

THE LIGHT BREAKS IN

2024 Advent Devotional Guide

Mountain Brook Baptist Church

BIRMINGHAM, ALABAMA

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INTRODUCTION

I love the lights of the Advent season—from driving around my neighborhood in the evening looking at festive displays to sitting in my living room in the quiet of the night, or early in the morning, with only the glow of the Christmas tree to light the darkened space. There's something beautiful and profound to me about light breaking through the darkness, especially in a season that is literally dark because the sun sets so early!

But there's also something inherently theological about light piercing the darkness; it is a theme woven throughout the story of Scripture. This Advent, we invite you to join us as we walk through the story of the Bible and look at the ways we see light break through the darkness, from creation in Genesis 1 to new creation in Revelation 21-22.

This year's devotional guide was made possible by many church members who volunteered their time and talents to share their reflections on Scripture passages. As we prepare to celebrate Christ's coming, we are reminded that his light breaks through the darkness of our sin and despair. On that first Christmas morning, the Light of the World came down to live among us in the person of Jesus. We are also encouraged by the promise that he is certainly coming again. One day, the dwelling place of God will be with man, and he himself will be our light.

Amy M. Hirsch

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"LET THERE BE LIGHT"

Sunday, December 1 — Genesis 1 — Amy Hirsch

Of all the Bible stories, perhaps the creation narrative is one of the most familiar. In Genesis 1:1, God creates the heavens and earth. The earth was “without form and void and darkness was over the face of the deep” (Genesis 1:2 ESV). And into the chaos, into the waste, and into the barrenness, God begins to speak, and life springs forth out of what was once dark, dismal, and disjointed through the power of his word.

Into the darkness God says, “Let there be light.” And the God who is powerful enough to bring forth life from nothing speaks light into existence, dispelling the darkness hovering over the earth. As God continues to create in Genesis 1, we sit back in awe, astounded by the majesty and sovereignty of this God who declares all that he creates to be good.

Though this is a familiar story, it’s interesting to me that God’s first order of business is to create light. When we come into a dark room in our house, with our hands full of stuff, the first thing we probably do is flip on the light switch, so that we might be able to see clearly to navigate our path and put things in their proper spot. But God doesn’t need to create light in order to see what he’s doing, or because he’s afraid of the dark!

So why light first? We can only guess, but one thing we do know is that this interplay between light and dark echoes throughout Scripture and reverberates in our own hearts. The darkness reminds us of our sin and our waywardness. It reminds us of the bleak and dismal. It reminds us of death. Perhaps there is something instinctually built into us to fear the darkness and night as children, and perhaps it all goes back to Genesis 1.

But light is a symbol for life, and there is a God who is able to speak light into the darkness and bring life out of what was formless. He is the same God who speaks life into a dark tomb, and in the light of Easter morning, it becomes apparent that darkness and death will not have the last word over Christ.

If you are walking through a season of darkness and despair, remember that God sees you and that dawn is coming. In the words of the Advent hymn, he will “disperse the gloomy clouds of night, and death’s dark shadows put to flight.”¹ He continues to bring life and light to the shadows in our hearts, to the places that seem bleak and dismal. By declaring, “Let there be light,” he promises that darkness and death will not have the last word for us, either.

¹ Translated by John Mason Neale, “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel,” 1851.

“DRAWN TO DARKNESS”

Monday, December 2 — Genesis 3 — Rachel Pitts

Genesis 3 is one of the Bible’s heaviest passages, providing the origin story of human nature’s tendency to leave God’s light for darkness.

The Garden of Eden was set up perfectly to fulfill the needs of mankind. Adam and Eve lacked nothing. Everything from food to deep connection with God was immediately and perfectly available to them. Yet, while all other trees in the garden were “pleasant to the sight, and good for food” (Genesis 2:9 KJV), the serpent successfully created discontent in their minds with God’s good gifts. Adam and Eve chose to turn from the light towards darkness, eating from the one forbidden tree.

We live in a world that does not like clear distinctions like good and bad or light and dark. The world prefers a negotiable in-between. Living this way is tempting, because there is less pressure to make right choices. As Christians, we know that this ambiguity actually misses out on what God has deemed right and, therefore, what is for our good. Although we know this important distinction, like Adam and Eve, we find ourselves drawn from God’s light into darkness. Thankfully, the rest of Genesis 3 paints a hopeful picture of God’s response to sin.

First, God curses the serpent, promising us a future solution to the darkness that has entered the world. Second, he makes Adam and Eve garments to clothe themselves. This gesture is heartbreaking. God sees the pain they are experiencing, knows it was caused by their own actions, and loves them enough to provide covering for their shame. Finally, he drives them out of Eden. While this seems harsh at first, it is the most loving thing God could do. Adam and Eve are not yet reconciled with him, and he knows that to live forever in their sinful condition would be unbearable. Instead, they must await the promised solution to their sin.

This Christmas season, let us remember our human instinct to be drawn to darkness. Let us pray for the Lord’s strength to fight that temptation and choose the light. And let us remember, when we fail, the depth of God’s love and his promise of salvation.

“EVERYTHING ACCOUNTED FOR”

Tuesday, December 3 — Genesis 15 — Caroline McVay

As much as I love Birmingham, I can't always see the stars as well as I've seen them out West. When I backpacked across the Grand Canyon, I slept in the open air. At night, I saw so many stars that the countless twinkling lights made the darkness look like water sparkling, the sky in constant motion!

I'm guessing Abram had an even better view when God told him to try and count the stars in Genesis 15. By now, God has already made a covenant with Abram to make his family into a great nation that will be a blessing to the world. Abram asks God how this covenant will continue, since he does not have a son to inherit it. Their interaction reveals a great deal about God's character and compassion toward us.

He understands Abram will need a reminder of his covenant. Every night, Abram will see a picture of God's promise in the night sky. Every night, the people of Israel will be reminded of God's faithfulness to make them a great nation. Every night, we are invited to remember that every single promise God makes, he keeps. Even if we cannot see stars every night, we have his Word and his Church to remind us daily of his goodness.

God is not surprised or angry when we have questions; therefore, we can ask questions without fear of retribution. God is a patient and deeply personal Creator who knows us and cares for us. Three times, God acknowledges Abram's emotions and responds—first in verse 1, encouraging Abram not to be afraid. In verse 4, God answers Abram's inheritance question with a promise. Finally, in verse 8, Abram asks for assurance that he is following God's will, and God responds with another covenant promise of the land in verse 18.

As with Abram, God personally addresses our doubts with a promise—a promise of something better than what we may have expected. Abram asked for a relatively short-term solution to his inheritance problem, to which God first assured him a son. God then invited Abram to count the stars and promised that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars. God does not make and fulfill his promises with bare minimum effort. To us, God promises not only salvation from sin through Jesus' death and resurrection but also abundant, eternal life as sons and daughters, members of the blessed nation!

Let us remember Jesus as the true fulfillment of all of God's promises. Jesus is the Son who inherits Abram's covenant, announced to the world at his birth through the brightest star in the sky. What promises has Jesus fulfilled for you?

"CHILDREN OF THE PROMISE"

Wednesday, December 4 — Exodus 1 — Haley & Chris Henley

As we reflect on the season of Advent, we are reminded of its anticipatory nature. Of course, we know the story—we know that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. We know that he was sent to take the punishment that we justly deserved, was crucified, buried, and conquered the grave through his resurrection and ascension to his rightful throne. Throughout the entirety of Scripture, we read of God's redemptive story from the creation and fall in Genesis to the final victory over hell in Revelation.

Picking up where Genesis 50 left off, we know that Joseph is dead. It is no coincidence that Joseph's story is a foreshadowing of the Exodus. He was sold into slavery by his brothers, elevated to authority in the Egyptian courts, accused and imprisoned by Potiphar, and was released and returned to a position of influence in Egypt. In his final recorded words to his brothers, Joseph said, "I am about to die, but God will visit you and bring you up out of this land to the land that he swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob" (Genesis 50:24 ESV). In Genesis 15, God made a covenant with Abraham that he would deliver them to the Promised Land. And the story of the Exodus out of Egypt is God's fulfillment of that promise.

Throughout the book of Exodus, we see how God's sovereign purposes are manifested through the Israelites' captivity, enslavement, freedom, wandering, and eventual arrival to the land of Canaan. We also see how God is the one who has worked all of the events of the Exodus for his glory—from the Israelites' slavery to freedom, and from the prosperity of the Egyptians to the onslaught of plagues.

While we do not experience slavery in the same way that the Israelites did, without Christ, we are slaves to sin (John 8:34). Without the grace of Christ, we are wandering through life oblivious to the infinite chasm between our depravity and the holiness of God. We feel, much like the Israelites, that we are in a spiritual wilderness; we are hopelessly lost in the bondage of sin. "But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ" (Ephesians 2:4-5 ESV). Thanks be to God for his mercy!

Throughout the Exodus, we read of how God brought his people through the wilderness and how, despite their "momentary affliction," he accomplished his divine purposes to bring the Israelites to the promised land. In our lives as children of God, we are "children of the promise." We live in the knowledge of the resurrected Lord who has chosen us, in Christ, to be his children.

"BE HIS LIGHT"

Thursday, December 5 — Exodus 3 — Elizabeth Jewell

My mother and I share a love of the movie *The Ten Commandments*. During my childhood, my family would gather around the TV on the eve of Palm Sunday to watch the film. Now my own family has the leisure to watch the movie during any season—thanks to YouTubeTV recording.

Charlton Heston brings the story of Moses alive, even though it took place over 3,000 years ago. The audience feels the characters' emotions firsthand and can imagine what it was like to live in that time. The beautiful fabrics and vibrant colors of the Egyptian world are a stark contrast to the Israelites' sand, straw, and brick world ... until the light of Moses fulfilled the Israelites' prayers.

Exodus 3 has several depictions of light. The most obvious is the Lord appearing as the burning bush. The second is more figurative. God calls Moses to be the light to the Israelites and lead them out of bondage. However, the most reassuring light in the passage is the Lord saying to Moses, "I will be with you." The Lord is a light to Moses and to all his people.

God appeared to Moses through the burning bush. Spoiler alert: You probably won't experience the presence of the Lord via a burning bush in your lifetime. But remember that God appeared to Moses during his daily routine of watching his father-in-law's flock. We can experience God's presence anywhere and anytime. Be aware of these moments in your ordinary life!

God called Moses to be the light to the Israelites. God calls all his people to use their unique talents and abilities to serve his purpose in the world. During this Advent season, challenge yourself to share the love and light of God. Deliver Backpack Buddies to Grantswood. Serve at Faith Church Food Pantry in Midfield. Even something as simple as an extra "thank you" to the grocery checkout team can provide hope to others. God is calling you to be his light in the world.

Just as God told Moses, "I will be with you," we can have confidence that the Lord will always be with us. No matter what challenge we face, he does not leave us. Be encouraged to know that he is always with you. God is your light!

Go and share God's light with the world knowing he is with you. Be his light!

"THE GOD ON YOUR SIDE"

Friday, December 6 — Exodus 12 — Mark Rector

Read Exodus 12:1-30. Ask yourself these questions as you read this passage: 1. What do we learn about God? 2. What do we learn about people? 3. Where and how does this passage point you to the good news of the gospel?

Are you a “glass half-empty” or a “glass half-full” kind of person? Maybe it depends on the context of a particular situation. As I sat in the stands and watched Tua Tagovailoa take a sack on 1st and 10, I have to admit I wasn't very confident that a walk-off touchdown to win the national championship would happen moments later. When my dad was diagnosed with cancer for a third time several years ago, however, I had a confidence the Lord would provide for my dad and for my family because he had healed him of cancer twice before. No matter what life may throw at us, we have a choice as Christians. We can either fix our eyes on the Lord, or we can let our eyes wander elsewhere. No doubt that's easier to say or type on a Word document than it is to actually live. But a beautiful truth that we can hold on to is that our God is in control, and his ways are better than we can sometimes fully know.

Exodus 12 is part story and part instruction, describing the current situation of the Israelites, God's chosen people. The Lord has been working for the Israelites' good from the beginning of Exodus. God has looked out for them in the midst of slavery and oppression (Exodus 1:12), called Moses to lead them (3:7-20), and promised deliverance for them (6:6-8). And now, God has sent the tenth and final plague to Egypt in order to get Pharaoh's attention: the killing of all firstborn sons throughout the land.

In this passage, the Israelites have the same choice we have. They can either let their eyes and hearts wander elsewhere, or they can fix them on the Lord. One theme the book of Exodus makes abundantly clear is that the Lord will provide for his people. In the killing of the firstborn sons and the Lord's passing over the Israelites, we see clearly how God provides for and helps his people. Because of the Lord's grace and kindness, the expectation is that the Israelites will remember and celebrate the Passover for generations to come (12:24-28).

With this choice in mind, how has the Lord provided for you? I hope this Advent season spurs you to remember, reflect, and celebrate the many ways God has provided for you. “If it had not been the LORD who was on our side,” King David sings, then the storms of life would have consumed him (Psalm 124 ESV). “If God is for us, who can be against us?” exclaims the apostle Paul (Romans 8:31). God delivered on his promise in sending his Son Jesus Christ to earth; he is indeed the “hopes and fears of all the years” met in him.² And in doing so, the Lord did not pass over his one and only Son in order to extend salvation to us all—thanks be to God!

² Phillips Brooks, “O Little Town of Bethlehem”

"TAKING THE LONG WAY"

Saturday, December 7 — Exodus 13:17-22 — Britt Redden

I love it when you read a passage you have read several times, but you discover a new meaning. It is a constant reminder that Scripture is living and active as the Bible tells us in Hebrews 4. Today's passage focuses on God leading the Israelites using a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. As we often see in the story of Scripture, God uses light to lead his people where he would have them go. In this passage, we see clearly that God is leading his people, both during the day when the sun provides the light and also at night when he leads them with the light of the fire. There is nowhere the Israelites will go that the Lord will not lead them.

While these words are familiar and the image of God leading his people is always comforting, it is the first verse of the passage that struck me the most. God did not lead them the shortest way (Exodus 13:17). I am sure that if I was an Israelite in the desert, I would probably have grumbled, complained, and not understood why we were taking the "long way." If God had promised a land so great, why must we take the "scenic route" to get there? But God knew that if he took the Israelites straight to the land of milk and honey then the Israelites would not have experienced complete dependence on him. To survive in the desert, they needed him to provide manna each morning and water from the rock. They needed God's presence in the pillar of fire and the cloud to protect them, guide them, and show them that he loves and cares for them. While the short way would have been easier, God knew that the Israelites needed to learn that life is better spent living in complete dependence on him.

During this time of Advent, I cannot help but think how this relates to the Christmas story. God could have sent King Jesus to earth on a big white horse with an army of angels to take back his people, but instead he chose once again to do it the "long way" by sending Jesus to earth as a baby to live among his people. Too often we, like the Israelites, want the short way to the promised land. God knew that like the Israelites, we need to learn that life is better spent living in complete dependence on him. I pray this Christmas season that you will be struck by the Christmas story in a new way and that you will be grateful that we have a God who loves us enough that he took the "long way," giving each of us the chance to accept him as Savior and spend eternity with him.

"GOD'S COVENANT AND OUR IDENTITY"

Sunday, December 8 — Exodus 19 — Matt Rich

In our previous readings, Moses led the Israelites out of bondage, across the Red Sea, and through the wilderness. In Exodus 19, we find the children of Israel arriving at a mountain in the desert—the very mountain where God first revealed himself to Moses in the burning bush (Exodus 3:12). This arrival and the subsequent events are high points in Exodus, showcasing God's fulfillment of his promise to Moses and initiating a new stage in his covenant relationship with his people.

This new era came with the promise of three blessings. The Israelites will be his "treasured possessions, a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" if they obey God's voice and keep his covenant (Exodus 19:5 ESV). Essentially, God tells the Israelites that if they obey him, they will be his most prized possession—a whole nation set apart to give him glory and dedicated to serving him in all aspects of life.

Imagine hearing this promise while being a slave wandering through the wilderness with no country to call home, no possessions except for the few items you carry, and no standing in the world's eyes. You have no gifts, prestige, power, or talents to merit God's favor. Yet, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob calls you into a relationship with him because you are his royal property, his most prized possession. This is not because of anything you have done but because of who God is and his love for you (Deuteronomy 7:7-8). How wondrous is this new identity! However, this covenant came with a condition. God clarified it required full, perfect obedience. Because of their sin, the Israelites were never able to fulfill the terms of the covenant. They struggled to keep the law and failed every day. The more they struggled, the more they realized their need for grace and someone who could perfectly obey the law. They were waiting for the one who would come not in thunder and clouds but in a lowly manger, the one who would ultimately keep the law perfectly.

We are not much different from the Israelites. We know his law, but we fail to abide by it. We are all broken, wandering, enslaved to sin, and in need of a Savior. We cannot offer or do anything to merit God's grace. We are covenant breakers who must look to Christ for our salvation. By God's covenantal choice, we are also a kingdom of priests (1 Peter 2:9-12). He has made us his treasure, bringing us from slavery to royalty and setting us apart for his holy service. Since we are saved for God's glory, our service is to worship and serve him in all of life.

Soli Deo Gloria.³

10 ³ Latin for "Glory to God alone"

"THE LORD'S GLORY"

Monday, December 9 — Exodus 40:34-38 — Cathy Benton

Many of us are familiar with the story of Exodus...how the Israelites were slaves in Egypt...how God used Moses to lead them to freedom...how God took Moses to the top of Mount Sinai and gave him not only the Ten Commandments but also the additional laws and the details of the tabernacle. We know how the Israelites then made a golden image of a calf to worship and how God forgave them for their rebellion against him.

In Exodus 35-39, minute and even mind-boggling specifics are given for the construction of the tabernacle, its furnishings, the garments of the priests, and everything that had to do with the housing of the Ten Commandments and the Law. The details were extraordinary. And shockingly, we are told in Exodus 39:43: "Moses inspected all the work they had accomplished. They had done just as the Lord commanded" (HCSB).

In 40:33 we read: "So Moses finished the work"—the setting up of the tabernacle, the holy dwelling for the Lord. As C.H. Mackintosh explains, "The Lord had given the most minute instructions concerning the entire work of the tabernacle. Every pin, every socket, every loop, every tach, was accurately set forth...The tabernacle was in all respects according to the divine pattern, and therefore it (the tabernacle) could be filled with the divine glory" of God, the divine, eternal Word.⁴ God's coming to dwell or to tabernacle among them, despite their rebellion, gives testimony of the mercy and grace of his promise never to leave or forsake them.

John 1:14 tells us that Christ dwells, that he tabernacles within our hearts if we prepare a place for him through a heart of repentance of our sins and confession of him as our Lord and Savior.

Let there be room in our hearts for you, Lord, only room for you.

I want to close in prayer, using these words from Pastor Wayne:

Lord, we thank you that "we have seen the glory of God in the person of Jesus; and God's presence in Jesus is a clearer sign of God's presence than the cloud or fire that filled the tabernacle in the wilderness. We believe that we will one day behold the glory of God in the person of Jesus Christ when Jesus returns to the earth."⁵ Until that day, may the glorious Light of your tabernacle in our hearts so there is no room for anything but your presence. Come quickly, Lord Jesus. Dwell in us and fill us with your glory.

⁴ C.H. Mackintosh, *Notes on the Book of Exodus*

⁵ Wayne Splawn, *Dwell: God With Us, 2022 Advent Devotional Guide*, pg. 22

"A KING AND A KINGDOM"

Tuesday, December 10 — 2 Samuel 7:1-17, 2 Samuel 23:1-7 — Lauren Burroughs

A new day has dawned for King David and the people of God: David finally resides in a permanent dwelling, safe and secure. And yet, something bothers the king: the ark of the Lord is not in a permanent dwelling, but rather, in a tent. Why should the king be in a house of cedar when the Lord is dwelling in a tent? So, in this passage, David seeks to right what he felt was wrong. David tells the prophet Nathan that he intends to make for the Lord a house of cedar.

And then night falls. In the quiet of the night, God speaks to Nathan. God details his history with dwelling spaces and makes it clear that his dwelling place is among his people. God recounts to Nathan some of their history, reminding Nathan that the Lord has done great things without the aid of a permanent dwelling. What the Lord wants David to focus on is not building a house that will one day fall apart, but instead on building a kingdom that will never perish, spoil, or fade (1 Peter 1:4).

It is on this night that God makes his covenant with David. When David's days are done, he will rest with his ancestors while his lineage lives on. In fact, the kingdom coming through David's house will be established by the Lord and will remain forever. From David will come the true and better King. From David will come the Light of the World. He will be the Lion of the Tribe of Judah, the Root of David. This King will be our Redeemer and the only worthy one (Revelation 5:5). And while this covenant is made with David, we are reaping its benefits. From this promise comes hope. From this promise comes light. From this promise comes Immanuel, God With Us.

"TEMPLE TRUTH"

Wednesday, December 11 — 1 Kings 8:1-21 — Sarah Rich

Sometimes I find myself identifying with the ancient Israelites. Life can feel an awful lot like wandering in the desert. Just when we think we've found a place of rest, we're hit with an unexpected job loss, diagnosis, or grief. Even parenting can feel like this. Just when we breathe a sigh of relief that we've made it through teething or potty training, we discover that a new phase of challenges is upon us. Life is a never-ending attempt to find our firm footing.

That's why I find hope in the story of 1 Kings 8. Solomon is seeing the immediate fulfillment of God's promises to his father, David. Surrounding nations are rife with belief in deities who are capricious and fickle, easily provoked to judgment and wrath. Yet the temple itself is a tangible reminder that the God of Israel is steadfast, trustworthy, and gracious—a Creator God who chooses to dwell with his chosen people. He is the One whose righteous judgment sent them into the desert, **and** whose sovereign mercy delivered them into the land of promise. In all of their wanderings, he never abandoned them but chose to guide them with cloud and fire. Now the God who cannot be contained by the highest heavens (1 Kings 8:27) has chosen to make his dwelling place in a structure made of stone and clay, built by human beings that he himself formed from dust. Solomon beckons the people of Israel to look upon this temple and turn their hearts to God in repentance, reverence, and obedience.

Today, we experience even further fulfillment of God's covenant with David. We know that **Jesus** is the King from David's line who reigns on the throne eternally. It's because of his life, death, and resurrection, that we can "dwell in the house of the LORD forever," (Psalm 23:6 ESV) since we—as believers adopted into God's chosen people (Romans 11)—have ourselves become the very temples in which God's Spirit dwells (1 Corinthians 6:19-20). Doesn't that give greater meaning to the song, "O Come, O Come Emmanuel"? As Christians, we not only have God *with* us, but God *in* us.

The world says we should look within ourselves to find the power we need to succeed. I agree...sorta. Life is often hard and always unpredictable; suffering is inescapable. My prayer is that when the desert journeys come, you and I will cling to the "temple truth." May we look within—not to ourselves, but to "Christ in us, the hope of glory" (Colossians 1:27). Then, come what may, we can proclaim with Solomon, "Not one word has failed of all his good promise!" (1 Kings 8:56).

“THE LORD IS MY LIGHT AND MY SALVATION”

Thursday, December 12 — Psalm 27 — Joel Burks

When I was younger, I would often find myself sleepwalking around the house. Aside from one instance where I found myself outside, these spells were relatively harmless. Most of my sleepwalking materialized because of a spark of fear. Sometimes I would have a nightmare where I was sure that a monster was out to get me and right on my heels. I would throw myself out of bed, dash down the hall, and run straight into my parents’ bedroom. With my heart pounding and a sideways look from my dad, my fears subsided, and I would briskly walk back to my room.

This feeling of relief from fear is something the psalmist feels in Psalm 27. He is obviously in distress. A brief reading of David’s life reveals that he was very familiar with hairy and disastrous situations. One commentator says, “As with many of David’s psalms, it is impossible to confidently state which period of his life it comes from. It speaks of trouble from enemies, adversaries, false witnesses, and violent men, but this was true of many periods of King David’s life.”⁶ David obviously believed that God was a sturdy, trustworthy, and strong refuge in times of trouble—someone who not only protected him but also dissolved the very fear within him. Over this past summer, the youth studied the book of Judges. The book of Judges helps us see that while other things seem to be able to save us, only one person can truly save us. The judges in the land were usually able to deliver the Israelites from their oppressors, but only for a period. Only God can truly save us. Only God can bring total relief from our fears.

Miraculously, every time I made it into my parents’ bedroom, the apparition that was chasing me would fade away, and I would be left standing there staring at the long hallway behind me. Something about being close to my father and mother gave me comfort. My parents drove the evil things from my mind. In the same way that I sought to be near my parents, we should seek to be near God. His presence has a way of ceasing our fears like nothing else.

Yet God does not need us to come all the way to him. The Christmas season is a time when we celebrate how God left the glory of heaven to join us here on earth. God brought the true light and our true salvation to us. God longs to be near us. He longs to bring our fears to an end. When we are near the Lord, we then get to carry his presence near to others who might be fearful. We get to participate in God’s work. In the words of the psalmist: “I remain confident of this: I will see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living” Psalm 27:13 (NIV).

"GOD'S WAY IS LIGHT"

Friday, December 13 — Isaiah 5 — Lassic Hatley

Years ago, on a quick trip to East Tennessee, Kely and I stopped at a fascinating attraction in the small town of Sweetwater. The Lost Sea takes tourists down into a deep cave that has an underwater lake. While riding in a small boat, tourists are surprised to find the lake is filled with rainbow trout. Originally, the trout were brought in to see if they would venture to better living conditions on their own. However, they stayed put, grew comfortable in their darkness, and now barely resemble their cousins living above ground. You see, "rainbow trout are supposed to be colorful, control dragonfly populations, forage, mate, and host colonies of parasitic slime mold."⁷ Now after living in continual darkness, they have lost most of their color and a good bit of their eyesight; they rarely mate and have become dependent on human feedings.

Our flourishing as humans can also be thwarted when we continue to live in spiritual darkness. In Isaiah 5, God delivers a message to Israel, warning them of the consequences of lives lived apart from the Light of the World. The message is delivered through the prophet Isaiah as both a parable and a song. God is the owner of a vineyard that he has carefully tended. The fruit is the nation of Israel. Despite God's care and blessings to enable them to produce their best, they have chosen darkness. God expects their fruit to be lives lived with justice and integrity. Their fruit is rotten because they have instead committed a litany of named sins. They have no regard for the deeds of the Lord or the works of his hand (Isaiah 5:12). God calls them out for calling evil "good" and good "evil," naming dark "light," and exchanging bitterness for sweet (5:20). Sadly, their circumstances and consequences are dire.

We don't have to look far to see people ignoring God's instructions and living in darkness. Jesus said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (John 8:12 ESV). Since Jesus is light, a life lived apart from his will is total darkness. However, unlike the cave trout, Christians know the path toward light. 1 Thessalonians 5:5 says, "For you are all children of light..." So, as we wait for the second coming, let's be eager to share the ways he has illuminated our lives and rescued us from darkness.

Dear Lord, may we reflect your light in our interactions with others so that they can't help but run to you. In Jesus' name, Amen.

⁷ Fabien Tepper, <https://thepointmag.com/examined-life/cave-trout/>

"WHEN GOD'S LIGHT DEPARTS"

Saturday, December 14 — Ezekiel 10 — Clarke Skelton

Ezekiel was a prophet of the Lord God to the people of Judah. He spoke for God during the time of the exile when Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, conquered the people of Judah and carried the leaders of the nation into captivity in Babylon about 598 B.C. Ezekiel was a contemporary of the prophet Jeremiah, and like Jeremiah, Ezekiel warned of God's judgment coming because of the sin of God's people.

Even after King Nebuchadnezzar initially conquered Judah and carried Judah's leaders into captivity, God's people did not repent of their sins. In fact, Ezekiel said that idolatry was even being practiced in the temple. Because of the ongoing sin of God's people, in chapter 10 Ezekiel used fiery coals to symbolize that God himself was bringing judgment on Jerusalem. This judgment came in 587 B.C. when the armies of Babylon returned to Jerusalem and completely destroyed the city and the temple.

In chapter 10:18-19, Ezekiel described the Spirit of the Lord departing from the temple because of the sinfulness of God's people and their unwillingness to repent. God reluctantly departs from the temple knowing that his departure will bring terrible suffering upon his people when they are ravaged by the armies of Babylon. God's presence is described as the "glory of God" which is depicted as a shining light. When God's shining light departs, all that remains in Jerusalem is the vast darkness of sin and suffering. God spoke through Ezekiel to warn his people that their continued sinfulness would bring his judgment upon Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple. The people of Judah were devastated when Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed by the armies of Babylon in 587 B.C. They had assumed that God would never let the temple be destroyed because it was God's house.

Ezekiel's message for us is that we must always examine our hearts for sin both as individuals and as a church. The season of Advent reminds us that God's standard for right living is Jesus. Therefore, whenever we are not like Jesus, we must confess our sins both individually and as a community of faith. We must repent and turn back to God. God's promise is that if we confess our sins, he will "forgive us our sin and cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9 ESV).

Father, we confess that we are not like Jesus and we experience darkness instead of the light of your presence. Thank you that when we confess and repent of our sins, you are faithful to forgive us and restore the light of your presence in our lives and in our church. Amen.

For more background information about the book of Ezekiel, scan the QR code to check out this overview from The Bible Project:



"WITH US IN THE DARKNESS"

Sunday, December 15 — Psalm 88 — Amy Hirsch

I have a confession to make: I actually like the lament Psalms. As a person who can tend toward melancholy and feeling all of the big feelings, I love the honesty and the rawness. I love their vulnerability. I love how they model prayer for us in a way that is authentic and goes deeper than a laundry list of “pleases” and “thank yous” offered to God in a ritualistic sort of way. But Psalm 88 makes even me uncomfortable. Other lament psalms have some note of redemption, some tiny sliver of light peeking through the darkness. The psalmist brings his request to the Lord, explains the situation with transparency, and asks the Lord for his help—and then he recommits faith in the Lord, trusting that he is good and able.

But Psalm 88 ends with darkness—literally. After the psalmist recounts his complaints and desperation, he ends the psalm by saying that darkness is his only companion because he has been deserted by friends and feels forsaken by God. We don’t know the original context, but I could imagine a psalm like this being written by the Israelites during exile. As they watched the temple’s destruction, saw friends and family face torture and death, and experienced persecution in a foreign land under oppressive leaders, they must have felt forsaken by God.

And while Israel deserved exile for breaking their covenant with the Lord despite his repeated warnings and calls to return to him, there were faithful Israelites living in the land who had to face the consequences for their nation’s sin. Sometimes we suffer because of our sins. Sometimes we suffer because of the sins of others. And sometimes, there is simply no reason given for our suffering. We aren’t God and we just don’t always understand.

So what do we do with this psalm? First, I think this psalm models honest, persistent prayer: continually coming before the Lord, being real, dropping the pretenses, and being honest with God. He’s big enough to take our feelings. Second, I think this psalm points us to Jesus. In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prayed and asked God to take away the cup of suffering. On the cross, Jesus cried out to God and felt like he had been forsaken by his Father. And while we know the end of the story and how dawn came for Christ on Easter morning, remember that Jesus knows what it is like to suffer, to be abandoned by your closest companions, and to feel as if the darkness has had the final word. He faced that darkness for us, and he is with us—even in the darkness.

"GOD SHINES LIGHT INTO OUR DARKNESS"

Monday, December 16 — Isaiah 9:1-6 — Sean McMillan

How do we respond to spiritual darkness, either in the world or in our own hearts? After the financial recession in 2012, I was financially and spiritually broken. I would even say I was heartbroken in this dark season of life and blamed everyone, including God, for my troubles. I put a smile on my face, grinning and bearing it as I scratched and clawed to be strong for my three girls and wife, but honestly, I could only see darkness in my future and felt alone.

In 2014 while driving in the early morning hours on my way to Tulsa, Oklahoma, God shone his light into my darkness in the form of a beautiful sunrise. Still today, I cannot describe the sunrise other than to say the morning was very dark and as the sun began to peek over the horizon, it shone the most beautiful light of colors only to be described as from God. In that moment, I could feel the presence of the Lord come over me, and it was divine assurance that God saw me. He was with me in my pain and sorrow. I wasn't alone, and neither are you. If you have ever felt this way, there is good news.

In this ninth chapter of Isaiah, we are reminded in Isaiah 9:2 "The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned" (NIV).

The light that has dawned is Jesus. God sent his only Son to be born into this world to deliver all people from their slavery to sin. In verse 6 he is called "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."

Living in peace is not living problem-free. It is living a messy life in the presence of the living God. God can and will provide divine order in your broken world if you invite him into your deep darkness. There is no limit to Christ's peace, but we must seek it in him. Practically, this means our love for the Lord is demonstrated by our willingness to read and obey his Word. Whenever we face challenges, our first response should be to seek his thoughts, discover his desires and purposes, follow his instructions, and trust his promises. As we respond in faith to God's Word, his peace enters our hearts and replaces our anxiety.

Lord Jesus, thank you for being our Prince of Peace and the Light of the World. We trust you with our lives and lift our burdens to you. You reign forever and ever with justice and righteousness. Increase our joy today. In Jesus name, Amen.

"LIFE AND RESTORATION IN THE MESSIAH"

Tuesday, December 17 — Isaiah 11:1-10 — Laine Chapman

The land has been reduced to stumps—destroyed, a wasteland. Even still, Isaiah 11:1 brings us great hope, as “a shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit” (NIV). Not just any branch will spring up.

Once again, we are pointed to the promised Messiah, the King who will come from the line of David, son of Jesse. The Spirit of the Lord rests upon him, and he would not be like the many kings who came before him. The Messiah to come would be righteous, faithful, and just. As this passage points to Christ, it also provides a beautiful—and what seems in the current world, unimaginable—picture of the restoration that is to come, when all will be made new: “The earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD” (Isaiah 11:9).

But what could the earth look like now, in *this* Advent season? This season will look different for each of us. Some are rejoicing in new life. Some are trying to make it through the first Christmas without a loved one. Some are praying for restoration here on earth of faith, friendship, and family. How can we come alongside our families and communities in the coming days? Isaiah 11 gives us the perfect example in the Messiah. He is covered in the Holy Spirit, and he delights in the fear of the Lord. Are we striving to cover ourselves with the Holy Spirit and to be completely in step with the Lord? Are we judging and making decisions in right standing with God? Are we being faithful to love and care for others as Jesus does? I pray that as we continue to cover ourselves in the Spirit, and draw nearer to God, everything we do will point to Christ and the hope we have in him.

You may find yourself feeling as if you’ve been knocked down to only a stump and hopeless. May this passage serve as a reminder that Christ has come, and he will come again to bring full restoration. Until that day comes, let us be a people who rest in the Spirit, fully embodying the character of Christ, righteous and faithful servants of the Lord.

"A SERVANT SONG THAT BRINGS TRUE LIGHT"

Wednesday, December 18 — Isaiah 42:1-17 — Haley Fenn

During this Advent season, not only do we celebrate the birth of our Savior, but we also prepare our hearts for Christ's return. We are reminded of the coming of Christ throughout the entirety of Scripture. From Genesis to Revelation, our deep and desperate need for a Savior is revealed. I am often quick to turn to the New Testament during this season and read about the birth of Christ, but the more I learn about the Bible, the more I am amazed by the prophecies in the Old Testament and how specifically and beautifully they describe Christ even centuries before his birth.

As we have read each day, we continue to see the theme of light traced throughout the Bible. In today's passage, we read several glimpses of light that come from the Lord's chosen servant. The beginning of chapter 42 is known as one of the four "Servant Songs" in the book of Isaiah. Together, these Servant Songs ultimately point us to the servant of the Lord who will bring light to his people—Jesus Christ. The verses in this passage remind us that the servant of the Lord is filled with the Spirit. He faithfully brings forth justice and does not grow faint or discouraged. He will be given as a covenant for God's people and be a light to the nations. These verses describe specific characteristics of Christ which are meant to encourage believers and point us to the ultimate hope we have because of him.

The passage continues with a declaration to "sing to the LORD a new song" (Isaiah 42:10 ESV). The theme of light continues in verse 16 as God promises to lead the blind and guide them down paths they do not know by turning the darkness before them into light. These verses remind us of God's sovereignty and how his ways are far greater than anything we can truly ever imagine for ourselves. As we prepare our hearts this Advent season for Christ's return, let us recognize the hope we have in Christ and the light of the gospel that has come to save our broken and weary souls.

Father, we thank you for who you are and that you've sent your Son as the Servant-King to bring us hope and encouragement. Thank you for your Word and the opportunity to read and study this passage together today. I pray that we lean on you to lead, guide, and protect us in the plans you have set before us. May we be filled with your Spirit today as we seek to be a light to the people around us. We pray this because we trust and believe in you, Amen.

"HOPE IN THE FACE OF DARKNESS"

Thursday, December 19 — Jeremiah 23:1-8 — John Scott

The Old Testament prophecies we have revisited this season address the hope promised in the birth and ultimate return of Jesus Christ in the face of darkness in this world. Hope is one of the themes of Advent, and for good reason, as we celebrate the many ways we are blessed by the coming of Jesus Christ. One of the prophecies centered on this hope is found in a short poem in Jeremiah 23:1-8.

These verses are found in the midst of a declaration of God's condemnation of Judah's corrupt and unfaithful kings and prophets. This condemnation ultimately leads to the scattering of God's people into exile by the Babylonians. The exile results in a period of darkness emanating from the actions of kings and other leaders who were not men of God and contributed to paganism and corruption in Judah. There is no clearer example of God's people's need for hope as they face this exile. Yet, in the midst of this impending darkness, God conveys through Jeremiah a prophecy of hope—the coming of a "Righteous Branch." These words are significant to us, as Christians, in their connection to the New Testament and Jesus Christ.

The verses begin by declaring "woe to the shepherds," Israel's leaders. The shepherds have failed to care for their flock, God's people, which led to their scattering. But then God promises to place "good shepherds" over the people to lead them. This imagery is carried over to the New Testament in the ultimate identification of Jesus Christ as the "Good Shepherd." (John 10).

Finally, Jeremiah declares that the days are coming when God will raise up "for David" a "Righteous Branch" because of God's promise to him (see 2 Samuel 7:12-16). The "Righteous Branch" will be a king who will reign wisely and with justice and righteousness (Jeremiah 23:5). God's people will be saved by him and this "King" will, in fact, be called: "The LORD, our Righteous Savior" (Jeremiah 23:6 NIV).

The world can't save itself from the darkness of sin. But Jeremiah's prophecy confirms the coming of a Savior, divinely sent, who will not fail us, as he is God's true righteousness. This significant prophecy gave hope to God's people in the seventh century and extends that hope to us today with the promise of a righteous king who will return to save God's people.

In this Advent season, we can celebrate that this prophecy of hope first found its fulfillment in the birth and life of Jesus Christ. But, we also anticipate that one day, he will return as the Messiah and we will dwell forever with the Lord, Jesus Christ, who is the one true Light of the World.

"CHRIST'S LIGHT SCATTERS THE DARKNESS"

Friday, December 20 — Isaiah 60 — Kely Hatley

Darkness can be scary. When I was a young child, our house was set on a hill on a large acre lot. We had a basement, and because of the grade of our lot, it caused our basement to have very tall ceilings. To a small kid, it seemed cavernous. Our house wasn't in a conventional neighborhood. As a result, the basement was VERY DARK at night. I remember my mother asking me to take out the garbage (*which was in the dark basement*), or to take down the laundry to the washing machine (*which was in the dark basement*). I remember opening the basement stair door and shuddering. It didn't matter how many times before that I had been down there with nothing happening to me, I just knew that THIS was going to be the first time that something got me and held me down there. I would creep down slowly turning on light switches as I went, but returning upstairs was trickier. I would have to turn off the lights going back up. Whenever I would reach that final switch plunging the basement back into total darkness, I would bound up the stairs two at a time as fast as possible to get me back up to where the warmth and safety of the light of the upstairs hallway awaited me.

Isaiah lived in a time of darkness for the people of Israel. Scholars divide his prophecy into two parts: judgment (chapters 1-39) and comforts (chapters 40-66). Today's passage falls in the second section of the book. After all of the judgment narratives in the first section, it is a relief to read about the glory of Zion with all the images of light spread throughout the chapter. Isaiah is using light imagery to shine a spotlight on the despair and dread of the people, helping it to dissipate. He speaks prophetically about the coming of Jesus, "...but the LORD rises upon you and his glory appears over you" (Isaiah 60:2 NIV). He tells how nations will come before the Lord to bring their gifts. Nations will speak well of Zion, and peace will prevail.

I like to imagine what it will be like one day when these things come to pass. Our world feels like darkness has won and is extinguishing all that is light, but thanks be to God for our Lord Jesus Christ. We can look with hope to the promise in verses 19-20, "The sun will no more be your light by day, nor will the brightness of the moon shine on you, for the LORD will be your everlasting light and your God will be your glory. Your sun will never set again, and your moon will wane no more; the Lord will be your everlasting light, and your days of sorrow will end" (NIV). No matter what darkness you may be running or slogging through, Jesus, the Light of the World, is there to shine on the hard things and to strip them of their hold on you. Thanks be to God! With Jesus as our Savior, we are never truly in darkness.

"HAS GOD ABANDONED US?"

Saturday, December 21 — Ezekiel 43:1-9 — Ethan McVay

Today we read our final passage from the Old Testament. We were created by God yet rebelled against him. God pursued us through Abraham, delivered his people out of Egypt, and established his presence among us through the tabernacle. Even in the promised land, his people rebelled during the time of the judges. However, God pursued his people again through King David. Israel still chose to follow other gods and trust in other nations for strength. Ultimately, David's son Solomon was the last to reign over all of Israel, for after Solomon came a division that split the north and the south. Both kingdoms were ultimately exiled for their stubborn rebellion against God. In the midst of all this darkness and rebellion remains one question: has God abandoned us? When Israel returns from exile under Ezra and Nehemiah to rebuild the temple and the city of Jerusalem, they are still asking, "We returned from exile, but where is God?"

It is within this context that we read today's passage from Ezekiel 43. In this darkness, Ezekiel watches as the Spirit of God enters into the temple, fills it, and then speaks to him! God says "This is where I will live among the Israelites forever" (Ezekiel 43:7 NIV). God is still pursuing us. There is a flash of light and hope even as his people are asking, "Has God abandoned us?" No matter what you have done, no matter how serious the consequences have been, no matter how you have treated God, he is still pursuing you.

Along with his forgiveness, God provides a calling. "Let them put away from me their prostitution and the funeral offerings for their kings" (Ezekiel 43:9). When we receive the forgiveness of God, he offers us a new way of life. We can abandon our old sins and pursue a life that is good for us and glorifying to God. This is not a way to "make up" for all our past sins. Instead, this is grace on top of mercy! Not only does God forgive us and dwell with us again, but he also invites us back to his way of life, where we can experience his blessing more fully and deeply.

As we approach Christmas, be reminded that the Spirit of God no longer dwells in a temple, but in the hearts of all who believe. Look for him today. Search for the flash of hope in the darkness. Confess your sin and receive his full forgiveness and his way of life. It is in us that God will dwell forever. When you ask, "Where is God?" know that he is pursuing you.

"AGE AND LIGHT"

Sunday, December 22 — Luke 1:1-25 — Catherine Allen

Zechariah and Elizabeth were “stricken with old age” when God brought delight to their dim hopes. Both were descended from priestly families. They had lived righteously, blamelessly, according to God’s commandments. Yet they had no child. It was a catastrophe for them. And there was another matter of regret: Zechariah had never been chosen to approach the holiest place of the temple. Then came the day when his segment of priests had a turn for special service. “By lot,” like by a flip of the coin, the old gentleman got his chance at the holiest job in the rule book. On a day when multitudes were gathered at the temple grounds for prayer, Zechariah carefully took a ladle of incense into the room for burning incense, just outside the Holy of Holies. Precious ingredients including frankincense were to be burned on the altar of incense. Zechariah cautiously approached the gold-clad altar room, alone, except for one assistant. Darkness surrounded him for a moment—and then blazing light.

Other than the altar table, the golden room was furnished only with a huge seven-branch lampstand.⁸ It was solid gold, crafted according to God’s directives. A lamp sat on each branch, and each lamp had multiple flames. Even the aged eyes of the old priest could see that dazzling light, right through the haze of the smoking frankincense. Suddenly he saw a man, standing on the right side of the altar. “Fear not,” said the intruder. “Your prayer is heard, and your wife’s. You will have a son. You shall name him John...he shall turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord.”

As elderly people often do, Zechariah questioned the visitor. “How can it be? We are stricken with old age.” The visitor then introduced himself as “Gabriel, who stands in the presence of the Lord, who sent me to you with God’s message.” As punishment for his sassy disbelief, Zechariah was stricken by silence. His discussion with Gabriel kept him in the temple far over time—so that the people outside were alarmed that maybe the old guy had fallen dead. When he emerged from the bright haze of the incense room, he could hardly explain by signs. He would not be able to speak until his son John came to light, to fulfill the prophecy. That would be at least nine months of keeping his mouth shut. Anyway, who would believe that Gabriel came from God to him? He silently returned home, and it all came to pass, just as the angel Gabriel had said.

As Christians celebrate Christmas, we also see eight-branch menorahs burned by Jewish people in celebration of Hanukkah. A forerunner seven-branch lampstand once burned to light the way to the birth of Jesus.

⁸ The seven-branch lampstand at the altar of incense was the precursor for the eight-branch menorah used by today’s Jewish people in celebration of Hannukah. In 2024 the Hannukah holiday week will begin on the evening of December 25.

"GOD'S PROMISES FULFILLED"

Monday, December 23 — Luke 1:26-56 — Becca Hopper

In this passage, we witness the incredible announcement of the angel Gabriel to Mary. This announcement marks the moment when God takes on human flesh and represents the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies about the Messiah coming into the world. Gabriel's announcement to Mary is filled with grace and wonder. Mary is a young, unmarried woman from a modest background, yet she is chosen to be the mother of the Savior. By choosing Mary, God reminds us that he doesn't always work the ways we might expect, and he values humility and purity over status and power.

This passage highlights God's sovereignty in choosing Mary and his faithfulness in fulfilling his promises. By sending Gabriel to announce the birth of Jesus, God displays that he is in control of the redemptive plan of Jesus. The phrase "The Lord is with you" signifies that God extends favor and his presence to the humble and willing. It reminds us that God's favor is a gift of grace rather than a reward for human good.

Mary's response to Gabriel's message, "I am the Lord's servant," reflects a deep sense of humility and submission. Her initial sense of fear and then acceptance reveal our common human instinct to be overwhelmed by the plan of God and yet called to trust and obedience despite our own imperfections. Mary's situation represents our human need for God's plan. Just as she needed God's miraculous power to conceive and bear the Son of God, we need God's intervention in our lives to overcome sin and brokenness and to transform us into the image of Christ.

Jesus' birth signifies the fulfillment of the promises made by God throughout the Old Testament. Through Jesus, we receive the ultimate gift of salvation and reconciliation with God. Mary's role in the story is a testament to the hope that God's promises will always come to fulfillment, no matter how impossible they may seem. Mary's song, The Magnificat, is a powerful declaration of God's justice, mercy, and transformative power. It expresses hope for the downtrodden and promises that God's kingdom will upend worldly injustices. In Jesus, we find the hope that God is actively working to bring about a new order where grace and justice prevail.

"PREPARING FOR DAWN"

Tuesday, December 24 — Luke 1:57-80 — Kristen Watson

Last summer, I traveled to Acadia National Park. Acadia is home to Cadillac Mountain, the highest peak on the Eastern seaboard, so Cadillac Mountain's summit is the first point in the United States the sunlight touches each morning. Experiencing this first dawn required preparation, which involved making reservations days in advance and setting an early alarm so we could reach the summit by the 4:51 a.m. sunrise.

The morning of our visit was foggy, but we hoped the clouds would dissipate before dawn. We reached the summit in time, but as the minutes ticked toward sunrise, it became increasingly apparent that fog would prevent us from seeing those glorious first rays of light. Although we didn't experience a magnificent sunrise that morning, there was evidence the sun had indeed risen, as our surroundings sharpened into focus.

Today's passage reminds us of the promise that dawn will come. Luke describes John the Baptist's birth and Zechariah's response. Before this moment, the Israelites had not heard a prophet speak in 400 years. While those familiar with the prophecies knew Elijah would come as a forerunner to the Lord, generations waited for this prophecy to be fulfilled. Upon John's birth, Zechariah—filled with the Holy Spirit—sings his Benedictus, foretelling that his son will be the prophet of the Most High, sent to prepare the way for the Lord and to give his people the knowledge of salvation. Zechariah praises God for the prophecies' fulfillment and the good news that the Lord is come.

Advent is not only a season of waiting, but also a season of preparation. Isaiah 9 describes a great light that comes to those walking in darkness; once Christ comes, there will be no more doom for those in distress. Likewise, Luke tells us that God, in his tender mercy, will send his Son to shine on those living in darkness and bring peace to all who believe. Knowing the power of this most precious gift, how can we prepare to receive it? Are there mountains of doubt or sin we must overcome? Just as God descended to earth in the form of a child, born in a manger and crucified for our sins, so too must we humble ourselves and repent to experience the light.

Dawn may look differently for each of us this Christmas. For some, it may be a radiant sunrise. For others, it may be muted and gray. Regardless of the form in which dawn comes, let us remember that God sent his Son to overcome the darkness, and all who abide in him can experience peace and life everlasting. As we prepare our hearts and minds to celebrate the Christ child, may we also consider how we can make straight the path for the Lord. May we boldly proclaim the gospel to all who will listen, so that all may experience the immutable light that shines in the darkness and guides us into the path of peace.

"THE GIFT OF LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS"

Wednesday, December 25 — Luke 2:1-21 — Jenelle Hodges

In Luke 2:1-21, we witness the humble yet profound birth of Jesus. This passage encapsulates a pivotal moment in the overarching story of the Bible. It is here that God's promise of a Savior, long foretold by prophets, is fulfilled. Jesus, born in a manger, is the light piercing through the darkness of our world. The context of this passage is crucial. Israel, under Roman occupation, was in a state of political and spiritual turmoil, longing for deliverance. The angel's announcement to the shepherds—common, humble men—signifies that this light is for all people, regardless of status or circumstance. This humble beginning in Bethlehem sets the stage for a kingdom, not of power and might, but of grace and truth.

What does this passage tell us about God? First, it reveals his faithfulness. God's promises are true and reliable, as seen in the fulfillment of prophecies through Jesus' birth. It also shows his love and humility. God chose to enter our world not as a conquering king, but as a vulnerable baby, born to ordinary parents in modest surroundings. The birth of Jesus sheds light on our human condition. We live in a world marked by darkness—sin, suffering, and despair. Just as the shepherds watched over their flocks in the night, we too often find ourselves in times of darkness, searching for hope. Jesus' birth reminds us that God has not abandoned us in this darkness. Instead, he has sent his Son to be the light that overcomes it.

Our need for Jesus is profound. He is the light that guides us, the hope that sustains us, and the Savior who redeems us. In him, we find the answers to our deepest longings and the solution to our greatest problems. The angels proclaimed, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men!" (Luke 2:14 NKJV). This peace and goodwill are made possible through Jesus, the Light of the World.

As we reflect on this passage during Advent, let us remember that the light of Christ is not confined to the past. It continues to shine brightly in our lives today. In moments of darkness, we can look to Jesus and find hope, peace, and joy. His light dispels the darkness, offering us a path forward. May we, like the shepherds, respond with wonder and praise, sharing this gift of light and good news with others.

Heavenly Father, we thank you for sending the gift of your Son, Jesus, the Light of the World, into our darkness. As we reflect on his birth, may his light illuminate our hearts and guide our paths. Help us to embrace the hope, peace, and joy that Jesus brings. Empower us to share this light with others, proclaiming the good news of your love and salvation. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

"GLORY TO THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD"

Thursday, December 26 — Luke 2:22-38 — Fallon Farley

One of my favorite Advent songs is "Light of the World (Behold Version)" by Lauren Daigle. And it is one of my favorites because it so beautifully portrays the hope of the Christmas story. The lyrics for the bridge go: *"For all who wait, for all who hunger, for all who've prayed, for all who wonder; behold your King, behold Messiah, Emmanuel, Emmanuel; glory to the Light of the World."* Jesus' birth meant that the long-awaited Messiah had come and that he would bring salvation to the world.

From the very beginning in Genesis, we see that God intended his salvation to be for all people. When God first called Abraham, he promised that through Abraham "all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Genesis 12:3 ESV). In our passage, we see this promise both fulfilled and realized. Both Simeon and Anna are two faithful Israelites, who have been eagerly waiting for the promised Messiah. Luke mentions that God had revealed to Simeon that he would not see death until he had seen the Messiah. Upon seeing the newborn Jesus in his mother's arms, Simeon rejoices. Not only does Simeon see the fulfillment of God's word to him, but he also sees the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham (Luke 2:29-32). This little baby is "[God's] salvation"—"a light of revelation to the Gentiles" (2:32). Simeon realizes this, and both he and Anna praise God! No longer did they have to wait; no longer did they have to hope—for they beheld God's promised Savior with their very own eyes! The Messiah was finally here, and he would be a light of God's revelation, not only to their people, but to all people. *"For ALL who wait, for ALL who hunger, for ALL who've prayed, for ALL who wonder; behold your King, behold Messiah."* Jesus Christ, the Light of the World, had come to bring hope and salvation for all the world.

While Lauren Daigle's song primarily focuses our attention on Jesus' birth, her lyrics still ring true for us today. We have seen the light of Christ and have received his salvation, but we are still waiting for his return. But waiting in a broken world is not easy—we wait, we hunger, we pray, we wonder. So, in the midst of a broken and suffering world how do we wait and hope for Christ like Simeon and Anna?

"Behold your King, behold Messiah, Emmanuel, Emmanuel." Simeon and Anna kept their focus on God's promises and his promise-keeping character. We too must fix our gaze on the Light of the World and cling to his faithfulness, knowing that one day we will be singing *"Glory to the Light of the World"* as we behold him with our very own eyes.

“THE WORD BECAME FLESH”

Friday, December 27 — John 1:1-18 — Micaiah Kelly

Have you ever had a story you wanted to tell someone, and once you’ve started the story, you realize that it’s way more complicated than you originally thought? You realize that they need context for this person being in this place, and they don’t even know so-and-so and why they said this or that. That’s how I imagine John felt when putting pen to paper about Jesus. I imagine him thinking, “How can I possibly take a story that has so much weight and wonder, and boil it down to a few paragraphs to be a backdrop to the ministry of Christ?” But having grown up in synagogues, John looked to the Scriptures.

When John describes Jesus as “the Word,” he shows us that we see Jesus even as early as Genesis. He was there at creation. He is a part of the “Us” in Genesis who made mankind in his image. If we look to the Psalms, we see that they tell us that the law of God is perfect—“law” being another word for Scripture or the Word. By calling Jesus “the Word,” John reminds us of the prophets like Isaiah, Hosea, Micah, and many others who foretold the coming of our Savior centuries before the angel came to Mary. In only a few verses, John beautifully displays the mystery of the Old Testament revealed through Jesus’ birth, life, impending death, and glorious resurrection. He plainly illustrates the vastness of God’s love throughout all humanity by emphasizing that Jesus is God.

In this season of celebrating Emmanuel, God with us, John helps us remember that God has been there through all time and that he will always be there. Through the Word of God, we can commune with him daily, and allow him to be our comfort and provider, our protector and defender, and our rest and retreat. Be encouraged, Christian, because the Creator of the universe and Savior of all humanity loves you deeply and personally. Let him be your guiding light through the gift of Scripture, and lay everything down at the feet of the One who is worthy of all our praise.

Jesus, draw us near to you, for we depend solely upon you for guidance and wisdom. Remind us that you are with us always. We love you, Lord. Amen.

"THE LIGHT OF JESUS"

Saturday, December 28 — Matthew 2:1-12 — Pat Ferguson

The Magis' visit to Judea is not recorded in the other gospels. Matthew presents this account with very little information. Who were the Magi? Why did a star attract their attention? How did they know what the star meant? Why would they travel so far to see the child? So many questions but very few answers!

On a clear night, go out and look up at the sky and see the trillions of stars. How could this band of astrologists distinguish one star from trillions of other stars in the heavens? The star must have been new in the sky and so spectacular that they knew that something special was happening.

The Magi came from east of Judea. This could mean from places like Persia, Babylonia, and Assyria. Historically the Jewish people were enslaved by many of these conquering nations and deported from their homeland. In 539 B.C., the Persian king Cyrus the Great allowed the Jews to return to Judah. There were remnants of Jews who remained in the empire. As a result, Jewish history and literature were known by scholars in these conquering nations.

Magi were scholars and respected men, much like King Herod's "chief priests and teachers of the law." They were especially interested in astronomy and gifted in prophetic wisdom. Thus, they were consultants and advisors to the royal courts of Babylonia and Persia. These men may have studied ancient Jewish writings and knew the prophecy in Numbers 24:17:

"A star will come forth from Jacob, and a scepter will arise from Israel" (BSB).

These men saw the spectacular light of the star and evidently were aware of this prophecy that a king would come out of Judah. The Magi gathered their entourage, packed, and set out on a long journey to find the king of the Jews. These men were not Jewish, but God used them. They were watching the stars when the Jewish scholars and leaders were oblivious and were not looking for any star of promise. The Magi came to worship the new king and to give him gifts of great value.

May we be looking for the light of Jesus this Christmas and let it shine through us.

Lord, as I think about the light of the Bethlehem star and how it led the Magi to Christ, help me to share the good news of Jesus this Christmas with those whom you put in my path. Jesus is the reason for the season, so every time I see the light of a Christmas star, let me remember that it points me to you, Christ. Amen!

"FULFILLING RIGHTEOUSNESS"

Sunday, December 29 — Matthew 3 — Hannah Grace Hatley

When I was a kid, the story of Jesus' baptism always confused me. Why would Jesus, who was the perfect man, need to be baptized? If Jesus never sinned, he has no reason to respond in repentance. John himself was confused when Jesus came to him. John even tells him that he needs to be baptized instead.

It is important for us to remember that Jesus' baptism is not like our own. While we come in response to our inward repentance, Jesus came as an act of obedience and submission to God's plan. His baptism is used to show us that he is God's Son and through him, we gain access to God. When Jesus comes out of the water the Spirit of God descends. "This is my Son, whom I love. With him I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:17 ESV). This is the moment that begins Jesus' earthly ministry. Through this declaration, God is revealing Jesus' identity as Lord. John recognized Christ, and God affirmed his message.

Jesus tells John that it is fitting for him to be baptized because it "fulfills all righteousness." (Matthew 3:15). What does this mean? By Jesus coming to be baptized, he is yielding to God's plan and purpose for his life. He is at the beginning of a path that will lead to death on a cross. Yet Jesus still submits because he knows that this is what will ultimately restore God's people.

The Christmas season is about celebrating the coming of a King. Isaiah prophesied about this Messiah: "Prepare the way of the Lord and make straight paths for him" (Isaiah 40:3 quoted in Matthew 3:3). John echoed this by proclaiming to the Jews that the kingdom of heaven is near. God affirmed this by descending to be with his Son. All of these moments give us confidence that Jesus IS the Son of God. He IS the Light of the World. He IS the one to bring us back to a perfect relationship with our heavenly Father.

Advent is a time of waiting. Jesus came at Christmas and our passage today reflects his first coming. But as Christians, we are still waiting for Christ to come again. Today, I want us to be thankful for this reminder that Jesus came to fulfill God's righteousness. What would it look like for us to submit to God's plans and purposes? How can your repentance lead you to a life of obedience to God?

"THE INEXTINGUISHABLE LIGHT"

Monday, December 30 — John 8:12-30 — Brenda Atkins

Jesus was teaching in the temple. The people came to him, including the scribes and Pharisees. While teaching he said to them, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (John 8:12 ESV).

Darkness is the symbol of evil, sin, and ignorance of God in our world. God sent his Son as a light to shine through the darkness, and the darkness can never extinguish it. Jesus is the True Light that helps us see the way to God and shows us how to walk along the way. Psalm 119:105 declares, "Your word is a lamp unto my feet and a light to my path." In his hymn "The Light of the World Is Jesus," Philip P. Bliss wrote how he came to Jesus and how we too can come to Jesus with these words, "Come to the Light, 'tis shining for thee, Sweetly the Light has dawned upon me; Once I was blind, but now I can see, the Light of the world is Jesus."⁹

The Pharisees often disputed Jesus's identity as the revelation of God the Father. When they asked him, "Where is your Father?" Jesus answered, "You know neither me nor my Father. If you knew me, you would know my Father also." Jesus says in John 10:30, "I and My Father are one."

The Pharisees never considered that Jesus was the Messiah. When they listened to his teaching, it was always to find error. Instead of coming to the Light, they spent their time trying to extinguish it. We find the Light of the World, Jesus, through his Word. Deuteronomy 4:29 says to "seek the Lord your God, and you will find him, if you seek him with all your heart and with all your soul." In Matthew 7:7-8 we are instructed to "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened," and Isaiah 55:6 urges us to "seek the Lord while he may be found; call upon him while he is near." Let us seek Jesus, the Light of the World, the revelation of God.

"THE IMPORTANCE OF THE BEATITUDES"
Tuesday, December 31 — Matthew 5:1-16 — Hayes Holbert

Before Jesus began the Sermon on the Mount, he was healing the sick and sharing the good news in Galilee. The news of his good works spread rapidly throughout the region, and he continued to heal the weak. Eventually, large crowds from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and the region across the Jordan were following him. Once Jesus saw the crowds, he went to the mountainside and began the Sermon on the Mount.

In verses 3-12, also known as the Beatitudes, Jesus says, "Blessed are those who are poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, and those who hunger and thirst for righteousness." These traits are not celebrated in our society today, yet Jesus says that these people are blessed, or in another translation, happy.

For most of us, it is difficult to feel very blessed when we are mourning and poor in spirit. Jesus understands this because he faced the same problems we did. He is rather saying that we are blessed because God is with us in those times, and we should enjoy his presence instead of following what others would do.

The Beatitudes also emphasize the importance of mercy (compassion and forgiveness), purity (single-minded devotion to God), and peacemaking (healing conflict). Each of these qualities is shown throughout the Bible as examples for us to follow. Later, Jesus says, "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me." This is shown through the apostles as they were persecuted for spreading the word. Although it seems difficult, we shall rejoice and praise the Lord because Jesus guarantees his presence, which guarantees our happiness in times of need. We can praise God by thanking him for being there in the difficult times instead of praying to get out of those times.

In verse 13, Jesus tells us that we are the salt of the earth. As we know, salt is used to preserve and enhance the flavor of our food; likewise, we are called to preserve goodness and truth. We are also called to be the light of the world, so we will be set apart from the rest of the world's darkness. We are called to shine the light of the Word and spread it to those around us.

We can rejoice because the Lord is with us for not only life but eternity.

"CHILDREN OF THE LIGHT"

Wednesday, January 1 — John 12:27-50 — Nikki Harkins

This passage contains some of the last words of Jesus's public ministry. In John 1 we see that he is the light for all mankind and has been since the beginning of time. Jesus now warns his audience that he, the light, will not be with them much longer. They should "believe in the light while [they] have the light, so [they] will become children of light" (John 12:36 NIV). In other words, if we continue to close our eyes to the truth, eventually we will not be able to walk in the light.

In verses 37-43, we see a paradox: even though Jesus has come to be the Light of the World, he is hidden from some. In spite of seeing all of the miracles, many of the religious leaders and other Jews refuse to believe, and so their hearts are hardened. This is the tension between God's sovereignty and our human responsibility. We believe that God is in control of all things and holds all things together—and we also believe that we have all been given the choice whether to follow Jesus. We even see how God works through unbelief for his glory: the religious leaders' refusal to believe will lead to Jesus' death on the cross, to the offer of forgiveness of our sins through his shed blood, and to the hope of eternal life because of the power of the resurrection.

So how do we make sure that our hearts are not hardened? I am reminded of the times I have lost power while just beginning to dry my hair. As soon as the power blinks back on, I run to continue drying it just in case the power goes out again. I have no idea how long the power will stay on. We should have that same urgency when given the opportunity to accept the light of Jesus while we can.

So what does it look like to "walk in the light?" Rather than being like the religious leaders who saw the signs and the work of Jesus but refused to believe, we accept Jesus Christ as our Savior, turn from deliberate sin, and respond now before it's too late. The good news is that God gives us all a chance to know his glory. John 6:40 says "For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life." He is also "not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). So let us hold on to this promise, glorify him in all we do, seek the truth in his Word, and walk in that truth.

Father, thank you for sending your Son to die for us so that we can believe in him and no longer walk in darkness. Help us to feel the urgency to share that light with others as we live a life that is pleasing to you as children of light.

"A HEART LIKE HIS"

Thursday, January 2 — John 13:1-30 — Lindsay Brown

Every year on the last night of summer camp, my youth pastor, armed with a towel and a bucket of water, would wash the feet of the graduating class. This final act of service before sending the graduates into the world was as humbling for the students as it was impactful for those of us watching because of its representation of Christ's call to love and serve one another. When the time came for my feet to be washed I felt much like Peter—that it was I who should be bowed low washing the feet of the man who had humbly and sacrificially disciplined me throughout my middle and high school years! I cannot even begin to fathom how uncomfortable, embarrassed, and unworthy the disciples must have felt as their Lord and Master took on the posture of a servant.

Jesus washed the feet of those he loved as well as those who betrayed him. And he calls us to do the same. Talk about Mission Impossible! What about the person who hurt me? What about the one who rejected me, invalidated me, or betrayed me? What about the one who abandoned me, deceived me, or did not stand up for me? God calls us to serve those we feel deserve it and those we feel do not. God's kind of love requires forgiveness and a right understanding of Christ's love for us, because, while we were still sinners, Christ died for us (Romans 5:8).

The ability to serve one another as Christ served the church is directly correlated to our hearts. If my heart holds pride, anger, contempt, fear, or condemnation, I cannot follow in obedience to God's commandment to love one another. If I take the posture that I am entitled to hold onto my hurt or entitled to the other person owning their sin first, my heart is no more in right standing before the Lord than the person I am withholding forgiveness from. Living in obedience to Christ's commandment requires us to see our brokenness and need for a Savior. When we posture our hearts in light of this truth it allows us to see the one who hurt us as broken and in need of a Savior too. Christ, who being in the very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped but emptied himself by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men, perfectly modeled the posture we are to take towards one another.

As believers, we hold fast to the truth that God's way is right, true, and best. If, then, God calls us to love, forgive, and serve one another, isn't it also true that loving, forgiving, and serving one another leads us to freedom and abundant life? The call is not simply to the act of washing one another's feet but to the posture of our hearts.

“EATING, DRINKING, SLEEPING...INTO THE UNKNOWN?”

Friday, January 3 — Mark 14:22-50 — Matthew Hirsch

One of my little idiosyncrasies is that I don't always like going to restaurants where the lights are turned down low. Despite it probably being an attempt at creating ambiance, it feels like the proprietors are trying to hide the quality of food they're trying to serve. In some weird way, this quirk of mine gives me pause whenever I read or hear the account of the Lord's Supper. In my mind's eye, when I envision the events laid out in Mark 14, it's dark. As Jesus doles out the bread and the cup, lit only by the flicker of candles, the moment is solemn, and while beautiful, could inspire an element of scariness for the disciples. While Jesus uses this object lesson to tell the disciples what will soon happen, they seem to be—metaphorically and literally speaking—still in the dark.

Moving from the table to the garden, Jesus and the disciples go further into the darkness as they venture outside. (We assume it is still night.) Here we have the beautiful juxtaposition of Christ just passing the cup among his disciples to now asking the Father in another solemn moment, if possible, to take the cup from him. Because it's dark, Peter, James, and John inevitably fall asleep. Because it's dark, it's the perfect time for Judas and the mob to seize Jesus under the cover of night.

Darkness, and more specifically the fear of it, is inextricably linked to the unknown. Under the cover of darkness, we are unable to see. Under the cover of darkness, it is easier to hide. Anything can happen in the dark. Jesus—the true light—knows the impending events. Despite his distress, because he knows what is about to transpire, he says, “Yet not what I will, but what you will,” because this is not an “anything can happen” situation. Since we know what Christ endured, we can easily understand why he is burdened here. But also, because we know he knew what was ahead and went willingly, we can also have a spirit of gratitude.

Jesus, we recognize you are the Light of the World. Since you are our Savior and the author and perfecter of our faith, we are grateful that we can release our fear of the unknown. Even in the dark places and times, we know you are with us. Help us in those dark places to remember you, just as we remember you in passing the bread and the cup. Amen.

"THE BEATS OF MARK'S GOSPEL"

Saturday, January 4 — Mark 15 — Van Newell

When I was in graduate school, I took a screenwriting class as an elective where I learned about the concept of narrative beats. This concept refers to the "pulses" of the heart of a story. American movies generally feature somewhere between forty to sixty such narrative beats or scenes.

Using this concept, the fifteenth chapter of Mark has five such beats distilled into one chapter: Jesus before Pilate, The Soldiers Mocking Jesus, The Crucifixion of Jesus, The Death of Jesus, and The Burial of Jesus. Needless to say, this is a lot to reflect on for a daily devotion. Whenever directors have made a film or series based on this chapter, they inevitably expand these paragraph-length narratives because they are so rich in meaning and importance for the story of Jesus. Not only is the crucifixion central to the story of our faith and God's love for us, but the details before and after this central event that Mark recounts are fascinating because they present the complex and nuanced political, societal, and religious contexts of that time and place.

Even if we are familiar with this chapter, there can often be details that we can glean. Upon rereading this chapter, I found myself reflecting on today's date, January 4. Verse 33 notes the noon darkness that envelops the sky. Because today is so close to the Winter Solstice, we often have overcast days in early January that quickly become dark this time of year. And just as often, "overcast" or "dark" days can impact us, consciously or unconsciously.

Today please pray for those we know who are going through a difficult season of life. Then take a moment sometime today to call or text someone who God has placed on your heart. I have found that calling a friend or family member and having a five-minute phone call to catch up has benefited me even though I was the one calling them.

"GO AND TELL"

Sunday, January 5 — Matthew 28 — Wayne Splawn

One of my favorite parts of the Christmas season is singing familiar carols. I love music year-round, but music feels particularly meaningful during this time of year. It is difficult to pick my favorite Christmas carol. But, if I were pressed to narrow my list to one song, I believe I would choose "Go Tell It on the Mountain." I love the song for its upbeat, joyful music and its admonition to share the good news of our Savior's birth far and wide so others might join in the celebration of the birth of God's Son, our Savior.

In Matthew 28, we read Matthew's description of another incident in which Jesus appeared to people when they least expected it. This time Jesus didn't appear from the darkness of his mother's womb on Christmas Day. Instead, in this passage of Scripture, we read of the time Jesus appeared to his disciples after God had raised him from the dead by the power of the Holy Spirit. When all seemed lost and God's plan of redemption in Jesus Christ seemed to have been derailed by death, Jesus emerged from the darkness of the tomb in the light of that first Easter morning so his followers might know that God had overcome death, sin, and the grave through his resurrection. According to Matthew, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were the first people to see Jesus after his resurrection. But Jesus quickly commands them to go and tell the other disciples the good news of his resurrection. In the concluding verses of Matthew 28, Jesus commands the eleven disciples gathered on the mountain in Galilee to go and make disciples of all nations, teaching them to do all he had commanded them, trusting that he would be with them even to the end of the age.

All of us who are followers of Jesus Christ are still involved in this same mission to proclaim the good news of Jesus' resurrection today. The news is simply too good to keep to ourselves. In reading more about the carol "Go Tell It on the Mountain," I learned there is a variation of the song that encourages us to tell others of Jesus' resurrection, just as the more familiar version challenges us to share the good news of Jesus' birth. The Easter variation of the song goes like this:

"Go, tell it on the mountain,
Over the hills and everywhere;
Go, tell it on the mountain
That Jesus lives again."¹⁰

As you embark on a new year, perhaps this would be a good refrain to have on your lips and in your heart. May the Lord use each of us to be heralds of the good news that Jesus is alive!

"ON FIRE FOR JESUS"

Monday, January 6 — Acts 2:1-13 — Sharon Howard

Wouldn't you have liked to be there for Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit descended to the disciples? (Side note: just wait until Pentecost Sunday—I have the greatest prop for my children's sermon!) The disciples knew that Jesus had promised to send a helper, someone who would always be with them when he returned to heaven. On Pentecost, the disciples were filled with the Holy Spirit and able to do things that only God can do. They were able to clearly communicate the gospel in many different languages and later we know that God added 3,000 members who professed faith in Jesus.

Have you ever been so "on fire" for Jesus that people accused you of having too much wine? This passage is such an encouragement to me. First, the disciples knew that Jesus was alive. I am sure they were still afraid because they may not have fully understood what they needed to be doing since Jesus went to heaven. But, in God-sized fashion, he sent rings of fire on top of their head. That would get everyone's attention! And then, there were no barriers to sharing the gospel, and people responded. They were empowered to do what Jesus challenged us to do in the Great Commission—to go and share the gospel (Matthew 28:19-20).

Today, we still have the same challenge—as you are going, teach people about Jesus. Be on fire for the Lord. Let people be amazed by God and what he can do through you.

Dear God, thank you for keeping your promise to send the Holy Spirit to believers. Give us the courage to be the people that you have called us to be—to be on fire for you and share about Jesus in everything we say and do. In your name we pray, Amen.

“DELIVERED FROM THE DOMAIN OF DARKNESS”

Tuesday, January 7 — Colossians 1 — Jennie Pickett

You may remember the “delivery scandal” of 2021, when a FedEx delivery driver dumped approximately 400 packages into a ravine instead of delivering them. We greatly depend on our deliveries, whether it be clothes, gifts, household items, even weekly groceries. In a fallen creation, however, you can only imagine the problems that arise when we depend on someone to deliver what we need.

Colossians 1:13 gives us hope regarding one form of delivery on which we can always count. Paul writes, “For he delivered us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son” (ESV). That’s a pretty important delivery if you ask me. God’s choice and passion is to deliver us from darkness. In the Lord’s Prayer, we ask that he “deliver us from evil.” Isn’t it comforting to know that even before we ask, God answers that prayer.

It is God’s character to deliver, or rescue. We know that only light can break the darkness, and God is not only the creator of light but also THE LIGHT of the World. We struggle with the daily sin that drives us into the shadows, but Paul reminds us that God has the power to pull us out of the darkness. The original Greek translation of the word Paul used when he wrote, “delivered us from,” means “to snatch from danger.” An image comes to mind of a superhero grabbing a helpless soul from immediate harm. When God delivers, he doesn’t just give us a way out; he yanks us away from the danger of ever-present sin in our lives.

We may ask, then, if God has already “delivered us from the domain of darkness,” why do we keep finding ourselves back in the same dark places? We know that while God has satisfied his end of the bargain, we need to continually seek him in order to receive that deliverance—yes, over and over again. Because God has given us free will, he knows that we will consistently and repeatedly sink into the depths of the shadows of darkness. We are assured, however, that no matter how often we make the wrong choices, we are already delivered—we just need to acknowledge what Paul writes in Colossians 1:13. Seeking refuge in his Spirit is a daily, even minute-by-minute exercise that we need in order to experience God’s power and light.

So, while I hope that your deliveries, whether from Amazon, FedEx or the good old fashioned U.S. Postal Service, make it to you without a hitch, trust that there is one delivery on which you can always depend. When you find yourself hiding in the dark shadows, allow God to snatch you back into his light. One day we will all get to experience the eternal light of his kingdom.

"OUT OF DARKNESS, INTO HIS WONDERFUL LIGHT"

Wednesday, January 8 — 1 Peter 2:1-12 — Julia Brasher

Do you remember a time when you knew the Lord was good? Of course, we know he is always good, but what about a time you personally experienced his goodness? Maybe he calmed you over a certain fear, or he gave you certainty about a decision. Perhaps you felt his presence in a moving worship service or knew he was with you in your day-to-day tasks. Those moments are invaluable, and most likely, when you experience those moments, you have been spending time reading Scripture and praying to God. Those moments are so special for believers, but in this passage, Peter is reminding us that closeness to God is not just a moment. Closeness to God is given to us to be the foundation—the literal “cornerstone”—for our lives.

Verses 1-3 tell us that removing sin is what we must do to “grow up in [our] salvation.” Christians desire to remove sin because we “have tasted that the Lord is good.” What sin can you remove this year to grow in salvation and closer to God? When did you last experience God’s goodness, and with whom will you share that experience?

Peter knows that believers have moments when God feels close. He writes, as we “come to him,” we are “being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood” (1 Peter 2:4-5 NIV). The moments build on each other to become our spiritual foundation. The more time we spend with God, what might initially be isolated experiences transform into long-lasting moments in his presence as we embrace our identity in his royal priesthood. What thoughts do you have as you consider yourself a member of his holy priesthood? Are there lifestyle changes you want to make to reflect this identity?

I think Peter wanted to acknowledge that change is hard. Verses 9-10 are powerful statements that can support us in our desire to grow in salvation. When I remember that I am “a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession,” I am filled with his love. I have the confidence and desire to change and grow closer to God. God wants us to grow spiritually. We can grow because of his mercy that calls us out of darkness and into the light and sets us apart in a royal priesthood. How do your life and habits reflect your membership in his holy priesthood? What can you change this year that will strengthen your spiritual house?

Dear God, thank you for calling us out of darkness and into your wonderful light. Please give us the strength to change and glorify you as a member of your royal priesthood.

"WALKING IN THE LIGHT"

Thursday, January 9 — 1 John 1 — Kelly Rollow

We've all heard this passage, and can probably quote much of it, even if we're not exactly sure where to find it in Scripture. Beginning in verse 5, John reiterates Jesus' words from John 8, reaffirming that "God is light, and in him there is no darkness" (1 John 1:5 NIV). But we usually stop there. John continues on, however, underscoring the importance that we also walk in the light and truth of God's grace. Do we say we're without sin? Darkness. Do we continue on without repentance? Darkness. John urges us to confess our sins and to reflect his light so that others may come to see him and know him.

In our haste, we scroll over and often miss John's introduction and his reason for writing this letter. In the first section of John's first epistle, John reminds those to whom he is writing that he was there. He had seen the living, resurrected Jesus. He sets forth his desire to share this great news that he has seen from the beginning, that he has looked at, and that his hands have touched in order for us to be able to fellowship with him as believers and with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ (1 John 1:1). Because, John tells us, it is fellowship with **ALL** the saints that makes our joy complete.

The birth of Jesus brings us hope and joy. This is the good news. John understands that, in order for our joy to be full, we must live our lives in such a way that others will not only see his light but also come to fellowship with us and with the Father and his Son, Jesus Christ. As the shepherds before him, John saw the light and had to share it so that others would come to know him. As we continue to celebrate the birth of our Savior, let us walk in that light, share the good news, and make our joy complete.

"TREASURES IN JARS OF CLAY"

Friday, January 10 — 2 Corinthians 4 — Jane Hawth

“**B**ut we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted but not abandoned; struck down but not destroyed” (2 Corinthians 4:7-9 NIV).

I have read 2 Corinthians 4:7-9 frequently, but I had never considered anything but the obvious—treasures in actual jars of clay. In the timeframe of when the Bible was written, sacred documents were placed in clay jars and buried to keep the valuable contents safe. The Dead Sea Scrolls are an example of this. But in 2 Corinthians, it is God’s word that lives in us as treasure in fragile jars of clay.

Our bodies may be the fragile jars of clay, but God’s presence, grace, mercy, and love inside us are the treasure. It is the power of Christ, sustaining us. This treasure is the eyes of grace to see the good in our lives. It is a discerning heart to see God’s will for us and the wisdom to follow the path he has chosen for us. It is being grateful in all circumstances. It is the strength and endurance we need to turn stumbling blocks into stepping stones, to overcome and live above our circumstances. It is the light in the darkest of pits. Our bodies may develop cracks caused by our weaknesses, but God uses those cracks in the jars of clay to allow his light, grace, mercy, and love to shine through.

We testify to the treasures inside us by sharing our blessings, compassion, love, and forgiveness with everyone he brings into our lives each day.

“But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness’” (2 Corinthians 12:9 NIV).

Our bodies may be the jars of clay, but our faith in God and his constant and sustaining presence in our lives is the treasure.

“Behold I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, ... For I will not leave you...” (Genesis 28:15 NKJV).

“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil. For you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me” (Psalm 23:4 ESV).

"SHINE, JESUS, SHINE"

Saturday, January 11 — Revelation 21:1-22:5 — Mary Splawn

Today, at 4:59 p.m., the sun will set. Darkness will fall upon Birmingham, Alabama, and I will moan. Like many others, I struggle emotionally in this season where the light diminishes, and the days are short. This physical phenomenon points to a spiritual reality. Our physical bodies are attracted to light, and there are healing properties associated with the sun's rays. Likewise, our spirits need the illuminating presence of Jesus Christ—we were made to walk with him daily! When the days are shorter, the weightiness of the darkness around us seeks to overwhelm us. The absence of light in our lives looks different for each of us, but it all points to a void of God's guiding presence. The darkness could be addiction, poverty, and abuse around us. Within us, the shadows show themselves in selfishness, inordinate focus on things of little eternal value, and seeking our will rather than God's will.

While we eagerly await longer days and more sunlight, we look to Christ, the one in whom darkness is defeated! We read our Bibles because we believe he is our constant companion through Scripture and through his Spirit. We fight the darkness with his Word and with his presence as we fix our gaze on his face, the one in whom we find illumination as we walk by his light. And we long for a day when darkness is no more! This day of perfect light is described in Revelation 21 and 22. John describes the New Jerusalem as a place that will need no sun or moon because God and the Lamb will be our light (Revelation 21:23). Our dwelling will be with God and we will see him face to face (Revelation 22:4). Our physical surroundings will be restored to better than Eden (Revelation 22:1-3). In this place, the divine light will radiate more than the hottest day in the sun.

So, between this day and that day, our goal is to be Son-seekers. May we see the importance of time spent soaking in Christ's rays! Let us turn our eyes upon him, that he might shine his presence on us! He is the one in whom we see the face of God.

Father, in this life we weep because of the darkness around us and within us. We are sorry for our contribution to the darkness and ask your forgiveness. Shine down your piercing presence upon the evil in this world, illuminate our lives and our hearts, and protect us against the intruders of sin in our lives. We wait in hope for the glorious day when you return, when the sun and moon are no more, and we find our Light alone in you through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

Song Meditation: This passage reminds me of the song, "Shine, Jesus, Shine." Scan the QR code to listen to this song and praise the Father with this chorus. *"Shine, Jesus, shine. Fill this land with the Father's glory. Blaze, spirit, blaze. Set our hearts on fire. Flow, river, flow. Flood the nations with grace and mercy. Send forth your word, Lord, And let there be light."*

