

# DECEMBER 11

*Jesus called them to him, saying, "Let the children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God. Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it."*

*-Luke 18: 16-17*

Every year, beginning before Thanksgiving, we start to hear Christmas music. I always marvel the secular world's perception of what Christmas is. We are hit with decorations, Black Friday sales (before it even arrives), and advertisement after advertisement to buy, buy, buy. What if for every advertisement to 'buy' something, there was a spot to introduce Jesus to the world. I don't mean a song and dance routine, but simple words, spoken like a child, telling the world who our Savior is. What kind of a difference would those words make in how the world experiences Christmas?

Over the years of being in ministry to kids, I've heard all sorts of funny and surprising things from young children. One child's conversation with another:

First child: "Do you know Jesus?"

Second child: "Oh, I just moved here."

Completely honest, right? But this past Sunday, the question was asked, 'Why do you think God sent the angels to tell the shepherds and wise men that Jesus, the son of God, was being born?'

A four-year-old girl answered:

"Because, He needed messengers to tell about Jesus. No one else would have learned that Jesus was the real King, if He didn't tell someone to tell someone".

Children have the amazing ability to 'cut to the chase' without even a pause. What if we reached back to when we were young and searched for that childlike energy that doesn't pause to consider the words to make it easier to hear? Just once. We could be the difference that changes someone's life.

- Jean Wellfare

Director of Kid's Ministry

*Gracious Father, thank you for showing us your ways. Guide us through this glorious season to see it, believe it, and share it with someone. Amen*

## DECEMBER 10

*Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light. - Matthew 11:28-30*

Every year after Thanksgiving, all I can look forward to is Winter Break - finally, a break from school. A time to play, see family, and most importantly rest. I know that for some people, rest during winter break might seem like a stretch because of all of the different events or Christmas parties that go on with family, friends, and colleagues. Slowing down to rest is often something I struggle with because my personality is to go, go, go. Some might say, "How am I supposed to rest when I am way behind on my Christmas shopping?" For others this is a time off of work where all they want to do is relax.

I want to encourage you either way; if this is a season where you find rest or a season that is often busy and never seems to slow down, that you would rest in the invitation that Jesus gives us. Jesus's invitation is rest for our souls. Christmas, the birth of our Savior, God's fulfillment that all who seek eternal rest as a result of the forgiveness of our sins was provided through Jesus!

Even when the season seems busy, my prayer is that you would be able to slow down and rest in God's love. Rest in knowing that the Creator of the universe loves you so much He sent His only son to be a sacrificial lamb for your soul to have eternal rest. For me, the reminder to slow down and rest in the Lord is so important. Go, go, go is not sustainable, unlike God's love which will forever be sustainable. Our bodies need rest physically but also spiritually. The Christmas season can be the perfect opportunity to find both if you choose to slow down and rest in the Lord.

- Jake McKinnon  
After School Coordinator

*Father, I thank you for your promise of everlasting perfect love and the invitation to find eternal rest that you have given to all of us. Thank you for this season to spend time with loved ones and celebrate your glory. Lord help us to be an outpouring of love to all of those around us and to share your promise of rest with all those who are so desperately searching for forgiveness. Thank you Lord for the gift of Love that is your son, Jesus.*

## DECEMBER 9

*"Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call His name Immanuel (which means, God is with us)" – Matt 1:23.*

Every Christmas, I am reminded of this passage; it is one of my favorite verses.

What makes this verse so special is that it fulfills Old Testament prophecy that holds great significance to Christians. "Therefore, the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, a virgin will be with child and bear a son, and she will call His name Immanuel" – Isaiah 7:14. Even in his name, God is faithful to His presence with us.

Some years ago, my mother was diagnosed a third time with cancer. The first time she was diagnosed with cervical cancer I was in high school. I was in college when she was diagnosed with lung cancer. Then, right after my family and I moved back to Stillwater from Kansas, she was diagnosed a third time with metastatic brain and kidney cancer.

Unfortunately, her last battle with cancer ended up being her final fight. I vividly remember her last week in Mercy Hospital. The last few days her major organs shut down, and she fell into a coma. I spent her last two or three days in the hospital holding vigil with my two brothers. Because I lived out of town, I decided to head back home to get a shower and some clean clothes and figured I didn't need to head back until the next day. Early that next morning, I received a phone call from my oldest brother that our mom had passed away earlier that morning.

With that phone call came a great amount of guilt and struggle with the thought that I should not have left her bedside. I did not get the chance to say goodbye and tell her I loved her deeply. I had a very strong relationship with my mom. Stress and guilt overcame me as I was driving back to the hospital, and I was deeply concerned being by myself driving back to the City.

About halfway back, in the blink of an eye, I felt overcome with great peace and comfort about not being there for my brothers and my mom. I didn't recognize it at the time, but God was definitely with me at that moment of tremendous grief and guilt. God was lifting me up and putting my guilt and grief on his shoulders. I knew right then that my mom was in God's kingdom and no longer suffering in her worldly body. My mom was a tremendous talker, and I kept envisioning her talking Christ's ear off.

God's love for us when he sees our sick, battered, and broken souls lost in our transgression is beyond comprehension. What a great assurance that "God is always with us!"

- Mark Galliant

*I will end with this prayer: "May every day be a day that my way of thinking, feeling, and acting is not based on my self-interest; rather, that they are born by and wholly conformed to Your perfect will. Amen"*

## DECEMBER 8

*Blessed be the Lord! For He has heard the voice of my pleas for mercy. The Lord is my strength and my shield; in Him my heart trusts, and I am helped; my heart exults, and with my song I give thanks to Him.*

*- Psalm 28: 6 – 7*

When I was asked to pray about writing this devotion on God's presence in my life, my mind immediately flashed back to closing our business Her Golf and my sixteen years at Fleming Foods coming to an abrupt end. Thanks be to God that he led us to First Presbyterian Edmond the year before our business closing. In that year I had moments in worship I had never experienced before. I attended a Sunday school class taught by Fitz Neal who helped me understand the Gospel; I gave my life totally to Jesus. I know the Holy Spirit was moving in me to trust him completely.

The decision to close was tough to make as we still had a year plus on our lease contract. I was petrified on how we were going to manage this financial burden. The first day of our going out of business sale, two women walked in and told us they wanted our location for a store of their own. God walked into the store with these two women shouting "Ron, I am with you, do not fear." Without a doubt God carried me through the closing activities and the calm I had was God's presence. If I had tried to go through this ordeal on my own there would have been regular periods of my being a real jerk.

The year after closing our business, I was faced with the news that due to restructuring of the company I was working for, I would no longer have a job. As I walked out of the office to the parking lot where Marsha was waiting to pick me up, no longer having a company car, I talked with God. What a comfort knowing He always has an ear and time to listen to me. That is GOOD NEWS.

During my period of being unemployed I began to realize the power and presence of the Holy Spirit in my daily activities. This proved to me that it is easy to get so wrapped up in worldly activities that I was missing out on this personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

One of the first changes was when Merlyn DeVries invited me to Friday Morning Men's Group. Fifteen years later I am still reaping the benefits of His presence on Friday mornings. Because I had a lot of free time not having a job, God called me to Cursillo #24. Listening to the first rollo talk on Friday morning – GRACE – the walls around my heart crumbled. God's presence is available every day of my life. Will I take advantage of this gift, live life abundantly and glorify God and enjoy Him every day? I pray I will.

- Ron Bath

*Holy God, I praise you and thank you for your presence with me. Thank you for the moments when your presence explodes in front of me so I remember that you love me and want me to spend eternity with you. Lead me today and everyday so I can share with others what you have given me: eternal life. I pray this in Jesus' name, my Lord and Savior, Amen*

## DECEMBER 7

I remember a quiet Christmas Day, probably 20 years ago. No family visiting. No trips planned. We loaded our plates that evening and went down to the family room to watch a movie together. I'm the last one down the steps, when the steps disappear beneath my stocking feet. Everything is slow motion. Food and beverage ascending, then descending, covering every square inch of available wall and floor with the exception of where my body was, like some sort of chalk outline of a crime.

The family comes running. There is that very brief moment of concern. Has Dad died on the steps on Christmas Day? Then concern morphs into laughter. Even wonder- "how did that piece of brisket find its way to that spot?"

Years later we still talk about it, laugh about it, celebrate it as one of those goofy family legends with, somehow, meaning. Why?

Because you will fall. "For all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God." (Romans 3:23)

Because stuff will fall on you. "For the wages of sin is death...." (Romans 6:23)

Because love comes running. "For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord." (Luke 2:11)

Because joy wins. Jesus said, "So also you have sorrow now, but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you." (John 16:22)

Thank you, Jesus.

-Dave Moore

**DECEMBER 6**

*I remain confident of this: I will see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living. Wait for the Lord; be strong and take heart and wait for the Lord. – Psalm 27:13-14*

Everyone wants God on their time, but are we willing to get on God's time? There have been several times in my life when I wanted God to be on my timetable, but I was not listening to the plans He had in store for me. What I thought was right, God was telling me was wrong—but I did not listen.

I thought I had my junior and senior year of college all planned out. I was going to be the president of my sorority, I would move back home my second semester of my senior year to complete my student teaching, I would spend my senior year hanging out with my friends in Stillwater, I was going to be a high school history teacher when I graduated. None of my plans worked that way. I was not elected president, I moved home for my whole senior year and commuted to Stillwater, and I did not spend my senior year with my friends. I was angry with God for not allowing me to have these specific opportunities. I thought my plans were perfect.

I never planned on Alyssa contacting me during the summer before my senior year. I never planned on her asking me to be a student ministry intern. I never planned on saying yes. God planned all this and more for me, but still I didn't see it.

As the months in my internship went along, I started to notice God more. I realized why I was not president. I realized why He wanted me home and not in Stillwater. I noticed that He was there with me and always had been. He knew what I needed that year and he provided. When job offers did not seem to come in the way I wanted them to, He heard my cry when I surrendered all to Him. He gave me an opportunity I had been praying for; it was not a high school history position but a middle school geography job. I prayed about it thinking, "Really God? Middle school? Are we sure about this?" He answered "Yes."

God is always with us. Instead of being on my time, I am on God's time.

-Lauren Reddout

*Dear Heavenly Father,*

*Your timing is so perfect and so right. Even when we go through trials and tribulations, let us praise you and surrender to you. You will never leave us or forsake us, for you are always with us. During this busy season let us take rest in you and rely on you and your timing. Amen.*

**DECEMBER 5**

*Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a village. And a woman named Martha welcomed him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching. But Martha was distracted with much serving. And she went up to him and said, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me." But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her." Luke 10:38-42*

Have you ever found yourself looking for something all over the house because you needed it right at that very moment? Maybe for you it was a pair of scissors, or the keys to your car. You searched all the usual places, but with disgust in your spirit you found yourself feeling the sense that whatever it was you were looking for had somehow been lost. I'm embarrassed to admit, I do this often. I'm even more embarrassed to say that many times the very thing I'm looking for is actually laying out in the open and I've walked past it twenty times!

It's interesting to me that we have begun to decorate and celebrate Christmas a little bit earlier each year. I'm not upset about this, actually I think I totally understand why. The Christmas season has so much meaning and beauty and tradition. For many of us, by the time September rolls around we are just simply looking for some of that Christmas magic! The department stores are more than willing to help us out! By late September, if you are looking for that feeling of Christmas you can probably find it at Hobby Lobby! As December 25th gets closer the sights and sounds of Christmas are easy to be found; however, sometimes that feeling that we are looking for doesn't seem like it can be found. This makes absolutely no sense because the decorations, the trees, the lights, and the music are everywhere!

Several years ago, I wasn't looking for Christmas. It had been a rough year for our family, and I didn't want to face the reality of what Christmas looked like. I had no desire to decorate the house, turn on the music, or go shopping for those Christmas presents. I had no intention of being a scrooge, I just wasn't looking for Christmas. Much to my surprise, as I ignored the sights and sounds that were popping up everywhere to remind me of the quickly approaching holiday, I felt the realness of what Christmas was all about more than I ever had before. That year, the presence of the Lord was overwhelming for my family. The irony of that Christmas season reminded me that the presence of God is always available. It is always right here with us. For many of us, as the year draws to an end the presence of God is what we are needing and so we go looking for it. Our "looking for it" tends to go like this - we get out the decorations, turn on the Christmas music, settle

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in for a Hallmark movie, and put up the tree. Sometimes however, it is in this persistent “looking” that we struggle to find Him. Those traditions, while wonderful, do not spur the presence of God anymore than it already exists.

Yes, enjoy this beautiful time of the year. Engage in your sacred family traditions. But know that God is present, and He does not need to be ushered in with twinkling lights and nativity sets. God is with us in the here and now. Just like the scissors or the lost car keys, you may have walked past him twenty times already. He’s right out in the open. Embrace Him.

*Thank you Father for this beautiful time of the year. Thank you for all the wonderful traditions and decorations and blessings that are associated with Christmas. As I encounter each day God I want to feel the intimate presence of your Spirit. Don’t allow me to be so caught up in looking for you in the traditions and experiences of the season that I miss you. Thank you God for the gift of the Holy Spirit.*

Brett Hardy  
Associate Director of Student Ministry



**DECEMBER 4**

*In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to the Galilean village of Nazareth to a virgin engaged to be married to a man descended from David. His name was Joseph, and the virgin's name, Mary. Upon entering, Gabriel greeted her: Good morning! You're beautiful with God's beauty, Beautiful inside and out! God be with you. – Luke 1:26-28 (MSG)*

Many distractions threaten my enjoyment of the Christmas season: the shopping, the wrapping, the decorating, the cooking, and the hosting. But one distraction throws me off on a deeper level – the holiday greeting card. Because I have a background in design, I care a great deal about what I send to many of my friends and relatives as the one, personal mailing each year.

I grew up in a time when Christmas cards had beautiful scenes of the nativity or other seasonal designs; then digital photography came about, and now Christmas cards are all about the family photo. If you have children, you know the struggle of the family photo. It's a monumental effort to get every family member cleaned, groomed, and smiling, not to mention in coordinating outfits with an inspiring background.

But it occurred to me this year that as well-meaning as my efforts are to document our family's growth and capture this time in our lives with a beautiful family portrait, the family portrait that tops them all is that of a young family that changed history. They were a little family far from home who showed incredible faith despite scandalous circumstances. That humble family never had their picture taken, their portrait painted, or their image posted on Instagram; yet their depiction embodies the love that changed the world.

Though we don't know what Mary and Joseph were wearing, if their hair cuts were stylish, or even what they really looked like at all, we would recognize them anywhere. Their image defines Christmas. It's not about them – it's about the image of God made visible through them. And that's the family that I most want to look like, not the perfectly photographed, well-put-together family. I want my family to point to Jesus, no matter how our Christmas cards turn out this year.

-Blair Merkle

*Holy God, dwell in us, that the world might see your light and love. Take us out of ourselves and into your presence this season. Thank you for teaching us how to live through the example of your Son, Jesus. In His name, Amen.*

**DECEMBER 3**

*Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand. – Isaiah 41:10*

One of the most amazing mysteries of faith is the presence of the King of all Creation, the Lord of the Cosmos in the life of average, every day, sinful human beings. It is nothing short of extraordinary that the Lord of all condescends to our broken circumstances to act on our behalf! Jesus the King, the Word of God, born in a cave intended for animals proves this.

This fact was impressed upon me when I was struggling with a decision to be a pastor. I accepted an offer from the congregation where I was interning to become their Associate Pastor. This was a big life change for me. Not only did it mean a career change, it also meant a permanent move away from home to Tennessee.

I had spent two weeks at home on vacation and as I started the 10-hour drive back to Tennessee, my anxiety began to rise. With every passing mile I became more unsettled. I arrived at my temporary home back in Tennessee well after midnight. I struggled out of bed that morning to lead worship at Church as a liturgist but I was so unsettled and fearful that I considered telling the Pastor I was quitting even before the service! I decided to tough out the morning and most likely tell him Monday morning that I had made a big mistake.

I was afraid of so many things. I was afraid of the demands of ministry. I was afraid of where I was going to live. I feared this kind of commitment. Fear ravaged my heart. And I found myself praying, “Lord, how did you get me into this mess? If you won’t get me out of it, I will!”

That morning I stood behind the pulpit to lead worship in a very glum mood. I could not even look the smiling faces in the eye. I felt very inadequate.

Because I had arrived so late after a long night of driving, I did not even have time to look at the bulletin before I cracked it to announce the opening hymn. I looked at the black and white sheet as I spoke and I could scarcely believe my eyes. That hymn was “Give to the Wind Thy Fears.” It was the very piece of music God had used about 18 months before to calm my fearful spirit about beginning graduate school in Tennessee. I had not encountered either before or since! I first read its soaring lyrics when I was in a real crisis facing the unknown. I had turned to that first moment repeatedly to assure me of God’s plan as my hopes and dreams fell apart. Once again, crippled with fear, Jesus showed

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...continued

up to reassure me of God's love and mercy. My fear dissolved as Jesus' presence overwhelmed me. The words of that hymn still grace my wall:

Give to the wind thy fears.  
Hope and be unafraid.  
God hears thy sighs and counts your tears.  
God shall lift up thy head.

-Eric Laverentz

*Dear Lord, We know we are inadequate but that because of your strengthening presence we can do whatever you call us to do. Thank you that you know our deepest fears and you blow them away with the gentle breath of your spirit. In the name of your ever-present and loving Son Jesus, Amen.*

## DECEMBER 2

Surely we've all done it...gotten a gift and "regifted" it to someone else. Maybe it didn't fit our body or our style. Maybe we liked it, but suddenly remembered after our shopping was complete that we forgot a dear friend, so we regifted out of desperation to keep from hurting someone's feelings (or bringing embarrassment on ourselves). And we're left with either guilt for what we've done or fear of being found out.

Good news! This year, I'm encouraging us to regift the best gift ever with no aftertaste of guilt or fear! When the Creator of EVERYTHING searched His vast domain, He chose the very best to give to us! He gave us His Son, who loved us enough to pay the penalty for our sins so we can have His peace in this world now and live for eternity in a world totally renewed by His love. But when we "regift" this gift and give it to our friends and relatives, we don't lose it...It multiplies.

How will we share Jesus this Christmas? Take a widow to lunch? Play a game with a neighbor's kids while the single mom goes shopping? Give a new translation to someone who may need a nudge to get back into reading his Bible? Have a new awareness of those around us so that we see when they need a smile or a helping hand?

Take a moment to imagine how 2020 would look if all of us who have received Jesus would this year regift Him to everyone in our sphere of influence! May His Peace and Joy fill our Christmas and the New Year.

-Crystal McGee DePue

**DECEMBER 1**

This time of year is always special in our home. Not just because it is Christmas. Two of our three children happen to be Christmas babies. Sure, it adds to a busy time of year to have Birthday festivities for both of them but since they were born I always find myself feeling such gratitude to God for the blessing it is. Having a child born at Christmas brings with it a great perspective to Jesus coming.

There is a familiar Gospel passage that rings very true as I think about what it all means. “And the angel said to them, “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be FOR all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you....” Luke 2:10-12 ESV

Are we ever really “ready” to be a parent? This passage, particularly this translation, has really helped me to grasp what it means when it says, “For unto you...” and “For all the people.” Think about this with me. If you remove the word ‘for’ it changes the meaning. Adding FOR gives it connection, action, and purpose as if to say “with.” When God blessed us with our first child there was a lot that came with it but our children were a blessing FOR us. Just as God is FOR you. He is with You. You may not feel it or see it everyday but know that God is with you and for you and He sent His Son FOR you.

In this we have a great responsibility. We are called to share that news. During Christmas we have an opportunity to do just that. Share with others that Jesus came FOR them and is with them always. Here’s the best part of it all. When we say ‘for’ it speaks of a relationship. Not just a one time gift. It is a continued blessing that never leaves or forsakes even when we might stray away. Wow! Thank you God for the gift of Jesus!

Lord, help me to grasp that you sent your Son, Jesus FOR me. May I walk in that grace daily.

- Kyle Owen  
Director of Music and Worship Arts