad's health was declining and I should come to see him. My heart sank. I phoned my brother and told him to check in on Dad and I would be there as soon as I could. I had not been able to visit my Dad for over a month because of Covid-19. During my hour drive I pleaded with God to let him live until I could say goodbye. Surely, He would allow that.

I entered the facility and was told that I could not go up to Dad's room - only one person allowed at a time! My brother appeared after what seemed like an eternity and told me, "Dad's gone." I instantly felt alone, standing there weeping, with my brother not able to even put his arm around me because of the restrictions.

To be honest, I was angry with God. After all this time, couldn't He have just allowed Dad to live a few more minutes so that I could say goodbye?!

I think Mary and Martha were probably angry with Jesus too. He took His time getting to Bethany. They had sent word for Him to come and be with them during this painful time and do something about it.

But no, He waited.

A verse from John 8 came to my mind. "Jesus said to the people, 'I am the light of the world. If you follow me, you won't be stumbling through the darkness, because you will have the light that leads to life.'"

There is a happy ending. Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. The Light gave him life.

This same Light has given my Dad life too. I just can't see it yet. But I know it is true. I look forward to seeing him again some day.

My prayer for you is that you will be reminded of one important thing when you see the beautiful lights during this Advent season. Jesus came to us as the Light of the world. May you experience the hope and peace that only He can give.

## A TIME FOR MUSIC

Jason McCoombs

December 11

One of my favorite things to do is to go for a long drive and crank up some good rock music. I have had the pleasure of driving solo across the country on several occasions. I enjoy picking an artist at the beginning of the day and listening to and (losing my voice) singing along with their entire library.

Music is one of God's great gifts to humanity. It has the power to affect your mood, convey emotion, build suspense in a movie, help you focus while studying, lull you to sleep, or keep you motivated during a workout. It can even make a long day at work more enjoyable. Learning to play an instrument can help in the development of fine motor skills, as well as keeping the mind sharp. In the Bible, we see perhaps the most important use of music, which is to unite God's people in praise to him.

### **Please read Psalm 150**

Music is incredibly important in Scripture. There are at least 185 songs in the Bible, plus many poems that may or may not have been intended to be sung. Of these songs, 150 are found in the book of Psalms. Biblical songs come in many forms. As you might expect, many are songs of praise to God for what he has done. The very first song recorded in Scripture is the song of Moses and Miriam in Exodus 15, celebrating God's miraculous rescue of the nation of Israel from captivity in Egypt. There are songs of victory, including perhaps the first international hit song in history, recorded in 1 Samuel 18:7 and 21:11, after David defeated Goliath. There are songs of mourning and lament, celebration, prophecy, judgment, and justice. There are battle hymns, songs to be sung when approaching the temple, and even love songs! Many of the Psalms were songs of waiting for God to rescue his people and set things right in the world. These songs were fulfilled with the coming of Jesus.

For many people, the Advent and Christmas season is a wonderful and exciting time of year. For others, it is a difficult season to walk through, whether because of the loss of a loved one, separation from family, financial stress, negative past experiences, or any number of other reasons. However, notice in today's passage that God's praiseworthiness is not based on our experiences or feelings, but on his unequalled greatness! Everything that has breath is invited to praise God with music. Just as Jesus and his followers sang a hymn on the night he was arrested, and as Paul and Silas sang songs of praise after being severely beaten and imprisoned, we can sing our praises to God no matter the circumstances we find ourselves in.

During this season of waiting, we not only remember the first coming of Jesus the Messiah, but also look forward to his glorious return. If you are comfortable, please feel free to sing a song together as a family that anticipates the coming of Christ, such as O Come O Come Emmanuel or Come Thou Long Expected Jesus. Alternatively, you can check out some Psalms that look forward to the coming Messiah (Psalm 44, 74, 79, 80, 85, 98, 130).

**Pray** the Song of Moses in Revelation 15:3-4 – "Great and marvelous are your works, O Lord God the Almighty. Just and true are your ways, O King of the nations. Who will not fear you, Lord, and glorify your name? For you alone are holy. All nations will come and worship before you, for your righteous deeds have been revealed."

## A TIME FOR BEING IN TOUCH

December 12

Shirley Thompson

Early on in my life while attending a 2-room school in Darnley, PEI, the teacher would take our attendance for the day. When our name was called, we responded with "present" and then the teacher would give us a star to place beside our name on the bulletin board. This indicated that we were "present" in class that day.

### **Please read John 15:1-11**

*"So you must remain in life-union with me, for I remain in life-union with you. For as a branch severed from the vine will not bear fruit, so your life will be fruitless unless you live your life intimately joined to mine." (The Passion Translation - TPT) v. 4*

During the Advent season, we await the return of Jesus. So, how do you and I prepare for His ultimate return?

**First:** We must remain in "life-union" with Jesus as He remains in us otherwise, our life will be fruitless if we choose not to live our life intimately joined to His. We accomplish this by having an intimate relationship with Him each and every day. Begin each day with Him in prayer, mediation and reading His word.

**Secondly:** Choose to be present (in touch) with Him. He guides your steps. Many times throughout the day, you make decisions that don't always line up with His will for you that day. His desire for you is to turn over your plans to Him and allow Him to walk with you and guide your path. This means you are letting go of "self" and committing yourself to trusting in His ways for your life and allowing Him to be the source of everything. He then enables you to see things from His perspective.

**Thirdly:** Choose to write in your gratitude journal each night before going to bed, everything that you are grateful for that day...the good and the bad. Develop a heart of gratitude.

Are you "BE-ing" in touch with His presence each and every day? You can be joyful in the midst of brokenness by staying connected to Him. May you always stay connected to the true vine not only during this Advent season but every day as you await His return.

Begin each day with this Prayer by John Stott (an English Anglican priest and theologian):

*Good morning heavenly Father,  
good morning Lord Jesus,  
good morning Holy Spirit.*

*Heavenly Father, I worship you as the creator and sustainer of the universe.  
Lord Jesus, I worship you, Savior and Lord of the world.  
Holy Spirit, I worship you, sanctifier of the people of God.  
Glory to the Father, and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit.*

*Heavenly Father, I pray that I may live this day in your presence and please you more and more.  
Lord Jesus, I pray that this day I may take up my cross and follow you.  
Holy Spirit, I pray that this day you will fill me with yourself and cause your fruit to ripen in my life: love,  
joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.  
Holy, blessed and glorious Trinity, three persons in one God, have mercy upon me. Amen.*

## **A TIME OF RUSHING**

Grant & Cheri Andres

**December 13**

In a family of six, which includes 4 boys, busyness is a part of everyday life. It's Wednesday night, our busiest night of the week, with the exception of possibly Saturday. On the agenda for the evening:

1. Chiropractic appointments for myself and the oldest two boys
2. Piano lessons for the youngest two boys
3. Cadets for the youngest boy
4. Basketball practice for the second oldest
5. Youth group for the oldest

Many conversations in our house go something like this. "Do you have your water bottle?" "Do you have your piano books?" "What time is your practise again?" "Are you on your way home from work yet? Can you pick up the youngest two boys from piano so I can start making supper before the second oldest needs to get to practise and the oldest needs to get to youth?"

Making sure everyone gets to where they need to go on time, and no one gets forgotten somewhere - which has happened more times than I'd like to admit, can feel like a full-time job!

It's 4:00 pm, let the games begin...

### **Please read Luke 10:38-42**

As we see in the story of Mary and Martha we can often get so wrapped up in the preparation of day to day life and special events that we miss the main focus/opportunity for relationship. In Mary's case, she chose to make the presence of Christ her top priority and focus. She chose relationship over preparation/rushing. Sometimes in life we miss out on truly enjoying important moments (like celebrating a son's first basket in basketball) because we are too consumed by trying to "prepare" or work out all the details of our busy schedules and lives.

This Christmas, more than others, relationship with our Saviour (and then family and friends) needs to be our priority. We have all experienced times of isolation and have realized just how much relationships are a necessity of our human design. As we prepare for Christmas, whatever that may look like, we need to ready our hearts and spend time with our Saviour, the one who's birth we celebrate at Christmas.

This year may not have the same "rushing" or "busyness" as we have been used to in the past, but there are still many distractions that can take our focus away from the joy of this season. Christ came to have a relationship with each one of us and to save us from a life separated from Him. He longs to spend time with us and have us grow and become more like Him. This won't happen by buying and wrapping gifts or preparing a turkey or decorating the house. These are all "good" things, just like our daily activities, but they shouldn't be our focus. Don't miss the opportunities you have to spend time with Christ and loved ones this year. Like Mary, let's keep Christ's presence as our focus during advent, and throughout the year.

## **A TIME FOR SINGING**

**December 14**

Dean Haugan

I am not one for remembering exactly what people write on birthday or Christmas cards. Usually I am the type of person who wants to open up the card and see if there is anything else in the envelope!

But I remember on the occasion of my 17th birthday what my Mom and Dad wrote to me in a card. There were the usual loving regards that most people write in the cards of a loved one. But, at the end, my Mom wrote in her beautiful writing "you have a song in your heart, do not be afraid to sing it."

When it comes to Christmas, there is no time during the year that I love to sing more. I love Christmas music. I love the messages they bring and the feeling you get in your heart when you sing them. From the time I was a teenager I have been involved with bringing these songs to the many congregations I have been a part of. This is such an honor.

It is interesting to me that in every season of our lives, songs hit differently. When I sing Silent Night for example, I think back to being a child and having my grandpa sing that song to me as I went to bed. I also remember my mother singing it in church while we lit our candles on Christmas Eve. When I hear the song Away in a Manger, my mind goes back to my little cousin singing it on Christmas eve for special music at her church when we were visiting them.

In this season of my life, these songs bring me back but they also speak truth to my heart. One of the realities in the last few years is the fact that my parents divorced. Gone are the days where my family would meet together and spend Christmas at our childhood home. This brings me a great deal of sorrow, and over the past couple Christmas seasons in the background of my heart there has been a bit of brokenness in my singing.

With that said, I also feel the incredible hope that this season brings despite my circumstances and the message of hope has been even sweeter for me and my family. Even though our world may seem deeply broken, the peace of Christ rules in our hearts and our hearts still sing a song of love and hope and peace. I am thankful for the life I have, and hold on to the promises that God gives, and those promises are there for you as well.

**Please read Colossians 3:12-17**

During this season remember that your heart longs to sing a song of hope. Don't be afraid to sing it.



## A TIME FOR BAKING

December 15

Rachelle Kerber

My Grandma Burnstad was a woman who I adored, and I enjoyed any time that I got to spend with her. I was probably about 15 years old, the day I sat in her kitchen and watched her pull muffins from the oven. Without realizing she was teaching me, she stated (almost to herself), “ya’ know, it’s funny how so often when I bake something, I end up thinking about people who I know, who could use some encouragement...and then I end up giving a bunch away.”

If you know me at all, you will know that I love to bake, and to this day it is not uncommon that I pull something from the oven, think of Grandma’s words...and then joyfully deliver something warm and fresh to someone who I know. For me, it’s a tangible way to love people.

### **Please read Romans 12:9-13**

In Romans 12:9-13 we read, “Don’t just pretend to love others. Really love them...love each other with genuine affection, and take delight in honoring each other. Never be lazy, but work hard and serve the Lord enthusiastically...when God’s people are in need, be ready to help them. Always be eager to practice hospitality.”

I believe that we are living in a very lonely world. And a global pandemic has only intensified this problem. It’s easy to get caught up in and busy with our own lives, but God calls us to live outside of ourselves. He has called us to kindness, both to the people who are easy to love, and also to those who aren’t. In this season of Advent, I think we all need to ask ourselves, “what can I do to reach out to those around me?” Or “how can I tangibly touch the life of someone in need?”

Baking might not be your thing, but maybe you have a different gift to offer someone. Maybe it’s the gift of your time, like over a phone call or a socially distanced coffee date. Maybe you fix things, or you’re good with technology, or you can shovel a walk. It doesn’t matter what it is. But do it. Reach out and show someone you care. The crazy part is that it will end up blessing you as well, sometimes as much it blesses them. Kind of neat how God makes it that way.

The other cool thing is that you won’t know who’s watching. My Grandma wasn’t trying to teach me a lesson, she was just being who she was... and many years after her passing, the influence that she had on me continues to make an impact on the lives of others.

Please join me in this prayer today:

*Dear God, give me eyes to see the hurting, the lonely and the struggling. Fill my heart with love and grant me the vision to see people how You see them. Help me to use my gifts to reach out and impact the world around me. That through me, they may ultimately see a reflection of You. Amen.*

## A TIME FOR LOVE

JeriLee Shivkar

December 16

A few years ago, when I was in college, I joined an extra course in journalism. There was a group of folks who were in the same class as me. It turned out that there was one person in the group who was used to being “the smartest person in the class”.

In my mind, I was quite happy that there was someone brilliant in the class. I saw that person as an asset but she particularly saw me as an enemy. It was not easy to convince her that I’m not a threat or a competitor as she made me out to be.

It got worse as months went by. It didn’t matter what I said. She would argue with me in front of the whole class, try to put me down and humiliate me. It started to bother me, and it was really hard for me to be nice to her. I tried my best to be cordial but nothing could stop her from treating me indifferently.

It’s not difficult to love the people that love us. The challenge is to love those who have done us wrong. That was Paul’s prayer to us.

### **Please read 1Thessalonians 3:11-13**

Paul prays for two vital things in this passage. Firstly, he prays for their love to grow for one another and secondly, their overflowing love would mean they are found blameless when the Lord Jesus comes again.

No matter when Jesus comes, Paul wanted the Thessalonians to be found “blameless and holy” on that day. Not for one moment is Paul thinking that they can win salvation by being perfect; his whole idea was about having a track record of following GOD’S will and faithfully loving others.

Whatever you’re dealing with today, may you discover this truth in a new way.

This Advent Season, may we reflect and prepare our hearts and homes for Christ’s birth in the world as it is today. Let us also reflect on the triumphant return of our Lord Jesus Christ at the second coming.

*Dear GOD,  
thank you for coaching me through this great race called life. Help me to grow your love to the point it cannot be contained and spills out to everyone. Cultivate in me a sincere desire to walk in uprightness of heart so that my words and actions will show that I belong to you. I pray this in Jesus Christ’s precious name. Amen.*

## A TIME OF SOLITUDE

December 17

Lisa Watts

There was a time in my life when I thought if I had to be alone, I would die! Overly dramatic? Perhaps, but the fear was real. But then I had an experience that redefined solitude. I joined a convent. Well, I didn't actually "join", I just joined on weekends! I was living in Toronto and discovered a weekend retreat at a local convent. I went, slept in a very humble room, ate silently with the sisters (all meals were silent), met with a spiritual director, and communed with God in the beautiful gardens. It was a life altering experience and one I would repeat many times.

In the silence, with a little bit of direction, I was able to clear all the noise in my head and hear God speak. In taking a break from the chaos I discovered peace and quiet. I discovered God in solitude.

### **Please read 2 Corinthians 1:3-7**

In this passage the words "all comfort" are more than soothing sympathy, it means helping to make strong. At the convent I met with the God of all comfort. During this time in my life I was working through painful wounds from the past and time alone, without distractions, allowed me to hear God's voice and receive His healing touch. It gave the space for God to do some strengthening work in me that couldn't happen in the busyness of life.

I have continued a practice of solitude for many years since and the benefits have not just been a strengthening of my own soul but an increase in compassion and understanding that has allowed me to serve and care for others. It is a practice that Jesus modelled for us many times. Jesus chose solitude over people when He was preparing for a major task, recharging after a hard day, working through grief, before an important decision, in a time of distress, and when He needed focussed time in prayer.

Perhaps you are reading this and you have already decided that this isn't for you. Can't handle quiet? Mind wanders? Life is too busy to make the time? Well, solitude is a discipline. Solitude doesn't require silence but it does require planning and time. Just like your first plank wasn't 5 minutes long or your first run wasn't 25km; you had to work up to it with daily discipline. Spiritual disciplines are no different but vitally important.

Henri Nouwen wrote: "without solitude it is virtually impossible to live a spiritual life." It's not about being alone, it is an absence of human activity so we can more fully experience the presence of God. Solitude exposes our idols; it is often not a fear of solitude as much as an addiction to noise, busyness, and scheduling.

In this advent season, I encourage you to make time to be in the presence of the God of all comfort. That is why Jesus came, to be God with us.

*My child, I am the Lord who gives strength in the day of trouble. Come to Me when all is not well with you. Your tardiness in turning to prayer is the greatest obstacle to heavenly consolation, for before you pray earnestly to Me you first seek many comforts and take pleasure in outward things. Thus, all things are of little profit to you until you realize that I am the one Who saves those who trust in Me, and that outside of Me there is no worthwhile help, or any useful counsel or lasting remedy.*

*Thomas a Kempis, The imitation of Christ*

## A TIME FOR REMEMBERING

December 18

Terry Holte

As we begin another advent season it's good to look back at the past and see what God has done for us.

I remember back in late 1997 and early 1998. Kay and I were faced with a decision of either borrowing a whole bunch of money to keep the family farm going or looking at other options.

The first step was for me to go back to school and change my career path. Kay was a nurse at the time and was asked many times what is Terry going to do if he is not farming. Over the next few years, we saw how God provided for us, although some months were tough, we never went hungry and always had a roof over our head.

After graduating from college another fork in the road appeared. Do we stay on the farm and Terry commute to work somewhere or should we move? After much prayer it was clear God wanted us to move and Leduc kept coming up. So, we put the farm up for sale and it sold privately, fast, and without a hitch. We found a house in Leduc and moved.

In the midst of this big move lots of people thought we were crazy. Kay told her fellow nurses that we were going to move to Leduc. They replied, "oh did Terry find a job there?" She said no. They asked why Leduc and she said God told us. Of course, the room went silent. But God did provide a job and one job led to another bringing me to my current job with the City. Throughout this career and life changing journey God was with us and we didn't doubt it. It wasn't easy but God gave us glimpses of his love and plan for us. We just had to take the first step of faith.

### **Please read Isaiah 25:6-9**

*Dear God,*

*Thank you for your love and wisdom. Thank you that you know what is best for us. Thanks for the many times you have helped us along our journeys. These golden nuggets of faith help us to continue on in the bad times knowing that you are always with us. We are at that time now. There is so much uncertainty in our world. How long will Covid last? What about jobs, housing etc.? But we know you are in control and we remember what you have already done for us. So, we can have hope and faith knowing that you will see us through this until we are home with you. Amen*

## **A TIME OF PEACE**

**December 19**

### **- Hidden Treasure- the Best gift of All**

Dwight Paras

#### **Please read Matthew 11:25-30**

Did you react the same way I did? This is meant to be a passage for Advent, celebrating Christmas? Isn't Christmas a joyous occasion? A time of pageantry, cheerful lights, Christmas carols, merry chaos, traditional meals and great memories?

Memories, like fruit cake? I have a very happy memory of Christmas cake! I recall making the batter with my mom and being very discouraged by her continually adding more flour making the mixing harder. But finally it all came together and the reward was the great aroma bursting from the oven of the wood stove. Yes, I'm that old.

But beyond tradition and great memories isn't Christmas about angels, Bethlehem, baby Jesus and Peace and Goodwill to everyone? There seems to be enough movies, stories and examples of self-less giving to make us almost believe that we as humans are basically good.

In this passage in Matthew, Jesus is talking about the greatest gift of all- the Gospel. Now don't get me wrong, I'm not railing against, festivals, celebrations and pageantry. The Bible has much to say about social gatherings. The Old Testament mentions numerous feasts and celebratory occasions that were even required by the Israelites.

Jesus was not against marking celebrations and feasts. Holiday gatherings, celebrations and memories build a pretty strong story in our minds. That story can be a fantasy, partial truth or a complete, solid life-changing truth.

What was the truth Jesus was speaking about here? It is helpful to notice the context in which Jesus speaks. Many of the people that He spoke with did not understand that He was the One sent from God. Even John the Baptist, his earthly cousin, asked Him "Are you the One who is to come, or should we expect another?"

Jesus said that many would not understand Him and His message. And actually, His message would be hidden from many. But not hidden from all. He knew who He was reaching; they were poor and needy in spirit, the humble. Jesus knew something about humanity and He offered His yoke and burden which were light and easy. This contrasted to the yoke and burden of the religious leaders which was hard and heavy.

I believe He was also stating that He knew we humans are built for service. One way or another we put ourselves in servitude to something or someone. Alcohol, mind altering drugs, power, prestige, self or some "influencer". This was true from the very beginning. Adam and Eve were in servitude to God in the Garden. Until, they decided to switch allegiance to a new master- themselves.

Jesus comes with the gift of peace and rest which is eternal life with Him. He comes with a gift that is hidden from the self-sufficient, the worldly wise and the proud. The gift is offered to all. The invitation is "take my yoke upon you and learn of me". Not the cultural message "play nice and be a good person". Not the usual message of unattached "peace and goodwill to all". Jesus never intended anyone to start up a grass roots movement to get Christ back into Christmas

and the commercialization out of it. No, His call to action is "Love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind ... love your neighbor as yourself."

So, the message here is not the same as Dickens has Scrooge say "I will keep Christmas in my heart, and try to keep it all the year.". No, we are to celebrate Christmas but not like the culture we live in. When we celebrate, we celebrate with thanksgiving. That as a redeemed child of God you have been given the greatest gift of all; an eternal relationship with the Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace.

## A TIME FOR REST

Jen Oram

December 20

What first came to mind when I was given this topic, especially with the turn in the weather, was: rest is curling up on the couch with my favourite quilt and watching an entire Netflix series. That rest is good and necessary some days, but there's an even better rest for us!

### **Please read John 16:33**

There has been a lot of waiting, it seems, in 2020. And yet, waiting is okay! But waiting is not always restful. Even at the beginning of this pandemic, we were all waiting... but not all of us were at rest.

Our family found, in those really early days, that even though we had nothing to do and no where to go, we were not rested at all. In fact, we were more emotionally and physically exhausted. My husband was able to work from home most days, but was in virtual meetings nearly all day, with phone calls and constant emails in between. My family was definitely not rested.

Fast forward to June 2020 when my Dad became ill. We had to wait, again, for a diagnosis, which seemed to take forever, but in reality, was less than a week. This is the time when we felt this Rest that is promised us— when we FINALLY put it ALL in God's hands. Finally. Once we did that, we've had nothing but peace, calm, and rest. It provided comfort when my husband's Dad also needed cancer treatment at the same time.

A lot of things have been thrown at all of us this year, but nothing has caught God by surprise. It is so clear that He's got us in His hands all the time.

Our Dads have completed treatment and are on the mend, and that peace and rest is staying with us. When I get anxious about things (even writing this Advent devotional), I remember...God's got this!

I love music, and there's always a song or two that stays with me from different seasons of my life. This season's song is "Take Heart" by Matthew West. If you haven't heard it, I encourage you to have a listen. Actually, I just read a bit more about it and this 2020 season inspired him to write this song, which is probably why it resonates with me so much.

My family wishes you a wonderful Advent season!

Dear God,

Thank you for this day and every day. We know in this broken world we will have troubles and we thank you for the rest that comes with giving all those troubles to You. We can never understand how great Your love is for us, but we are so grateful for it. We pray this in Jesus name, Amen.

## A TIME TO GIVE THANKS

December 21

Taylor Watts

I didn't grow up particularly well off or wealthy. Don't get me wrong, we never went without food in our mouths or clothes on our backs but we were never so wealthy that we could just not worry about money. Now don't get me wrong, being a middle-class family in Canada where we have one of the highest qualities of life on the planet has me pretty well off in the grand scheme of things. Even so I always found myself asking why we couldn't have more? I would look at my mother and father, who both had to work incredibly hard to provide for us, and still had it in them to give their whole hearts to the people around them. Isn't it unfair that some of the most well-off people in this world also seem to be some of the worst? Doesn't the bible say that those with the most generous spirits are also those who will receive the most?

### **Please read 2 Corinthians 9:6-15**

A straightforward understanding of this passage would make one think that's how it works. "Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously." Doesn't this mean that my family should be better off than the corrupt CEOs of the world? And yet that didn't happen. No one showed up at our door to say "we realized there's been a mistake! You're MUCH better people than Jake Corruptington, here's all his money!"

I think it's easy to feel this way, easy to feel hard done by and entitled. Even as followers of Christ when we know that we shouldn't covet worldly wealth it's hard to look at someone with 12 Lamborghinis and not feel like it doesn't make sense.

But this passage isn't talking about worldly wealth. It's talking about spiritual wealth. I remember a day I spent with my mom in the city hunting down a homeless woman she had found on Facebook and purchased blankets and pillows for her among other things. This generosity wasn't rewarded with a basket on our front door and a "you're a great person" award. It was rewarded with the smile and thanks of the woman and the knowledge that she would be a little bit warmer at night. My parents have taught me that good people do good things because it's the right thing to do, not for any sort of reward.

As the Christmas season draws near, we give thanks for the greatest gift of all. Out of Christ's love for us we are called to love one another and give generously, regardless of what it does for us.

*"Father, Today I celebrate the reality of Your presence in my life. I celebrate Your birth, Your life, Your death, and Your resurrection. And as I celebrate, Lord, help me to be "God with skin on" to those in need around me. Open my eyes and let me see them as You see them! I love You. Happy birthday Jesus! In Jesus name, Amen."*

— Mary Southerland



## A TIME OF BLESSING

December 22

Amy Walton

I think my favourite emotion is relief. More than any other feeling, I seem to love the *reassurance and rest that comes from being released from anxiety or distress* (Oxford Dictionary). I have had many moments of relief in my life, some significant, some silly, but none mean as much as the relief that comes from knowing He is near. Of all blessings, none can fully compare to the assurance of His presence. In His mercy, God has granted such knowledge to me time and again, and this is my ultimate relief – that my God is here.

### Please read Ephesians 3:14-21

Paul's prayer is centred on the love of Christ – a love so indescribable, it requires power just to grasp it! Here Paul is praying for our inner-most being to be strengthened, rather than our external circumstance to be changed. Of course, as His children we lift up our lives and circumstances and ask for His hand to move – Jesus Himself asked for his external situation to be changed in the garden of Gethsemane. But as Jesus modeled, *even while asking*, we do not need the external situation to change in order to find strength, courage, and resolve; rather, it can come in a moment when we align ourselves to His purpose. Paul is pleading for our inner world to be strengthened, not because our outer world doesn't matter, but because our inner world matters more. And for the Believer, the power source for our inner world is the love of God.

Can you imagine 4 years without even a glimmer of God's presence? How about your whole lifetime? And your children's? And their children's? The 400 years of silence must have been terrifying for those generations of God's people. I struggle to understand how such separation was survivable – and yet, in God's timing, those who sat in darkness would see a great light...The Light of World. Jesus is the relief of dawn breaking.

We too are in a time waiting, but unlike our spiritual ancestors, we are not wondering Who the Messiah will be. We are waiting for Him to return as our triumphant King. And we long for that, even while we celebrate, with awe, the miracle of Christmas. We wait in the power of the Holy Spirit, with the love of Jesus alive in our hearts.

I found an old Christmas video of Andy and Alice making sugar cookies, chatting away with me. When I asked 3-year-old Alice how God gave us Christmas, she said, "with His imagination". When I asked *what* God gave us at Christmas, she rolled her dough for a moment and thoughtfully replied, "Himself." Yes, Alice, that is exactly right. In an eternal and sudden moment, God gave the world Himself – a time for blessing.

The English word relief comes from the Old French word *relever*, which means to raise up, and from the Latin *relevare*, which means to raise again. The One who rose again raises us! And so today we live by faith, but not in the dark. We too have seen the great light, and for those who know Jesus, we live strengthened, in our inner-most beings, by His love and presence. Immanuel – God is with us!

*Father, please connect our hearts to Yours, and grant us the rest and assurance that come from knowing You are near. Draw us into the holy night of Your arrival Jesus, and receive our gift of worship. Thank You Holy Spirit, for Your beauty and presence in each of our lives, please strengthen and encourage our hearts again this Season. We love You God, Amen.*

## A TIME FOR GIFTS

Nicole Hennink

December 23

When I was eight, I had a birthday party with all my friends from school. One of my closest friends at the time, Tyler, gave me a beautiful mermaid box full of string and beads. I loved it and Tyler beamed with pride. He'd picked it out himself from the store! We continued with the gift opening and a few gifts later I found myself opening an identical mermaid box from another girl. Tyler was devastated and began to cry. He wanted so badly to show me his friendship in a unique and thoughtful way . . . and now, in his mind, that moment had been ruined. I remember my little eight-year-old heart aching for my friend. Though I didn't really know how to express it at the time I wanted desperately to show him that he was appreciated and loved for his efforts. It seems like such an insignificant moment looking back now but the point I'm trying to make is that I remember, even twenty years later, how I felt in that gift giving scenario.

Now, I've never been much of a "gifts" person. I find when it comes to giving gifts I become stressed and overwhelmed and the whole process becomes a lot of emotional work instead of life giving and rewarding. When it comes to receiving gifts . . . oh man, I have so much going through my head. Did I respond well enough? Did the person giving the gift get the reaction they were looking for? Did they feel loved and thanked by me? Now as I describe these feelings I think some of you may think this anxiety is unwarranted - *Just embrace and accept the gift in love Nicole! Don't overthink it!* I hear you. And believe me, I give myself that pep talk at every birthday and every Christmas. I'm sure there are some of you who relate with me. You deeply appreciate the gift or the person so much that you become overwhelmed in your response.

### **Please read Ephesians 2:4-10**

Verse 8 says, "God saved you by his grace when you believed. And you can't take credit for this; it is a gift from God." When I read this passage, I can hear my inner voice speaking - (sarcasm intended) *Wow! A free gift that I don't deserve. Just embrace and accept the gift in love Nicole! Don't overthink it!* Easier said than done. I can feel the anxiety creeping in. How can I actively accept this? How can I show God, who I love so much and who loves me so unconditionally, that I appreciate this? Is appreciate even the right word!?

I take comfort in this though. The passage from Ephesians mentions a few times that this free gift, while for me and given out of love, is for God's glory and plan. So, my reaction to it is nothing compared to God's grand scheme. He is unphased by my feeble attempts to fumble together an "appropriate" response. He sees my heart, my intentions, my desire to accept this gift even though I don't know how. I can hear him whisper - *it's enough Nicole. Your heart is enough.*

As we approach this gift giving season, I want to encourage you as a child of God. He sees you. He sees your heart and your desires. Regardless of circumstance or abilities he has a gift for you. Believe in your heart that He is right there, saving you by grace, even though you can't fathom why you'd deserve it or articulate a worthy response.

*It's enough. Your heart is enough.*

## Please read Luke 2:1-20

*Suddenly, an angel of the Lord appeared among them, and the radiance of the Lord's glory surrounded them. They were terrified, but the angel reassured them. "Don't be afraid!" he said. "I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people. The Savior—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born today in Bethlehem, the city of David!*

As we celebrate the coming of Jesus, we read these familiar words and we grab hold of the words: Do not be afraid.

We are living in a time where there is a lot of fear. Fear for our health, fear for our families, fear for our jobs, and fear about the future, to name just a few. To us the angel says, do not be afraid. But how do we do this?

Ironically, the scriptures also tell us in Proverbs 9:10:

***Fear of the LORD is the foundation of wisdom. Knowledge of the Holy One results in good judgment.***

How do we fear God, and yet not be afraid?

It seems to me that we live in a world which has downgraded the fear of God. We speak of it as a kind of respect, or we talk about a God who is all about our happiness or success.

We have lost sight of the fear of God which dispels bad fear; the fear we have of circumstances and people. When we correctly fear God; God who is a consuming fire, what is extinguished is our fear of things in this world. As Jesus said in Luke 12:4 ***"Dear friends, don't be afraid of those who want to kill your body; they cannot do any more to you after that. But I'll tell you whom to fear. Fear God, who has the power to kill you and then throw you into hell. Yes, he's the one to fear.***

We are called to find our comfort in trusting God, who holds both life and death in His hands. Martin Luther who lived during the plague wrote these timely words:

*I shall ask God mercifully to protect us. Then I shall fumigate, help purify the air, administer medicine and take it. I shall avoid places and persons where my presence is not needed in order not to become contaminated and thus perchance inflict and pollute others and so cause their death as a result of my negligence. If God should wish to take me, he will surely find me and I have done what he has expected of me and so I am not responsible for either my own death or the death of others. If my neighbor needs me, however, I shall not avoid place or person but will go freely as stated above. See this is such a God-fearing faith because it is neither brash nor foolhardy and does not tempt God. (Luther's Works 43:132)*

You are I are invited not be afraid. It is one of the greatest gifts which we receive when we place our faith and trust in Jesus who came to earth to save us. And we discover it in full, when we fear the Lord, who would spare nothing to ensure our rescue. Merry Christmas everyone.