

DECEMBER 25

“Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.”
- Luke 2:15

What must those shepherds have thought when the nighttime became like day because the sky was filled with angels? God visited these simple shepherds who were out in the night simply doing their job and they saw His glory above and around them. They had no indication at all that this day, this night would be different than any other. They simply showed up and suddenly, out of the night, God spoke. The angel told them of a great joy, good news for all people, a Savior that had come in a form absolutely no one expected.

It would have been easy perhaps to just take all this in and go about their lives, keep guarding their flocks, diligent about the work they had been given. That is not what they did. Amazingly, they left behind their flocks, their livelihood, their responsibilities, and rushed into Bethlehem. It is about a mile and half walk from the likely location where the shepherd's guarded their flocks to the historic location of Jesus' birth, the present day Church of the Nativity. A lot of things could have happened to their flocks while they pursued the newborn Savior. But this did not stop those shepherds. God had spoken to them, and they needed to respond. Because their hearts burned with hope, they needed to see the King with their own eyes. So, not unlike Peter, Andrew, James, and John, who left their fishing nets and followed Jesus, these shepherds laid it all aside to meet this baby boy King.

God has come to you. That is what this day, Christmas Day, means. How has Jesus specially met you today through the work of the Holy Spirit? Not unlike the Shepherds tending their fields, simply doing their job, God has appeared to you. How will you respond? Will you drop everything? Will you drop something and take notice of this great grace given unto you? A greater grace, a greater truth, a greater gift, a greater Presence awaits.

- Rev. Eric Laverentz

Lord Jesus, help me to pause and take notice of your presence. Let me drop and leave behind whatever I need, whatever stands in the way, even at a great cost, so I may know you more fully today. Amen.

2019 Advent Devotional

DECEMBER 24

“And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. ¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. ¹² And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.” ¹³ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, ¹⁴ “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!”” -Luke 2:8-14

This scripture passage from Luke about the good news of Christ's birth stands out as a staple of my childhood Christmas Eve memories. My Grammy made sure that someone in our family read the birth narrative of Jesus sometime between supper and the opening of gifts as we celebrated Advent and Christmas. Now if that were the only recollection of my grandmother's devotion to Jesus, it would be enough of a learning experience. However, there was so much more.

Throughout each year, there were all kinds of occasions to see Grammy's faith in action. For example, my family had so many opportunities to gather around her kitchen table and share meals, usually once a week. In her kitchen were words of inspiration about God and his presence that she used in conversations and also had placed on the refrigerator and cabinet doors with care. Often we would hear from others in town how much they appreciated the time she spent reading aloud to residents of the nursing home a few times a week. And she was always preparing food or buying groceries for families in need. Grammy seemed to be bringing the good news of Jesus to people all the time, not simply during Advent. These are lessons that ring true this Advent, and I pray we can all pass things like this on to our own children and grandchildren.

*“He decreed statutes for Jacob
and established the law in Israel,
which he commanded our ancestors
to teach their children,
so the next generation would know them,
even the children yet to be born,
and they in turn would tell their children.” -Psalm 78:5-6*

*Merry Christmas!
- Pastor Matt Jones*

DECEMBER 23

As a teen growing up at Menlo Park Presbyterian Church our Pastor, Walt Gerber, would share this benediction at the close of each year's Christmas Eve worship service. The author is unknown, but the message continues to speak to me today and I wanted to share it with you.

*May you know the truth of Christmas
That Jesus Christ is King
Both in a lowly manger
Where heavenly angels sing,
And on the throne of God
Where hosannas ever ring.*

*May you know the peace of Christmas
That Christ alone can give
Not only in your home
And daily as you live,
But hourly, weekly, yearly
And onward to life's eve.*

*May you know the love of Christmas
Made incarnate on that night
When Jesus came to live with us
Bringing hope and light;
Conquering wrong, enthroning right.*

*May you know the joy of Christmas
Joy that only Christ can bring
As you give and then receive
May the warmth of Christmas cling
To you and everyone of yours
May you find Christ in everything.*

- Dave Moore

DECEMBER 22

Before reading on stop to read through Psalm 127:1-6:

*Unless the Lord builds the house,
those who build it labor in vain.*

*Unless the Lord watches over the city,
the watchman stays awake in vain.*

2

*It is in vain that you rise up early
and go late to rest,
eating the bread of anxious toil;
for he gives to his beloved sleep.*

3

*Behold, children are a heritage from the Lord,
the fruit of the womb a reward.*

4

*Like arrows in the hand of a warrior
are the children[a] of one's youth.*

5

*Blessed is the man
who fills his quiver with them!
He shall not be put to shame
when he speaks with his enemies in the gate.*

He is close to you. As we draw closer to Christmas the arrival of our Savior is on the horizon. As the people of Israel were awaiting the arrival of the Savior they did so through great sorrow. The scripture today reminds us that in the midst of the struggle and sorrow, we must keep our eyes on Jesus. He is fighting for you. Emmanuel is near. Though accusations fly and the enemy assaults your thoughts, though people try to cut you down and drag your name through the mud, though schemes are launched and temptations roar, though your flesh fails and screams for revenge—your hope is in the One who fights for you. You are safe in God's love and in the power of His mighty name.

- Kyle Owen

Father, in the middle of the storm I am setting my hope on You. You fight for me and You are greater than all my enemies. Nothing I face today is more powerful than You. You are the solid ground beneath my feet. Thank You for surrounding those who surround me. Give me peace in the presence of my enemies, knowing that You see me and defend me in Your love. Amen

DECEMBER 21

I love the Psalms. Before reading on today take a look at Psalms 135:13. "Your name, O Lord, endures forever, your renown, O Lord, throughout all ages."

God has no equal. No rivals. No shortages. No needs. He is before all things and at the end of the day He will be the last one standing. The world is filled with "little g" gods, but our God made the heavens and the earth. No one compares to Him. No one even comes close. He is the highest.

As you wait on Him today, give Him praise. Maybe your circumstances appear to be upside down, but His throne is decidedly right-side up! Praise Him in the waiting. Exalt Him in the wondering. So don't ask for much today, just keep lifting up the Name above every name. Let that Name be the strength to fill your heart and give rest to your soul. Let your praise drown out everything that can contend for your focus and affection. When you do, that song of praise will lift your thoughts to the very highest place. Praise becomes what brings us to a place of hope in Jesus.

- Kyle Owen

Father, what can I say? You have no equal or rival. My words and my thoughts are so small compared to You. Expand my faith and give me words as I seek to join the anthem of Your praise. All praise is Yours, now and forever. I will walk in that truth today. I will believe it. And act like it. And pray like it. And give like it. And praise like there is none above you. Amen

2019 Advent Devotional

DECEMBER 20

“Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.” James 1:2-4

My favorite part of the entire Christmas season is the calm after the storm... Do you know which part I am referring to? There is a sweet pause that happens the moment you put the final child to bed on Christmas Eve. The presents and toys are prepped and ready for the next morning. The fireplace is crackling in the background. The tree is lit and covered in memories from prior years. And, the peace of the Christmas season finally sets in.

I personally don't allow the peace of the season to set in until that final moment when my to-do lists are complete. I spend December and the better part of November stressing over Christmas lists, panicking over holiday meal prep, fighting the lines at the stores and oh the decorating! Until finally I have it all finished. What joy did I miss out on? I was so busy that I missed my children reading our advent calendar together. I missed the man at the store helping the elderly woman with her bags. I missed so many opportunities to share the precious story of our Savior's birth. WHY? Because I thought I could do it myself. And, I thought it was all about the stuff.

Friends, don't let yourselves miss the blessings that He provides us every day in small and large ways. We will face trials, even if they are like my self-made moments of frustration and consumerism. He will test our faith, just don't forget to be joyful through those times. Because our Lord is producing something in you, and it is no accident! You are chosen by a mighty God that loves you and will be there for you! My prayer for you this season is that you will find His supernatural peace in whatever place you find yourself this Christmas.

- Danielle Jones

Lord, we praise you as our Promise Keeper and the Provider of Peace. We are in awe of the gift of your Son! Help us keep our eyes on you Lord and your promise of New Life. Enter into our Christmas season and fill it with the Holy Spirit. Allow us to live boldly with the Gospel always on our tongues. In Jesus' name, Amen.

DECEMBER 19

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid. – John 14:27 (NIV)

As I sat in the emergency room following doctor's orders with my fever-ridden seven-week old daughter, I looked around the room wondering about the others in the waiting room. Sniffles, tears, groans and moans all held stories of their own. It had been three hours and surely it was about time for us to go back. The doors swung open and a gurney with EMTs pushing it quickly flew by ... gun shot, broken limb, car accident ... I don't remember, but they were given priority.

The tech told me to wait outside the examining room while the doctor extracted fluid from my baby to test for meningitis. I heard screaming and crying and apparently when it was all over, the tech had a few less chest hairs. I held my daughter and she was content and quiet while they told me they were going to admit her. My husband was out of town, all our family lives out of state, it was after midnight and I was exhausted, but I couldn't sleep. She had an IV in her tiny arm, and they had given her medicine to bring down the fever. She was sleeping very peacefully, and I remember thinking how surreal it was, but I wasn't scared. The tests would take three days to complete. My husband was emotional when he arrived, and I remember telling him, "She's going to be fine," and I truly knew and believed that in my heart. My mother arrived and took our 3 ½ year old daughter home with her for a few days. "Mom, she's going to be fine."

And she was. It was viral meningitis. Our doctor told me not to beat myself up trying to figure out how she contracted it or how I could have prevented it. Just be thankful the fever is gone, there should be no long-term effects and you are taking a healthy baby home. At that moment, God continued His work and I was at peace with letting it go.

God was there. He was holding my hand in the waiting room. He was holding me up during the doctor's exam. He was keeping me strong through it all. God was clearly in control.

Philippians 4:7 (NIV) – And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

- Carol Alexander

Dear Lord, During our weakest times, you are the foundation that holds us together. When we cannot stand, you hold us up. When we fall apart, you remain in control. Thank you for your everlasting love and peace and your humble reminders that you are always with us. In Your Name, Amen.

DECEMBER 18

For we did not follow cleverly devised stories when we told you about the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ in power, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. He received honor and glory from God the Father when the voice came to him from the Majestic Glory, saying, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain.

- 1 Peter 1:16-18

Tis the season for being with friends and family, eating lots of delicious food, being extra nice to one another, and of course watching a lot of Christmas movies.

My wife, Dani, loves to watch Christmas movies. Not just the great iconic Christmas movies of our generation like, Home Alone, Christmas Vacation, Elf, and The Santa Clause, but she loves to watch all of the Hallmark Christmas movies that are filled with C-List actors and cheesy plot lines. And now with streaming platforms like Netflix, she has a whole host of new cheesy C-List actor Christmas movies that she gets to watch... which always begins in early November.

My step-father Matt Jones helped raise me to be a movie critic, so watching these types of movies is like torture to me. So, when my loving wife invites me to watch one of these cookie-cut plot line Christmas movies with her, I typically respond quickly by saying (with my nose in the air), "No thanks. I'm pretty sure I can guess how it will end. They fall in love and live happily ever after. La-Ti-Da." Now, of course, this is also how the Christmas classic Die Hard ends, but that's beside the point.

The point is that Christmas, along with all the Christmas movies, has become predictable and maybe even a bit mind-numbing. Is it still a wonderful time of the year? Yes, but we know what to expect. Hearing the story of the birth of Jesus has perhaps become to us a bit less miraculous and predictable. But if we truly reflect on the story of the birth of Jesus, we discover that His story was far from predictable and it was truly miraculous. Even with all of the prophecies from the Old Testament, people still had a difficult time wrapping their minds around how God entered this world as a baby born of a virgin. Imagine yourself being alive during those times. Would you have believed in the story of Christ's birth? It's such a unique story that it would have made it difficult for anyone to believe it without later witnessing the miracles of Jesus.

Christ's story, the true story of Christmas, is far removed for anything that we would see in a typical Christmas movie. Honestly, His story is more captivating than any movie! His story is full of wonder, mystery, adventure and has an ending that is unpredictable.

I hope that during this time of advent that we don't gloss over this amazing true story of Jesus' birth. That we don't treat it as just another story from long ago. But that we marvel at the amazing birth and life of Jesus.

- Tyler Boren

Lord, when we seek You, we know that You are with us. Emmanuel, please speak to us in a new way this season so that our hearts and minds are refreshed and able to truly be a witness to Your amazing story. Amen.

2019 Advent Devotional

DECEMBER 17

But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. - Lamentations 3: 21-23

Memorial Day Weekend of 2002, I departed OKC in the early morning hours for Wilmington, NC to perform with a band at a music festival. I'd made the same 24 hour drive before and knew that Nashville was the ideal halfway point to stop on Day 1, and prior arrangements had been made to sleep on someone's couch that night.

All in the name of rock-n-roll.

However, other plans were already in the works. Severe rain began pounding down on us as we passed through the small town of Webbers Falls on Interstate 40 at the Oklahoma/Arkansas border. What happened next still gives me the chills. In the blink of an eye, the bridge before us disappeared just a few hundred feet in front of us, and vehicles began plunging down into the river, with little chance of braking in time on the wet surface.

This was in the days before cell phones (explain that to your kids later), so it wasn't until we finally reached Little Rock that evening that we found out half of the country was watching this tragedy unfold on national TV and just how many lives were lost that day when a barge on the Arkansas River slammed into the bridge.

Well, to say that I felt God's presence with me that day would be a true understatement. (And frankly, I don't do bridges anymore). Not only was my party kept safe from harm that day, but an overwhelming feeling of mercy and grace overcame me. What an important reminder for me to thank God for the provisions He has provided. My internal clock is now set to make an intentional effort to thank God every time I arrive home safely, whether from a trip to the grocery store, or after a late night drive.

I'm constantly reminded about all the other times we're kept safe from the unknown. At the time of this writing, our country is being pounded by multiple hurricanes. Still, God wants us to thank Him regardless of the circumstances, as an act of faith.

To paraphrase Isaiah 43: 1-3, God loves us and will be there for us in times of trouble and turmoil. As we "pass through the rivers" of difficulty, we have a choice. We can either trust in our own ability and drown, or trust in God and be rescued. If we are honest, we will realize that God is the only one who can redeem us.

He is with us in both the bad times and the good times. He is all around us.

- Kyle Martin

Lord, we give thanks, for You are good; Your love endures forever. Bless those who are traveling this holiday season. We pray for Your mercies and compassion on us. Amen.

2019 Advent Devotional

DECEMBER 16

Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, "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

It's hard to choose a single moment when I felt closest to the Lord. My parents loved Jesus and raised us children to love Him and to "practice the presence", as Brother Lawrence would say. My "practice" of the presence has been irregular and undisciplined, yet I cannot imagine trying to get through a day without counting on Him to strengthen me for the contests ahead, to be my advocate and my judge. It has been my role to serve as a witness on occasions in which only Jesus could influence an otherwise unavoidable outcome – and He undoubtedly did. Seeing His hand at work can be frightening and awesome. He is fearful in his mercy. But He is also kind and gentle.

Kathleen and I had dated off-and-on for eight years (I wanted her to be sure) before I finally faced the fact that I should be with her and she with me. I proposed and she said yes. We were both a little older than most for a first marriage, so we were mature enough to understand the commitment and the meaning of our choosing each other.

When Kathleen joined me at the altar, the pastor – my brother-in-law – said he had waited a long time for that day. Our families and friends – with us through the many peaks and valleys of our relationship – erupted in cheers and applause (having a little fun at our expense). Behind the pastor was a stained-glass window depicting Jesus as Light of the World, and as lovely as it was it was a dim reflection of the light in our hearts. Kathleen and I both felt His presence palpably, as if He were there in the flesh – witnessing our vows, blessing our union, sharing our joy – and our hearts were full. It was our own wedding at Cana. The moment is both a blur and unforgettable.

I have encountered the Lord in many places and in many ways – sitting quietly in snowfall on the banks of a trout stream; sharing in the first communion of a new Christian with dear friends; singing to my mother as she took her last breaths; hearing Him say not to be afraid – that He is there; feeling His pleasure with us and marveling that He would find our praise worthy. He leaves us changed every time.

He is a mystery—intimate but unfathomable, omnipotent but personal, fearsome but gentle – and He is the only hope of this broken world. May we be the people He made us to be – overflowing with goodness and mercy. Emmanuel! God with us.

- Ben Meek

Dear Lord, Thank you that wherever I am, whatever I am doing, you are there guiding, protecting, befriending, strengthening, and loving me in ways too personal, powerful, and creative to predict. Help me to be more attuned to sensing you with me moment by moment. In the name of your son, our Emmanuel, Amen.

DECEMBER 15

*Behold, I am doing a new thing;
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?
I will make a way in the wilderness
and rivers in the desert.
Isaiah 43:19*

I love that in Oklahoma we get to experience a taste of all four seasons. Granted, spring and fall don't last long - but it's nice to get a small feel of those transitional seasons. We have two massive trees in our front yard that when the leaves fall off, they cover everyone in our neighborhoods yards. I love our trees, but admittedly I'm not the greatest at staying on top of the raking and leaf clean up. This year, as I've watched the leaves fall from the trees I've been reminded of the sense of "newness" that comes in just a few short months. In just a few months, the air will warm up, the rain will come, and those leaves will birth all over the branches of those trees once again!

As this year comes to an end and the Christmas season draws near, I've been reminded of a book we read as a staff a couple years ago. Steve Macchia wrote a book called "The Rule of Life". In this book Steve explains how we can order our lives in such a way that we create rhythms and natural pathways to accomplish the things in life we are most passionate about, or that bring us the most joy. Last week as I watched the leaves fall from our front tree, a massive wind gust came through and all of a sudden thousands of leaves were falling off of the tree and blowing around all over the place... for me this was a picture of shedding all that filled my life this year and distracted me from the passions and joy God put inside me. Being able to truly live into what God has for me and who God created me to be will require shedding some things, cutting some things out, and enduring a winter period of focus and regeneration. But come time, I know that God will birth those new leaves in me.

What passions did Gods put inside of you? What brings you great joy? Christmas has a way of reminding us of those things sometimes. We tend to spend more time thinking about what's important in life this time of year. As you close out this year, I want to encourage you to consider how you can shed some of the things that are distracting you and keeping you from all that God has for you. Carve out a plan as to how you can create your own rule of life in the year 2020 and lean into some new life through Jesus!

- Brett Hardy
Assistant Director of Student Ministry

Father, thank you for the beautiful reminders that you can have woven into creation. I praise you because you are the master Creator and all that you have done is truly astounding! God, as I consider my own life and the passions and joys that you have given me - show me how to live into those things. Thank you for giving me these things. Where there is distractions that need to be shed so that I can have new life, help me to be courageous enough to leave those things behind. Thank you Father. Amen.

2019 Advent Devotional

DECEMBER 14

Christmas is, honestly, one of the favorite seasons for me and my family. If you know me, you know I happen to love a little pomp and circumstance. I make a living by turning other peoples' homes into Winter Wonderlands. This season can be magical but, at times, feel overwhelming with all that glows and glitters. Once my husband and I had children, we began to develop traditions in this season. We wanted to find a way to help teach our kids that Christmas is not about the glowing lights, the stockings stuffed with toys, or the man in a red suit. We came across a book called, "What God Wants for Christmas."

This book is a 7-day kid's devotional style book with each day highlighting a different member of the nativity story. As you read the character's story you open a small gift box to find a figurine to place into a little stable to give a visual. At the end of each day's devotional this line appears, "What God wants for Christmas is to you a surprise in box number 7 it is disguised. But, no peeking, be patient, for this you must wait. It's what you offer Him and it's really GREAT!" Wonder what is in the box marked with number 7...it's a mirror! God wants us for Christmas, our whole heart, mind, body, and soul. No matter how old our children get we will continue with this tradition for the 7 days leading up to Christmas. Because regardless of how fun the glitter and glow of the season can be, we want to teach our kids the message of this season is so simple: God wants you!

My prayer is that you find time to reflect on the quiet and the majesty that is the nativity story. I pray that you can remember that little baby was sent to save us all on that night, and it was the ultimate show of love from God for His people.

"The word became flesh and made His dwelling among us. We have seen His glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth." John 1:14

- Melina Owen
Kids Ministry Program Coordinator

2019 Advent Devotional

DECEMBER 13

“Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel” (which means, God with us). - Matthew 1:23

What makes you feel at home for the holidays? The people you love, cuddled up next to chestnuts roasting on an open fire? What are your Christmas decorating styles and traditions that make the atmosphere of your home set apart from the rest of the winter months? Do you deck the halls with boughs of holly? Do you have totes full of decorations that you put up, or do you put up a simple tree?

That feeling of home... safety, comfort, a place where you are known. Having a degree in interior design, I've spent significant time processing this feeling of being “at home,” not just for individuals, but for coffee shops, hotels, and various businesses. But growing up, I was longing for and dreaming of that “at home” feeling. I typically felt displaced and torn between two houses. I would dream of the day I could build a home of my own. A place to create, to decorate with things I liked, but also to relax and be free.

In the past 8 years, my husband and I have enjoyed creating a home together. We have lived with my in-laws, a sketchy apartment, a rental home, with the Hardy's for 4 months - as we closed on a home, in rental houses, and now we have a 1930's one thousand square foot home that we adore. Ultimately, we are learning that the feeling of “at home” can be deceiving for our hearts when it is rooted in the things of this world.

Tanner and I believe that it is our life's goal to develop people and places. Recently, we were digging into where this desire might have been birthed. The Greek work “oikdome” means building, construction and spiritual development of another life through acts and words of love and encouragement. The definition goes on to say “constructive criticism and instruction that builds a person up to be a suitable dwelling place of God, where the Lord is at home”. This struck me - I want the Lord to be at home in me. It's obvious our God wants to be with us - the choosing of that name - Immanuel- “God with us”.

I'm not saying don't decorate for Christmas or don't create a special home for you and your family - quite the opposite. There is beauty in creating atmospheres that show off the glory of God. I hope you press into your home, press into your family, and truly create something special. And then, I hope you share it often. Invite friends over for dinner, sit on your porch and get to know your neighbors, take in people with need! But, do all of that by first asking the Holy Spirit to make himself at home in you. To deck the halls of your heart with His fruits of peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self control (Galatians 5:22-23) . Be with the God that is with us! In Him you are safe (Luke 12:6-7, Psalm 46:1), free to be comfortable (Psalm 23:4, Psalm 119:76), and you are fully known (Psalm 139).

I know thats my challenge this season - to just sit and be in awe and wonder of the God that is with us! To dream, to create, to dwell with Him - that is what He invites you to do! Merry Christmas - Team Dees loves you!

- Alyssa Dees
Director of Student Ministry

God, Thank you! Thank you of your gracious gift of Jesus! Thank you that your character is love and peace and that you want to dwell with your creation. You are King, and we just want to spend time in your presence. You are welcome here. Make yourself at home in me, in my house, and in my family. For as for me and my household we will serve you Lord. We will flee from the deception of the world. We love you. Amen.

2019 Advent Devotional

DECEMBER 12

Be still, and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth!
– Psalm 46:10

If I had a nickel for every time I have heard this in my life! When I was a little girl, I was busy, always busy, and always talking and rarely listening. As an adult, I'd like to think that I have learned to control my chatterbox ways somewhat, but the "being still" and listening part has always been a challenge!

As a career teacher, I would occasionally have a student in my class who was in foster care who would have to miss class because he or she had to go to a court hearing that would change his or her life forever. The terrified, confused look on these kids' faces would haunt me. They felt powerless, angry, and betrayed by what the irresponsible, addicted, or mentally ill adults in their lives had done to them. I wanted to go to court with them to support them, but I couldn't because of confidentiality issues. So, I vowed that when I retired from teaching, I would investigate Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA), an organization that gives children in foster care a voice in court.

Seven years ago, after 40 hours of training and hands-on experiences, I was sworn in as a CASA volunteer in Oklahoma County. I felt completely equipped and ready to take on this challenge because my heart was in the right place, right? I had asked God to make it known to me what He would have me do in this second chapter of my life and I had answered the call, right? I was busy in the Lord's work, had a name tag, briefcase full of court orders that opened doors for ME to help these poor children... You see where this is going, don't you?

I remember the first time I was humbled in court when I thought I had all the answers, but the process didn't go the way I thought it should. I had done the legwork, I had conducted countless interviews and home visits, school visits, doctor visits, had written what I thought to be a shining example of what a court report to the judge should be, but none of my hard work seemed to matter when the final decision was made by the judge. I was stumped and frustrated.

As I sat in my car in the parking lot of the courthouse, I felt absolutely powerless. Then, it came to me. I WAS powerless. I had used every resource I had at my disposal to help this child except the most important. I had forgotten in all of my "efficiency" and "busyness" to BE STILL. The words from Psalm 46:10 "Be still and know that I am God" hit me like a loving ton of bricks. According to Christiancourier.com, this command—"be still"—forces us to think on two things: that we are finite, and that God is infinite. I had mistakenly thought that I could fix the situation all on my own, forgetting who had led me to this calling in the first place. My efforts could only go so far to help this child, but God's power to change the seemingly hopeless situation is INFINITE!

It was at this point, in my car in the parking lot, that I surrendered with the words "Lord, YOUR words, not mine." I repeat this each time I am about to exit my car at the courthouse and participate in a hearing which will determine which direction a child's life will take. I have felt such peace and confidence since realizing that I am not in charge of the hearing, I am only a vessel through which God speaks. He is always with us—what a blessing!

- Cindy Birdwell

Dear God, help us to always be aware of your infinite presence. Cause us to BE STILL and know you are God, our God, our Heavenly Father who wants only the best for us. Help us to remember that if you send us, you won't forsake us. Amen

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 ever 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

2019 Advent Devotional

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.

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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”

2019 Advent Devotional

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

DECEMBER 5

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 they 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