

A detailed pencil sketch by Leonardo da Vinci, depicting the Virgin Mary seated on the left, holding the Christ Child on her lap. To the right, St. Anne is seated, holding the Christ Child. The drawing is a study of human figures, showing soft shading and anatomical detail. The background is a textured, brownish wash.

December 2020

It's all about Jesus

Readings, Reflections and Prayers
for Advent and Christmas

Dr. Bruce Martin
First Baptist Church
1614 - 5th Avenue S
Lethbridge, AB T1J 0W3
403-327-2082
bruce@firstb.net
www.firstb.net

Sketch by Leonardo da Vinci (c. 1500)

Monday, November 30: Isaiah 7

Why do we celebrate Advent? Advent is a time to prepare our hearts for Christmas. The word "Advent" literally means "The coming ...". It's a time of waiting and anticipation of the coming, the birth, of Jesus. This week we reflect on the theme of **HOPE**. How does Jesus bring **hope** to our hurting, broken world?

In Isaiah's time, Israel is split in two kingdoms. King Ahaz and Judah (southern Kingdom, capital Jerusalem) are being attacked by Israel (northern Kingdom, capital Samaria) and Syria. Ahaz made an alliance with Assyria. Isaiah tells Ahaz, "Be careful, keep calm and don't be afraid. Do not lose heart ... It (an invasion) will not take place, it will not happen ..." (7:4, 7). Why? Because ultimately God is God. He is in control. Ahaz needs to trust God, not Assyria: "If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all" (7:9).

God even offers Ahaz a sign to solidify his faith. But Ahaz refuses, ostensibly for good theological reasons. Ahaz really refuses because he doesn't trust God and His power. God's response reveals His frustration with Ahaz: God will provide a sign anyway. God's prophetic word has a dual meaning:

- for Ahaz, it is another encouragement to faith: God can do miracles (the Hebrew word in 7:14 implies virginity) **and** God is with us (the name "Immanuel" literally means "God with us").
- For us, this prophecy is fulfilled in Jesus. Jesus is fully human (born of Mary) **and** fully God (conceived by the Holy Spirit not a human father). Matthew cites this verse in Matthew 1:23.

Since God is with them, the Judeans should not fear their neighbours. But, since they will NOT trust in God but DO trust in a military alliance with Assyria, God will let them suffer dire consequences. God would be faithful. Assyria will be treacherous. God desperately tries to get Ahaz to trust *Him*. Ahaz is desperately trusting *Assyria*.

What does this mean to us? We can think about:

- *How do I make decisions?* Ahaz did not consult God. He thought he was making the best choice by cozying up to Assyria. What about me? Do I seek God's wisdom? Do I look in Scripture for guidance? Do I speak with wise Christian friends? Do I trust my own street smarts?
- *Am I "religious" or do I really have faith?* Ahaz was "religious"; he kept the rituals. But deep down he did not really trust God. How about me? Do I genuinely trust God, His word, and His way?
- *If "God is with us," we can live without fear.* With God's help, we can live with integrity, faith, and righteousness knowing God will provide for us, no matter what may come our way.
- *If "God is with us," we can have hope in all circumstances.* "If God is for us, who can ever be against us? Since he did not spare even his own Son but gave him up for us all, won't he also give us everything else? ... Christ Jesus died for us and was raised to life for us, and he is sitting in the place of honor at God's right hand, pleading for us" (Romans 8:31-34). That is great news.

During Advent, we celebrate Jesus is Immanuel, "God with us." When Jesus is among us, God is among us. When Jesus travels with us, God travels with us. When we are in tough times, God is with us. When we mourn, God is with us. When we celebrate, God is with us. When we need wisdom, God is with us. Invite Jesus into all the circumstances of your life. Jesus is with you. God is with you. Have hope.

*Spirit of God,
with your holy breath you cleanse the hearts and minds of your people;
you comfort us when we are in sorrow;
you lead us when we wander from the way;
you kindle us when we are cold;
you get us together when we are at variance;
and you enrich us with many and various gifts.
We pray that you would daily increase those gifts which you've entrusted to us;
that with your light before us and within us, we may pass through this world
without stumbling and without straying, serving you and only you.
Amen.*

Erasmus (1466-1536)

Tuesday, December 1: Isaiah 9:1-7

(You are welcome to read Isaiah 8, it repeats the prophecy of a child Savior (7:14) and emphasizes that God is the God of history. We need to reorder our priorities, asking "How can I please God?")

Because of Ahaz's stubborn refusal to trust God, the result is his "allies," the ruthless Assyrians, turn on Judah. They invade Judah, beginning in the border districts of Zebulun and Naphtali (parts of Galilee), moving toward Jerusalem. Even though the deep darkness of foreign conquest is relentlessly falling, God offers hope for restoration (9:3-5), a reference to Gideon defeating the Midianites at Jezreel (Judges 7).

How will God save His people? Isaiah repeats the promise of a child who will be born, a light that will shine in the darkness (9:2, John 1:4-5). 9:6-7 are clear prophetic words about the coming of the Messiah, Jesus. Only Jesus is God Himself among us. Only He can truly save us.

Judah is conquered. God did not miraculously deliver His people. He allowed them to be "humbled" by letting them experience the consequences of their decision to trust in their army, economy, politicians, and allies rather than God. God's purpose is not to punish them. His goal is that, as His people suffer, they will turn to Him in genuine repentance and faith. When God's people put their hope in Him, He can "honour" them in the future (9:1). God's will for us is always hope, joy, freedom, and peace. But He will not save us from our own dumb decisions. However, even when we bring pain on ourselves, He can bring good things even from the despair.

Jesus, of course, did come from Nazareth, in Galilee (9:1). But He was finally "crowned" and recognized as king when He was hung on the cross in David's city, Jerusalem (9:7): the sign when Jesus was crucified read, *"This is the King of the Jews"* (Matthew 27:37). By taking on Himself all the sin and oppression of all people, Jesus can truly give freedom, peace, hope, love, and joy in a deep, profound way that no government or power can take away. This has been the experience of (even the most persecuted) Christians through the ages.

We trust in politicians. We trust in banks, bonds, and markets. We trust in bombs and missiles. Into an equally violent world, God came in love. Into a brutal time and place, God came as a defenseless, helpless child. He came as a suffering Saviour. In humility, He defeated the military superpowers of His age and all ages.

It is a timely reminder to us that throughout history great powers have come and gone, and will continue to come and go. We, God's people, may suffer. But Jesus and His church have always survived and will always survive. In His apparent weakness – as He was crucified – He won a victory that has outlasted every empire. The power of His love and grace is far more powerful than President Xi or the U.S. president.

"Christ Jesus died for us and was raised to life for us, and he is sitting in the place of honor at God's right hand, pleading for us. Can anything ever separate us from Christ's love? Does it mean he no longer loves us if we have trouble or calamity, or are persecuted, or hungry, or destitute, or in danger, or threatened with death? ... No, despite all these things, overwhelming victory is ours through Christ, who loved us" (Romans 8:34-37).

Reflect on 9:6-7. Jesus is our Wonderful Counselor: what does that mean for you, today?

- Jesus is our Mighty God: what does that mean for you, today?
- Jesus is our Everlasting Father: what does that mean for you, today?
- Jesus is our Prince of Peace: what does that mean for you, today?

*Father, thank you for Jesus, your son, our Saviour.
Grant us, O Spirit, to know that which is worth knowing,
to love that which is worth loving,
to praise that which can bear with praise.
Father, help us to disavow what in your sight is unworthy,
and to prize what to you is precious,
Above all, Father, son, and Spirit.
Help us to search out and to do what is well pleasing to you always, all days.
Amen*

Thomas à Kempis (1380-1471)

Wednesday, December 2: Isaiah 65:1-10

The Old Testament world – before Jesus – was a dark time. The Israelites were constantly under danger from invading powers. Often, as we have read, God allows evil to triumph because His people do not trust Him. They trust in their bank accounts, politicians, and military alliances. God also allows them to suffer because they lie (and tolerate liars in power), the poor get poorer while the rich get richer, justice is perverted toward the wealthy, and they do not care for the needy or foreigners. They perfectly go through the motions of religion, but they live selfish, corrupt, greedy lives. God allows them to suffer so they turn to Him in hope and faith. In 65:2-7, the Jewish people are certainly religious. But ritual of any sort, without a changed heart, is worthless.

Christians can do all the right religious things, too. We can affirm the right doctrines and do the right rituals. But if our faith doesn't show the same love, grace, mercy, forgiveness, compassion, and justice Jesus modeled, it means nothing. *"If I could speak all the languages of earth and of angels, but didn't love others," Paul writes, "I would only be a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. If I had the gift of prophecy, and if I understood all of God's secret plans and possessed all knowledge, and if I had such faith that I could move mountains, but didn't love others, I would be nothing. If I gave everything I have to the poor and even sacrificed my body, I could boast about it; but if I didn't love others, I would have gained nothing"* (1 Corinthians 13:1-3).

In Isaiah 65:1, God promises to reveal Himself to other people. If God's people won't honour Him, He'll go to others. God's good news is for ALL people. A Saviour will come, for ALL people. Those who "seek the Lord" with a sincere heart, they will find Him, no matter what their background (65:10). They will be blessed.

John Oswalt writes: *"What does it mean to be a Christian? In all too many ways we find ourselves in a similar position to those Isaiah is addressing in this passage. We gauge our faith on the basis of certain externals.*

- *So one person says, 'I am a Christian because I am a formal member of that body of people known as the Christian church. I am a Christian in just the same way that the Judeans were members of the people of God ...'*
- *Someone else says, 'That is not true. Church membership means nothing. You must have received Christ as your personal Savior ...'*
- *A third person says, 'That is really not any necessary indication of your heart condition. A Christian attends worship with the body on a regular basis. Christians worship God with sacraments and music and prayer and the hearing on the Word of God.'*
- *Another says, 'There is more dead form at 11:00 a.m. on Sunday than any other hour of the week. Christians feel the presence of God in their hearts when they worship him spontaneously and energetically.'*
- *Finally, someone else says, 'What you're "worshiping" is the exciting feel of worshipping. A Christian is someone who gives a cup of cold water to the thirsty, a coat to the freezing, a word of encouragement to the despairing, all for Christ's sake.'*

"Well, what IS it to be a Christian, for heaven's sake? I believe it is all of the above and none of the above. What do I mean? That with the right attitude every one of the above is characteristic of the Christian, and that with the wrong attitude every criticism of the above is correct. That, if we gauge our Christian faith by external behaviors alone – any external behaviour – it is all dust and ashes ... Unless we have come to the place where our service to God is growing out of a glad servant heart, it is all in vain.

"Can you imagine a bridegroom asking a minister how many hours a month he has to spend with his bride to keep the marriage in force? If he does ask this question, we know something is severely lacking in his devotion to his bride, and we also know the relationship is doomed. By contrast, if we really have a loving bond-slave relationship with the Lord, we will want to express that love in every possible way, from meeting with Christian brothers and sisters to worshipping him in the most profound ways possible, to telling others about him, to reaching out to the downtrodden for him, to working for justice in the world ..."

May our loving, servant hearts express themselves as we seek the Lord and live for Him ...

*O consuming Fire, Spirit of Love,
reproduce within me those gracious qualities of Jesus,
that I may be the love of God to those around me –
through the power of Your Spirit,
in the name of Jesus,
for the glory of the King of Kings,
Amen.*

adapted from Elizabeth of the Trinity (12th century)

Thursday, December 3: Isaiah 66

The prophet Micah asks, "What can we bring to the LORD? What kind of offerings should we give him? Should we bow before God with offerings of yearling calves? Should we offer him thousands of rams and ten thousand rivers of olive oil? Should we sacrifice our firstborn to pay for our sins?" Is it all about the right religious ritual?

Micah's answer? "No, O people, the LORD has told you what is good, and this is what he requires of you: to do what is right, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God"(Micah 6:5-8).

Isaiah reminds us of the same truth: religion and ritual don't impress God (66:1-6).

This final chapter of Isaiah reminds us that nothing we can **DO** earns us Brownie points with God. We are saved by **hope and faith** in Him. Salvation is God's gift to us; we simply accept His grace and mercy by faith. Because it is not about our merit and our hard work, we can be humble before God:

- We know He is in control of the universe. We can have **hope** knowing that ultimately everything is in His hands. We may not understand things, but He does. He will see them through.
- We know God, our Creator and loving heavenly Father, knows best. With humility, we need to hear His wisdom and obey His commands. We can have **hope** knowing His ways are right and good, even when we see evil people thrive (in the short term anyway).
- We know He will supply all our needs. We may think we make it through life because we are so smart, resourceful, and strong. However, every blessing, even our wisdom and strength, is a gift from God. We can have **hope** knowing He will never leave us or abandon us.

Isaiah's book ends with **ALL** nations gathering to worship God. On one hand this prophecy is yet to be fulfilled. The vision that looks forward to the day when God's "shalom," His perfect peace, will come when Jesus returns.

On the other hand, it reminds us that today there are followers of Jesus in every country on earth. God's Spirit is moving in Asia, Africa, Europe, Oceania, South America, and North America. We are part of a dynamic movement of God's Spirit that spans the globe, including women and men from every cultural group, young and old. God is building His church in China. God is building His church in Rwanda. God is building His church in Cuba. God is even building His church in Lethbridge. We have **hope**. The Kingdom of God has come, is coming today, and will continue to come in the days ahead. It will finally be fulfilled when Jesus returns.

As God's people, may we be people who do what is right, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God.

*Lord may I do what is right, love mercy, and walk humbly with my God
When I bring my tithes and offerings or give alms to the poor,
let me not congratulate myself, let there be no pride in my act.
The wealth I possesses is on loan;
God has made me its steward.
I am his hands and his heart.
Let my love for others be God's love;
let my pity for the needy be his;
let my tithes, offerings and alms be received as his gift.
Amen.*

Celtic prayer

Friday, December 4: Luke 1:1-25

Catherine Marshall writes, *"God is the only one who can make the valley of trouble a door of hope."*

As we prepare for Jesus' birth, a key person in the Advent story is John the Baptist. John's story is intertwined with Jesus'. John's mother, Elizabeth, is an older relative of Mary, Jesus' mother (Luke 1:36). John will prepare the way for Jesus' ministry by calling people to repentance and faith.

The story of the angel of the Lord appearing to Zechariah reminds me of God's call to Abraham: an elderly, childless couple would have a baby who would be a key part of God's salvation story. Zechariah, like Abraham's wife Sarah, has a difficult time believing the promise. I can appreciate his scepticism.

Zechariah and Elizabeth remind me that:

- being *"upright in the sight of the God, observing all the Lord's commands and regulations"* is a good thing (v.6) – it pleases the Lord and is honouring to Him;
- while life generally goes well when I am faithful to God, even godly people have struggles (v.7);
- even people of faith struggle with trusting God, being patient, and waiting for His timing (v.18);
- God is in the business of saving His people – including me, my family, friends, and neighbours (v.16-17);
- God can and does work in hearts and lives in miraculous ways.

Which of these points do I need to reflect on and remember most?

What else do I learn about God, His work, and His mission from this story?

*Almighty and merciful God, the fountain of all goodness,
who knows the thought of our hearts,
we confess to you that we have sinned against you, and done evil in your sight.
Wash us, we pray, from the stains of our past sins,
and to give us grace and power to put away all hurtful things;
so that, being delivered from the bondage of sin,
we may bring forth the fruits of repentance.
O eternal Light, shine into our hearts.
O eternal Goodness, deliver us from evil.
O eternal Power, be our support.
Eternal Wisdom, scatter the darkness of our ignorance.
Eternal Grace, have mercy upon us.
Help us to seek your face with all our hearts, and minds, and strength;
and finally bring us, by your infinite mercy, into your holy presence.
So strengthen our weakness that, following in the footsteps of your blessed Son,
we may obtain your mercy, and enter your promised joy.
Amen.*

Meuin, 8th century

Saturday, December 5: Luke 1:26-40

God's interventions in history are often mind-boggling. God sometimes works totally 'outside the box' of what we might expect. Sometimes He even allows us to experience a crisis or two.

For Elizabeth and Zechariah, the news of a baby was great. Married for years, trying to have a child for years, the news of expectation and hope was fantastic for this couple.

For Mary, still single, the news of a baby was *"greatly troubling"* (v.29). This is not 2020 Canada when marriage, pregnancy, and all that come in many different forms and all are considered good. This was an ultra-traditional culture where pre-marital sex was forbidden. A couple only had sexual relations after marriage. For a woman to be pregnant before marriage (even by her fiancé) was socially unacceptable. A single Mom could not work. She had only two options: become a beggar or support herself by prostitution.

Mary was engaged, but not yet married. She's pregnant. Joseph knew he was not the father. No one would believe her story of divine conception (it had never happened before; it hasn't happened since). Everyone would assume she was an immoral woman. No wonder she hurried out of town, ASAP (vs.39-40).

Where are Mary's mother and father? Curiously they are never mentioned. Perhaps they are already dead. Perhaps they were unsupportive of her (although they are not even mentioned later on, when Mary is married to Joseph). Whatever the circumstances with her parents, the reality is that this young woman is pretty alone in the world. How does that help me appreciate her courage even more?

How do I react in a crisis?

How does Mary react in this crisis? She is confused. Perplexed. Stressed. She hears God's call, but questions how it could be true. She has the freedom to say 'Yes' or 'No'. She ponders the invitation in her heart. Then her response is from a full heart: she says 'Yes' to God. Even though the future looks bleak, she is willing to step out in faith and believe God's promise, *"Do not be afraid, for you have found favour with God"* (v.30).

How do we respond when we sense God calling us? He may be calling us to help someone. To call someone. To give a little more than usual. To volunteer in some capacity. To change our routine. To step out in faith in some way. To share our faith with someone. To invite a friend to church over Advent/Christmas. To give a gift through a programme like Canadian Baptist Ministries' *Hopeful Gifts for Change* (<https://hopefulgifts.ca/>).

God may be inviting us to be and do things we cannot believe possible. It is OK to be a bit perplexed. But God's promise to us, as people saved by His Son, is *"Do not be afraid, for you have found favour with God."*

What can you learn from Mary's example? Sarah Thebarger writes, *"Love may cost you dearly. It did for Mary. And it may break your heart. It did for Mary. But in the end, it will save the world. It did for Mary ... and for us."* This Advent, can you say, *"I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said"* (whatever "it" may be God is calling you to) (v.38). Pray that as your prayer.

*O Lord, I am your servant.
May it be to me as you have said.
Help me do your will.
You are the author and creator of peace, love, and mercy:
soften our hard and steely hearts, warm our icy and frozen hearts,
that we may wish one another well, and may be the true disciples of Jesus Christ.
Give us grace even now to begin to display that heavenly life
in which there is no disagreement or hatred,
but peace and love on all hands, one towards another.
Amen.*

Adapted from Ludovicus Vives (1492-1540)

Sunday, December 6: Luke 1:39-56

This week we reflect on **PEACE**. The time of waiting before Jesus (Advent) was tough. There was violence, war, poverty, lies, injustice, inequality ... They were troubled times, a lot like our own. But in the midst of it, God promises His **peace**. His **peace** that passes all understanding

A traditional Irish greeting to a pregnant woman is *"God bless both of you."* This is precisely Elizabeth's greeting to Mary (1:42). How did Elizabeth know Mary was pregnant? The Holy Spirit somehow told her (1:41). And Elizabeth's baby, who we will know as John the Baptist, jumped for joy in her womb. It is true that Mary is *"blessed among women"* (1:42), but perhaps more profound is Elizabeth's comment: *"You are blessed because you believed that the Lord would do what he said"* (1:45).

Mary believes what the Lord says will actually come to pass. Do I? Why? Why not?

Mary's song (1:46-55) is a wonderful song of praise and thanksgiving to God. One writer reflects, *"This glorious prayer is charged with dynamite. It points to a society in which nobody wants to have too much while others*

have too little. The hungry are fed and the lowly are raised up. Lord, may I never be seduced by sweet devotion while I have more than I need and others have less." Mary's words are not a nice, sweet lullaby. She prays that God will tear down the wealthy powerbrokers of the world and feed the hungry. She is praying for a revolution in an unjust social order that rewarded millionaires and marginalized the poor. Jesus will not come to pat the privileged on the back. He will come to shake them up. Jesus will begin His ministry by quoting from Isaiah 61, *"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, for he has anointed me to bring Good News to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim that captives will be released, that the blind will see, that the oppressed will be set free, and that the time of the Lord's favor has come"* (Luke 4:18-19).

To a wealthy mover-and-shaker, Jesus says, *"If you want to be perfect, go and sell all your possessions and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me"* (Matthew 19:21). He may not literally ask us to give away everything, but He certainly calls us to humility, compassion, and to hold our wealth loosely. The Kingdom of God calls us to mercy, kindness, grace, justice, and blessing.

"Sometimes I want to ask God why He allows poverty, famine and injustice in the world when He could just do something about it," muses one pundit. *"But I'm afraid He might ask me the same question."*

In the Lord's prayer (from Matthew 6:9-14), we pray, *"Your Kingdom come and your will be done on Earth as it is in Heaven."* Do we really mean that? If we do, we are praying that *"He will show mercy from generation to generation to all who fear him"* (1:50). That's good. But we are also praying that, with His mighty arm, *"He will scatter the proud and haughty ones. He will bring down princes from their thrones and exalt the humble. He will fill the hungry with good things and send the rich away with empty hands"* (1:51-53).

If you dare (and if you mean it), do pray that God's kingdom will come on earth, more and more, as it in heaven. How can we do something about it? In what small way can you be merciful (1:50), lift up the humble (1:52), and help the poor and hungry (1:53)? How can we be the grace of God to our world? How can we the blessing of God to our world? How can we be Good News to our world?

*O King of glory and Lord of grace, who said,
"Be of good cheer, I have overcome the world":
be victorious in us your servants.
Without you we can do nothing.
Grant your compassion to go before us,
your compassion to come behind us;
before us in our undertakings,
and behind us in our endings.
May your compassion go our from us,
to those beside us and behind us.
May we be the Good News of the Gospel to those you have given to us.
And what more shall we say but that your will be done in us.
For your will is our salvation, our glory, and our joy.
May your salvation come upon all people,
through your Spirit and through our faithful obedience.
Amen*

Alcuin (735-804)

Monday, December 7: Isaiah 40:1-17

We're going back to Isaiah, and the promise of the coming Messiah. This vision from God anticipates the coming of both John the Baptist (40:3-8) and Jesus (40:9-11). This good news of the coming of God (40:9), the Lord (40:10), the good Shepherd (40:11) – Jesus – is for *"ALL people together"* (40:5). The Jewish people thought of salvation in Jewish-privilege terms: God would save them, Israel, and only them. The rest of us were "Gentile dogs," doomed for destruction. However, God's good news is for ALL people of ALL nations. God's Kingdom is coming for ALL people of ALL nations, today, too (Jesus was not a white European).

The "highway" picks up a theme in Isaiah 35:1-10, referring to the deliverance of Jewish exiles from Babylon and return to Jerusalem. But Isaiah's words have a dual or triple meaning. Is this prophecy referring to:

1. The return of the Jewish people from exile in Babylon? *or*
2. Jesus' birth, life, death and resurrection? *or*
3. Jesus' second coming at the end of history?

- Certainly, the immediate context was the exile in Babylon. This is what Isaiah's readers heard.
- It clearly refers to the birth of Jesus: John the Baptist uses these verses as his motto.
- Ultimately, the complete fulfilment of this will only happen when Jesus returns again, in glory and judgment (especially if you choose to read on through Isaiah 40:12-31).

Note that the coming of Jesus does not take us out of the wilderness right away (40:3). We are still on a journey from Babylon (evil/pain/life in this fallen world) to Jerusalem (a metaphor for eternal life in His presence – Revelation 21). Jesus gets us through the valley of the shadows (Psalm 23:4), but does not miraculously airlift us out of them into Paradise. Walking with Jesus is a matter of following Him along the way of life, often through dark places and tough times. There are some great words of encouragement here:

1. God is with you in the wilderness getting you through it (40:3-5). He is with you in the wild places – lifting up your deep valleys and lowering your steep mountains, smoothing the roughest spots and helping you through the trackless landscape.
2. God is your shepherd (40:10-11, c.f. Psalm 23, John 10:1-16). He tends His flock – including you, and including ALL His people – gathering, protecting, caring, feeding, doing the best for us.

This Advent, as we go through our challenges, reflect on the good news in Isaiah 40:3-5 and 10-11. How are these images encouraging to you, today? Think about the tenderness of the images in 40:11. Have you ever thought of yourself as one of the "lambs" in this picture? What does that mean for you? God is the God of ALL people: who needs the encouragement of this good news today? Can you share it?

*I arise today, through a mighty strength, the power of the Trinity,
Through the belief in the threeness, through confession of the oneness of the Creator of Creation.
I arise today through the strength of Christ's birth and his baptism,
Through the strength of his crucifixion with his burial,
Through the strength of his resurrection and his ascension.*

*I arise today through the strength of heaven:
Light of sun, radiance of moon, splendor of fire, speed of lightning,
swiftness of wind, depth of sea, stability of earth, firmness of rock.*

*I arise today through God's strength to pilot me:
God's might to uphold me, God's wisdom to guide me,
God's eye to look before me, God's ear to hear me,
God's word to speak for me, God's hand to guard me,
God's way to lie before me, God's shield to protect me,
God's host to save me from snares of devils, from temptations of vices,
from everyone who shall wish me ill, afar and anear, alone and in multitude.*

*Christ to shield me today.
Christ with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me,
Christ in me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me,
Christ on my right, Christ on my left,
Christ when I lie down, Christ when I sit down, Christ when I arise,
Christ in the heart of every man who thinks of me,
Christ in the mouth of everyone who speaks of me,
Christ in every eye that sees me, Christ in every ear that hears me.*

*I arise today, through a mighty strength, the power of the Trinity,
Through belief in the threeness, through confession of the oneness,
of the Creator of Creation.*

Amen

attributed to Patrick (390-460)

Tuesday, December 8: Luke 3:1-18

John the Baptist uses Isaiah 40:3-5 (yesterday's reading) as his motto. Like the prophets of the Old Testament, John speaks to the evil and corruption of his day, as well as pointing forward to the coming of the Saviour, Jesus (John is often listed as the last prophet: he is the final prophet before Jesus comes, God-Himself-with-us). Jesus changes everything.

John is brutally honest with those who have no genuine faith in or love for God, especially those who think they're saved simply because they're Jewish or because they follow all the religious ritual and rules (sounds like Isaiah.). John challenges them to repent (radically change the direction of their lives), truly believe in God, and live their faith. Religious rituals and ethnicity are of no value before God. Not even all their good deeds matter. They are only be saved by faith in God. True faith ought, inevitably, show itself by living in godly ways and a life of peace. These people's evil lives reveal their lack of faith.

People of God have used symbolic washing – baptism – as a symbol of God's forgiveness and spiritual cleansing for centuries (Exodus 24:4, Leviticus 16:4, 1 Kings 5:1-14). As John the Baptist comes, preaching such a baptism, he was following in a long Jewish tradition.

But John's message about the difference between his baptism and the Jesus' baptism is important. Jesus' coming will be radically different. Jesus is not going to be just another Old Testament prophet like John:

- His status will be different (*"the thongs of his sandals I am not worthy to untie"*). Jesus will be a King, but not just an earthly king. He will be King of Heaven come to earth, God with us.
- His power will be different. John preaches filled with the Holy Spirit. Jesus gives the gift of Spirit, fulfilling a prophecy in Ezekiel 36:24-32.
- His judgment will be different. John can warn about evil and coming wrath. Jesus actually is the righteous Judge who brings justice, judgment, and sets things right.

Jesus, God with us, brings us **peace** with God. It is good for us, during Advent, to humble ourselves before God and ask Him to help us see the issues in our lives. In what ways do we put other priorities before God? In what ways are we deliberately disobedient to God? Honestly confess your sins to God. Jesus has already paid the price for every one of them. Be thankful. Rejoice. Be blessed by His gift of forgiveness.

Jesus, God with us, also brings us **peace** with other people. We are called to forgive others as God has forgiven us (Matthew 6:12-15). Who can you bless with the gift of forgiveness today? Forgive them. When you let go, you bless the other person. You also bless yourself: instead of hanging on to the anger, bitterness, and ulcers, you let them all go. You experience a tremendous sense of joy, peace, and release. You sleep better. Your physical, emotional, and spiritual health improves, too.

*Lord God Almighty, shaper and ruler of all creatures,
we pray for your great mercy:
guide us better than we have guided ourselves,
towards you and your kingdom;
guide us to your will, to the need of our soul,
better than we can ourselves;
help us focus our minds toward your will
and strengthen us against the temptations of the devil;
put from us all lust, and every unrighteousness,
and shield us against our foes, seen and unseen;
teach us to do your will, that we may inwardly love you before all things, with a pure mind.
For you are our Maker and our Redeemer,
our Help and our Comfort, our Trust and our Hope:
praise and glory be to you now, ever and ever, world without end.
Amen.*

King Alfred of Wessex (849-901)

Wednesday, December 9: Matthew 1:1-17

No one is just a name. Every person is created by, and beloved by God.

We often skip Matthew 1. Most of these people we've never heard of; their names are recorded nowhere else. But each of these folks was a real, living, breathing person, beloved by God. There is no unimportant person.

However, note a couple of things:

- Each of these people was an indispensable part of God's plan. Even though some of their names were not famous or well known, they were important parts of God's mission. You may feel insignificant or feel you don't have much to offer – but only God knows what you can truly do for His Kingdom. You are an important part of His family. Use what you have to serve Him. It will be significant.
- Some of these people are well known – Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David, Solomon (if you have read Kings or Chronicles in the Old Testament recently you would know that these men – from David through Josiah, were kings of Judah). Curiously, none are perfect examples of faithfulness: Abraham lapsed in faith, passing his wife off as his sister (twice) and had a child with Hagar; David lusted after and committed adultery with Bathseba, then committed murder; Solomon was tempted by other gods. But God used these imperfect people in His mission. No matter what's in your past, what you've done, or where you've been, as you confess your sins, repent, and recommit yourself to Him, God can use you.
- Some of these characters were downright evil. Some were disasters. But God is in charge of history. He is fulfilling His plan and His purpose, in spite of us. God will save His people and express His love no matter what. No matter what obstacles you are up against, God can overcome them. It may take time. He may frustrate you. Keep trusting.
- By looking back we you can gain encouragement for the present. We are God's children – Jesus' brothers and sisters (John 1:12). This family tree is our family tree. These are your spiritual ancestors. When God leads you into strange new challenges, study your forefather Abraham, and be encouraged. When you are up against giants, reflect on your forefather David, and be empowered. When you need wisdom, ask God for it as your ancestor Solomon did. Draw strength from your spiritual heritage.

You are as important to God as any person in this list. Thank Him.

The people you love are just as important to God as any person on this list. Pray for those you love, that they might know that they are God's beloved child.

*Thanks be to you, our Lord Jesus Christ,
for all the benefits which you have given us,
for all the pains and insults which you have borne for us.
Most merciful Redeemer, Friend and Brother,
may we know you more clearly,
love you more dearly,
and follow you more nearly, day by day.
Amen.*

Richard of Chichester (1197-1253)

Thursday, December 10: Matthew 1:18-25

Advent and Christmas are not all about sweetness and light, love and joy, warm fuzzies and hot apple pie.

Christmas card pictures of Mary, Joseph and Jesus are delightfully idyllic. But think of the heart-breaking crisis Joseph faces in this incident. Joseph faces the awful questions: *Has Mary been unfaithful? Who is the father? Should I divorce her? What will happen to the child? How can I save her from disgrace? What about me? What will people think of me? What should I do?*

What does Joseph do? He does not panic. He prays. He waits for God. There is a model here for us as we face difficult decisions and deal with doubts: pray about it, ask God about it, and wait ... He will answer.

What do we know about Joseph? We know he had a deep love for God that allowed him to hear God's encouragement and comfort. We know he loved Mary so much that he suppressed his doubts about her integrity and went ahead and married her. We know that he faced great difficulties and dangers because of this child (having to flee with Mary and the boy to Egypt within the first couple of years). We know that, hard though it must have been, he allowed himself to be regarded as the father of her child, knowing he wasn't.

We sense God gave Joseph peace, even in the midst of crisis after crisis.

Frank Doyle notes, *"Joseph is the least quotable of all the saints: the Gospels do not record anything he said. Yet he was the rocklike foundation of the family, the unflappable, faithful, quiet father, who must have loomed huge in the mind of Jesus. The marks of good parenting are clear in Jesus: physical stamina, courage, strength of purpose and attractiveness to men, women and children; and he followed his father's trade."*

We know about Joseph through what he did, not what he said. Here was a man who, to the best of our knowledge, never talked the talk. But he walked the walk with integrity, determination, faithfulness, and love.

Martin Luther King Jr. said, *"True peace is not merely the absence of tension: it is the presence of justice."* How are Joseph actions a practical demonstration of this principle?

What can you learn from Joseph? How can he inspire you?

*O Lord, who desires to be called 'Love', give me love,
that I may love you more than I love myself,
and care not at all what I do with myself,
so long as I'm doing what is pleasing in your sight.
Grant me, O Father, to be your faithful servant and the obedient sheep of your pasture.
Speak to my heart – your servant's heart – and give joy to my soul.
Teach me to speak often with you in prayer.
Thank you that you take all my poverty of soul and need of spirit,
O Lord, my God, my Father.
Have pity on my weakness and forgive all my sins,
for you – and you alone – are my strength.
And may it be to your great glory that, in humility and thankful love,
I continue to serve you.
Amen.*

William of Saint Thierry (1085-1148)

Friday, December 11: Revelation 4

Advent and Christmas take us into the heart of God. God loves His creation so much He gives us His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him will not perish but have everlasting life (John 3:16).

The angel told Joseph, *"The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" - which means, 'God with us'* (Matthew 1:23). The angel was explaining how Jesus' birth would fulfill the words of Isaiah, given hundreds of years earlier.

As we noted when we read Isaiah, Jesus' birth doesn't come out of the blue. It's a critical chapter in the story of God's salvation. Ever since the disobedience of Adam and Eve, God has been saving people. He saves them through the Exodus. All through the stubborn disobedience of His people, God has a plan to deliver His people. With the arrival of Jesus – God Himself with us – the story moves to a whole different level. Jesus will be the One who will carry all our sinfulness and disobedience to the cross. He will save us, once and for all.

Revelation 4-7 give us a glimpse into the character of our amazing God. This incredible God loves us so much, He is willing *"to make himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness; and*

being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death - even death on a cross."(Philippians 2:7-8).

John sees the universe as a series of concentric circles of worshipping humans, angels, and other creatures. What is at the centre? Who is at the centre? The Lord God Almighty is. And what is He doing? He is governing the whole of creation and history, all of which is open before His gaze. God owns and rules the universe. Everything in all of creation belongs to God. Everything is in His hands.

This has ethical implications for how I live my life: the earth is the Lord's; it is not mine. He holds me – us – responsible for how I/we use it. Jesus uses a parable of a landowner (God) and tenants (us). How should we, the tenants, treat God's creation? I need to reflect on my "footprints" in God's creation. I need to reflect on the choices I make and how I live. I will be accountable to God for how I live in His world.

This also has implications for me as I try to live my life for Jesus: wherever I go in Christ's name, I am walking on His land and dealing with people He created and loves. That is an invitation to wise stewardship. It also challenges me to treat EVERY person as God's creation. How then should I live?

The fact that God is King is also an assurance of His power and presence: *"Whatever power or influence Satan and his demonic hosts exert over places or people is usurped, illegitimate, bogus and ultimately doomed. The universe belongs to the Lord"*(Christopher Wright). God's power is greater than Satan's, everywhere in creation. That can be a tremendous encouragement to me in tough times. How then should I live?

Advent and Christmas invite us to celebrate that God's light, His Son, comes into the darkness of the world. Whatever "darkness" you face, God is there with you. Pray, and know His hope and His peace.

*Lord of my heart, give me vision to inspire me,
that working or resting, I may always think of you.
Lord of my heart, give me light to guide me,
that at home or abroad, I may always walk in your way.
Lord of my heart, give me wisdom to direct me,
that thinking or acting, I may always discern right from wrong.
Lord of my heart, give me courage to strengthen me,
that among friends or enemies, I may always proclaim your justice.
Lord of my heart, give me trust to console me,
that hungry or well fed, I may always rely on your mercy.
Lord of my heart, save me from empty praise,
that I may always boast of you.
Lord of my heart, save me from worldly wealth,
that I may always look to the riches of heaven.
Lord of my heart, save me from strength at arms,
that I may always seek your protection.
Lord of my heart, save me from vain knowledge,
that I may always study your word.
Lord of my heart, save me from unnatural pleasures,
that I may always find joy in your wonderful creation.
Heart of my own heart, what ever befall me,
rule over my thoughts and feelings, my words and actions.
Amen.*

Celtic prayer

Saturday, December 12: Revelation 5

What is the purpose of life? The old Westminster Catechism says our purpose is *"to glorify God and enjoy Him forever."* In other words, our task is to love/worship/glorify God – and enjoy His love. Of course our love for God also shows in our love for our neighbour, too. Jesus, when questioned about the greatest commandments, replied that the most important things are to love the Lord our God with all our hearts, minds, souls, and strength, AND to love our neighbour as ourselves. That's what life is all about.

Revelation 5 gives us a glimpse of **who Jesus is** and what **His purpose** in life was. Revelation 5 helps us see Jesus as *"the Lamb who was slain."* Jesus, fully God, loved us (His neighbours) so much He died to save us.

The paradox of Jesus' birth is that He was born to die. The scroll in this passage refers to the whole purpose of God throughout history, His salvation history. Since the beginning, God has been saving us, His people. The only One who can open its seals is the One who fulfills its story, Jesus. Jesus' birth is a critical chapter in God's story of salvation, but the climax is the cross, the once-for-all source and strength of our salvation.

- **The cross is redemptive** – Jesus *"purchased men for God"*(5:9). Humanity will not simply *"go down the drain."* Through Jesus' death and resurrection, by faith, you have eternal life – now and forever.
- **The cross is universal** – Jesus' death fulfills God's promise to Abram that He would bless all nations. Jesus saves people *"from every tribe and language and people and nation"*(5:9) – including you.
- **The cross is victorious** – Through the death of Jesus, God has achieved complete victory over all that opposes Him. On the cross and at the end of history, the Lamb wins. We share in the Kingdom of God as Jesus reigns over us and all of creation through the Holy Spirit.

The cross is the climax, the turning point of history. But the cross is not the end. Jesus rises triumphantly from the dead on the third day to prove God's power and victory over all evil, even death itself.

As we move through Advent, keep the bigger picture of what Jesus' birth is all about. It is about God bringing the whole story of salvation together in one person, Jesus. Ultimately Jesus, God with Us, will die on the cross so that all people, everywhere and everywhen, might be part of this eternal celebration. Even you. Jesus does rise from the dead, proving God's power, and opening the door to eternal life for all of us who believe.

Spend some time this Advent worshipping Jesus, the Lamb who was slain, the Lamb upon the throne. *"Jesus is the God whom we can approach without pride and before whom we can humble ourselves without despair"* (Blaise Pascal).

Reflect upon our purpose: to love God with all our hearts, minds, souls, and strength AND to love our neighbour as ourselves. What is Jesus, the Lamb upon the throne, saying to me?

*Lord, how much juice you can squeeze from a single grape.
How much water you can draw from a single well.
How great a fire you can candle from a tiny spark.
How great a tree you can grow from a tiny seed.
My soul is so dry that by itself cannot pray;
yet you can squeeze from it the juice of a thousand prayers.
My soul is so parched that by itself cannot love;
yet you can draw from it boundless love for you and for my neighbor.
My soul is so cold that by itself it has no joy;
yet you can light the fire of heavenly joy within me.
My soul is so feeble that by itself has no faith;
yet by your power my faith grows to a great height.
Thank you for prayer, for love, for joy, for faith;
Let me always be prayerful, loving, joyful, faithful.
Amen.*

Guigo the Carthusian (12th century)

Sunday, December 13: Revelation 6

Today we reflect on **LOVE**: the Lord has done marvellous things for us. Out of His incredible love for us, He has saved us.

God loves us – desperately. He gave us Himself in His Son. Through the cross, Jesus dealt with all of the sin in

the universe. There is no sin He cannot forgive, for His death on the cross paid the price for it all.

You no longer need to

- Feel guilt or fear punishment; you are now right with God (2 Corinthians 5:21, 1 Peter 2:24)
- Be controlled by your evil impulses or sin; Jesus paid the price for your freedom so you can freely love and serve God (Mark 10:45, Ephesians 1:7)
- Be separated from God; all barriers are removed (Romans 5:10-11)
- Feel dirty or stained; we are cleansed by the blood of the Lamb (1 John 1:7-2:2)

This is great news.

Revelation 6 helps us see the cosmic forces of evil. There is evil in the world that is more than simply people being bad. This chapter is not one to be fearful of, unless you are one of those Satanic forces causing havoc in creation (which you're not). Ultimately the Lamb-that-was-slain, the Lamb-on-the-throne, Jesus, will destroy all that is evil. The cross, the climax of God's salvation story, is the great cosmic victory of God through Christ.

"God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross."(Colossians 2:13-15)

Ultimately all evil forces will be totally destroyed. Jesus has won the war. That is good news. Of course, there are still battles to be fought: Satan, sin, and evil are not going down without a final fight.

This Advent, remember Christmas is one chapter in God's big story of destroying evil once-and-for-all. It is a beginning, but it is not the end. Ultimately Advent and Christmas lead us forward to freedom, the true freedom that only comes through knowing Jesus, the true freedom of being forgiven and loved by God, the true freedom of rediscovering who were created to be: people who love God and love our neighbours.

Even though there are only a handful of shopping days left until Christmas, don't lose your focus. Remember the "reason for the season." Find your real meaning, fulfillment, and joy through knowing Jesus.

*Now we must give glory to Guardian of heaven;
we must praise the Architect of creation and his wisdom of mind,
we celebrate the Father of glory, Maker of all wonders,
and all He has done.
He, the holy Creator, first fashioned heaven as a roof for his children.
Then the eternal Guardian of mankind, our Saviour,
adorned the earth below, a land for all people.
He sustains us, supports us, empowers us, enfolds us,
Grants us food and shelter, peace and joy, friends and family.
Almighty King, everlasting Lord,
our Saviour, our King,
Holy Spirit of love,
we praise your name.
Amen.*

Adapted from Caedmon (7th century)

Monday, December 14: Revelation 7

I'm checking my little gift list and checking it twice. I THINK I've got everything done ... If I don't, does it really matter? My little problems on this particular Christmas really don't matter a whole lot.

Advent and Christmas invite us into the grand narrative of God's action in creation. Old Testament scholar, Christopher Wright, invites us to think about the BIG picture of what Christmas is really all about:

- *Sin should be punished and sinners – you and I – forgiven;*
- *Evil should be defeated and humanity – you and I – liberated;*
- *Enemies – you and I – should be reconciled to one another and to God;*
- *Creation itself should be restored and reconciled to its creator*

And all of these led to the cross of Christ. The cross was the unavoidable cost of God's mission – as Jesus himself accepted, in his agony in Gethsemane: 'Yet not as I will, but as you will' (Matthew 26:39). So as we get our minds around the biblical concept of salvation, let us make room for all the Bible teaches. Salvation is not just a theory, a doctrine, or a merely subjective state or experience. Salvation is what God has done.

Biblical salvation is the historic reality that God sent his Son into the world and his Son willingly gave up his life on the cross in fulfillment of that mission. It was the unfathomable determination of the saving love of God that led to those six hours on a Friday outside Jerusalem; to that bleeding body stretched on two pieces of wood; to a torn curtain and a quaking earth; to that awful cry of dereliction, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' (Matthew 27:46); and to that triumphant shout of achievement, 'It is finished.' (John 19:30). For it was indeed on the cross that Jesus accomplished the mission of God, for 'God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself' (2 Corinthians 5:19)."

Why bring this up a week before Christmas? Because Christmas has a purpose in God's plan. Christmas is the beginning of the end of God's story of love, the story of salvation. Christmas is about the birth of the Saviour, Jesus. Salvation – your salvation, my salvation, and salvation for all who receive His invitation through repentance and faith – is the purpose of Christmas.

Our response to Jesus' birth at Christmas – to His crucifixion on Good Friday – to His resurrection on Easter Sunday – should be to fall down in worship before Him.

*"Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.
Amen. Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength
be to our God for ever and ever. Amen."*

In your busyness this Christmas season, don't forget what it's all about – salvation for you, your family, friends, and all creation. Christmas, with its grand music, wonderful Scriptures, and out-of-the-ordinary sights, smells, and tastes is a great time to enjoy God's love and to express our love to God, through worship.

- How can you express your worship to Him today?
- How can we share this good news with those around us?
- How can we share the love of God in practical ways with neighbours, friends, and family?

*My soul's desire is to praise my Father, my Creator.
My soul's desire is to praise my Saviour, my Jesus, my King.
My soul's desire is to celebrate the Spirit, alive and moving in my being.
My soul's desire is to see the face of God, and to rest in his presence.
My soul's desire is to know the wonder of God's love.
My soul's desire is to know the power of the cross.
My soul's desire is to be freed from all fear and sadness, and to share Christ's risen life.
My soul's desire is to study the Word and to learn the ways of God.
My soul's desire is to imitate my Saviour, and to sing His praises always.
My soul's desire is to follow His Spirit where He leads me.
My soul's desire is to know His Presence and His Power.
My soul's desire is to enter the gates of heaven,
and to gaze upon the light that shines forever.
Dear Lord, you alone know what my soul truly desires,
and you alone can satisfy those desires.
Amen*

Celtic Prayer

Tuesday, December 15: Isaiah 61

What is Christmas? Christmas is the time when we celebrate the coming of our Saviour, Jesus, who brings us hope. We are forgiven; we have peace with God. It's a time to reflect on the wonders of God's love. It's a time to experience joy, knowing our lives are safe in His hands: He is with us.

Isaiah 61:1-2 is the text with which Jesus will begin his public ministry (Luke 4:14-21). In His – in God's – mind, this is a text that speaks about the coming of the Saviour. Jesus Himself claims this as His own mission. As we read through this chapter, what is our impression of the coming of the Messiah?

- Will His advent be a time of sadness? Gloom? Despair? Fear?
- Or will it be a time of joy? Celebration? Re-creating what is right and good?

"Fundamentally, our Lord's message was Himself," say J. Sidlow Baxter. *"He did not come merely to preach a Gospel; He himself is that Gospel. He did not come merely to give bread; He said, 'I am the bread.' He did not come merely to shed light; He said, 'I am the light.' He did not come merely to show the door; He said, 'I am the door.' He did not come merely to name a shepherd; He said, 'I am the shepherd.' He did not come merely to point the way; He said, 'I am the way, the truth, and the life.'"*

Reflect on your recent readings from Revelation 4-7 about the purpose of Christmas. Christmas is the fulfillment of God's love, shown to us through the death of Jesus. How is Jesus' coming a source of joy? How does it bring us peace with God? How does it reveal God's love?

How are you including a celebration of Jesus in your Christmas? How can you tell the story of His purpose and love (not only of His birth) this season? How can that enrich your Christmas?

Moving deeper, one Christian musician asks, *"Want to keep Christ in Christmas? Feed the hungry, clothe the naked, forgive the guilty, welcome the unwanted, care for the ill, love your enemies, and do unto others as you would have done unto you."* (There is still time to give through practical campaigns like Canadian Baptist Ministries' *Hopeful Gifts for Change* (www.hopefulgifts.ca)).

Jesus' passion is people know Him as Saviour and know His love and justice. How can we value both?

*Lord Jesus, through the power of your cross, save me:
Lord Jesus, through your broken body,
forgive my sins and make me holy;
Lord Jesus, through your blood shed for me,
restore my soul and wash me clean.
Lord Jesus, through the power of your cross, comfort me.
Good Jesus, never let me be separated from you;
from the deadly enemy protect me;
In the hour of death, comfort and call me.
May I come to you,
that with the saints I may sing your praise, forever and ever.
Amen.*

Adapted from *Anima Christi* (14th century)

Wednesday, December 16: 1 John 4:7-21

A picture is worth a thousand words, they say. If that's true, than an actual in-person demonstration must be worth a thousand pictures or ten thousand words.

How do we know what **love** looks like? Acts like? Lives like? We know it by looking at God. By looking to Jesus. He gives us an in-person demonstration of what authentic love actually lives like ...

John writes, *"God showed how much he loved us by sending his one and only Son into the world so that we*

might have eternal life through him. This is real love – not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as a sacrifice to take away our sins ...”

Love, in the Bible is not a warm, fuzzy emotion. Love is a deliberate choice, leading to action, to put the needs of others before my own. It’s an other-focused commitment to DO what is right and good.

How do Jesus’ actions model that kind of self-giving, sacrificial love? How are we blessed by that?

However, John then turns to face us, and says, *“Dear friends, since God loved us that much, we surely ought to love each other. No one has ever seen God. But if we love each other, God lives in us, and his love is brought to full expression in us”*(1 John 4:9-12).

Is this even remotely possible? John believes it is, because God has given us His Spirit: *“God has given us his Spirit as proof that we live in him and he in us ... God is love, and all who live in love live in God, and God lives in them. And as we live in God, our love grows more perfect”*(1 John 4:13, 16-17).

We might want to protest that this is not fair. It’s one thing – one wonderful thing – that God loves us so much – it’s quite another to expect us to love other people with the same kind of love. John, however, is relentless in his call to us to follow Jesus’ example: *“If someone says, ‘I love God,’ but hates a brother or sister (including biological relatives, but also Christian brothers/sisters, friends, and even non-Christian neighbours), that person is a liar; for if we don’t love people we can see, how can we love God, whom we cannot see? And he has given us this command: Those who love God must also love their neighbours”*(1 John 4:20-21). Hmmm.

What is God saying to you?

*Disturb us, Lord, when we are too pleased with ourselves,
When our dreams have come true because we dreamed too little,
When we arrived safely because we sailed too close to the shore.
Disturb us, Lord, when with the abundance of things we possess
We have lost our thirst for the waters of life;
Having fallen in love with life, we have ceased to dream of eternity
And in our efforts to build a new earth,
we have allowed our vision of the new Heaven to dim.
Disturb us, Lord,
to dare more boldly,
to venture on wilder seas where storms will show Your mastery;
Where losing sight of land, we shall find the stars.
We ask you to push back the horizons of our hopes;
And to push back the future in strength, courage, hope, and love.
This we ask in the name of our Captain, who is Jesus Christ.
Amen.*

Sir Francis Drake (1540-1596)

Thursday, December 17: John 14:1-14

Buckingham Palace has 775 rooms. These include 19 State rooms, 52 Royal and guest bedrooms, 188 staff bedrooms, 92 offices and 78 bathrooms. I think the Queen has more than enough room to handle a few guests, now and then. Maybe, next time you’re in London, you should see if she could put you up?

God loves us. That’s the great good news of Advent and Christmas.

In John 14, Jesus reminds us of God’s great love for us – He is preparing for us an eternal future with Himself. Jesus uses the metaphor of “his Father’s house” to describe our eternal destiny. Most likely this doesn’t refer to a literal “mansion” or “palace” like Buckingham palace. We have no idea of what that might possibly be like other than it will be very, very good. We do know it is good news.

The only other time Jesus refers to "his Father's house" is referring to the Temple (John 2:16). The whole point of the Temple is that it's where heaven and Earth meet, where God is physically present with His people. So the wonderful future Jesus is talking about is a reality when we are personally with God forever. And there is room for everyone in this new reality.

"I am the way, the truth, and the life," says Jesus. *"No one can come to the Father except through me"* (14:6). Some people are offended by the exclusivity of Jesus' claim. It seems narrow and arrogant in a multi-faith world. However, if Jesus really is who He says He is – uniquely God Himself with us – then it makes sense that He, and only He, is the way to truly knowing God. If Jesus is the only One who is fully human and fully divine, then it is not surprising that the only pathway to God runs through Him, and Him alone. Jesus is unique.

Jesus is the perfect expression and embodiment of God's amazing grace and love. The One who is the way, truth, and life – Jesus – is far from arrogant. He is the One who washed His disciples' feet and told them to likewise. He gave His life for all people on the cross and challenges us to take up our cross and follow Him. Far from being narrow, He invites all people to come as equals into His Kingdom.

Advent and Christmas are about God's love, shown to us, in and through Jesus. How can we model our lives after His?

*O Lord Jesus Christ,
who crossed from this world to the Father,
You love those who are in Your world.
O Lord Jesus Christ,
make my mind cross from earthly to heavenly things:
help me despise those things that are evil,
help me desire only what is good.
Help me to hold lightly to those things which are passing away,
and hold strongly to those things that are eternal.
Kindle the fire of your love within my heart
So that others are warmed by your love burning within me.
O God, who condescended to wash of the feet of your disciples,
purify my heart by pouring upon it the light of your Holy Spirit.
In all things and above all things may I love you,
my Lord Jesus Christ.
Amen.*

Adapted from Anglo-Saxon Prayer Book (10th century)

Friday, December 18: John 14:15-31

When I was a child, my parents took my brother and I to Europe. We had rented a small camper van in the UK, then crossed the channel and drove around Europe. Poor Mom. This was before GPS-es, so she was trying to navigate by maps. Poor Dad. Driving a British van on the Continent, the driver was on the curb. I remember being in Cologne, Germany. We were trying to get to the cathedral. In desperation, Mom or Dad asked a local how to get there. Thankfully he spoke pretty good English. Instead of just giving us verbal directions, however, he said, "Follow me!" He got in his car and guided us right to the front door of the cathedral. Having him navigate the winding, medieval streets of Cologne with us, was amazing.

In John 14, Jesus reminds us of God's great love for us – He is preparing an eternal future with Himself for us. And He promises to be with us, every moment of every day. We don't navigate life on our own. The Creator of the universe and our loving Saviour is with us, guiding us, always. That's amazing. That's good news.

The good news is about eternal life with God in the future, but also the presence and power of God with us today. He blesses us with the gift of the Holy Spirit: His personal presence in our lives, every moment of every day. The good news is also that we live as God's chosen, beloved people right now. Yes, we have a future hope of being in God's loving presence. But, through the Spirit, that's also a present reality, now and forever.

Jesus also emphasizes that love is lived out in obedience to God and His commands (He says this three times, in 14:15, 21 and 23 – and negatively in 14:24). As John mentioned in 1 John 4 (Wednesday), since God loves us so passionately and profoundly, we also ought to love one another, in practical, tangible ways.

If we really believe God is the loving Creator of the universe – that Jesus is the loving Saviour of the world – then we should recognize that His commands are wise (after all He made us and knows us inside out) and good (He desires what is best for us). We should love to obey His commands for our own good. And we should obey them because we love their author and Creator.

- Why do we find these commands irritating?
- Why do we struggle to live them?
- What does it mean to you, that Jesus is with you always?

Jesus' promise is that the Holy Spirit will be born in us and fill us. He will help us in the ongoing challenge of living Jesus' commands to love one another. He knows it's a battle to try to live as He desires us to live. His Spirit helps us. "Love," says Dr. Karl Menninger, "cures people, both the ones who give it and the ones who receive it." What is Jesus saying to you? How is Spirit inviting you to love, in Jesus' name?

*Breathe in me, O Holy Spirit,
that my thoughts may all be holy.
Act in me, O Holy Spirit,
that my work, too, may be holy.
Draw my heart, O Holy Spirit,
that I love but what is holy.
Strengthen me, O Holy Spirit,
to defend all that is holy.
Guard me, then, O Holy Spirit,
that I always may be holy.
Amen.*

Augustine (354-430)

Saturday, December 19: Philippians 4:4-9

Christmas is about **HOPE, PEACE, LOVE, and JOY**. **Joy** comes through knowing Jesus, our Saviour, Redeemer, and Companion through life.

Paul is writing this letter to his friends in Philippi from prison in Rome. Ancient Roman prisons were NOT nice places to be. Does that surprise you.

During his suffering, Paul encourages us to stay joyful. Paul is an inspiring and challenging example of someone who is going through tough times, and yet finds joy in His relationship with Jesus. "Joy does not simply happen to us," Henri Nouwen observes. "We have to choose joy and keep choosing it every day."

- Read through this passage a few times. Reflect on what Paul is saying.
- Paul is in prison. How are his words challenging and inspiring?
- How can you be a more joyful person?

Richard Foster comments, "Joy, not grit, is the hallmark of holy obedience. We need to be light-hearted in what we do to avoid taking ourselves too seriously. It is a cheerful revolt against self and pride." Sometimes we do take ourselves too seriously. When our faith is in Jesus, we can walk a bit more lightly and laugh a bit more.

"Be faithful in little things," adds Mother Teresa, "for in them our strength lies. We may not be able to give much but we can always give joy that springs from a heart that is in love with God."

How can our lives reflect the joy that springs for a heart in love with God?

*God, be in my head, and in my understanding;
Jesus, be in my eyes, and in my looking;
Holy Spirit, be in my mouth, and in my speaking;
Holy Spirit, be in my heart, and in my thinking;
Jesus be in my beginning, and in my journeying;
God be at my end, and at my departing.
Amen*

Adapted from *Old Sarum Primer* (13th Century)

Sunday, December 20: James 1:1-18

What do you do when you are feeling stressed? How do you handle it when you're struggling?

The hope, peace, love, and joy of Christmas invite us to come to Jesus. Jesus is God with us. Paul writes, *"Christ is the visible image of the invisible God. He existed before anything was created and is supreme over all creation, for through him God created everything in the heavenly realms and on earth. He made the things we can see and the things we can't see – such as thrones, kingdoms, rulers, and authorities in the unseen world.*

"Everything was created through him and for him. He existed before anything else, and he holds all creation together. Christ is also the head of the church, which is his body. He is the beginning, supreme over all who rise from the dead. So he is first in everything. For God in all his fullness was pleased to live in Christ, and through him God reconciled everything to himself. He made peace with everything in heaven and on earth by means of Christ's blood on the cross"(Colossians 1:15-20).

The idea that God could save the world through the birth of a child is completely illogical. God should come with billions of dollars, great armies, fiery tweets, and powerful weapons. Instead God comes in humility, with love, with mercy, with forgiveness, with grace, and with compassion.

The greatest military empires have faded into the dust. The Kingdom of God and Jesus' church have thrived and grown through servanthood, love, mercy, forgiveness, and compassion, not power and violence. It shouldn't work. It's a miracle. But miracles **are** God's business. That's a key part of the message of Christmas.

As we read James 1, there is a lot that is counterintuitive here, too: *"When troubles come your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy"*(1:2). That doesn't seem right, does it?

And yet as you read through James reasoning, what do you think?

Have you noticed we actually grow most during the most difficult times? When we overcome our greatest challenges we realize we mature the most ... and, paradoxically, enjoy ourselves the most.

Eugene Peterson writes, *"The gospel message says: 'You don't live in a mechanistic world ruled by necessity; you don't live in a random world ruled by chance; you live in a world ruled by the God of Exodus and Easter. He will do things in you that neither you nor your friends would have supposed possible ...'"* That's good news for us to hear. God is very much with us. And nothing is impossible with Him (Luke 1:37).

This is our good news. *"I am convinced,"* writes Paul, *"that nothing can ever separate us from God's love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow – not even the powers of hell can separate us from God's love. No power in the sky above or in the earth below – indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord"*(Romans 8:38-39).

"Whatever is good and perfect comes down to us from God our Father, who created all the lights in the heavens. He never changes or casts a shifting shadow. He chose to give birth to us by giving us his true word. And we, out of all creation, became his prized possession"(James 1:17-18).

*O, Son of God, perform a miracle for me: change my heart.
You, whose crimson blood redeems mankind, purify my heart.
It is you who makes the sun bright and the ice sparkle;
you who makes the rivers flow and the salmon leap.
Your skilled hand makes the nut tree blossom, and the wheat turn golden;
your Spirit composes the songs of the birds and the buzz of the bees.
Your creation is a million wondrous miracles, beautiful to behold.
I ask of just one more miracle:
take my hear, my soul, my life and make it the home
where the fire of your Spirit burns forever bright.
Amen.*

Celtic prayer

Monday, December 21: John 1:1-14

"The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). God became a person, just like us. "This is what incarnation means," writes Frederick Buechner, "It is untheological. It is unsophisticated. It is undignified. But according to Christianity, it is the way things are."

Unlike other religions, which talk about transcending the physical, rejecting our physical lives, and becoming completely "spiritual," God, in-Jesus, meets us where we are in all our real world physical messy-ness. He meets us and cares for us in the real world. God, in Jesus, walks with us through real life.

"Incarnation," Buechner continues, "means that all ground is holy ground because God not only made it but walked on it, ate and slept and worked and died on it. We are saved here. And what is saved is not some diaphanous distillation of our bodies and our earth, but our bodies and our earth themselves. Jerusalem becomes the New Jerusalem coming down out of heaven like a bride adorned for her husband (Revelation 21:2). Our bodies are sown perishable and raised imperishable (1 Corinthians 15:42)."

Is this important? Yes. Jesus' coming means you have a God and Saviour who understands the challenges of your life. He knows pain, frustration, hunger, heat, loneliness, heartache, sorrow, cold, joy, grief, hunger, pleasure, anger, betrayal, and love. Jesus can help you though it all, because He has been here and done this.

Jesus' coming among us is also important because He affirms everything you are is important to God – not just your soul, but also your body, mind, heart, and relationships. He created them all; He cares about them all. You can bring your aches, joys, cares, hopes, and concerns about all of your life and person to God. It's all important to Him.

Paul prays, *"I pray that God, the source of hope, will fill you completely with **joy** and peace because you trust in him. Then you will overflow with confident hope through the power of the Holy Spirit"* (Romans 15:13).

*O Lord Jesus Christ,
make me worthy to understand the profound mystery of your holy incarnation,
which you have worked for our sake and for our salvation.
Truly there is nothing so great and wonderful as this,
that you, my God, who are the creator of all things,
should become a creature,
so that we should become like God.
You have humbled yourself that made yourself small
that we might be made mighty.
You've taken the form of a servant,
so that you might confer upon us a royal and divine beauty.
Lord give me a glimpse of what the wonder of your incarnation means.
Lord give me a passion to love others as you do.
Amen.*

Adapted from Angela of Foligno (1248-1309)

Tuesday, December 22: John 1:15-34

Who is Jesus? How does John the Baptist describe Him?
Consider these quotes about Jesus as you read John 1 today ...

"I know men and I tell you that Jesus Christ is no mere man. Superficial minds see a resemblance between Christ and the founders of empires and the gods of other religions. That resemblance does not exist. This is between Christianity and whatever other religions the distance of infinity ... I search in vain in history to find anyone similar to Jesus Christ. Neither history, nor humanity, nor the ages, nor nature, offer me anything with which I am able to compare Christ or explain his gospel. Here everything is extraordinary ... Everything in Christ astonishes me. His spirit overawes me, and his will confounds me ... Between him and whoever else in the world there is no possible term of comparison. Alexander, Caesar, Charlemagne, and I have founded empires. But on what did we rest the creation of our genius? Upon force. Jesus Christ founded His empire upon love; and at this hour millions would die for Him."(Napoleon Bonaparte)

"Jesus of Nazareth, without money and arms, conquered more millions than Alexander the Great, Caesar, Mohammed, and Napoleon; without science and learning, he shed more light on things human and divine than all philosophers and scholars combined; without the eloquence of school, he spoke such words of life as were never spoken before or since, and produced effects which lie beyond the reach of orator or poet; without writing a single line, he set more pens in motion, and furnished themes for more sermons, orations, discussions, learned volumes, works of art, and songs of praise than the whole army of great men of ancient and modern times."(Swiss-born theologian, Philip Schaff)

"The Christmas message is that there is hope for a ruined humanity – hope of pardon, hope of peace with God, hope of glory – because at the Father's will Jesus became poor, and was born in a stable so that thirty years later He might hang on a cross."(J.I. Packer)

"Our tendency in the midst of suffering is to turn on God. To get angry and bitter and shake our fist at the sky and say, 'God, you don't know what it's like. You don't understand. You have no idea what I'm going through. You don't have a clue how much this hurts.' The cross is God's way of taking away all of our accusations, excuses, and arguments. The cross is God taking on flesh and blood and saying, 'Me too.'" (Rob Bell)

*My soul longs for you, my God, my King, my Saviour.
Today I turn to you from the depths of my heart.
May your holy presence remove all dangers from my soul and body.
May your many graces fill the inmost recesses of my heart,
and inflame it with your divine love.
O most sweet Jesus.
Turn your face towards me.
Today, with all the power of my soul I cry out to you.
May all that is beautiful and good in all of creation praise you for me,
may all creation bless your holy name –
for you are our protection in time and eternity,
you are the consoling presence and power of God,
and you are our Saviour and Sustainer.
Amen*

adapted from Henry Suso (1295-1366)

Wednesday, December 23: Luke 2:1-7

What is Christmas all about? Especially in challenging political times, how is Jesus' coming good news for us?

During the horrors of World War II, C.S. Lewis gave a series of talks about Christianity on BBC radio (later he published these in the book, *Mere Christianity*). Lewis sums up Christmas and Christianity in one memorable sentence: *"The Son of God became a man to enable men to become the sons of God."*

The invitation of Christmas is to find new life – a whole new identity and purpose – in and through Jesus. In the midst of the tough times, in Jesus God comes to us, to give us new life. We rediscover the purpose for which He created us: to love God and to love our neighbour in His name. To know and to be His good news.

As we read in John 1 a couple of days ago, *"He came into the very world he created, but the world didn't recognize him. He came to his own people, and even they rejected him. But to all who believed him and accepted him, he gave the right to become children of God. They are reborn – not with a physical birth resulting from human passion or plan, but a birth that comes from God"*(John 1:11-13).

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a contemporary of Lewis', was A German theologian. He was arrested by the Nazis and imprisoned in a concentration camp for helping Jews. What might Christmas mean in Germany during World War 2? How could a Christian understand "good tidings of great joy" which had supposedly arrived with the birth of Christ in that difficult environment? Bonhoeffer did not see Christmas as a confusing contradiction in a world of evil, but as a profound message of hope and joy for those living under oppression.

He wrote, *"For the great and powerful of this world, there are only two places in which their courage fails them, of which they are afraid deep down in their souls, from which they shy away. These are the manger and the cross of Jesus Christ. No powerful person dares to approach the manger, and this even includes King Herod. For this is where thrones shake, the mighty fall, the prominent perish, because God is with the lowly. Here the rich come to nothing, because God is with the poor and hungry, but the rich and satisfied he sends away empty. Before Mary, the maid, before the manger of Christ, before God in lowliness, the powerful come to naught; they have no right, no hope; they are judged."*(see Mary's song, Luke 1:46-55)

Jesus comes with a promise of hope, peace, love, and joy. Will we let Him into our hearts? *"The only real blind person at Christmas-time is he who has not Christ in his heart."*(Helen Keller)

*O God, my Father,
looking up at the shining stars of the cold December sky
I remember the patient mother and the rock-hewn manger in lowly Bethlehem
where lay cradled your Love for the world.
In the shadows of the silent stall I stand beside the Christ.
Speak to my soul as I wait and pray.
Let the trusting, loving spirit of the Child
steal into my life until it calms my fears and soothes my pain.
In willing surrender and passionate longing
let me take the Christ child to my heart,
and henceforth I may live as he lived,
love as he loved,
and follow in his footsteps,
bring help to the needy,
courage to the weak,
comfort to the sorrowing,
and hope to the lost.
Amen.*

Anonymous

Thursday, December 24: Luke 2:1-14

The Magi (from the distant Parthian Empire) will have to travel long dusty caravan routes to find Jesus.

The residents of Bethlehem and the shepherds on the nearby hills, don't have to go anywhere: Christmas came to them. Jesus was born in their town. They only had a short walk to find Him. Did most of them bother?

We have read this story in Luke so often it ceases to amaze us. But try to imagine it in fresh ways. Imagine the life of a shepherd. It's a tough life, cold and thankless. It's a meagre life, poor paying and low status. It's a dull life, monotonous and boring. It's a lonely life, cut off from all but a few fellow shepherds. "Fun" would be

laughing at the same old jokes over the same fire with same old guys.

Suddenly all heaven breaks loose. Can you imagine? None of us can even begin to comprehend what it is like for an angel of the Lord to appear, surrounded by the radiance of the Lord's glory. Then to have the angel speak. His words are that the hopes of the prophets are finally fulfilled: *"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."* Then to have the angel joined by a vast host of others – the armies of heaven – praising God and saying, *"Glory to God in highest heaven, and peace on earth to those with whom God is pleased."*

"Two things stand out in the story of the shepherds. First, any day may become a special day if we have the heart to see its wonders. Second, any town will become all the more marvellous to the person who seeks for evidences of God's presence among the most familiar byways" (Charles Allen and Charles Wallis).

What wonders do you see today? What evidence of God's presence do you see in your familiar byways today?

Where is God at work in our town? Look at things with new eyes, eagerly seeking evidence of God's work in your life and among us. Praise God and give thanks.

*O God, whose mighty Son was born in Bethlehem those long days ago,
lead us to that same poor place where Mary laid her tiny child.
And as we look on in wonder and praise,
make us welcome him in all new life,
see him in the poor,
and care for his handiwork:
the earth, the sky, and the sea.
O God, bless us again in your great love.
We pray for this through Christ our Lord.
Amen.*

Anonymous

Friday, December 25: Luke 2:8-20

Martin Luther writes, *"There are some of us who think to ourselves, 'If I had only been there. How quick I would have been to help the baby. I would have washed his linen. How happy I would have been to go with the shepherds to see the Lord lying in the manger.' Yes, we would. We say that because we know how great Christ is, but if we had been there at that time, we would have done no better than the people of Bethlehem."*

That observation hurts, doesn't it? Many of us, like most of the residents of Bethlehem, would have missed Jesus' birth. We would have been so busy. Mary and Joseph were so poor. They were Middle Eastern migrants "from away." They are not one of us. They are not our problem. Other people would help, right?

Mary and Joseph (and Jesus) were unimportant. More of an annoyance and inconvenience, really.

Luther goes on to ask this hard question: *"So why don't we do it now? We have Christ in our neighbour."*

In our rushing about what are we missing? **Who** are we missing? Is there someone we could call? Encourage? Forgive? Help? Get together with? Pray with? What about Middle Eastern migrants 'from away'?

"I tell you the truth," Jesus says, *"when you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were doing it to me"* ("It" is any loving act of justice or mercy, see Matthew 25:31-46). Christmas is a great time to come alongside someone who is struggling, someone you have lost contact with, someone who needs some love, someone who needs your forgiveness, and to make a difference in the name of Jesus.

Loving our neighbour is not something we ought to limit to the Christmas season. We all have opportunities to care for people in the name of Jesus throughout the year. Maybe one of your "New Year's Resolutions" can be to keep the spirit of God's love, grace, care, and compassion going all year around. How might you do that?

Support a ministry (like Canadian Baptist Ministries or another ministry of care and compassion) on an ongoing basis? Help out at the Soup Kitchen? Call a shut in regularly? Call a lonely person weekly/monthly? Mentor a child/youth? Encourage someone with a smile? Get to know some of our refugee families?

You don't have to do it all. Just do one thing to share God's love ...

*Loving Father, help us remember the birth of Jesus,
that we may share in the song of the angels,
the gladness of the shepherds,
and the wisdom of the wise men.
Close the door of hate
and open the door of love all over the world.
Let kindness come with every gift
and good desires with every greeting.
Deliver us from evil by the blessing which Christ brings
and teach us to be merry with clean hearts.
May Christmas morning make us happy to be your children
and Christmas evening bring us to our beds with grateful thoughts,
forgiving and forgiven, for Jesus' sake.
Amen.*

Robert Louis Stevenson (1850-1894)

Saturday, December 26: Luke 2:21-35

On the 8th day after his birth, every Jewish boy is to be circumcised and named. Circumcision is an ongoing symbol of God's covenant promise to Abraham (Genesis 17). This covenant included blessings for Abraham and his descendants that they would be a blessing to all nations (Genesis 12:1-3). They were to be a missional people, sharing God's miraculous love with the world (they never really understood that blessing others thing).

Mary and Joseph bring their baby boy to the Temple on the 8th day. Mary and Joseph's son is circumcised and named "Jesus," the name given before he was conceived (Luke 1:31).

Later, a firstborn son was always presented to God in the Temple and offered to Him as a gift. Then the parents would symbolically "buy back," or redeem, the child through an offering (Exodus 13:2, 11-16; Numbers 18:15-16). Through this symbolic act, the parents would acknowledge their child belongs to God, who alone has the power to give life. They recognize their child is a God's gift, given back to them as a blessing.

For 40 days after the birth of a son, the mother was ceremonially unclean and could not enter the Temple area. So this story, from Luke 2:22 on, takes place at the end of those 40 days. In accordance with the law, the family goes to the Temple to present Jesus to the Lord and offer a sacrifice of redemption.

As Mary and Joseph bring Jesus to the temple to fulfill these requirements, they meet Simeon. Simeon was old. He had been doing a lot of thinking and a lot of praying. He had lived through hard times in Israel: Roman occupation, brutal taxes, and systemic corruption. He had much to complain about. But rather than dwelling on his disappointments, Simeon chooses to look to God's future with hope. Nothing is so bleak as a day without a tomorrow; Simeon has hope for tomorrow. Simeon refuses to lose his hope in God's love, mercy, grace, and power. Patiently, he waits. Stubbornly, he keeps the faith. Can Simeon be an inspiration to you?

Note Simeon's prophetic words: he knows Jesus has come for ALL nations, ALL peoples, and ALL cultures (as in Abraham's call and Isaiah 61). Jesus is a new beginning of Abraham's mission to be a blessing to ALL people on earth (Genesis 12:1-3). Salvation is not just for Jewish people (that's good news for all of us non-Jews).

Jesus has come to with good news to everyone in our town – no matter what their ethnic background, ability, age, gender, income, or life experience. How is that encouraging for 2018?

Echoing the words of Isaiah 9 and John 1, Simeon describes Jesus as our light in the darkness. What does light do? Light makes your darkness disappear. Light calms your fears. Light reveals mysteries to you. Light helps you find your way. Light provides warmth. Light allows you to see and be seen by other people and build good relationships. Light is comforting. Light does not allow anything to be hidden. *"God is light, and there is no darkness in him at all ... if we are living in the light, as God is in the light, then we have fellowship with each other, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, cleanses us from all sin"* (1 John 1:5-7).

How can we walk in His light today and every day, this Christmas and in the year ahead?

*Dearest God,
please never let me crowd my life full to the brim
so that, like the keeper of Bethlehem's inn,
I find I have no room for Him.
Instead, let my heart's door be ever open,
ready to welcome the newborn King.
Never let my life be filled with fear, jealousy, or rage,
So that like, Herod and his friends
I put up walls to push Jesus away.
Let me offer the best I have to Him, who gives me everything.
Amen*

Rosalyn Hart Finch

Sunday, December 27: Luke 2:36-38

Hope. Peace. Love. Joy. These are qualities that just seem to flow from Anna.

As I get older (ain't none of us getting any younger 😊), I hope I can age gracefully. I hope I can model the hope, peace, love, and joy of Jesus more and more.

I appreciate this poem about Anna from Ivan Kauffman. As you read his thoughts, think about what the birth of Jesus means to you ...

"The Prophet is old and stooped over, her face covered with wrinkles, like Mother Teresa. Her eyes are bright and clear, like a child's. She is beaming with excitement and obviously has something important to tell us. Her voice is quiet and peaceful, but also convinced and powerful. As she speaks she constantly looks up, searching for the next word which produced gaps in her speech, as age has produced gaps in her teeth. The boundary between the present and eternity has long begun to dissolve for her. Anna the Prophet:

*"He's here. What we're waiting for.
His parents came to the temple this morning. Cutest little thing.
Every baby, we always wondered, is this the one?
Then we'd say, 'Maybe the next one.'
The Romans told us to stop. They said, 'We're it. Get used to it.'
But all they had was soldiers, what could they do?
Make work for the grave diggers.
If that's all there is, why bother?
We don't need more dead bodies to bury.
We need people to pray.
It's the only thing that works.
I'm eighty-four years old.
People ask me why I don't give up.
I say, 'I'm waiting.'
They say, 'What for?'
I say, 'The same thing you are.'
That's why you can't get on a train if you don't have a ticket.
You wouldn't know when to get off.*

*People don't understand that.
 They say, 'What you see is what you get.'
 But what you see is what you're looking for.
 Forget about the pie-in-the-sky-by-and-by stuff. Dreams never turn out the way we think.
 There's got to be real babies. Somebody you can feel their heartbeat. Change their diapers.
 "People who pray understand. The others mostly stand around that argue.
 Whoever changed anything arguing?
 The prayers, they're up to Yahweh. Who knows what Yahweh can do?
 This should make even the sourpusses happy.
 Well, it's time for me to go now.
 But you – you stay and have a party.
 Sing a lot. Kiss the girls, be happy. It's gonna be a great time."*

We have so much to rejoice in. "You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you **out of darkness into his wonderful light**. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy ... Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us" (1 Peter 2:9-12).

Lord, help me to be person who flows with the grace of God in these days.

*Lord, make me an instrument of your peace,
 Where there is hatred, let me sow love;
 where there is injury, pardon;
 where there is doubt, faith;
 where there is despair, hope;
 where there is darkness, light;
 where there is sadness, joy;
 O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console;
 to be understood as to understand;
 to be loved as to love.
 For it is in giving that we receive;
 it is in pardoning that we are pardoned;
 and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.
 Amen.*

attributed to Francis of Assisi (1182-1226)

Monday, December 28: Matthew 2:1-12

A friend of mine gets all in a knot. He insists we have to "keep Christ in Christmas" by saying "Merry Christmas" instead of "Happy Holidays." That friend is also always busy, always grumpy, and just not a lot of fun to be around at Christmastime or any other time of the year. He makes sure his words say, "keep Christ in Christmas," but I wonder if he is missing Jesus? He certainly seems to know very little of Jesus' hope, peace, love, or joy.

We can say "Merry Christmas" all we want, and not know Jesus at all.

I love the Magi because these travelers from far away Persia (modern day Iran), find Jesus. The local religious Jewish people miss God's love and grace completely. They are "keeping the faith" but are stressed, angry, and miserable. The miss God. These Iranians find Him and their lives are transformed by Jesus.

Every time I read this passage, I'm reminded of a simple hymn by James Fast. It gives me pause to think:

*Wise men seeking Jesus, traveled from afar,
 Guided on their journey by a beauteous star.
 But if we desire Him, He is close at hand;
 For our native country is our Holy Land.*

*Prayerful souls may find Him by our quiet lakes,
Meet Him on our hillsides when the morning breaks.
In our fertile cornfields while the sheaves are bound,
In our busy markets Jesus may be found.*

*He is more than near us, if we love Him well;
For He seeketh ever in our hearts to dwell.*

- Have I missed Jesus this Christmas?
- How can I organize my life so I can spend time, daily, with Jesus?
- How might I need to change things up so I have more time for Him?
- How can I let Jesus dwell in my heart?

*Child of glory, Child of Mary, Child of God,
born in the stable, the King of all:
you came to our wasteland,
and in our place you suffered,
draw near to us today as we call to you.
Bless to us this day of joy,
open to us heaven's generous gates,
strengthen our hope,
revive our tired souls,
till we sing the joys of your glory, with all the angels of heaven.
Amen*

Ray Simpson

Tuesday, December 29: Matthew 2:13-18

Tom Wright, Research Fellow at the University of Oxford, writes, *"I was once preaching at a big Christmas service where a well-known historian, famous for his skepticism toward Christianity, had been persuaded to attend by his family. Afterwards, he approached me, all smiles. 'I finally worked out,' he declared, 'why people like Christmas.'*

'Really?' I said. 'Do tell me.'

'A baby threatens no one,' he said, 'so the whole thing is a happy event which means nothing at all.'

"I was dumbfounded. At the heart of the Christmas story is a baby who poses such a threat to the most powerful man around that he kills a whole village full of other babies in order to try to get rid of him. At the heart of the Christmas story is a baby who, if only the Roman Emperor knew it, will be Lord of the whole world. Within a generation his followers will be persecuted by the Empire as a danger to good order. Whatever else you say about Jesus, from his birth onwards, people certainly found him a threat. He upset their power games, and suffered the usual fate of people who do that.

"In fact, the shadow of the cross falls over the story from this moment on. Jesus is born with a price on his head. Plots are hatched; angels have to warn Joseph; they only just escape from Bethlehem in time. Herod the Great, who thought nothing of killing members of his own family, including his own beloved wife, when he suspected them of scheming against him, and who gave orders when dying that the leading citizens of Jericho should be slaughtered so that people would be weeping at his funeral – this Herod would not bat an eyelid at the thought of killing lots of little babies in case one of them should be regarded as a royal pretender. As his power increased, so had his paranoia – a not unfamiliar progression, as dictators round the world have shown from that day to this.

"The gospel of Jesus the Messiah was born, then, in a land and at a time of trouble, tension, violence and fear. Banish all the thoughts of peaceful Christmas scenes. Before the Prince of Peace had learned to walk and talk,

he was a homeless refugee with a price on his head..."

Does this part of the Christmas story disturb you? It should. It's meant to. It's a harsh reminder of the very evil that Jesus has come into the world to save us from. And, in an odd way, it's comforting as we begin a new year – whatever it brings – blessings or trouble. Jesus will be there in the midst of it with us. For many people around the world today, knowing they have a God who understands terrible suffering is very comforting.

"No point in arriving in comfort, when the world is a misery; no point in having easy life, when the world suffers violence and injustice." says Wright. "If Jesus is to be Emmanuel, God-with-us, he must be where the pain is." Jesus is where the struggles (and the blessing) are. Thank you, Lord.

*Spirit of Christ, stir me;
Spirit of Christ, move me;
Spirit of Christ, fill me;
Spirit of Christ, seal me.*

Consecrate in me Your Heart and Will, O Heavenly Father.

Create in me a fountain of virtues.

Seal my soul as Your own, that Your reflection in me may be a light for all to see ...

*We beg You, all-merciful Father through Jesus, Your only-begotten Son,
made man for our sake, crucified and glorified for us,*

*to send upon us from Your treasure-house the Spirit,
who rested upon You in all his fullness:*

the Spirit of wisdom,

enabling us to relish the fruit of the tree of life, which is indeed Yourself;

the gift of understanding:

to enlighten our perceptions;

the gift of prudence,

enabling us to follow in Your footsteps;

the gift of strength:

to withstand our adversary's onslaught;

the gift of knowledge:

to distinguish good from evil by the light of Your holy teaching;

the gift of piety:

to clothe ourselves with charity and mercy;

the gift of fear:

to withdraw from all ill-doing and live quietly in awe of Your eternal majesty.

These are the things for which we petition.

*Grant them for the honor of Your holy name, to which,
with the Father and the Holy Spirit, be all honor and glory,
thanksgiving, praise, and lordship for ever and ever.*

Amen.

St. Bonaventure, 1221-1274

Wednesday, December 30: Matthew 2:19-23

President Abraham Lincoln wrote, *"I have been driven many times to my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had nowhere else to go. My own wisdom, and that of all about me, seemed insufficient for the day."*

Moving into a New Year invites us to think about new beginnings.

The BIG event Old Testament Jews kept looking back to, for inspiration and encouragement, was the Exodus, the miraculous way God delivered them from slavery in Egypt into the Promised Land. Every year the feast of Passover retells this story of God's provision, power, and salvation. God brought them into a place of salvation. But, though God had saved His people to be a blessing, the Israelites consistently failed and fell short:

- They felt short in their devotion to God (for example, making a golden calf to worship after God had

miraculously led them through the Red Sea);

- They fell short in their love for their neighbours, both Jewish and non-Jewish.

Now Jesus comes out of Egypt (yes, he, Mary, and Joseph have been refugees there. God has a heart for refugees. That's good to remember). It's a new beginning. This time God Himself will show His people – you and I – how we ought to live in as His people. You have been brought out of slavery to sin and bondage to evil. You have been saved by the blood of Jesus. You are in a "state" of salvation; you are saved. You are safe in God's hands, today and for all eternity. How do you live in this Promised Land of new life in Jesus?

Jesus can show you how you can:

- Live a life of faithful devotion to God. Determine to walk humbly, as a student, with Jesus. Make it a goal to learn from and be more like Jesus.
- Love your neighbour as yourself. Ask Jesus to help you act justly and love mercy in new ways.

Resolutions are great. But you will also have to come up with some specific strategies you to implement your desire to faithfully follow Jesus. It helps to ask a trusted friend to hold you accountable.

- Will you read/pray every day? What? (these guides can help) When? Where?
- Will you be part of a small group or class? Which one? When will you begin (this week?.?.)?
- Is there a practical ministry of service/volunteer work you can be part of? Which? When?

Is God calling you to reach out to a specific person in mercy and love? Who?

What will you do about it?

*May the Strength of God guide us.
May the Power of God preserve us.
May the Wisdom of God instruct us.
May the Hand of God protect us.
May the Way of God direct us.
May the Shield of God defend us.
May the Angels of God guard us against the snares of the evil one.
May Christ be with us.
May Christ be before us.
May Christ be in us,
Christ be over all.
May your Grace, Lord, always be ours,
This day, O Lord, and forevermore.
Amen.*

Attributed to Patrick (390-460)

Thursday, December 31: Colossians 1:1-14

As we reflect on Christmas and try to figure out what it means for us, what might Paul say to us? We'll look through his letter to Colossae and think about its relevance to us, in Lethbridge, in 2021.

Colossae was a city in western Turkey. Paul wrote this letter (like Ephesians, Philippians, and Philemon) from prison in Rome. Paul never actually visited Colossae; the church was founded by Epaphras and other converts from Paul's journeys. The church had issues. Some people were suggesting any road to God is a valid road to God. If paganism worked for you, if Judaism worked for you, if philosophy worked for you ... it was all good. Colossae was a pre-modern post-modern city.

Paul sees things differently. For him, Jesus, and only Jesus, can bring us into relationship with God. As we live in a post-modern world where personal experience, personal beliefs, personal values, personal ethics, personal morality, and personal rights are celebrated as the ultimate good, it's helpful to hear Paul talking about absolute truth, absolute belief, absolute ethics, and absolute freedom.

Do you remember the parable of sower (Matthew 13:1-23)? Paul uses that same metaphor. The seed, of course, is the good news about Jesus. *"This Good News that came to you,"* Paul says, *"is growing and bearing fruit ..."*(1:6), which is exactly what happens when it falls on good soil.

What does the fruit look like? Paul says their faith leads to a *"confident hope of what God has reserved for you in heaven"*(1:5) and a *"love for all of God's people"*(1:4). Faith, hope, and love are key indicators of growth (in Galatians 5:22-23, Paul gives a more comprehensive list of indicators of spiritual growth: *"the Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control"*).

Paul goes on to pray for the people in the church:

- *"We ask God to give you complete knowledge of his will and to give you spiritual wisdom and understanding."* Why? *"Then the way you live will always honor and please the Lord, and your lives will produce every kind of good fruit (there's that spiritual fruit, again.). All the while, you will grow (there's 'growth' again.) as you learn to know God better and better."*
- *"We also pray that you will be strengthened with all his glorious power so you will have all the endurance and patience you need. May you be filled with joy, always thanking the Father."* Why? *"He has enabled you to share in the inheritance that belongs to his people, who live in the light. For he has rescued us from the kingdom of darkness and transferred us into the Kingdom of his dear Son, who purchased our freedom and forgave our sins."*

Growth is a good thing in any healthy organism. A lack of growth leads to stagnation and death. As people loved by God, we should always be growing, becoming more and more like Jesus (none of us is there yet, are we? I know I'm not).

Are you becoming more loving? More joyful? More at peace (within your own soul? with others?) More patient? More kind? More 'good'? More faithful? More gentle? More self-controlled? If so ... great. Keep it up. If not ... pray that God would help you keep growing. And keep working at it. Keep praying and walking with Jesus.

*Our Father, grant that in the days of this New Year
we may feel your love,
the love that surrounds us,
the love that will not let us go but will ever bring us back:
back to your side, back to your will, back to your way.
It is in that way – your way – that we would walk, O Lord,
for though all we like sheep have gone astray, like sheep we are tired –
tired of missing your path and stumbling along paths of our own choosing.
Like sheep we would return to the fold.
We would come back to you,
confessing that we are not proud of the mistakes we have made,
not too proud of our record as we look back over the last year.
We are conscious not of our triumphs and success but of our failures.
We are in no boastful mood, O Lord, as we look into a new year.
We seek your forgiveness for our stupidity and our obstinacy,
for the blindness of our hearts,
for the wrong choices that grieved you and subtracted from our own happiness.
Forgive us, Father.
Humbly and gratefully we open our hearts to receive your miracle of grace.
We thank you for the fresh strong wind of your Spirit
which comes to bring us refreshment, cleansing, and perfect peace.
Amen.*

Peter Marshall (1902-1949)

Friday, January 1: Colossians 1:15-29

How do we keep growing and keep bearing fruit in our lives? There are lots of books and lots of teachers with all sorts of ideas and advice and self-help. Paul points us back to Jesus. Life only makes sense, the world only makes sense, our faith only makes sense when they are centered on Him. Coming back to Jesus, again and again, can help us live with passion, with purpose, and in ways that bear fruit.

In Jesus, we discover who God is: "*Christ is the visible image of the invisible God.*" We cannot see God. We may be aware of His presence: many people, many religions, many philosophies all sense there is Someone or Something, that is real, but which we cannot see. However, Jesus shows God to us so that, when we look at Jesus, we are seeing God Himself. The more we listen to Jesus, watch what Jesus does, learn about Jesus and get to know Jesus, the more we learn about God and get to know God.

Before Jesus came, God was a mystery. Now, while we still cannot fully comprehend Him, we can know Him a lot more fully than before. That's one of the reasons why, in 1:1-14, we can be thankful.

Jesus holds together the universe and gives us hope for the future. God – Father, Son, and Spirit – created and sustain the universe as we know it. He created it good, beautiful, wonderful, incredible, and amazing. The more we learn about creation (through science, for instance), the more we stand in awe of God, the Creator. The more we get to know God's creation, the more we get to know the wonder, wisdom, and love of God.

Through Jesus' death on the cross and His resurrection, God reconciled us and everything else with Himself so we can know life with Him. This is a profound mystery which leads to an even deeper sense of awe and worship.

Paul says, "*Jesus HAS enabled you to share in the inheritance that belongs to his people, who live in the light. He HAS rescued us from the kingdom of darkness and transferred us into the Kingdom of his dear Son, who purchased our freedom and forgave our sins. He HAS reconciled you to himself through the death of Christ in his physical body. As a result, he HAS brought you into his own presence, and you ARE holy and blameless as you stand before him without a single fault*" (1:12-14, 22). He has already accomplished all this.

Real life with Jesus is not just about being with Him one day, some day in the future. Jesus is God with us, today, January 1, 2021. He invites us to love God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength, AND to love our neighbour, today. He empowers us to be His love and His grace to the people around us, today.

Our challenge is to live like Jesus here and now. It's tough. There are so many temptations. I make mistakes so often. My motives are not always what they should be. But I will press on ...

*May we who are pilgrims, conscious of life's changes and challenges,
learn by faith, Jesus, to cling to you.
We know you will be with us in the future as you have been in the past.
We know you will lead us on through all the tomorrows
as you have led us through the yesterdays.
We know you will not let us go,
even when we, in willful neglect and indulgence, try to wander from your way.
As we begin the New Year, we know full well it will bring many changes.
The old must give place to the new.
Time does not stand still nor the world cease from its turning.
Grant us the courage and fortitude of mature men and women
that will enable us to stand upon our faith,
as the Spirit of the living Lord shall give us strength.
In your strong name we pray.
Amen.*

Peter Marshall (1902-1949)

Saturday, January 2: Colossians 2

Following Jesus in the real world of 2021 can be a challenge.

Colossians is a letter to a particular group of Christians in a particularly challenging place. There was lots of "spirituality" but not much Christianity (sound familiar?). People from Jewish backgrounds were insisting Christians become Jews, first: circumcision, keeping the Sabbath (legalistically), observing all the Old Testament food laws ("Don't handle. Don't taste. Don't touch.").

Other people, caught up in mystery religions, Greco-Roman religions, and folk religions, worshipped the moon and planets. Some people worshipped angels, mythical heroes, strange gods, even the Roman emperor. Some people preached asceticism, self-denial, even self-mutilation. Others taught indulgence, excess, and hedonism. Some people had unique "visions from God" and taught their own personal spirituality. Colossae and other 1st century cities were wild, confusing places to try to follow Jesus.

Other religions, philosophies, and teachings made it all about doing the right things. Other religions, philosophies, and theories make it all about the right technique, today, too. "Self-help" is big business: **if you DO** the right things, God will love you. **If you DO** them well enough, and **if you DO** enough good deeds, **you** will be fulfilled. This appeals to our human nature. We like to think we can earn our way. That just seems fair, doesn't it? God loves good people: God doesn't love non-good people. It's all about what **IDO** ...

However, Paul says, "*Why do you keep on following the rules of the world, such as, 'Don't handle. Don't taste. Don't touch.'? Such rules are mere human teachings about things that deteriorate as we use them. These rules may seem wise because they require strong devotion, pious self-denial, and severe bodily discipline. But they provide no help in conquering a person's evil desires.*" (2:21-23). We just can't be good enough for God. None of us can ever do enough good stuff to earn God's favour. It doesn't work. As hard as we try, we fall short.

Paul's prescription for us, and for the world, is simple: Jesus.

- *In Christ lives all the fullness of God in a human body. So you also are complete through your union with Christ, who is the head over every ruler and authority.*
- *When you came to Christ, you were 'circumcised,' but not by a physical procedure. Christ performed a spiritual circumcision – the cutting away of your sinful nature.*
- *You were buried with Christ when you were baptized. And with him you were raised to new life because you trusted the mighty power of God, who raised Christ from the dead. You were dead because of your sins and because your sinful nature was not yet cut away. Then God made you alive with Christ, for he forgave all our sins. He canceled the record of the charges against us and took it away by nailing it to the cross ...*
- *These rules are only shadows of the reality yet to come. Christ himself is that reality ...*
- *Christ is the head of the body. He holds the whole body together with its joints and ligaments, and it grows as God nourishes it.*
- *You have died with Christ, and he has set you free from the spiritual powers of this world. (2:9-20)*

It's not about what **you DO**. It is all about what **Jesus has already DONE**.

It's not about what you do **for God**. It's all about what Jesus has already done **for you**.

"*You are complete through your union with Christ*" (NLT), "*In Christ you have been brought to fullness*" (NIV) (2:10). You can do nothing to add to what Jesus has already done for you. You are saved. You have new life in Him. It is done. Complete. That's what Christmas and Easter are all about.

In response – in thankfulness – we are then called to live for Him: "*Just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness*" (2:6-7). Lord, help us to live, faithfully and thankfully, for You.

*Our Father,
 give us the faith to believe that it is possible for us to live victoriously,
 even in the midst of dangerous opportunity that we call crisis.
 Help us to see that there is something better than patient endurance
 or keeping a stiff upper lip,
 and that whistling in the dark is not really bravery.
 Trusting in You, may we have the faith that goes singing in the rain,
 knowing that all things work together for good to those who love You.
 We are so often confused.
 We live at cross-purposes with you and one another.
 Help us see things from your viewpoint
 so we might see them as they really are.
 Help us make wise decisions with prayer upon our lips,
 for our wisdom fails us.
 Help us follow you this moment, this day, and always.
 Through Jesus Christ our Lord,
 Amen.*

Peter Marshall

Sunday, January 3: Colossians 3:1-4:1

How do we live, wisely and well, as God's people in confusing times? This is an incredibly practical, relevant question. Paul has given us great theology. We base our lives on Jesus: He has accomplished our salvation; His Holy Spirit is within us. But in practice, what does this mean?

In the crazy, mixed-up, eclectic 1st century world of Colossae, ethics ranged from super-strict Pharisaical Jews, to hedonistic worshippers of Bacchus (god of wine), from ascetic philosophers who practiced self-denial, to temple prostitutes in fertility cults (such as the Temple of Artemis, down the road in Ephesus). I notice similar extremes today: some people (including some Christians) make religion into a legalistic straightjacket of rules condemning anything even remotely enjoyable. Other people (including some Christians) say "*anything goes – if it feels good, do it – you are 'free' in Christ.*" Self-indulgence and hedonism reign supreme.

Paul has taught us about Jesus, God with us. Now Paul's basic principle for how we live is this: "*Whatever you do or say, do it as a representative of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through him to God the Father*" (3:17).

Paul uses a clothing metaphor to explain why this works: "*You have stripped off your old sinful nature and all its wicked deeds. Put on your new nature, and be renewed as you learn to know your Creator and become like him*" (3:9-10). Because we love Jesus, are saved by Jesus, and are called back to our created purpose and identity by Jesus (to love God and to love our neighbour), we should live like Jesus.

Paul gives the Colossians (and us) some practical advice:

- Have nothing to do with sexual immorality, impurity, lust, and evil desires.
- Don't be greedy, for a greedy person is an idolater, worshiping the things of this world.
- Get rid of anger, rage, malicious behavior, slander, and dirty language.
- Don't lie to each other,
- Clothe yourselves with tenderhearted mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience.
- Make allowance for each other's faults, and forgive anyone who offends you. Remember, the Lord forgave you, so you must forgive others.
- Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds us all together in perfect harmony.
- Let the peace that comes from Christ rule in your hearts. For as members of one body you are called to live in peace.
- Always be thankful.
- Let the message about Christ, in all its richness, fill your lives.
- Teach and counsel each other with all the wisdom he gives.
- Sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs to God with thankful hearts.

- Love and serve your family with self-giving, other-honouring love.
- Work willingly at whatever you do, as though you were working for the Lord rather than for people.

Paul also reminds us that it's not about ethnicity. No one (Jewish, non-Jewish, Canadian, refugee, rich, poor, educated, non-educated, whatever) is better than anyone else. All those old categories are gone. *"In this new life, it doesn't matter if you are a Jew or a Gentile, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbaric, uncivilized, slave, or free. Christ is all that matters, and he lives in all of us"* (3:11).

"Christ is all and is in all" (3:11). It's all about Jesus. How can we live these principles in our lives?

What is God saying to you today?

*Christ has no body now, but yours.
 No hands, no feet on earth, but yours.
 Yours are the eyes through which Christ looks compassion into the world.
 Yours are the feet with which Christ walks to do good.
 Yours are the hands with which Christ blesses the world.
 Let nothing trouble you,
 let nothing frighten you.
 All things are passing:
 God never changes.
 Patience obtains all things.
 He who possesses God lacks nothing:
 God alone suffices.
 Amen.*

Teresa of Avila (1515-1582)