Thoughts for Advent

by Liz Cottrill

Advent Day One

On this first day of the church calendar, I read Matthew, chapter 1. It's tempting to skim the genealogy. Why is it there?

In the same way, I prepare, plan, and plot strategies for navigating the season, and often come out on the other side feeling I have skimmed superficially past people. Some are relatives I am just as happy to have missed. Some are strangers I'm too busy to stop to tell the good news to.

The Christmas celebrations mark off the years of our life, but these lives listed here mark the fingerprints of God, show his plan. It's hard to fathom the millions of minutes each of those individuals breathed. We know so little about most of them other than that they each mark a link in the unbreakable plan of God for us. Among them are giants of faith, who surely knew weeks of defeat. Here also are lots of characters I wouldn't want to list in my family tree: in line is Perez, the product of a one-night stand with a supposed prostitute, Salmon who married a prostitute, Obed born of an enemy of Israel, a slew of godless kings, and outcasts. They lead down to Joseph, and he is told the name of the son he himself did not father, "You shall call his name Jesus: for he shall save his people from their sins."(Mt. 1:21)

People talk about "the reason for the season," that baby born God, but his name alone tells us the purpose for his arrival. This simple name, Jesus, is life changing, because the reason He came is for—changing lives! He has come for this purpose, to be our salvation, the gift of life. What can possibly burden me in the holiday when I know that truth: forgiveness—forever—for everything. This is all that matters in life.

> *Prayer:* Father, help me remember and rediscover the gift of your Son again this year, that what is most wanted, most needed, and most important for me and everyone I meet is to know that He forgives our sin.

Advent Day Two

Surely if an angel appeared in the midst of my daily routine, I would respond differently than Zacharias did…wouldn't I? Well, it is true that I absolutely would be terrified like him.

Here is a priest, a righteous one who knows all God's commandments, yet when a word is brought to him, he is stuck in the material world and cannot imagine that something outside his understanding can be happening. I am like this. How many times has God done a truly marvelous thing and I missed it, so stuck in the ordinary ways I expect and trust.

He had a sorrow, a disappointment that a child had never been given. I get used to my unanswered prayers, comfortable wearing my disappointments, used to silence, am inattentive. He was too old. Can't happen. Fact: angels can only obey, so their word from God is the same as God's. Zacharias did know the Word, and knew angels did appear to Abraham, Samson's mother, Daniel…He was a faithful priest, a good one. The consequence was wordlessness.

I have His word and know it is living—still, know that it is there for my help, instruction, guidance all the time…

> *Prayer:* Lord, I have heard your word and know it well, so help me to listen to you in it and believe what you say so that I can speak of this truth to others, starting with this: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." (John 1:1)—believe that this Jesus we worship is the very living reality of all you say, have said, ever will say to me. When your word comes to mind, help me to know it's really for me, right now, and show my believing by acting on what you say.

Advent Day Three

The older I get, the more swiftly Christmas arrives. I unpack decorations (wasn't I just doing this recently?), some of them generations old, getting a bit tarnished and tattered. My grandchildren enter the house and are ecstatic! Ooh and ahh exclamations, and scrutinizing every detail. It is astonishing that we haul a tree inside, after all. The decorations aren't new, but the children are. Everything is new to them. They are just starting their celebrations in life.

After an all day outing with us, my grandson, Eddie, returned home to find his mother Lydia had decorated and arranged the house for the holiday and he was thrilled: "We have all the Christmas things! Christmas is here!"

And so we prepare. Like John the Baptist proclaimed, "Prepare the way of the Lord." In all these preparations—decorating, gift wrapping, baking, concerts and caroling and crowded gatherings—we are preparing not for ourselves, not because it's the thing to do this time of year, but preparing the way of the Lord, pointing to Him for others to see. All around us, not just these little ones, but old ones who have been knocked about by life, hopeless ones, hardened ones, are in our midst and we have a loud and clear opportunity to say, "He has come!—for you."

> *Prayer:* Father, before the foundation of the world you prepared these things for me. Help me celebrate preparations as part of your grand plan for others.

Advent Day Four

Elizabeth certainly was not prepared for that gift of conception. She had given up hope years ago that a child would ever inhabit her body. Imagine the incredulity and joy she must have known. Every other concern she knew suddenly evaporated. Talk about preoccupied!

Yet, when a guest arrives, her first words: “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!But why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For indeed, as soon as the voice of your greeting sounded in my ears, the babe leaped in my womb for joy. Blessed is she who believed, for there will be a fulfillment of those things which were told her from the Lord.” (Luke 1: 42-45)

We are by nature supremely self-occupied. When big things are going on in our lives, we can think of nothing else; when nothing is going on in our lives, we can think of nothing but that lack. Only the presence of Jesus can turn our attention. it is really Him we are waiting for, longing for, needing. He said, “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.”(Rev. 3:20) (Really?—with me personally?—just to eat together?)

> *Prayer:* Lord, I am waiting for you, you alone, and not for circumstances. Help me to understand that these matters that consume me are insignificant next to the necessity of hearing your voice, opening myself to you, seeing you. Please come in and show me that all these supposed demands and needs and hopes I have are met only in knowing you. Please come and teach me to hear your voice, invite you into every situation, and have the joy of Elizabeth in recognizing you. Today, when the unexpected person enters, let me look for you and believe that you have sent them. Train me to look outward and upward, and not miss you there.

Advent Day Five

Crowds. People. Packed parking lots. Lines. “Out of stock,” responses to the online selection (you know, the attempt to avoid the crowds).

Crowds can be energizing, but they can be oppressive. All that coughing, jostling, and crying kids at stores and office parties and recitals. Sometimes I can feel myself inwardly pushing against the exhausting annoyance of waiting and noise and rudeness.

Bethlehem was so crowded there was “no room for them in the inn.” And Mary’s body was crowding her, too. Yet, “God so loved the world, he gave his only son” reminds us of his multitudinous love—the kindness for each person individually that never sees us as a mass. He showed us this in His Son, “the express image of His person.“ (Heb. 1:3):

“And seeing the multitudes he had compassion…” “…and he received them and spoke to them about the kingdom of God…” “He withdrew to a private place…and the multitude followed him…” “Master, the multitudes throng and press you, and you say, ‘who touched me?” “The twelve said, …’send them away’…’give them something to eat.”

Everywhere he went was the press of needy hands reaching out, grasping, pleading of sick and diseased and lunatic souls. He came to be among them.

> *Prayer:* Lord, help me to know you are with me in these gatherings—have even planned for me to be there-- to see the needs and not turn away. Fill me with your Spirit that brings true joy, the genuine smile, the kind word, the helpful hand. Lord, you loved the world and came among us, and have called me to be your presence in the lives of countless strangers, as you were and still are today. Open my eyes to see persons, my ears to hear the hearts, and strengthen me to be willing to touch in ways you need so they will know you are still here in this mad world. I know your love, but most do not. I truly am grateful to be able to be out and about, and will be as thankful there as I am to be quiet and alone with you.

Advent Day Six

Our Bible begins, “In the beginning… and the Gospel of John, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” Beginnings are invigorating. We relish a new book, a new friend, a new baby, A new adventure. a new year.

Jesus came once to Bethlehem, to us on earth. God had planned this from eternity, but that night was a new beginning. We had messed up his new earth back in the Garden and have continued to do so ever since. Then He came to be “God with us”—“Behold! I make all things new.”

Advent is an old, old custom. The world’s year is drawing to a close. We are tired of it and look forward to 2020. The church’s calendar is ahead, its new year already underway by then starting with Advent. But before time, Christ existed. He is eternal with the Father. At the appointed time, Jesus, Son of God, entered our time, became a man for a time, died for a time, and rose from death to break the power of death and sin once and for all time, and to make it possible for our old self to be made new, not just for a time, but in endless time. We will not always be chained to this old world, this old body, but are being renewed in the inner man. As someone exalted recently to me, “We are getting older, but in Christ we are also getting newer and newer!”

“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; Behold, all things have become new.”

> *Prayer:* Lord, as we shop for new things, receive new things, look forward to a new year, show me all the old things that I should let go of—old sins, old grudges, old bitternesses. Cleanse me and I will praise you for washing me thoroughly by the blood of your Son and thank you for your power that makes it possible to walk in newness of life.

Advent Day Seven

If there is anything this season reminds us of, it is the contrast between what the world values and what we value. It is tough to have an empty wallet at Christmas, the season of giving when generosity is on display. If you've had lean Christmases, you know how creative penny pinching can inspire you to be.

But to focus on Christ as this season calls us to do, is to always remember that God destined our Savior to be born into the poorest family, to live and serve among the poor. This is part of the generous justice of God, to always reach those who most need him—with what they need most. Mary even sang: "He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty." Jesus condemned those who were rich in the world's goods and "poor toward God." It was not socio economic concern that appointed our Lord to be born in a stable, but a living example of the state we are in when God is not with us. Paul reminds us that God is rich, "...but yet for your sakes he became poor, that you through his poverty might become rich."(2 Cor. 8:9) In another place he points out that Christ "humbled himself;" and Jesus first teachings began, "blessed are the poor in spirit...those who hunger and thirst for righteousness."

The best thing about an empty pocket is realizing the emptiness we truly have in our relationship with God. There is more to us than our physical body with its constant needs, but made in the likeness of God, he has made us with souls. We can be outwardly wealthy and utterly destitute and impoverished of soul. The true hunger we have is for his Spirit to live in us, for sin starves us and strangles us to death.

> *Prayer:* "...that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him, the eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that you may know what is the hope of his calling, what are the riches of the glory of his inheritance in the saints..."(Eph. 1:17-20) Lord, you have made me rich in life through your death, forgiveness by your sacrifice, and power to live a life full of the fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, goodness..."How great is your goodness, stored up for those who fear you." (Ps. 31:19) Oh, I am rich in gratitude for gifts I am powerless to even open without your grace!

Advent Day Eight

With the birth of our Lord came singing—of the heavenly hosts. “Glory to God in the highest!”

We are made to sing. We are reminded to sing in over 400 commands to do so in His Word. Singing is the simplest, easiest way to glorify our Father.

We hear carols everywhere. I once heard choral arranger Alice Parker say, “We live in a time when music is more accessible than at any other. We are surrounded by songs, but starved of singing.” We listen, but do not participate.

Now, at this time of year, it is easy to sing along. Put on the carols and no one thinks you are odd for singing with them. No one can remain grumpy when they sing—it’s impossible. Singing lightens our hearts, lifts them above the cares that pull us down, fills us with hope and joy in believing that God is great, works wonders, does the impossible. In singing we automatically glorify the God we were made for.

“He who sings, prays twice.” Read the words to some of our ancient carols and be in awe again of the greatest work ever done: the salvation graciously given in Christ Jesus. Meditate on them. Sing them. If your prayers fall flat, they will receive new life if you sing the songs of the season with all your heart. Song is a Christmas gift we all are given, can give to others, and most amazingly, can return to God for all He has given to us.

> *Prayer:* Father, your word says, "The Lord rejoices over you with singing." (Zeph. 3:17), so may I, your child, sing back to you with all my heart!

Advent Day Nine

Life means work, unending toil is our lot and our blessing. This season means extra work for all the obligations, preparations, and demonstrations of celebrating. We grow weary. We fret and fume and worry about how to accomplish all the tasks on our lists.

Then unexpected interruptions occur: illnesses, deaths, broken down cars, accidents, and snowstorms. Normal and unimagined events continue to come our way even in this season that interfere with or make even more work.

Like Snow

by Wendell Berry

Suppose we did our work

Like the snow, quietly, quietly,

Leaving nothing out.

Prayer: Lord, you said to "fret not," "be anxious for nothing." I am noisy with my complaints and exasperations with work—work you have given me to do. Yet, in stillness, darkness you sent your Son, the outward sign of your masterful work of redemption came—quietly, quietly. Your works are perfect. "Let all creation praise his works." Lord, as you are making me into the likeness of your Son, help me remember this quiet work is being accomplished because you do all things well, You leave nothing out. And that [we] "...are your workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them." (Eph. 2:10)

Advent Day 10

Hospitality is not only shown in God's word, it is commanded (Rom. 12:13; Hebrews 13:2) Obedience to this commandment includes not only opening our home to friends, but to strangers. At Christmas, we often find ourselves called upon to welcome family members (even for several days and nights) who are not strangers, but perhaps a little strange to us, our children's or husband's friends with whom we have nothing in common, or larger groups than we normally feel comfortable hosting.

"The friendly and generous reception and entertainment of guests, visitors, or strangers" is how the dictionary defines hospitality.

But how does God define it? It is easy to see when we think about Christ's coming. He calls to one and all to "Come!"—all who are weary and burdened, hungry, tired, needy, sick, fearful. "While we were sinners, Christ died for us…the righteous for the unrighteous." In the story of the prodigal son we have the clear illustration: running to greet, open arms, clothing, and not just feeding, but throwing a party for the one who had sinned against him. We were all strangers, aliens, far from God and have been invited, welcomed, and made to be at home with him. "You prepare a table for me in the midst of my enemies, you anoint my head with oil, my cup runs over, surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life and I will dwell in the house of the Lord FOREVER!"

This perspective changes our view of "entertainment" from anything like impressing or even having all the "right" tableware. Remember he began his earthly ministry in a stable, ministered in the streets. He made room. "Let every heart prepare Him room…" because, "No longer do I call you servants, …but I have called you friends." (John 15:15)

> *Prayer:* Lord, you have taken me in, undeserving, unfit. Help me to welcome others in humble gratitude because of all you have done for me—and for no other reason.

Advent Day Eleven

Part of the fatigue of this season is simply the effort of thinking about, holding onto, and remembering so many details. Our preoccupation score is off the charts. (Have I forgotten anything?)

I once commented that I hoped something I was praying about wasn't too small a thing for God, and a friend reminded me that to God Almighty, everything is small! Then recently, John Piper asked if it has ever disturbed us to think that if God had planned the arrival of Messiah from eternity, why in the world was there no place for him to be born?

I wonder. It must be that His purpose was for such a rude and rustic entrance into the world. Our King of Kings and Lord of Lords arrived in the humblest way—on purpose.

> *Prayer:* Lord, your thoughts are greater than mine, your ways beyond comprehension. As I try to manage all the details, help me to remember that you manage the infinite details, no atom anywhere is outside of your control. When things don't fall into place for me, open my eyes to see the details you have ordered instead and to worship you as master of all the unexpected events of my day.

Advent Day 12

The popular Christmas song asks: “Mary, did you know?”

We often hear Mary described as an ordinary peasant girl. I would argue that there is really nothing very ordinary about having an angel appear to you to announce the astounding news that you are the one chosen to bring Messiah into the world. Neither is there anything ordinary in her character in her response, “Behold the handmaid of the Lord! Let it be according to your word.” I doubt that attitude of hers toward the Lord began that extraordinary moment.

She didn’t know how it could happen, didn’t know what would happen next. She didn’t understand how God’s plan would be fulfilled, and she didn’t know the pain it would bring her. She did know her God though, and we know what she thought of Him by the names she uses to praise Him: Lord, “My soul magnifies the Lord,” and Savior, “and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior.”

> *Prayer:* Lord, I know your will for my life is to know you. To hear your names Lord and Savior is so ordinary to me I forget how utterly extraordinary it is that you have made yourself known to me in the power to rule over all (even me) and power to save souls (even mine). To know you are my Lord and my Savior is enough to say yes to whatever you ask.

Advent Day Thirteen

There is a big difference, though it seems slight at times, between nagging and reminding. Probably our phone reminders are nags.

But, just because someone repeats something does not mean they are nagging. Our attention is so flawed that we depend upon repetition. We return to worship every week because we need reminding of the Gospel—every week.

One of the oldest reminders God has given is the rainbow, which someone recently told me she saw from her airplane window high in the clouds even in dark December. Actually, December itself is a reminder.

For this season, reminders are all about us: that Christ has come, that sin can be forgiven, that peace is found in a Person, that light shines in the darkness and can never be put out, that we have a hope and a future.

The failure is never in the promises themselves, nor the reliability of the promises, the certainty that they will be kept--but in our failure to remember those promises and especially in believing them.

> *Prayer:* Father, in my weakness I forget and in your faithfulness you remind me that your mercies are new every morning, that what you have said you will surely do, and that no matter what, you hold me in your perfect, powerful hands, will never fail to do so, and I am grateful for the reminders of this that are about me every day, especially in December.

Advent Day 14

If there is anything this season represents, it is the feasting. We resign ourselves to putting on unavoidable pounds. Out come all the delectable treats we haven't had for a year, in come gifts of food in all kinds of packages from friends and family and neighbors. It is easy to set aside self-control because we know January with its no-nonsense return to routine is ahead and we will resignedly go back to yogurt and carrots.

The food obsession in our part of the world is obvious—just turn on the TV menu and see all the cooking shows. We blame food for nearly every illness or behavior man suffers.

God's first family was set in a garden of delights and practically the first thing he told them was to taste and eat everything—except that one tree. Food is good, blessed by God, given for us to enjoy. Why else would there be so many colors, flavors, textures, varieties and infinite combinations of foods? The Psalmist reminds us, "Open wide your mouth, and I will fill it," and "taste and see the Lord is good."

Jesus' first miracle was at a wedding feast; he got in trouble for eating and drinking with friends; and he said: "I am the bread of life," "I am the living water," "I am the true vine," and commanded us to remember him in the breaking of bread and drinking of the cup; and was recognized after his resurrection in the breaking of bread with the men on the road to Emmaus; and prepared a breakfast on the beach for his disciples (even though they had abandoned Him in his hour of need). "Taste and see," indeed!

Few of us are concerned with where our next meal is coming from. Some of us obsess over food in one way or another. We forget that true satisfaction is only found in a person, our Lord, born in an animal's food trough, destined to be broken on a cross and conquer death in His resurrection.

> *Prayer:* Lord, every time the goodies and gourmet delicacies present themselves to me this season, let me pause to rejoice and be thankful to think of what you have accomplished not just for my physical life, but for my eternal true and everlasting life. Help me to eat with glee and gratitude to know that you are the sweetness and savor alone that makes life worth living. All my longings, desires, and satisfaction is truly only found in you. I celebrate your gifts, your presence, and Yourself.

Advent Day 15

My soul magnifies the Lord,
My spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior.
For He has regarded the lowly estate of His maidservant; for behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed.
For He who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is His name.
And His mercy is on those who fear Him from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with His arm; He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.
He has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted the lowly.
He has filled the hungry with good things,and the rich He has sent away empty.
He has helped His servant Israel, in remembrance of His mercy,
As He spoke to our fathers,to Abraham and His seed forever." (Luke 1:46-55)

> *Prayer:* Lord, thank you for this prayer, recorded for me that I might learn to pray according to your Word and to know your way of prayer. As I attend worship today, Lord, be magnified as I rejoice in You, my Savior, for truly you rescued me from my impoverished state and have filled me with the very Spirit of your Son! You are mighty and have done great, great things for me! Holy is your name. You have shown boundless mercy to me, and by your might have lifted me out of sin and despair and humbled my proud heart to fear your name. Kings and rulers of this world will pass away, but I will worship before your everlasting throne everlastingly. Every hungry need in me you fill, and all the riches of this world will leave me empty. I stand in awe that I have been made part of your chosen people and one of those millions of offspring you have called by name out of the seed of Abraham. Let me worship you today in your spirit and in this truth.

Advent Day 16

> ”For unto us a Child is born
> Unto us a Son is given;
> And the government will be upon his shoulder.
> And His name will be called wonderful…” (Isaiah 9:6)

As God was made flesh, the God of Wonders lived among us. As soon as Jesus’ earthly ministry began, He was found to be working wonders — healings, multiplying bread, changing water to wine, raising the dead… As John said, if all the things he did were written, the world could not contain the books.

A name is important. When a child is born, he receives a name and that child is forever represented by that name. The wonder of Almighty God is that His name does not just identify Him, but is who He is. His actions, his works, his character are all the same as His name.

Truly God was born as a baby, a Son, and would prove in history that all powers and governments are under His authority.

Yet, of all the wonders He has done, that even angels glory at, that we can never stop marveling over, His greatest work,, most marvelous accomplishment, awe-inspiring and breathtaking wonder: His salvation of sinful man. Eternal redemption is truly an indescribable wonder. His is the name above all names.

> *Prayer:* Our Father, hallowed be thy name—in Your kingdom, in Your will being done on earth as it is in heaven, in giving us our daily bread, in forgiving as we forgive, in leading us not into temptation but delivering us from evil, for Your glory, and Power, and eternal kingdom—may your name be hallowed wonderful.

Advent Day 17

> ...And His name will be called... Counselor...(Isaiah 9:6)

It is painful to be lonely at Christmas. Secular Christmas tunes remind us. Psychologists and physicians are alarmed at the loneliness crisis—47% of Americans believe they have NO friend. Social media connectedness, the number of virtual "friends" we have accentuates our isolation rather than alleviates it.

In the past week, I have spoken with seven or eight individuals who have all expressed feelings of not fitting in, not belonging, feeling disconnected, unnoticed, misunderstood. I understand because I have been in this place many times. All of these friends say they know Jesus.

Lonely places are special times to know this Lord who has come to us for such times as these. He is truth. Our feelings and perceptions often are not rooted in His truth. From the Garden of Eden, it has been easier to believe lies.

The truth is that in the Gospel, we see Jesus touching lepers, stopping for beggars, speaking with the lonely woman at the well, the adulterous woman cast out to be stoned. "No greater love has any man than that he lay down his life for his friends...I have called you friends...I know my own and they hear my voice...your name is written on my hands...I am the Light of the world...lo, I am with you always..."

The angel that announced Christ's coming said, Emmanuel, God with us. He was born in no place of consequence, was unappreciated by all who knew him—even and especially those in His own hometown—had no friend to watch and pray with Him in his hour of agony in Gethsemane, stood alone with no one to defend him before the high priest and Pontius Pilate...a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief...esteemed not, of no appearance that any should look upon him...denied, betrayed..."My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" He was lonely.

Like us. He came to share in our experiences of isolation, rejection, and indifference. God Himself—with us. He knows our weakness, our need, our loneliness.

> *Prayer:* Lord, my True Friend, you have walked not just through the Valley of death, but through death itself for me. Help me to live in comfort and assurance that I am never alone, and help me to resist all the lies of the Enemy that try to convince me otherwise. You are the God who sees, my compassionate counselor, my faithful friend, my sympathetic listener. With you at my right hand, it is impossible for me to be alone. As you were

with Joseph sold into slavery, Jacob the fugitive, Jeremiah in the bottom of the well, Elijah in the cave, Paul abandoned by friends and in prison…remind me that I am always in good company. Thank you for your inescapable presence.

Advent Day 18

"And his name will be called…Mighty God…" (Isaiah 9:6)

Creator of all things,
Author of life,
Sustains ALL THINGS,
Orders ALL THINGS,
Ruler over all authorities and dominions,
All powerful,
Destroyer of the world by flood,
Replenished it again,
Keeper of eternal promises,
Spoke from a burning bush,
Worker of signs and wonders,
Divided the Red Sea for a nation to pass through,
Returned it to cover their enemies,
Sender of heavenly manna and water from rocks,
Wrote His law in stone,
Put armies to flight,
Held back the sun a day,
Delivered men from furnaces,
Placed His seed in a virgin,
Sent angels to proclaim good will to men,
Changed water to wine,
Fed thousands,
Gave sight to the blind,
Stilled tempests,
Heals the lame and deaf and maimed,
Casting out demons,
Forgives sin,
Conquered death in the resurrection of His Son,
Converter of souls…

Prayer: Almighty God, of what am I afraid?

Advent Day 19

"And His name shall be called…Everlasting Father…" (Isaiah 9:6)

It's true that some never know their earthly fathers; it's true that some earthly fathers are not worthy of the name. We not only receive life from our fathers, but, whether for good or evil, receive life from them. We are born with the longing for love, guidance, comfort, instruction, discipline, training, mercy, and fellowship with a father. That longing is only found in Christ.

Jesus also had an earthly father, but it was through the Holy Spirit seed of God the Father, his Heavenly Father who said, "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased," Who sent him to live among us. Throughout Jesus' ministry, he showed the intimacy of his relationship with his Heavenly Father: "I and my Father are one," "I do the works of my Father," "I thank you, Father, that you have hidden these things from the wise and revealed them to children," and was obedient to His Father, "Father, not my will, but thine be done." His desire was for his Father's glory and he sits now at his Father's right hand.

Jesus blessed children. In fact, He said, "Unless you become as a little child, you cannot enter the kingdom of heaven." And so He does—welcomes us into his Father's kingdom—when we come in trust and dependence with all our feeble, fussy, and foolish selves.

"But as many as received Him, to them he gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name: who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh,

Nor of the will of man, but of God." (John 1:12-13)

And the Father so loved us, he gave his only Son that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

For He is in truth our everlasting Father—never to die, never to leave, never to fail us, world without end.

Prayer: Lord, As your Son taught us to pray to you: Our Father in Heaven, hallowed be thy name…forever and ever.

Advent Day 20

"And His name shall be called…Prince of Peace…" (Isaiah 9:6)

Nations war and rage. In our personal lifetime, we have never known war in this country with all its devastation. But, we all have known war, disharmony, irreconcilable differences with coworkers, friends, neighbors, spouses, children. Conflict within tears us emotionally, destroys our health, drives us further from God. War may have begun in the Garden of Eden with man's first sin, but we all know that same fight. From the beginning we set ourselves up as enemies of God. The littlest unkind thought, harsh word, indifferent act is a war against Almighty God and the horrific wars we read about are nothing in comparison.

While we were yet sinners, Christ died, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might make peace with us. His way is to make the first move.

God sent his ambassador and laid him as a helpless infant in a manger. Jesus would pay the price for Peace, shedding His blood to end the war. Our Prince would lead the way to reconciliation and end the war by turning stone hearts to flesh. In Christ, eternal peace is won, beginning in the heart of man, worked out in relationships, and undermining a world of violence with every act of obedience to the law of His kingdom—loving Him with all we have and loving our neighbor as ourself.

Prayer: Hallowed be thy name…for thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Unending thanks I give for calling me to peace with You, Father, to live in a kingdom of peace. With this knowledge, continue to teach my heart to obey the law of your kingdom since I know that out of my heart my mouth speaks, and as I think, so will I behave. Lord, may I forgive as I have been forgiven for rebellion, defiance, and war against you, to speak peace and do peace as our Prince of Peace has shown us how, for you said, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God." Give me courage to make the first move, say the first word, do the first act of peace knowing you paid a tremendous price on the cross to win peace for me.

Advent Day 21

Good tidings of great joy!

To you, this day, great Christmas joy! Merry, merry Christmas! Christ has come. Laugh, be full of pleasure, gaiety, mirth, and fun—rejoice! The Lord has done great things for us.

Rejoice in the Lord always is a command to be obeyed. Joy is not a feeling as much as an act. It's impossible to rejoice where bitterness is harbored, grudges carried, revenge is secretly longed for. We have been hurt, disappointed, injured, but our desire is never satisfied, we never have true joy, when sulking or seeking joy anywhere but in the person of Jesus, who is joy.

Bach tried to put it into music: Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring. What brings us joy is Joy Himself, the generosity of God, the healer of hearts, the perfect justice giver, the merciful and mighty Way, Truth, and Life Himself. Joy is a person and He has given everything to make us glad!

Prayer: Lord unclog the halls of my heart that prevent Your joy from filling me. "Restore to me the joy of your salvation!" and out of the overflow of gratitude, may I be filled with joy in knowing you and allowing you to be my All in All! You alone are my joy. I will rejoice!

Advent Day 22

Children wonder. The first word out of my grandchildren's mouths is why…? They want to know about everything, are curious about everything. They wonder.

But I forget to. I am preoccupied with work and worry and have no time for wonder. At the root of all my hard-heartedness, cynicism, coldness toward God is that lack of wonder. I not only don't ask why, I don't even think it.

We have a wonder working God. Why did he send his Son? Out of love—I wonder…

What kind of love? Not that mushy gushy weak and worn-out Hollywood kind. God's love is far from temporary fizz, an emotional response, a fleeting fancy. His love is all action, full of truth, mercy, generosity, kindness, patience, longsuffering, justice, strength, joyful, gentle, hard as unbreakable, unshakable rock.

Real people—Joseph, Mary, shepherds—were told: God with us. Come and see, touch. The Creator of the universe and your King forever is here, with you.

And He still is.

What kind of wondrous love is this? Why…why did God do it this way? "This I know: God is for me," says the Psalmist. For salvation of all who would believe, the arrival, the weary service to teach and heal and live among men, to suffer, be abused, rejected, and die was for them and us, the power of the resurrection to give new life was for all of us—all for us. For the very Spirit of your Son to live in us, work in us, transform us, make us into your very likeness, made new for eternity…wonderfulness beyond expressing. For us!

It still is.

The wonder of love, still with us, all for us…it is heart-shattering.

Prayer: I am in awe and wonder of this kind of love. Soften my heart with the wonder of your mighty love every day—even every hour and minute.

Advent Day 23

Traveling at Christmas has its challenges: the overpacked car, the flu season, delayed flights, the weather! There are so many unknowns. Worn and weary, we face inconveniences, delays, mishaps because, come what may, the family has to be together at Christmas. Sometimes our home is the destination for others, sometimes we are the ones slogging through scary blizzards with sniffly colds and holiday fatigue to get there. "Are we there yet?" is the refrain from the backseat, and we are wishing for a magic carpet.

Imagine journeying by animal or on foot 90 miles and nine months pregnant. Surely she wished to be at home at this time. But she was serving her Lord in obedience. And the shepherds left their flocks and warm fires to journey to Bethlehem to worship the newborn king, because the angels said, "go!" Then there is that journey, presumably by camel, of the kings from the east over dangerous terrain and subject to robbers or other attacks. They were seeking, not knowing what was ahead. They were serving the call that light in the East was beckoning to them.

"The Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head," said Messiah as he traveled to and from across the Jordan, through Samaria, up the Mount of Olives, in storms on the Sea of Galilee, having come to serve and not be served. He was obeying his Father, "I am the good shepherd," laying down his life for us sheep, on his way down the road to Calvary to win life for us, our King of Kings.

And so we serve all those around us at the holidays, lay our lives down that others may have comfort and joy, because He did the same for us—

Prayer: Father, I know Christ has gone to prepare a place for us, that in your house are many rooms waiting for us. Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life and I will dwell in your house forever. Remind me as I reach the end of my holiday strength that this home, this travel, these labors are practice for my eternal home. Help me to find joy in serving until the day of that glorious homecoming.

Advent Day 24

The day before Christmas has arrived. The celebration is about to begin. O come!, let us adore him!

Waiting is anticipation, silence and darkness, not knowing, hard work, uncertainty, and trusting in the promises all at the same time. A nation waited for centuries for their long expected king. He came. Shepherds, wisemen, servants of the temple marveled and adored Him.

But their working and watching and preparing was all in the dark. Then the Light was born, shone all around them—and the darkness has never put it out.

And centuries later we practice preparing for this day, to remember — remember so we can continue to prepare for another day when our bridegroom will come in all his glory. Jesus taught about the ten virgins waiting with their lamps, in the dark, listening, watching, waiting. Those who filled their lamps and brought a supply of oil were among those who went in rejoicing when the bridegroom arrived. The celebration time comes. “There shall be no night there: they need no lamp nor light for the sun, for the Lord God gives them light. And they shall reign forever and ever.”

We will. There is much to be done to be ready. Advent is practice for that day when we will see Him face to face, as the shepherds and Mary and Simeon did. All waiting will be worth it. All sorrow and pain will be forgotten, and we will be like Him. Meanwhile, as in advent with all it’s longing and preparation and making ready and tuning our hearts to celebrate—we wait with patience, working, praying, singing, repenting, and worshiping. Today is the day before the final celebration.

Prayer: O come! Let us adore Him!