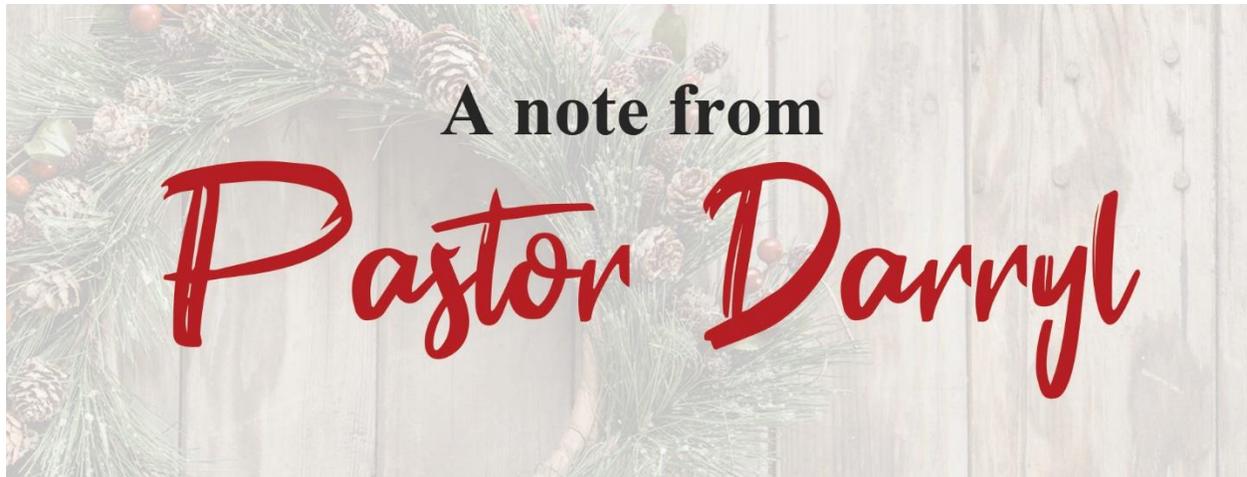


THE OTHER SIDE OF
Christmas
DEVOTIONAL



It seems each year Christmas starts earlier and earlier. Stores have been getting ready since before Halloween and online sellers have been doing Black Friday sales for what feels like months. Yet, there is still a part of me that finds it hard to believe that December is here already. As we enter the Christmas season, we will turn to a study called "The Other Side of Christmas." It will be a reminder what life is like on the one side before Christmas and what life can now be on the other side of Christmas. The birth of Jesus changes everything.

Various people in our church have been asked to reflect on Scripture and write a devotional to help us focus of the difference Jesus makes in our lives. Some of the writers may be familiar to you. They may be your small group leader, your child's Kids Crossing leader, a friend of your teenager, or the guy you sit next to every Sunday morning. Others may be totally unknown to you. Either way, I think you will find it refreshing and encouraging to hear from them! This year we've helped you put a face to a name by providing a photograph and a brief biography of the author.

In addition to the devotional element, each year we have a Christmas mission focus. This is a time we can be generous and bless one of our mission partners in a significant way. Our initiative this year is scholarships for children to attend the new Bombay Teen Challenge school in India. These children are set on the path into the sex trade industry. Attending this Bombay Teen Challenge school is currently the only available avenue out of that life. There are 15 children on the waiting list. All costs (clothes, food, medical care, etc.) for one year at the school is \$2,500. Our goal is to provide one year of school for ten children, making our goal this year \$25,000. Pray about what God would lead you and your family to do to make a difference in their lives.

I hope God shows you more of Himself through our Christmas season together.

Merry Christmas!
Darryl

December 1, 2019

Houston, We Have a Problem

Ephesians 2:1-5 (ESV)

And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. 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—by grace you have been saved—

I love reading history books because they allow you to learn about different civilizations and cultures. Reading about the mighty ancient Aztecs or the formidable Zulu Empire can give you a glimpse into how different people thought, acted, and believed. While it is interesting to learn about the many differences between the ancient Mayans, the German Nazis, and the modern Americans, there is a common thread that binds all of humanity together. Regardless of time, space, and culture our sinfulness binds us. It is no secret that mankind has a sin problem. Watching the news is a sad, yet helpful exercise for us to observe the sinfulness of mankind. Headlines about school shootings and conniving politicians are commonplace. Even in our own lives, we can see our sinfulness manifest in fibbing to a boss, mentally cheating on a spouse, or cursing in rage when we get cut off in traffic.

Many philosophical ideas and world religions try to resolve our sinful condition by either enforcing strict religious obedience, encouraging wild pursuits of pleasure, or promoting solemn quests for knowledge. The problem isn't that we are broken and in need of fixing. Nor is it a problem of enlightenment or lack thereof. The problem of mankind is that we are spiritually dead and in need of new life.

In Ephesians 2:1, we see that Scripture exposes the reality of our spiritual condition – *“you were dead in the trespasses and sins”* (ESV). Our sinfulness causes us to live in a state of spiritual death; which ultimately earns us God's wrath. Ephesians 2:3 affirms this by telling us that without divine intervention, we are *“by nature children of wrath”*. Fortunately, God doesn't abandon us. In Ephesians 2:4-5, we see that God is abounding in mercy and pulls us up out of the grave – *“by grace you have been saved”*. And that “grace” came in the form of God Incarnate. Yet not incarnate as a Glorious Being, but instead as a helpless infant. An infant born as a carpenter's son in the lowly town of Bethlehem, nearly 2000 years ago. An infant who became a man that lived a sinless life, died on a cross, and rose victoriously from the grave so that we could be raised to new spiritual life with Him.

RESPOND

Consider any unrepentant sin in your life and pray for forgiveness. God is quick to forgive! Then spend some time listening to worship music to praise God for His forgiveness.

PRAY

God, thank You so much for Your love and mercy. Without You, I am dead in my sin. But with You I am made alive. Help me to live like I've been brought to life by being obedient to Your Word. Please bring new life to my friends and my family members who don't know You. In Jesus' name, amen.

Joe Pantaleo

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Joe is the Director of Student Ministry at Stafford Crossing. He has attended Stafford Crossing since 2002, when a friend invited him to come to youth group. Joe is married to Laura and they have two active boys, Alistair and Isaiah.



December 2, 2019

Falling Short of Accepting the Gift

Romans 3:23 (NASB)

For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

From Genesis to Revelation, Scripture is replete with a narrative of people regularly failing to live up to expectations; yet He used them, nonetheless. This truth should be good news for us all, however I think we tend to forget just how much God uses us despite the fact we continually “fall short” in our lives.

When was the last time you fell short of expectations? Perhaps it was that time you failed to give grace to someone who desperately needed it. Or maybe you lost patience with someone in the face of adversity and stress. We have all been there multiple times and will undoubtedly experience it again in the future.

In Romans 3, the Apostle Paul is speaking to a multi-ethnic group of Christians struggling over God’s expectations, arguing about whether to follow Jewish laws or not. In its broader context, Paul’s message to the church was that the laws were not the source of their spiritual problem. The true problem is that everyone (Jews and Gentiles) is incapable of meeting the expectations of God in their fallen condition. Everyone suffers from the heart condition of sin, and although Paul admits that laws can be good for humanity, laws fail to make humanity good. Paul’s distinction here is important—people simply fall short of God’s finish line. Period.

Looking carefully at nearby verses, Paul makes it clear that the only means to be made good in the eyes of God was to accept, by faith, the gift of Christ; that “*by the works of the Law, no flesh will be justified in His sight*” (Rom 3:20). Having fallen so short, believers are only “*justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus*” (Rom 3:24), by “*faith apart from works of the Law*” (Rom 3:28).

The word justification basically means “being declared innocent.” Redemption refers to “paying a ransom or setting someone free.” To summarize, Paul is saying that as Christians we are:

- redeemed . . .
- through the free gift of grace . . .
- by our faith in Christ . . .
- resulting in our justification before God

There it is folks. Christ followers never fall short in the eyes of God! We make it to the finish line and onward to eternity because of our faith in the only Christmas gift that actually keeps on giving. Try accomplishing that with an ugly Christmas sweater! I personally would rather put on Christ—He is much less itchy, and you can enjoy Him year-round. That is of course, if you remember to put Him on.

RESPOND

What did you do the last time you fell short of God’s expectations? Did you dwell on the failure and condemn yourself, or did you lean on the grace of God to get back up and keep running towards the finish line where Christ offers no condemnation (Rom 8:1)? This Christmas season reflect on Paul’s words that make it crystal clear: Christ is the gift and answer for a world falling short of God. All we need to do is accept that gift and run towards Him.

PRAY

Heavenly Father—please forgive us when we fall short of accepting Your amazing gift in Christ Jesus, whom You sent to finish the race that humans cannot finish on their own. Empower us to listen to the Holy Spirit as He uses us despite our shortcomings. Teach us to remember that we never fall short when we kneel every day at the feet of

Jesus with our struggles. Enable our daily acceptance of His help in leading us across the finish line every day, one day at a time. In the name of Jesus, we offer this prayer, amen.

Luke Moen

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Luke is an active duty Major in the U.S. Army and works currently at the Defense Intelligence Agency headquarters in Washington, D.C. He and his wife Tammi have three boys. He has been a member of Stafford Crossing for three years and serves with the Sunday worship band as a drummer.



December 3, 2019

Past, Present, and Future

1 Timothy 1:15–17 (NIV)

Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his immense patience as an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life. Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen.

“Me, volunteer at church? Really, do you know what’s in my past? I have blown it! God can never use me.” Have you ever said these things to yourself? Maybe right now, everything appears to be going wrong and there doesn’t seem to be an end to it. Maybe you’re weighed down and feel incapable of meeting all the demands you have each day. We allow this weight to build, leading us down a dark path towards self-destruction. We allow negative feelings and thoughts to take over. We allow guilt, hurt, and blame to eat away at us, changing us into someone we really don’t want to be. But we don’t have to live under that burden. 2 Corinthians 12:9 says, *“My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect in weakness. Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me.”* God’s grace is sufficient for YOU! Yes, you! Romans 5:8 says *“But God demonstrates His own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”* You see, no matter what we have done or been through, God can still use us. Sometimes it is hard to understand or comprehend or feel like we can be used by God. When we yield to God’s leading and direction in our lives, no matter where we have been or what we have done, God can and will still use us. As a result of our obedience to Him, others will believe and be saved. God is patiently waiting for you to come to Him. Won’t you accept His unconditional love and forgiveness and release your weight of burdens and allow God to empower and encourage you?

RESPOND

When the enemy reminds you of your past, stop, pray, and remind him of his future.

PRAY

Father forgive me when I take my eyes and focus off You and allow myself to be absorbed into the world. Show me Your face Lord, so that I may see You and feel Your presence in all that I do. Humbly, I come to You, asking You to use me in such a way, to minister to those around me and encourage them to seek You. Father let them see You in me, whether it is through actions or words. May all that I do and say bring glory and honor to You, Father, amen.

Tim and Pam Reffner

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Tim and Pam Reffner have three children, Tim Jr (33), Heather (27) and Matthew (16). Tim is employed in the construction industry. Pam runs her own business from home. They help with the shopping card ministry, encouraging people to change how they spend their money to help the ministries of Stafford Crossing.



December 4, 2019

The Defeat of Sin

Titus 3:3-7 (NIV)

“At one time we were too foolish, disobedient, deceived, and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another. But when the kindness and love of our God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.”

As Paul describes in Titus 3:3, we were foolish people characterized by disobedience, envy, malice, and hate. We were so deep into our sin that we couldn't climb out of it on our own; we had no hope.

But then, our Savior appeared. He left His heavenly throne to save His children from their own sin. He saved us, not because of any of our righteous acts, but because of His mercy. This is why we celebrate Christmas. We celebrate the fact that not even the darkest of sin can separate us from our Miraculous Savior.

However, sin has not left the earth; it's still here—tempting us every day. But because of the kindness and love of Jesus, we are no longer defined by our sin. We are no longer characterized by our evil, for we are made new in Christ, and we are now His children. Christmas is a whole lot more than the stress and chaotic season that comes with it. However, even as Christians, we sometimes miss the greater meaning. Jesus came and stripped sin of its grip on us, saved our broken world, restored our hope in eternal life, and made all old things new again by His Spirit. We are transformed.

Let's be a church fully focused on the miraculous mercies of God and how we can spread His love this Christmas, and all the days of the year. Let's shift our focus this holiday season and praise Jesus' defeat of sin!

RESPOND

Shift your focus. Tell someone today of Christ's kindness and His mercy on us. It can be anyone: a friend, a coworker, a stranger, or you can even remind a fellow Christian. As a church, let's start seeing this season as one of thanks and praise by openly thanking God in our daily life by spreading His truth to others.

PRAY

Dear Heavenly Father, we thank You so much for coming into this broken world and saving our hearts from the suffering of sin. We are undeserving of Your love but You so graciously love us anyways. You are so merciful, Lord. Help us to focus on Your goodness this holiday season, and to be vessels for Your will. Help us to focus less on the material aspect of this holiday, and more on Your glory. We love You God, in Jesus' name we pray, amen.

Charlotte Vazquez

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Charlotte is a senior at Colonial Forge High School. She began attending Stafford Crossing in November of 2018. She is a part of Fusion Student Ministry and now is starting to serve regularly in Kids Crossing.



December 5, 2019

Dig Your Roots

Jeremiah 2:13 (CSB)

“For my people have committed a double evil: They have abandoned me, the fountain of living water, and dug cisterns for themselves- cracked cisterns that cannot hold water.”

Tis the season to be jolly? More like tis the season to be stressed... finding the perfect gift, creating “Pinterest worthy” cookies, anticipating family drama, fitting in an abundance of events onto your calendar, etc. A lot of this stems from the media displaying what a “perfect” Christmas looks like. When we follow these “earthly standards” for a [so called] perfect holiday season, we focus on ourselves and on impressing others, which ultimately leads to us veering away from and losing sight of the true meaning of Christmas; celebrating Christ's birth.

It is important during this holiday season, that we remain close to God so He can help guide our paths and help us stay rooted to His Truth. Psalm 1:3 says, *“He is like a tree planted beside flowing streams that bears its fruit in its season and whose leaf does not wither...”*. God is a fountain of Living Water; He has all we need, and it will flow to us in His perfect timing. If we remain true to Him, fall on Him with our worries, and ask Him for help, He will provide us with the sustenance we need to thrive. If we try to do it all on our own and make the holiday about us, we rely on our own “cracked cisterns” that have no purpose or structure. With the amount of stress that the holidays bring, we will quickly run dry and wither. His water is the only thing that will help us prosper and properly enjoy the holidays. This is true not only during the holiday season but throughout all our lives. When we are tempted to try to control our lives on our own, we miss out on the beautiful and sweet fruit that will come from His watering. Yes, we all wander, but it is important to always find our way back to our roots next to God and His fountain of Living Water.

RESPOND

As you become stressed throughout this holiday season, remember to always make your way back to God and the true reason for the season. Cast your worries on God in prayer and He will provide peace and calmness in the time of chaos. Whenever you feel far from God, ask Him for help to guide you back towards Him.

PRAY

Dear Lord, I thank You for this season of togetherness and celebrating. I ask for guidance, Lord, as the stressors of this holiday season begin to surface, that You will help me stay grounded with Your Word and Your Truth, amen.

Renee Leiby

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Renee is a pediatric physical therapist from Pennsylvania who moved to Virginia last year. Soon after moving, she began to attend Stafford Crossing regularly. Renee attends Sunday worship services and is part of a weekly small group Bible study for young adult women.





December 6, 2019

More Grace

James 4:1-10 (NIV)

What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You desire but do not have, so you kill. You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight. You do not have because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures. You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world means enmity against God? Therefore, anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. Or do you think Scripture says without reason that he jealously longs for the spirit he has caused to dwell in us? But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says:

"God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble."

Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come near to God and He will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and He will lift you up.

God's word is a beautiful thing. We can read a scripture not once but multiple times and each time skim over a word that one day jumps from the page and grabs us. More grace. How often have we read these words and missed the word "more"? What does it mean that God gives us more? Didn't He give it all to us through His ultimate action of grace, sending His son Jesus to take the punishment that we so rightly deserved? From the moment sin came into this world, God was laying out His plan to reconcile us to Him through the promise of the Messiah. He extended His grace to each one of us; which covers all our iniquities and sins.

Through Christ we are complete, but we daily battle with our sin nature and the want to do things our own way. This is where God extends more grace to us. As we humble ourselves before Him, He extends grace for us to serve Him sacrificially and selflessly. He gives grace for us to love others who make life difficult and challenging. He gives us grace when we find ourselves in a mess of our own doing. He gives us grace to endure physical and emotional pain. He gives us grace to take move forward when we feel we cannot take another step.

God's great love for us is the reason for giving us more. God wants a daily relationship with us. He wants to hear from us, He wants to walk with us, and He wants to give us His grace. As we humble ourselves before Him, He will extend more grace. It is through our humbleness and His grace that we will walk a life that has been reconciled to Him. Through the process of humbling ourselves before Him, our love for the One who has loved us from the beginning will increase in ways we cannot imagine.

RESPOND

Think about the areas of your life where you need to humble yourself before God and give it to Him. Be confident in knowing that He will give you the grace you need to handle the challenges that will come your way today.

PRAY

Father, thank You for Your love for us. We thank You for extending more grace to us as we walk daily with You. We pray that today we will be reminded to humble ourselves before You so we can better serve You and share Your love with others, amen.

Sherri Gaskill

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sherri is a new member of Stafford Crossing Community Church. She has a heart for teaching children about God's Word and His love for them. She serves in the Kids Crossing Preschool Department.



December 7, 2019

First Morning Snow

2 Corinthians 5:21 (NIV)

God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

One of my favorite parts about an overnight winter snow is waking up in the morning and seeing how clean and fresh everything looks. It is amazing how a few inches of snow can make everything look so new. However, as the day goes on, the plows start working, the kids build snowmen, and the family pet goes outside in the yard a few times, just as quickly as the snow was perfect and clean, the snow is now black, brown, and yellow. What once was so pretty is now dirty and becomes a huge mess.

Just like that early morning snow cover, we all start in this world looking pure and clean. However, it doesn't take long for sin to take over and make things a real mess. When I look back at the life of Jesus, I am always in awe of the fact that he had absolutely no sin. No matter what this world hurled at him, He never reacted in sin: no bad thoughts, no ill will, no giving in to temptations. It sounds about as impossible as keeping that first morning snow cover completely clean and unaltered for a lifetime. However, God did the impossible. He gave us the gift of salvation through the sacrifice of his pure and sin-free son. He who was void of all sin, took on our sin so that we may spend eternity with our Heavenly Father.

As the Christmas season approaches, I can't imagine a world without the gift of Christ. Today's verse helps us to understand what a profound sacrifice God gave so that we could be cleansed of our sins. I hope that as you prepare your heart for the Christmas season you can see how blessed we are to have been given such an amazing gift.

RESPOND

Spend time today imagining how incredible Jesus was to live a life totally devoid of sin. As the Christmas season approaches, we can remember this amazing gift when the hustle and bustle threaten to let our sins take over. If you haven't accepted Christ into your heart, take time in prayer asking for a deeper understanding of the gift of Christ and for a relationship with Him.

PRAY

Dear Lord, thank You for the gift of Your Son. We are so thankful that You sent Him down to live a life without sin so that He could become our sin and we might live eternally with You. As we celebrate the Christmas season, we ask that You help us to keep this reminder of what a true gift You gave us, amen.

Paul and Sarah McIntosh

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Paul and Sarah McIntosh have been coming to Stafford Crossing for the past 4 years. Paul is a Pediatrician and Sarah is a Pediatric Physical Therapist. Sarah serves at the Connections Desk and helps lead worship in Kids Crossing. Paul serves in the Fusion Student Ministry with the 6th grade boys.



December 8, 2019

Glorifying God Again

Romans 8:1-8 (NIV)

Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death. For what the law was powerless to do because it was weakened by the flesh, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. Those who live according to the flesh have their minds set on what the flesh desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. The mind governed by the flesh is death, but the mind governed by the Spirit is life and peace. The mind governed by the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. Those who are in the realm of the flesh cannot please God.

The purpose of all creation is to glorify God. But when sin entered the world, we lost that ability. Isaiah 64:6 (NIV) says, "All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away." Our problem is that the flesh governs the mind so that we cannot glorify God (Romans 8:6-8). Isaiah is very straight forward with this; he tells us the way we should be viewed by God. We are nothing but leaves in the wind, unable to do anything about our sin. Those who live according to the flesh have their minds set on what the flesh desires and the mind governed by the flesh leads to death (Romans 8:5-6). The solution to our problem is to let the Holy Spirit govern our mind so that we will be able to glorify God (Romans 8:5-6). By letting the Holy Spirit govern the mind, you submit to God's law and can glorify Him again. To start the process of setting your mind on what the Spirit desires is simple. We need to let Jesus Christ into our hearts because without Him our works are like filthy rags. Once you let Jesus into your heart and have a conviction to follow Christ, the Holy Spirit will change your mind to focus on the desire of the Spirit. The way you interact with people, spend your time, and use your money will be evidence of a change in your heart and your mind.

RESPOND

Accept Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior and allow Him into your heart. Do this by admitting to your sin, accepting the grace of God and letting Him into your life. The Spirit will enter your mind and transform it to seek the desires of the Spirit.

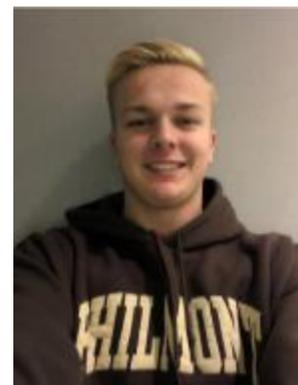
PRAY

Dear Lord, we ask You to look over us this holiday season and point out where our mind is governed by the flesh. We ask for the Holy Spirit to guide us so we may be more focused on glorifying You. In Jesus' name we pray, amen.

Jennings (Jack) Tlapa

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jennings is a 17-year-old senior at Colonial Forge High School. He and his family have attended Stafford Crossing Community Church for 7 years. He is active in Fusion Student Ministry.



December 9, 2019

A Thrill of Hope

Galatians 4:3-7 (ESV)

In the same way we also, when we were children, were enslaved to the elementary principles of the world. But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God.

It's the most wonderful time of the year. At least that's what the old Christmas song says. Yet Christmas, for so many, can be at best a difficult time. Loss, pressure to keep up with Pinterest Christmas expectations, family strife, illness, loneliness, or distance from family can all contribute to making what should be a joyous, light-filled season into a season you just need to "get through." Christmas can be exhausting.

Our church just finished a sermon series called "The Road to Recovery". We talked about our tendency to carry around hurts, habits, and hang-ups and how those things can, as Galatians says, enslave us. They keep us from living life as God intended. We were designed for relationship with God and for that relationship to lead and guide all our other relationships, including the things we tell ourselves about ourselves.

Paul tells us in these verses, however, that we are no longer slaves to those hurts, habits, and hang-ups. In fact, we have received adoption as sons (and daughters) of the King. Jesus came, born of a woman, to redeem (save) us and to free us of from the confines of a law we could never hope to keep. We now call God our Father, our Abba, and are heirs to God's kingdom. We have gone from slaves to sons and daughters. We have gone from having no ability to control any aspect of our lives to the freedom that being a child of the Most High gives us. We have gone from powerless to having access to unlimited power. We have gone from a relationship void of love to one forged in love.

That is what we celebrate at Christmas. Trees, lights, good food, and family are all wonderful elements of this season, but we celebrate because Jesus came to take us from slavery to sonship. That is the thrill of hope the weary world needs.

RESPOND

Take a few minutes from the busyness of the season to make a list of the ways that Jesus' coming has freed your heart and life. Then take the bold step to share that with a friend who needs to see what Christmas is really all about.

PRAY

Thank You Father for sending Your Son, born of a woman and under the law so that I might have access to adoption as a child of the King. Thank You for setting me free from the slavery of my hurts, habits, and hang-ups. Help me to live in that freedom this Christmas season.

Chris Cepulis

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chris Cepulis is the Worship Ministries Director at Stafford Crossing. She's been a part of the church since 2013. When she's not on stage as part of the worship band, you will find her serving alongside the tech team. She loves teaching guitar, watching movies, and hanging out with the girls in the young ladies' small group she co-leads.



December 10, 2019

...From the Stump of Jesse

Isaiah 11:1-5 (NIV)

A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit. The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him—the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of might, the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the LORD—and he will delight in the fear of the LORD. He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes, or decide by what he hears with his ears; but with righteousness he will judge the needy, with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth. He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth; with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked. Righteousness will be his belt and faithfulness the sash around his waist.

Why was God so patient to bring His final sacrifice for the whole world's sins? Just how much does God love me that He patiently carried out His perfect plan of salvation to rescue me from my own self-destructive sins? How much must God love me!

In His perfect, patient plan of salvation, God sent Jesus. Whose gruesome death on a cross could set us eternally free from sin and whose resurrection from the grave could set us eternally free from death itself! His Holy Spirit who rested upon our Messiah (Isaiah 11:2) was also sent to us so that He could counsel us and could empower us to live free from the power of sin over us! All for His Glory!

Could. He could do. We could invite Him to do what He wants to do.

When we respond in faithful obedience, God can and will provide His messianic salvation and Holy Spirit power.

Though we may traditionally experience Christmas as little more than a seasonal celebration, Isaiah still testifies of our Sovereign LORD's ancient, patient plan to provide salvation through Jesus Christ, who was and is made available for all people to faithfully respond, trust, obey, and place ultimate hope in the Christ of Christmas! Our Lord Jesus defeated sin itself, so that we may "proclaim the year of the LORD's favor" both now and forever (Isaiah 61:2, Luke 4:19)!

RESPOND

Continue responding to Jesus now, for disobedience only fosters a tragic history in place of what God would have done for us.

PRAY

LORD God, You alone are righteous and faithful; and I am unworthy of You. Please forgive me, LORD, for I know I need Your salvation. I want to delight in You this Christmas. In Jesus' name, amen.

Timothy DeVine

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Timothy DeVine is an ordained minister. He is married to Katie and the father of five, with #6 due in January. He currently serves as a group leader in Kids Crossing.



December 11, 2019

Embrace Your Freedom...and Hold On!

Galatians 5:1 (NIV)

"It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery."

There's a story about an old convict who spent nearly his entire life in prison. He went before the parole board year after year and was denied parole each time. The old man had all but accepted that he would never leave the prison. Then, one day, his parole was unexpectedly approved. The thing he most wanted and least anticipated was finally in his grasp, but he was surprised at his own reaction when the prison gates opened in front of him. As he walked out into the warm, bright light of day, instead of the joy of freedom, he experienced fear and loneliness. He wished for his cold, dark cell with its familiar walls and rusty locks.

Jesus came to set us free! Still, sometimes we struggle with doubt and fear. The burdens we gave up to Him call to us to pick them back up. They feel somehow comfortable even as they pull us down and rob us of the freedom Christ bought for us. But Hebrews 12:1 says, "...let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles." There is an act of will involved here. You must choose to leave the prison. Unlike the old convict, though, you don't walk out alone. Jesus doesn't stand by the gate waving goodbye as you go. He goes with you! Remember too, that you are part of the community of believers. We are much more able to "stand firm" when we stand together as brothers and sisters in Christ, supporting, encouraging, and helping one another. So, let me encourage you to embrace your freedom and hold on tight!

RESPOND

Reflect for a moment on Galatians 5:1. Are there areas where you are struggling to stand firm? Ask God for help and lean on your small group for support. Who do you know that needs your support and encouragement? If you aren't part of a small group, ask God to lead you to one!

PRAY

Thank You Father, for the freedom You have given us through Jesus. Please reveal the power of that freedom to me and help me to live in it more every day!

Mark Heeren

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mark has been worshipping at Stafford Crossing for about 16 years. Over the years, he's been part of the worship band, served with First Touch, and loved being part of an awesome small group. He loves God and is super thankful for His amazing grace in our lives. He was a Christian School Principal a long time ago. These days, his "full time ministry" is as a government contractor.



December 12, 2019

Generous in Forgiveness

Luke 6: 36-38 (NASB)

“Do not judge, and you will not be judged; and do not condemn, and you will not be condemned; pardon and you will be pardoned. Give and it will be given to you. They will pour into your lap a good measure—pressed down, shaken together, and running over. For by your standard of measure it will be measured to you in return.”

While much has changed about the world since Jesus said these words, they are just as applicable today as when He spoke them. People are still inclined to find fault and condemn others while readily justifying their own behaviors. Isn't it far easier to look for flaws and mistakes in those around us than to deal with our own faults and weaknesses? But when we are always critical, we tend to have a lot of critics in return. In today's verses, Jesus offers a very different path for us to follow. He instructs us to not only avoid judging and condemning others, but to freely pardon them as well—in the same way that each of us needs pardoning by those we offend, as well as from God.

When we admit our own failings and our need of a Savior, it becomes harder to judge and condemn others. Our forgiveness is not meant only for those who ask for it or deserve it either; instead we are to be as generous as God has been with us. He has redeemed us through Christ's death and resurrection. He has forgiven us of our sin. Just as God's generous forgiveness removes all condemnation, the outpouring of our own forgiveness eliminates the toxic waste of hatred and unkindness that can accumulate in the dark recesses of our hearts toward those who have wronged us. Jesus' message here is at the very core of the Gospel: what He generously gave to us is ours to give to others; what is given to others is what is given back and by it, we are set free! Generosity flows both ways and by our giving, many will seek reconciliation, desire to learn more about who Jesus is, and give their burdens over to God.

RESPOND

Let God be the sole judge of others in all your relationships. Consciously forgive by name those you believe have wronged you and those you have judged and condemned.

PRAY

Lord, I thank You that there is no condemnation because of Your Son, Jesus. I confess my own shortcomings today and ask for forgiveness and the power to change. Help me not elevate myself as the judge of others but instead, let me see those whom You have put in my path with eyes of compassion rather than the glare of condemnation. Give me patience with those around me that I would generously extend the same grace to them as You have so generously extended to me. Thank You for speaking to me through Your Word. In Jesus Christ's name I pray, amen.

Wayne Sinclair

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Wayne grew up as a missionary kid in southern Africa. He retired from the Marine Corps in 2018. He and his wife Delena have been married 27 years and have two children. He has attended Stafford Crossing for five years, is active in a small group, and has been involved in various ministries.





December 13, 2019

Treasure in Heaven

Matthew 6:19-21 (NIV)

“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

How did we get from a humble manger in a stable when there was no room in the inn to Black Friday, doorbusters, online deals, and free shipping? Well, we could spend hours studying the history of the holiday (I have done this), learning about the origins of celebration of the winter solstice in ancient northern European lands where it was dark for months, and the joy when the days finally started to have more light. December 25 was chosen in the 3rd century as the date to observe Christ's birth, as a metaphor for the true Light shining in the darkness (John 1:5). Christian influence on the celebration of the solstice helped tone down the debauchery characteristic of these festivities. The introduction of Santa Claus (St. Nicholas Day, December 6, Bishop of Myra and defender of the Trinity) espoused generosity in gift giving. The Puritans eschewed the corruption of the holy day, banning it in the New World. But its popularity resurfaced in the 19th century with Clement Clark Moore's poem, *Twas the Night Before Christmas*.

Modern depictions grew fashionable with Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* in 1843. Gift giving was an economic booster for a young entrepreneurial nation, and thus it was capitalized upon. And so today, we Americans give gifts at Christmas! Our traditions of the holiday have been exported to the global economy as well. But where is Jesus in all this?

The answer: He is everywhere. He is not just the reason for the season, but the reason for our salvation, every day, not just on Christmas or on Easter or on Sunday. He is not caught up in the materialism, nor is He forgotten. He is in our hearts, and we are His hands and feet, doing His work in every season, if we let Him work through us. His gift to us is freedom from the bondage of sin, and that is the greatest gift we can share with others.

RESPOND

If you are overwhelmed by the material obligations of the season (the gift lists, the entertaining, the decorating), stop and pray! Pray for the person you are gifting. Pray for the friends and family you are hosting. Pray for His guidance to keep it simple, focus on Him, and accomplish what He deems important. It might mean crossing some items off your to do list in order to concentrate on what is important. Ask God to help you reach out to someone who isn't normally on your guest or gift list and bless them with a phone call, a hug, or a kind word of encouragement.

Christmas does not have to be a stressful time if you commit your plans to the Lord! (Proverbs 16:3). Share the joy of His sacrifice and perfect gift to us.

PRAY

Lord, in this season that often feels taken over by consumerism and focus on things rather than Your sacrifice, help us to see the beautiful truth of Christmas and the treasure You have promised us in Heaven. With an eye on eternity, let us proceed to be the hands and feet of Jesus in this season and all year, celebrating His light in the darkness.

Kelly O'Connor

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kelly is a homeschooling mom to 4 daughters. Her husband Ken recently retired from the Marine Corps. As a family that has moved a lot over the years, they are grateful for their family, friends, and church here in Stafford.



December 14, 2019

From Slave to Saved

Romans 6:16-18 (ESV)

Don't you know that when you offer yourselves to someone to obey as slaves, you are slaves to the one whom you obey—whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or obedience, which leads to righteousness? But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you wholeheartedly obeyed the form of teaching to which you were entrusted. You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness.

When you were a kid, and someone asked you what you wanted to be when you grew up what did you say? Maybe you wanted to be a teacher, or a firefighter, or an athlete. We may not have all gone on to be what our little seven-year-old self dreamed of, but we do have one thing in common--none of us aspired to be a slave. Sometimes slavery is less like an occupation and more like a feeling, one that weighs us down and keeps us from God.

Do you feel enslaved to anything this Christmas season? Is it your job or your finances? Maybe it's a relationship with a family member or a friend? Is it your mental or physical health? Whatever it may be, take comfort in knowing that slavery is not God's will for your life. God sees your pain and is patiently waiting to set you free if you'll allow Him. He's gone ahead of us and made a way out of captivity by sending His Son, Jesus. Thankfully, we don't need to fight for freedom because our Father has already won it for us. He's taken us from slave to saved, now we just have to act like it.

RESPOND

God is the only one who can change slave mentality into saved mentality. Take some time today and talk to Him about the areas where you feel enslaved, then plan to talk to someone who can hold you accountable or help you get away from the thing that is holding you captive. Pray about being a part of Celebrate Recovery when it starts in 2020.

PRAY

Lord, thank You for sending your Son to free me from sin. Reveal to me the ways I'm enslaved. Help me to trust that only You can free me. In Your name, amen.

Kristi Gilzean

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kristi works in the Stafford School system as a paraprofessional. She has been attending Stafford Crossing most of her life. Her parents started attending when she was in 1st grade and her family has called it their church home ever since. Currently, she serves in Kids Crossing almost every Sunday as a teacher for the 2s and 3s class. She also hosts a Bible study for her second family, a young ladies' group, every Monday.



December 15, 2019

Proper Focus on the Holiday Season

Psalm 72:11-14 (NIV)

*May all kings bow down to him
and all nations serve him.*

*For he will deliver the needy who cry out,
the afflicted who have no one to help.*

*He will take pity on the weak and the needy
and save the needy from death.*

*He will rescue them from oppression and violence,
for precious is their blood in his sight.*

There is some confusion whether Psalm 72 was written by Solomon or by David for Solomon before he died. Regardless, this Psalm does not describe Solomon or his life. All nations did not serve him (verse 11) and while he had amassed great wealth there is really no indication that he made that wealth available for anyone except himself (verses 12-14). As well-known theologian, Matthew Henry, pointed out, this psalm is not really about Solomon because of those areas that don't match with Solomon's reign. Henry goes on to say this Psalm is really a foreshadowing of the One who was to come that would have all kings bow to Him and all nations serve Him - Jesus. It also provides us with a glimpse into the heart of this Jesus who did come.

In this season, it is important to recognize the gravity of Christ's heart in our lives. Jesus' heart goes out to the poor and needy in scripture. What are we doing to care for the needy, poor, or those who are oppressed? Let us not forget to follow His example of love to the poor in this Christmas season. My family always goes to the World Vision catalog to purchase things required by the needy; things that allow them to pursue a profession- farming, seamstress, accounting, schoolbooks, etc. Others we know help in food kitchens, give to other organizations, invite someone who is lonely to share in the holidays, or find their own way to reflect what Jesus would do if He was walking in their shoes.

RESPOND

If this is the kingdom our Lord Jesus will create then we need to consider this when we enter the season to celebrate and remember His birth. What would you do to serve the poor and needy this Christmas season?

PRAY

Father, show us what You want us to do this Christmas season with Your desire to help those in need. And then give us the desire and the courage to follow through on what You're calling us to do.

Sam Fiore

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sam is sixteen years old and has attended Stafford Crossing most of his life. He attends Fusion Student Ministry and serves in Kids Crossing.



December 16, 2019

The Cheerful Giver

2 Corinthians 9:6-15 (ESV)

The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work.

As it is written,

“He has distributed freely, he has given to the poor; his righteousness ensures forever.”

He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. You will be enriched in every way to be generous in every way, which through us will produce thanksgiving to God. For the ministry of this service is not only supplying the needs of the saints but is also overflowing in many thanksgivings to God. By their approval of this service, they will glorify God because of your submission flowing from your confession of the gospel of Christ, and the generosity of your contribution for them and for all others, while they long for you and pray for you because of the surpassing grace of God upon you. Thanks be to God for his inexpressible gift

Christmas is a time that reminds us of all the joy that can come from giving. It also reminds us of the burden you can feel when you feel expected to give out of obligation. God doesn't want you to feel compelled to give out of guilt, pleasure, or obligation. He calls us to give out of our trust in Him. Nothing on this Earth is "ours". He is the creator and provider of all things. If we put our trust and faith in Him that He will provide what we need. Then giving becomes easy and joyful. *“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?”* (Matthew 6:25-26, ESV)

So, what happens when we trust in Him and become generous givers? We benefit. As Paul says, "God loves a cheerful giver." He blesses generous givers. Verses 8-11 emphasize that "God is able to make all grace abound to you." I know what some of you are thinking, because I've had the same thought – sometimes it doesn't feel like you have room in the budget to give even a little bit let alone generously, especially during the Christmas season. The great part is God will give you what you need so that you can be generous. *“He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. You will be enriched in every way to be generous in every way, which through us will produce thanksgiving to God.”* (2 Corinthians 9:10-11) So not only do you benefit by bringing glory to God and receiving His endless grace, He will provide what you need to give, and it feels great. Cheerful givers love and trust God and that deepens each time they give. It is an act of worship and it's exhilarating!

When you give, others benefit. Paul mentions specific ways that others will benefit:

- The poor will be fed. Churches will be planted. Missionaries will be supported. The gospel will be advanced.
- It will cause others to thank God and give glory to Him. When you give, you will be an answer to someone else's prayer. When God uses you to meet their needs, they will thank and glorify God as a result of your gift.
- It will bring you closer to others. They will long for and pray for you because of your generosity to them.

So in closing, God asks us to trust in Him as our creator and provider. You will benefit from giving and it feels great.

God will provide you with what you need to be a generous giver and others will benefit. The church's mission will move forward and more people will trust and follow Jesus. Embrace this season of giving and enjoy the joy that it brings.

RESPOND

Give giving a try! Trust in God to provide what you need to be a generous and cheerful giver. Seek His guidance and let Him work through you to meet the needs of others.

PRAY

Father, thank You for giving us the opportunity to trust in You and feel the exhilarating joy that comes from giving. Help us to give freely when You place a need before us. Guide us, open our eyes, and help us to have the courage to act on opportunities. Thank You for providing everything we need to allow You to work through us. You are a good Father who gave the ultimate gift in Jesus. You showed us the incredible work that can be done through giving when Jesus gave His life to save us for all eternity. We love You. In Jesus' name we pray, amen.

Katie Carpenter

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Katie is a mother of two and military spouse who works as Stafford County's Emergency Management Planner. She has attended Stafford Crossing and been a part of her small group for two years. Her favorite way to serve is helping those in need during the holiday season and all year long.



December 17, 2019

Remembering the Promise of Christmas

Psalm 30:10-12 (NIV)

*Hear, Lord, and be merciful to me;
Lord, be my help."*

*You turned my wailing into dancing;
you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy,
that my heart may sing your praises and not be silent.
Lord my God, I will praise you forever.*

In past years, we found ourselves complaining about the hectic nature of the holidays. We had too many events to attend, too many gifts to buy, and certainly too many Hallmark movies to watch. Even if we had time to think about what we wanted for Christmas, our list would have been decidedly short: fewer places to be and more money to spend.

But now, the battle we face is not against time or money, but grief. We'd gladly take those busy times instead of the Goliath that is looking over at an empty seat where our loved one used to sit. Last year, we lost my father to cancer. He always loved the Christmas season. The light of Christmas now has a shadow of sadness. And with the holiday season lasting over a month, the shadow can seem inescapable and all-consuming.

But what gets us through this time is praying to God to help us focus on remembering the reason for the season. It is not money, time, or grief. It is Jesus, for He is the one who offers eternity that renders lost time irrelevant, strength which offers more security than money can ever buy, and comfort that wipes our tears from the depths of grief. As Psalm 30:12 suggests, we should focus on Him and the greatness of His deliverance, the same way David wanted God to be praised, and not himself.

So, we are going to focus our time and thoughts on giving honor and glory to the one and only true God who offers mercy, remembering all the times He turns our wailing into dancing, removing our sackcloth to clothe us with joy, so that our hearts may sing His praises and never be silent.

RESPOND

Pray and ask God to help get through the hectic holiday season and provide the joy necessary to overcome sadness; and remember all the battles He fought and won for us, giving Him all the honor and glory.

PRAY

Father God, when our hearts feel heavy and burdened, help us to put our thoughts and attention on You, help us to lean on Your words and promises during this holiday season. In Jesus' name we pray, amen.

Tim, Tia, Maya & Jacob Johnson

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Tim and Tia Johnson have been married for 23 years. They have a daughter, Maya, who is a junior at George Mason University, and a son, Jacob, who is a freshman at Colonial Forge High School. They have attended Stafford Crossing since May 2014. They enjoy serving on the First Touch Team.



December 18, 2019

A Sign from The Lord

Isaiah 7:14 (NKJV)

Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel.

When I bought my first car, I always loved to drive and go out to different places. This was around early 2005 when GPS systems were not very common and very expensive. I always printed on paper the directions to my destination from MapQuest and followed the directions religiously, turn by turn. One day, a friend invited me to join her family for Thanksgiving dinner. I printed the directions from MapQuest and set out on my journey. As I got into the town, I could not find my next sign or the street to turn on. After about thirty minutes of going back and forth I gave up trying and decided to call for help. My friend told me that the road shown on MapQuest was closed and a new road had been constructed which was not updated on the map. Sometimes in life's journey we are looking for clues and signs to take the next step or make a move. We often get worried and anxious about what will happen next. The prophecy of Isaiah we read today gave the people a sign and hope about the coming of the long-awaited Messiah. This sign was so unique that no one could miss it.

An acronym for the word Bible is Basic Instructions Before Leaving Earth. It gives us every instruction to get through life's most challenging problems. In Joshua 1:5, when Joshua had the daunting task of leading the people of Israel, God assured Joshua that He would never leave him nor forsake him. What a relief to know that God will never abandon you, even for a second. God gave the wise men from the East a sign, a star that led them to the location of the baby Jesus. Matthew 2:9-10 says, *"and behold, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came and stood over where the young Child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy."* God still gives us signs and clues to go through life through His Word and the Holy Spirit. Matthew 28:20b says, *"And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."* The term "On-Demand" is used by cable and media streaming services but it can be used to relate to God's readily available help in our daily lives, too. Psalm 46:1 says, *"God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble."* We rest assured when we rely on His promises in His Word. The peace we enjoy in our heart in difficult times is a sign of God's comforting hands in our lives.

RESPOND

As we go through this life, remember that God has made provision for every life situation and you must just look for the signs in His word and through prayer.

PRAY

Father, thank You for every provision You have given me through Jesus Christ. Give me the grace and patience to trust and follow You every step of the way. Open my eyes to see what You have provided for me and my ears to hear Your voice when You speak. In Jesus' name I pray, amen.

Kwesi Thompson

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kwesi was born and raised in Ghana where he grew up in church; his father is a Methodist minister and teacher of the Word in Ghana. He became a Christian in 1992. He is the last of four children. He migrated to the United States in 2004. He is married to Eunice and they have three beautiful girls. He and his family have been attending Stafford Crossing since the summer and just completed the Alpha course. He is excited about Jesus and loves to teach others about Jesus.



December 19, 2019

Timeless Reminder – Turning to God

John 3:16-21 (NASV)

"For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him. He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. This is the judgement, that the Light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil. For everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come to the Light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. But he who practices the truth comes to the Light, so that his deeds may be manifested as having been wrought in God."

We would be hard-pressed to find a verse quoted more often than John 3:16. We can often hear the words of such a powerful verse, fail to grasp the meaning of it, and forget that this verse only begins to talk about the promise of Christ and the fulfillment He provided. God is a being of infinite love; He sent His Son to save a people that had rebelled against Him, are rebelling against Him, and will continue to rebel until the time of final judgment. He didn't have to do that for us, but He promised that He would fulfill the covenant made between man and God, even though we are completely incapable of fulfilling our part in it.

The second half of this passage is not one we should forget either. We must remember that when we sin, we are not to hide that sin in shame from others and from God, but rather bring those sins forward to be exposed and to seek rectification. Hiding sin can seem like the easier choice, and at the start it may feel easier, but the longer we allow our sin to dwell in the dark, the harder it will be to bring our deeds to the Light and the more our sins will proliferate, infecting more and more of our lives.

During this season of celebration at the fulfillment of the promise of Christ, let's not let the words of this passage ring hollow, but really focus on what this means for us. God is so loving that He provided a way for us to be with Him even though we struggle against His will at every turn. Do not allow shame to keep your sin hidden in the dark, but rather bring it to the Light so God may redeem you and allow you to heal.

RESPOND

When you sin, don't hide it from God. He already knows all your transgressions and He sent Christ to die on the cross regardless. Seek accountability from other brothers and sisters in Christ as well.

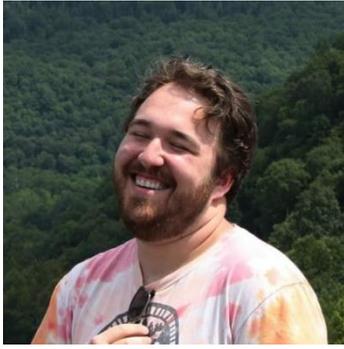
PRAY

God, how amazing You are that, despite all our rebellion and transgressions, You loved us enough to send Christ to take our place! Thank You for always providing for us even when we have done nothing to deserve Your love! Help us to bring our sins to the Light so that You may rectify us and our actions and drive us from hiding in the dark toward You. We love You and praise You. In Christ's name we pray, amen.

Justin Freeman

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Justin Freeman has been attending Stafford Crossing since 2010 when his family found out a church was holding service in his high school. He volunteers both with the 4th and 5th graders during Kids Crossing as well as 7th and 8th grade boys at Fusion.



December 20, 2019

Walking in the Dark

Isaiah 9:2-7 (NIV)

*The people walking in darkness have seen a great light;
on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned.
You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy;
they rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest,
as warriors rejoice when dividing the plunder.
For as in the day of Midian's defeat, you have shattered the yoke that burdens them, the bar across their shoulders,
the rod of their oppressor.
Every warrior's boot used in battle and every garment rolled in blood
will be destined for burning, will be fuel for the fire.
For to us a child is born, to us a son is given,
and the government will be on his shoulders.
And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end.
He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness
from that time on and forever.*

The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this.

Have you ever started a task and suddenly the lights went out? Did you find yourself stumbling around in the dark, trying to feel familiar objects just to help you move around or try to find a friend or family member to make sure they were okay in the sudden darkness? As soon as the light came back on, you probably felt relieved that you could see your surroundings and complete your task or felt assured that your family member or friend was now okay. However long or short-lived the darkness is, we feel a sudden discomfort when the lights are out.

As people we were destined to walk in darkness, until God, who is rich in mercy and love for us, sent His only Son, Jesus Christ, who is the Light of the World to be the light we need to navigate our way through life in this fallen world. The light of Jesus gives us joy amid sorrow or pain and a blessed assurance of salvation that includes a close relationship with Him. Because of Jesus' birth, we can be sure that His light will direct our path, give us joy through difficult times, and peace regarding our eternal salvation.

RESPOND

During this Christmas season allow the Lord to reveal the Light of Jesus through you to your family, church, and fellow man by showing them that God promises light in the darkness, joy in pain, and a Savior for those who will trust and follow Jesus.

PRAY

Father help me to show the light of Jesus to others in darkness, give us joy in times of sorrow and pain, and have the constant assurance of Your salvation.

Laura Artis

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Laura is originally from Richmond and is the youngest of a large family. She works for the Federal government and does music in many capacities in her free time. She has been at Stafford Crossing since 2015. She serves as part of the Sunday morning worship band and is involved in a small group.



December 21, 2019

A Son Given, a Savior Sent

Matthew 1:18-24 (NIV)

This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" (which means "God with us").

When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife.

In Luke's gospel we learn of Mary's obedience to bear our Savior, but here in these verses of Matthew, we learn of Joseph's obedience to a situation beyond his understanding. Joseph is described as "righteous" (he lives by God's law), not self-righteous, a quality that would cause him to demand harsh justice. We see Joseph model Christ-like compassion for Mary, whom he thinks has sinned. Now God steps in, the angel of the Lord appears in a dream to Joseph. Joseph is called to action and he obeys. In this dream, Joseph is given the honor to name our Savior. A name above every other, He will be called Jesus (which means "God saves"). We ask, "Saves from what?" From our sins. Jesus was sent not to overtake Rome, but to be our righteousness, our refuge, and our light in this fallen world. His birth was prophesized throughout the Old Testament and recounted here in Matthew. Matthew mentions prophecies about the Messiah eleven times throughout his gospel, indicating that Jesus is the Messiah, the chosen one. Lastly, Joseph awakes from his dream, without pause of question, he puts God's plan into action.

What does this say about God? God has a plan for us all. Here we learn of His plans for His only begotten Son to come in the world using Mary and Joseph.

RESPOND

We can relate to Joseph here. Like Joseph we look at situations in our lives and ask, "How is God in this?" "Or how does this make any sense?" We always need to understand that we are called to be obedient to God's calling, sometimes even without understanding.

PRAY

During this Christmas season, I pray for us all, that we will seek God's plan in our lives and all that we do, and to be thankful for His plan to send us our Savior, Jesus. Merry Christmas.

Todd Collins

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Todd Collins is married to Cheryl Collins. They have a 23-year-old daughter Alexa. Todd and Cheryl have been members of Stafford Crossing since 2015. He serves in Kids Crossing and enjoys sharing his faith and the love of God with the children.



December 22, 2019

The Wonder and the Glory

John 1:14 (NIV)

“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.”

“Glory” (noun): high renown or honor won by notable achievements; magnificence or great beauty; biblically, the manifestation of God’s presence as perceived by humans

I’m the type of person who gazes up at a night sky and gets lost in the vastness and the mystery out there. Such a huge universe, and here I am, on this little rock rotating around a star. I’m so small, yet I was created and am known by my Creator. An item is assigned value by who made it (the quality of the craftsman) and who desires it (demand). You are both designed by AND desired by God of the universe, Creator of all things. I can’t think of a higher value that can be assigned to anything.

“The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.”

Of all the places in all creation, Jesus came to this little rock to show Himself to us. That shakes me. It humbles me. It makes my tummy do an excited little flip-flop, because the Creator of all things loved ME enough to come HERE and reveal Himself to me. It’s what He desires: to be known by us.

I John 4: 8-9 (NIV) reads, *“...because God is love. This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him.”*

Love became flesh and blood on Christmas Day, and that’s a majesty and a mystery to be revered for all of our days.

RESPOND

As we approach Christmas Day, focus on the wonder and joy you can find by seeing how much God loves you, how much you matter to Him. Tell God every day how much you value His love and that, by His gift of Jesus, we can approach Him and one day enjoy His presence in its full glory.

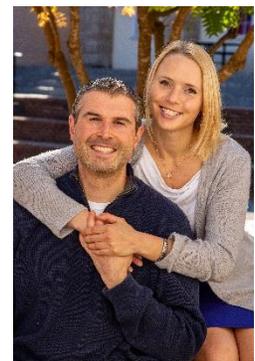
PRAY

Jesus, may we always keep close the joy of Your presence. Thank you for revealing the glory of Your love for us in Your coming to Earth to reach us and eventually die for us. Let the magnitude of that love never leave us. In Your name, amen.

Heather Ulstad

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Heather is originally from Detroit, MI and has been living in Virginia for ten years. She and her family have attended Stafford Crossing since 2013.





December 23, 2019

Joy to the World

Luke 1: 26-38 (CSB)

"In the sixth month, the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man named Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And the angel came to her and said, 'Greetings, favored woman! The Lord is with you.' But she was deeply troubled by this statement, wondering what kind of greeting this could be. Then the angel told her: 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. Now listen: You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give him the throne of his father David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and his kingdom will have no end.'

Mary asked the angel, 'How can this be, since I have not had sexual relations with a man?'

The angel replied to her: 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore, the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. And consider your relative Elizabeth - even she has conceived a son in her old age, and this is the sixth month for her who was called childless. For nothing will be impossible with God.'

'I am the Lord's servant,' said Mary. 'May it be done to me according to your word.' Then the angel left her."

In the world of constant hustle and bustle, it can be easy to lose sight of why we continue to press on, day after day. While we look forward to Christmas and the joy it brings, we hold the elements that are stealing that joy ever close to us, allowing one of the greatest gifts in life, the joy of a coming Savior, to be stolen by things of this mundane society. We allow school, work, self-doubt, and daily trials to steal Jesus' selfless gift and to blind us from the reason we truly celebrate this season.

But Christmas is not supposed to be this way, because Jesus has come, and joy is here. The same joy that filled the hearts of the shepherds in the fields can fill our hearts as well, we just must be willing and open. Leaving the protection and comfort of heaven, Jesus came to walk among us, to bring us joy in the most unpredictable and unjoyful circumstances. Even when it seems impossible, even when we are on the verge of breaking down because of the stress of this world, we must continue to choose joy. The same Jesus who is known as the Son of the Most High, the Light of the World, the Great I Am, is the same Jesus who brought joy to the world in circumstances that were very confusing and messy indeed.

Yes, we must seek it out and yes, it is hard to find joy every moment of every day, but Jesus will bring joy if we bring our hearts to Him. The Light of the World has come; let us run to Him with open arms and a surrendered heart, ready to receive the joy He has set before us.

RESPOND

Take the time to find at least 3 things that spark joy in your life every day. Whether it is what you are having for dinner or that you are getting to meet a friend for coffee. Make it a priority to find Jesus no matter the circumstance.

PRAY

Dear Lord, thank You for bringing your son into this world to bring joy to us. Thank You for the opportunity we have to more intently focus on the gift of Jesus this holiday season and reflect on the impact of joy His coming brought to us all. As we face the daily trials of this world, we pray that Your joy will come to surpass all understanding as we completely surrender our lives to You. Help us to seek to find Your joy in all that we do. In Jesus' name, amen.

Kylee Fields

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kylee Fields is a senior at Colonial Forge High School and has attended Stafford Crossing her whole life. She is actively involved in the Fusion Student Ministry and serves in Kids Crossing.



December 24, 2019

Jesus' Coming Brings God Near to Us.

Matthew 2: 1-12 (NIV)

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."

When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written:

*"But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for out of you will come a ruler
who will shepherd my people Israel."*

Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."

After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

As a child I can remember taking great delight in going to my school library and finding a new book to read. I especially loved to read the 'Create Your Own Adventure' books. These always fascinated me because while I would start with the same introduction to the story, I could always choose which pages to jump to next in the book. The completion of the story depended on the action that I chose. I read a book two or three different times and each time the story for the characters followed a different narrative depending on the path I chose.

When we consider the passage above and think about the beginning story of Jesus' life, we see that everyone is impacted by their response to His arrival. The Magi, while not Jews, were so greatly moved by the news of Jesus' birth that they traveled a great distance over a significant period to worship this newborn King. There is no doubt that this journey was not without struggles and hardships. Yet, they did what was necessary to complete the journey so that they could encounter Christ and humbly worship Him. In contrast, we see Herod's response is one of fear. When this earthly king received news that his throne and power may be overthrown by someone greater than him, he responds with deception and ultimately, violence.

RESPOND

Dr. Tony Evans is quoted as saying; "You can reject Him, or you can accept Him, but you CANNOT ignore Jesus." The choice belongs to each of us individually and the narrative of each of our stories will depend on the choice we make in this adventure of life we have been given. I urge you to not confuse holiday busyness with worship of our Savior. The traditions we keep, the gifts we exchange, the decorations we put up and the gatherings we attend are all good, but they are not worship. Take some time today and this week to be quiet or alone with the Lord so that you can worship and celebrate His presence in your life.

PRAY

Lord, thank You for entering this broken world. Thank You for giving up Your place in the Heavenly realms to come and save us. Please help us to see You and focus on Your presence during this busy and sometimes difficult season. We desire to encounter You this Christmas season in a new way that increases our hope and joy in You. We love You Jesus and it is in Your name we pray. Amen.

Lauren Johnson

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lauren Johnson a mom of 2 boys and married to AJ Johnson. She has been a member at Stafford Crossing since 2015. On Sundays, you can find her assisting people near the "At Home" wall between services. She also serves on the stage design and décor team.



December 25, 2019

A Way... In a Manger

Luke 2:1-20 (NIV)

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to their own town to register.

So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

*"Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests."*

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about."

So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

The definition of a manger is: a feeder used to hold food for animals. Jesus, when He was born, chose to come into this world in the lowliest of places. Jesus stripped away the rights and privileges He was heir to and instead, made Himself nothing. He came into this world surrounded by farm animals and among the poorest of the poor. On this night, the manger became a symbol. A symbol of humility, yet God also used it as a sign. Jesus, the Messiah, the one who would be the sacrifice for sin for the entire world, was first placed in a feeding trough. A food trough to physically feed animals meant to be used as a sacrifice themselves. As the trough was used to feed animals, Jesus would be the spiritual food to feed the world.

God also used the lowest of the low to spread the message that would change the world. Shepherds, in the first century, were known to be dirty, smelly, and dishonest. I suspect that on that night, they were sitting in a field, maybe trying to keep warm, and the next minute they see the sky on fire and heard an indescribable boom suddenly surrounded by angels. In a split second, they found themselves in God's own glory. Of course, they were scared. This was something they had never experienced before. These angels had the task of being the first beings to tell of the Messiah's birth and they immediately worked at calming the shepherds down. Notice what they say here... that they *"bring great news and that today in a town of David, a Savior has been born to you!"* Notice the inclusion in the angels' message. They didn't say, a son has been born to the Jewish people, or to Mary and Joseph, but to you! This

includes all people! The mention of the town of David reminds us that God keeps His promise. God always has a plan and God's plans never fail. When Jesus was born, it was after God had been silent for 400 years. He was quietly setting the stage for what would be the most extraordinary act, a promise fulfilled that would change the world. God sent us the greatest gift ever – Jesus – to make a way so that sons and daughters of men could become sons and daughters of God.

RESPOND

In the middle of the craziness that Christmas Day can be, take some time to recognize that Jesus came not merely for the world but for you. Pray together as a family a prayer of thanksgiving for Jesus' birth and the access that gives us to God, not as strangers who are dirty and smelly, but as sons and daughters of the Living God. That is cause for a Merry Christmas.

PRAY

Father, what an amazing sight the shepherds must have witnessed; what an amazing message came from that night! Even when we feel like we are nobody, like we are the lowest of the low, remind us that those are the kinds of people whom You use. Help us to remind others and even ourselves that although we may not see you working in miraculous ways, You are still there quietly setting things in place to make a way and that You will let your plans eventually be known. In Jesus' name we pray, amen.

Shawn and Stepheny Fanning

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Shawn and Stepheny Fanning met in the Air Force. Both have been baptized and have dedicated their lives to Christ. They moved to Fredericksburg in Sept of 2016. They started attending Stafford Crossing on Good Friday in April 2019 and have since fallen in love with the church. In October of 2019, they attended the member orientation and began volunteering.

