

Advent Devotional
First Reformed Church
November 2022

Dear First Reformed Church Family and Friends,

What a privilege it is to share with you this year's Advent Devotional, written by fellow members of the FRC family! You will be blessed by the thoughts expressed here. It always amazes me how God pulls together perspectives from so many different people to create a beautiful blessing for all who read it.

Advent is a season of preparation for Jesus's birth. As you prepare your hearts for Christmas, we pray that:

- you are stirred once again by the wonder of "God with us" as the tiny babe in the manger*
- these quiet moments you spend with God will bless you and call Him to mind frequently throughout your day*
- you will share His joy and love with others this Christmas season, especially with those who do not know Him, and*
- most of all, that He will cause all of these words, and everything we do and say, to work together for His glory, that His name may be magnified at FRC and around the world.*

May He be glorified forever! Have a blessed Christmas!

Debbie Asmus
Worship Director

"For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." – Romans 15:4-6

Day 1 – November 27 - Read: James 1:2-12

Change is Part of God's Plan

“Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness.” - James 1:2-3

It's inevitable. It's God ordained. Sometimes it's easy and seems beautiful - the changing colors of fall trees, the first snowfall of the season, flowers blooming in the spring. But sometimes, change is hard! The Bible says that we will have trials and troubles to test us, to help us to become better people, to develop our endurance and make us strong in character.

What a change it was for everyone in heaven when Jesus left and came to earth! He made himself nothing; He took the humble position of a slave and appeared in human form – the utmost change ever! It was a life change for Mary and Joseph and the shepherds and wise men. But for most people at the time, it was just another day.

Though change is all part of His plan for us, God our Father never changes. He is the same yesterday, today and forever. Jesus said, *“Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows. But take heart, because I have overcome the world.”* These verses give us hope that in heaven, the hard changes will be over, and only beautiful changes will occur. Those are changes we can look forward to.

If you know Jesus as your personal Savior, you will see Him face to face in heaven. But in the here and now, never forget that He is right here - living in you - to mature you, so that you will be strong in character and ready for anything.

Change....it's inevitable. God ordained. Embrace it!

Prayer: Father, thank You that You never change. We can trust You to be with us, no matter what changes life brings our way. Amen.

-Shirley Simon

(See also: Philippians 2:7; Hebrews 13:8; John 16:33)

Day 2 – November 28 - Read: 1 John 4:7-21

Love Others with God's Love

“Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God.” - 1 John 4:7

What is love? First, love is unselfish and seeks the best for others. Some may roll their eyes at this, but I love watching Christmas movies. I enjoy them because the characters in these stories seem successful in the world's eyes, yet on the inside they're not happy. I love to see how their lives change through the truly happy, giving, unselfish people they meet.

Second, love comes from God, and everyone who truly loves others is born of God and knows God through personal experience. If we do not love others, we truly have not really come to know God. How did you come to know God? When did you first believe and accept Jesus as your personal Savior and Lord? How is God working in your life? Share your story, because people need to hear it. Keep getting to know God by reading His Word every day so that you can continue to love others.

Third, God's love is displayed in us through the Holy Spirit because Jesus Christ came into our world. How can we display God's love to others? What are we doing in our community to draw people to God and to faith in Jesus as their Lord and Savior? Where do we need to go to share the Gospel? How do we get people excited about coming to our church?

Finally, love does not fear. When it comes to sharing the Good News, what are we afraid of? Fear does NOT stand a chance when we're standing in God's love. So many people are seeking answers that only God can provide, and we may be the only Jesus they see. Let's conquer those fears, get out of our comfort zone, ask God to show us where we need to go, and share His love with them.

Prayer: Lord, all my life You have been faithful. All my life You have been so, so good. With every breath that I am able, I want to share Your love with others. Help us to be your faithful servants. Amen.

-Carolyn Wolbrink

Day 3 – November 29 - Read: Jeremiah 33:14-16

More than We Could Have Hoped For

“Judah will be saved, and Jerusalem will dwell securely. And this is the name by which it will be called: ‘The LORD is our righteousness.’ - Jeremiah 33:16

Did you know God has a phone number? It appears earlier in this chapter; Jeremiah 33:3 says, “Call to me and I will answer you, I will tell you great and hidden things that you have not known.”

Elsewhere Jeremiah instructs God’s people to call out to God and to repent. He laments at the plight of the Israelite people. The Israelites had been conquered and taken into Babylon, where they were enslaved and brutally treated. The lineage of David who had led them as king for 400 years no longer ruled the people. The circumstances were so dire, and Jeremiah’s cries to God so vivid, that they earned the prophet the moniker of “The Weeping Prophet.”

Yet the prophesy in today’s scripture could not be more hopeful! Unfortunately, the Israelites interpreted this passage to mean an earthly king at that time and up through when Jesus was put to death.

We have the benefit of hindsight. We have the benefit of knowing about Jesus, who He is, and what He has done for us. God did not provide a king who would soon be forgotten. He provided a Heavenly King, the Messiah, Emanuel, the Lord of Lords, and our Savior. So much more than we could have hoped for!

Prayer: Dear Heavenly Father, Your thoughts are not our thoughts. We often think we know what we need; however, Your word constantly reminds us of Your provision, of Your love and grace. We thank You for the gift of Your Son and the gift of salvation offered through Jesus. Amen.

-Brian McDaniel

Day 4 – November 30 - Read: Zephaniah 3:14-17

He Rejoices Over You

*“The LORD your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save.”
– Zephaniah 3:17*

Sing! Shout! Rejoice!

Have you ever heard words that make you want to jump for joy, sing like your voice can reach the sky, shout to the very top of a mountain? God declares He is in our midst! We are called to celebrate the freedom from our sins, enemies and fear of evil through the promised one from God – His name is Jesus.

The Lord is in our midst – His name is Jesus!

The Mighty One who saves – His name is Jesus!

He rejoices over you – His name is Jesus!

He comforts us with His love – His name is Jesus!

The One we serve, worship and praise is the very One promised, the very One who also rejoices over you!

Prayer: Lord, we of all people have the most reason to be joyful, for You rejoice over us! Help us to be grateful for Your mercy and grace and the many blessings You have given us. Help us to share Your Word with our families and friends, so that many more generations will faithfully love and serve You. Amen.

-Sharon McDaniel

Day 5 –December 1 - Read: Isaiah 9:2,6-7

For Unto Us

*“His name shall be called Wonderful Counselor,
Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” – Isaiah 9:6*

Whenever I read this passage from Isaiah, I immediately start to hear the violins' introduction to “For Unto Us a Child is Born” from Handel’s *Messiah*. George Frederic Handel wrote this 53-piece oratorio in 1741 with full orchestration and choral parts – by hand – in only 24 days! Handel used prophetic verses from Isaiah as the lyrics for many songs in this masterpiece.

The prophet Isaiah wrote these verses approximately 700 years prior to the birth of Jesus Christ. Isaiah was already giving us a clear picture of the coming Messiah. The birth of Jesus would fulfill over 350 prophecies found in the Old Testament.

These verses from Isaiah 9 give us a beautiful description of the coming Christ:

- He would be born a male *child* and grow to be a man of great influence. This establishes Jesus as fully human, thus able to stand in the place of sinful man as a substitute for the punishment man deserves.
- *The government will be upon his shoulders*. This will ultimately be fulfilled in Christ’s second coming, when He will appear as King of Kings and Lord of Lords.
- He is *wonderful*, filling our hearts and minds with wonder and amazement.
- As *counselor*, Jesus is our immediate resource to guide our lives and help with all of our problems.
- He is *almighty God*, who is fully God of all and an equal part of the Trinity.
- He is *everlasting God*, eternal, with no beginning and no end.
- Jesus is the *Prince of Peace*, the One who makes peace between God and man.

We truly serve and worship a Savior who fulfilled all the prophecies of the Old Testament. In this Christmas season, take time to enjoy all the beautiful Christian Christmas music and reflect on the incredible miracle of Jesus’ birth.

Prayer: Dear Heavenly Father, we thank You and praise You for Your grand plan of salvation through Jesus Christ. Help us to focus on our relationship with Jesus and help us to draw closer to You daily. We pray these things in Jesus’ name. Amen.

-Gregg Bleeker

Day 6 – December 2 - Read: Matthew 1:1-17

An Exciting Genealogy

“...and Boaz [was] the father of Obed by Ruth...” –Matthew 1:5

Wow! What a boring passage of Scripture to read, right? Well, maybe at first glance it is, but if you take the time to study it more closely, you will find that it is actually quite exciting.

Let's take a closer look at one of the names in verse six. That would be the name of Ruth. Ruth is a Moabitess; she was not a Jew. Therefore she should not, in human thinking, be in the lineage of Jesus - but she is.

I don't know about you but, man, does this give me hope! It demonstrates that God does not worry about our past. He is not concerned about our bloodline. His only concern is our willingness to be led by Him.

So the next time the enemy jumps up on your shoulder and tries to tell you that you're not good enough, I would challenge you to take a closer look at those who God used to bring to mankind the greatest Christmas gift ever given, “Yeshua HaMashiach” – Jesus, the Messiah.

In this Advent season, remember also the words of Galatians 3:28:

*“There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free.....
for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”*

Our Heavenly Father does not see our past - just our ability and willingness to be led by Him.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, Thank you for being willing to take my broken past and turn it into something beautiful in your Kingdom. Amen.

-Donald Jackson

Day 7 – December 3 – Read: Matthew 1:18-25

Happily Ever After

“When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife.” -Matthew 1:24

Have you ever watched one of those Hallmark Christmas movies? Oftentimes it’s a story where boy meets girl, they fall in love, and everything is going great until some event happens that threatens the relationship and their happiness. In the end, though, everything turns out well and they live happily ever after.

These verses from Matthew describe the early events of the Christmas story. I would imagine Mary and Joseph had planned a “happily ever after” life much like characters in a movie, but then Mary became pregnant by the Holy Spirit and Joseph had a decision to make. He had to decide whether or not to marry her. An angel appeared to him in a dream and told him not to be afraid to take Mary as his wife.

Joseph did what the angel commanded, and he and Mary lived happily ever after, right? While the Bible doesn’t tell us very much about the life of Mary and Joseph after the birth of Jesus, we do know that Mary was at the foot of the cross when Jesus was crucified – certainly not a “happily ever after” moment to witness her dear son’s death.

My family went through a tough time a couple of years ago when several loved ones died in a relatively short period of time. I remember asking God why we were suffering with grief and loss again and again. The Bible tells us in John 16:33 that we will not be spared troubles in this life just because we are Christians.

Just as the angel spoke to Joseph, the Holy Spirit speaks to us today to give us guidance and direction during life’s challenges. Like Joseph, we need to be obedient to the Spirit’s leading.

Prayer: Dear God, Thank You for sending Your son to save us. Thank You for the Holy Spirit, who gives us guidance as we live for You. Help us to be obedient until the day we experience our eternal “happily ever after” with You. Amen.

-Joann Moller

Day 8 – December 4 – Read: Luke 1:26-38

Life's Curveballs

"For nothing will be impossible with God." - Luke 1:37

Life throws many curveballs that don't always follow the plans we make. We see our life going one way, and then something happens, and our life goes a whole different way. This can sometimes be good and sometimes bad.

My first major curveball was at age 21, when I lost my brother in a car crash. This tragedy deepened my need to understand how life is all a part of God's plan, even when I may not like it.

My second curveball was getting pregnant at the age of 40. Scared and confused, I again had to trust the Lord that this was all a part of His plan. This trust can sometimes make you feel uneasy or anxious.

I wonder how Mary must have felt when the angel came and told her that she had found favor with God and was going to have a baby that would be the Savior of the World. What a curveball! Last week she was betrothed to be married to Joseph, and now she is going to have a baby who is the Son of God.

But as a follower of Jesus, we need to have unwavering faith - faith that can withstand the good and bad, even when it is so terribly hard. Mary had so much faith in God that she became part of God's plan to save the world. Do you have faith like Mary? Are you willing to be a part of God's amazing plan?

I know I do not have faith like Mary yet, and I am still working on that second curveball. But so far, it has been one of my very best gifts from God!

Prayer: Dear Lord, when our plans for our life differ from Yours, remind us that You can be trusted and Your plan is best. Remind us that You are with us always. Amen.

-Dina Vander Wilt

Day 9 – December 5 – Read: Luke 2:1-7

A Humble Birth

“And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.” – Luke 2:7

One might expect that the birth of our Savior and Lord – the God and creator of everything - would be glorious, magnificent, and elaborate. However, the story of Jesus’s birth is far from anything we’d ever expect.

Most of us plan carefully for our own children. Yet no hospital or luxurious room was prepared for Christ, no high-end onesie or first outfit was purchased, and no studiously prepared announcement was sent out to all of the most important people in the couple’s lives.

Christ not only humbled himself to come to Earth as man, but did it in the most meager and lowly means possible. For God (who is complete and perfect) to come to us in this way, we can only assume He did so out of the greatest of love for us, His children. What an unthinkable and unsurpassable love!

Where in our lives have we been vain, envious, greedy, looking to bring ourselves praise, possessions, and honor? Are we more worried about how we are treated or perceived by others than about shining the light on Christ alone? If the very God of creation can humble Himself out of His love for us, how can we be entitled to more than what He received? For He deserved so much more!

Let us examine ourselves, leave our pride and expectations at the feet of Jesus, and walk with Him humbly. For when we do, we gain so much more than anything we could ever want or expect.

Prayer: Lord, examine my heart, and point out to me those areas where I feel like I have been let down or deserve more. Help me to set those aside and humbly follow You so that I can bless others in Your name. Amen.

-Jackie Bailey

Day 10 – December 6– Read: Luke 2:8-15

A Holy Camping Trip

“Suddenly there was...a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased.’” –Luke 2:13-14

The passage I was assigned for this devotional is a very familiar story. Because of its familiarity, I looked for things in the story that I could relate to. I wanted to find a way to make it fresh, so we can apply it to our lives today.

I started by reading this passage using various versions. The *Message* version begins, “There were shepherds camping in the neighborhood.” Camping? Now there’s a subject I can relate to; we have done a lot of that this past year. I also did a little research on shepherds. At the time of Jesus's birth, shepherds were not very popular and were considered unreliable and social outcasts. Okay, I can relate to feeling that way at times.

So imagine with me - you're on a camping trip, sitting around a campfire with your family late into the evening, just minding your own business. Suddenly the starry sky explodes with light and an angel tells you the Savior has been born! What are you going to do? You load everyone up and drive to the nearby town, where you find the baby just as the angel said. Crazy, right?

So now what? Has seeing Jesus changed you? If not, I challenge you to look again. Verse 17 tells us that the shepherds spread the word about what they had seen.

If seeing Jesus has changed you, will you follow their example and tell others? Tell others, and invite them to come and see Jesus as well!

Prayer: Lord, as we reexamine the gift of Your son this Christmas season, may we (like the shepherds) return glorifying and praising God for all we have heard and seen. Help us to spread the word concerning what we have found. Amen.

-Flora Tieszen

Day 11 – December 7 – Read: Matthew 2:1-12

The Magi Mindset

“Wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, saying, ‘Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star... and have come to worship him.’” – Matthew 2:1-2

The magi go to Jerusalem to inquire about the baby who was born king of the Jews. Jerusalem would have been the area where the High Priest resided and the location of the Temple. They probably expected answers and would have thought others would be worshipping their king, the one specifically born for the Jews. Wouldn't that be exciting?

The magi thought that, once they got to Jerusalem, they would not need a supernatural star to guide them anymore; they would have the leaders of the Jewish community to direct them. After all, the Jewish leaders should have known the way to their king, the messiah.

I see this mindset in myself and fellow believers. My tendency is run to my Christian friends, my pastor, my commentaries, and my favorite podcasters to experience spiritual growth. Looking at the Magi as an example, it would be better for us to go to God directly. To pray and read His word. To stop relying on others for our spiritual growth, and instead, allow the Holy Spirit to teach us what we need to know as we read the word for ourselves.

We need to be like the Magi at the end of their trip, when they listened to the Spirit and went home in a different direction. We too need to follow the Holy Spirit's direction.

Prayer: Dear Supreme Provider, please forgive us when we don't honor You, when we seek outside help and don't go directly to You. Please bless us with discernment to understand Your Spirit's leading. Amen.

-April Geist

Day 12 – December 8 – Read: John 1:1-14

Immanuel: God with Us

“The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.” -John 1:14

Growing up, our preparations for Christmas started soon after Thanksgiving. We decorated our house and a tree and played Christmas albums on a stereo. Most of the cookies, breads, pies, and candies we made were given to others as gifts. We helped wrap Christmas presents and ‘secretly’ made gifts for our parents. On Christmas Eve, we attended the midnight church service. It seemed inevitable that one of us would need a little pinch on the arm to stay awake during church.

John’s gospel doesn’t have a chapter about Jesus’ birth. John’s gospel does give witness to the glory and splendor of Jesus - He existed with God at the beginning of creation, He was God the Son, and everything was created through Him. The incarnation of Jesus means “the Word became flesh.” God sent His divine Son to earth to become the Son of Man. Jesus would dwell with mankind in the world created through Him. Jesus was Immanuel.

Pinch your arm or leg, and you pinch tissue and muscle - your flesh. If someone pinches you hard enough, it hurts and may leave a mark. In a sense, it wakes you up or brings you back to reality.

During Advent, remind yourself that Jesus, while always God the Son, was also truly here in the flesh during His life on earth. Jesus knew what it felt like to be pinched and have marks on His body. John wanted all people, Jews and Gentiles, to understand that God’s gift of His Son results in Jesus’ greatest gift of eternal life to everyone who will receive Him.

Prayer: Father, there is reason for so much joy every day of the year. Thank You for loving us so much that You gave your Son, so that we have the hope of dwelling with You in eternity. Amen.

-Jeanne Krome

Day 13 – December 9 – Read: John 1:29-34

The Lamb of God

“Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” -John 1:29

In this passage we read that John the Baptist was the forerunner to our Lord. John announced here that Jesus was the Lamb of God and the Savior of the world. John came to explain that he baptized with water, but Jesus baptizes in the Holy Spirit.

This story has special meaning for us as believers, but also for those who have not accepted Jesus as their Savior. First, we must believe in the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. John the Baptist says that in His death, Jesus was the sacrificial lamb who paid the penalty for our sins.

So for anyone who has not accepted Jesus as your Savior, the first step is to repent of your sins and ask Jesus to be the Lord of your life. Jesus is the atoning Savior. He will forgive you, take away your sins, and help you live an abundant life.

Second, we must be baptized by Jesus in the Holy Spirit. John the Baptist baptized in water to make Christ known to Israel; Jesus baptizes us in the Spirit to enable us to make Christ known to the world.

Third, we must present the Lamb of God to the world. Our Lord has commissioned us to share Christ and His good news with the world.

Let's go out and tell others about the Lamb of God. We need to tell about His birth, which we are celebrating now during this Christmas season. But we must also tell others about His death, burial and resurrection, which we are blessed to celebrate every day of our lives.

IT'S ALL ABOUT THE LAMB!

Prayer: Heavenly Father, help us to be bold and tell others about Jesus! Amen.

-Vicky Graves

Day 14 – December 10 – Read: John 2:12-19

Where's the Sign?

“What sign do you show us for doing these things?’ Jesus answered them, ‘Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.’” – John 2:18

In today's world we carry cell phones that capture every amazing and unbelievable thing we see. We share these moments of proof that we did or saw something great.

If Jesus had a cell phone, would He have shared His story on Facebook, Instagram, or Snapchat? Would we believe the proof presented, or would we be as oblivious as the Jews who failed to understand the fulfillment of what was written?

We continue to look for tangible and explainable proof of Jesus' sacrifice to the world, meeting doubt at every turn. We continue to ask the same question, “What sign do you show us for doing these things?” Faith prompts us to put doubt aside, and humble our hearts, and allow God to work through us, not so that we can share those moments in selfish motivation, but so that we can show glory to the One who deserves it.

There is a difference between the things God places on our hearts and what we place on our hearts. We can have selfish motivation, fooling ourselves that God guides our actions. Did the merchants and money changers believe they were doing the right thing? We can quickly become engulfed in things that we desire, but let us instead meet God and allow Him to be the lamp to our path and Lord of our life.

Prayer: Dear God, help us to set aside the things we seek that do not honor You. Help us instead to seek those eternal things Your Spirit desires for us, so that we may show others the light of our Savior. Amen.

-Jacob Bailey

Day 15 – December 11 – Read: John 3:16-21

Come to the Light

“Whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God.” – John 3:21

Let us start with a prayer: “God, let us remember that You have given us all of our family and friends. Let us have a joyous time. I pray in Your name, Amen.”

I remember a time where I had a big oopsy. I had done something I shouldn't have. I'm sure we have all made an effort to hide something bad that we have done from our parents.

For example, I had to do the dishes before I could go to a birthday party. I did all but three dishes. I told my dad that I was done with the dishes and then he asked me if I did Mom's coffee cup, which was one of the dishes I didn't do, but I told him I did. He said, “So you found the money then?” I said, “No, I didn't find the money.”

At that moment he knew that I was lying, because he hid the money under the coffee cup. So since I told that one little, no big deal lie, I had to do the dishes for the rest of the week.

This is what God is talking about in John 3:20: “Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed.” But then in verse 21 He says, “But those who do what is right come to the light so others can see that they are doing what God wants.” Like when you do something good and you want to tell everybody what you did.

Prayer: God, I pray that You will help us step into the light and out of the darkness. In Your name we pray. Amen.

-Tucker Pietz

Day 16 – December 12 – Read: John 5:22-30

Jesus, Our Judge and Advocate

“For the Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son, that all may honor the Son, just as they honor the Father.” – John 5:22

As we enter this Christmas season again, our emphasis is on Jesus’s virgin birth. But in this passage we’re reminded there is so much more to the story!

John 5: 22 tells us that one of Jesus’ purposes for coming to earth is to be judge. Because Jesus is both God and man, He is the perfect judge of humankind. He is not like us sinful people who at times judge unfairly and seek to fulfil our own agendas. How many times have I made snap judgments about people or situations with limited knowledge, later learning my judgment was completely wrong? Thank God that He is our ultimate perfect judge who knows all things and doesn’t make any mistakes.

The primary purpose of Jesus coming to earth was to provide the way to eternal life for all who believe in Him. As believers, we won’t have to face ultimate judgment. Jesus came to earth as a baby, lived on earth, died on the cross and rose again for our sins. He took our punishment so that, as believers, we can have eternal life. John 5: 24 says, “Very truly I tell you, whoever hears my word and believes Him who sent me has eternal life and will not be judged, but has crossed over from death to life.” What assurance we have in these words!

In gratitude, let us live out Colossians 2:6: “So then as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in Him.”

Prayer: Jesus, thank You for being our advocate. Thank You for providing us as believers with a way so that we won’t have to face ultimate judgment. Now we can look forward to eternal life. Help us live our lives in gratitude for Your great love and sacrifice. Amen.

-Jan Klinger

Day 17 – December 13 – Read: John 6:22-40

Food for the Soul

“I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.” – John 6:35

I think it is fair to say that if there is anything at FRC that brings us together, it's food! Well, the group of people in this passage are no different. Jesus fed them loaves of bread, so they followed Him across the sea. Why not, right?

However, when they found Jesus, He told them not to work so hard for food that spoils, but to work for food for the soul, Jesus Himself. The crowd then asks Jesus what they should be doing to do “God’s work.” Jesus simply tells them to believe in “Him whom He has sent,” AKA Jesus Himself. The crowd tells Him to prove it – “our fathers ate manna from heaven.” Jesus tells them Moses did not provide the manna, but God did, and He (Jesus) is the bread that gives life to the world. Jesus tells us that He is the spiritual food and drink, and He will NEVER cast out anyone that comes to Him.

Jesus ends by saying that the will of God is that whoever believes in Jesus will have eternal life. What a wonderful comfort this is to those of us that are sinners. It is like Jesus gave His mission statement to the crowd, His entire reason for being on earth. Belief in Jesus gets you eternal life. Boom! Mic drop! Can't top that!

Prayer: Father God, How do we begin to thank You for wanting us to be in Heaven with You? You are such a loving, mind-blowingly amazing God, that You would send us Your Son so we would have a way to be with You! Do we doubt You, even when it is obvious? Yes. And do You forgive us? Yes. Help us in our unbelief, Lord (Mark 9:24). Can we do enough works to get to Heaven? No.

Help us, Lord, to do Your will, believe in Jesus, and be good and faithful servants (Matthew 25:21). Thank You, Lord, from the bottom of our hearts, thank You! In Christ Jesus' faithful and holy name we pray. Amen.

-Randi Pietz

Day 18 – December 14 – Read: John 7:32-44

The Good Shepherd

“Has not the Scripture said that the Christ comes from the offspring of David, and comes from Bethlehem, the village where David was?” – John 7:42

John 7 tells of when Jesus was at the Feast of the Tabernacles. He was preaching and had met with both opposition and support. The chief priests and Pharisees had even tried to arrest Him because of what He was saying.

As He preached, He told the crowd that whoever believed in Him, as the Scripture had said, streams of living water would flow from within him. People discussed what He meant. Some were now positive He was the Christ, but others were still doubting, saying He couldn't be the Christ because He had come from Galilee, and Scripture had said that Christ would come from Bethlehem. People continued to be divided on their opinions.

One of my favorite Christmas songs is “O Little Town of Bethlehem.” When I hear any song, I tend to focus on notes, not thinking as much about the lyrics, but the words of this song are beautiful! Probably even more so because we usually sing or hear them in a church full of people we love, with candles and decorations surrounding us.

*Oh little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie....
yet in the dark streets shineth the everlasting light....
the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.*

As you read the words from John, telling of a time closer to Jesus' death than His birth, remember that our SAVIOR indeed did come from Bethlehem. We are safe and saved because of that baby born so many years ago! I also encourage you to take the time to really think about the beautiful words of our Christmas songs this year. Go ahead and Google them!

Prayer: Lord, we are grateful for music, and especially the songs of the Christmas season, which point us to Your birth and the salvation You brought for all who believe. This season, help us to ponder what we sing as we worship You. Amen.

-Laurie Kent

Day 19 – December 15 - Read: John 8:12-20

Light of the World

“I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” – John 8:12

Remember those pitch black nights camping or laying out in the backyard? You laid on your back and could see all the stars in the sky – wondering how in the world a God who created every single star, and every single galaxy we can't see, would care for someone like you in small-town South Dakota?

The Bible mentions light over 230 times, so it must be important. But whenever I think of light in the Bible, I think of Jesus as the “light of the world,” and I think of the bright star that shone the night of Jesus' birth. Yes, the same star that led shepherds and wise men right to Jesus so they could worship Him.

Jesus not only says He's the light, but He shows how the light always leads us right back into His arms. Jesus calls Himself the light because He guides us in the darkness – just like the fire led the Israelites in the wilderness and the bright star led the shepherds and wise men.

As the Light of life, He guides us on the path of righteousness, and if we stray, His light will bring us back home. He is the eternal light guiding our path. He's the ultimate example for how to live our lives. And when we choose to let Him actively work in our hearts, then we become a light to those around us, showing them out of the darkness of the world.

Prayer: God, help us to relentlessly chase after You in our everyday lives. Help us to shine a light to those around us, showing Your love through everything we do. Help us to bring joy in this holiday season to someone who needs it most. Amen.

-Kaitlyn Van Peurse

Day 20 – December 16 – Read: John 10:1-10

Christ is the Door

“The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.” – John 10:10

John 10:10 tells us that Jesus came to give us abundant life. Quite often, for many, life in the Christmas season gets a little “overly abundant.”

With all the gift getting, baking, planning with different sides of the family, Christmas programs, indoor soccer (ok, maybe that one’s just my family)... the list goes on, all along with our normal duties. We can often feel a little overwhelmed.

Unfortunately, this isn’t even the abundance that Jesus was talking about giving us. Rather, these things can often be the “ones that came not through the gate, but are the thieves and robbers who came over the wall.” While all these things that we have to do may be important in our lives today, we can’t allow them to steal from us our focus and the reason for all of the activity - celebrating the birth of the One who came to “be the gate” for us to follow and be saved.

So during this busy time, make sure you take time to “listen to the Shepherd” and to follow Him in what you do, in order to have the abundant life that He graciously promised us.

Prayer: Dear Heavenly Father, thank You for being our Shepherd through the good times and the hard times. May we hear Your voice and follow You through all that we do. Amen.

-Tom Stevens

Day 21 – December 17 – Read: John 10:11-21

Sheep Need a Shepherd

“I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me.” -John 10:14

In my years of farming, I have raised cattle and hogs, but not sheep. However, as little as I know about sheep, I do know three major characteristics of theirs. They like to stay in a herd or flock. They have a need to be led. And they are a very vulnerable animal. Simply put - they need a lot of care.

I believe a good caretaker of livestock also has three major characteristics. First of all, you need to be invested in them; you will spend a great deal of energy protecting and providing for them. Secondly, you need to be relational to them. In other words, to recognize their needs, you must spend a significant amount of time with them. And last of all, you need to be sacrificial with them, since there will certainly be times that you need to put their care in front of yours.

Reading today’s passage, I’ve come to realize that we share the three characteristics of sheep. We too like to live and interact with others. We tend to seek and look for direction as we move forward through life. And we can become very vulnerable, easily led astray.

Jesus is the prime example of a perfect Shepherd. He is invested in us; verses 12 and 13 say that He will never flee us. He is relational; He knows each of us personally (verse 14). And He is sacrificial; He laid down His life for us. This passage very clearly says that His life wasn’t taken, but rather sacrificed for all mankind.

During this time of Advent, let’s thank our heavenly Father for giving us the perfect Shepherd. For without His birth, life, sacrifice and resurrection, we too would be like a wandering flock of sheep, alone and vulnerable with no sense of direction.

Prayer: Father, thank You for the gift of Your Son. May we always look to Him for guidance, safety and direction as we serve You and bring the good news of His birth, life, death and resurrection to others. Amen.

--Dan Moller

Day 22 – December 18 – Read: John 11:17-26

Giving Comfort: Not Why, but Who

*“But even now I know that whatever you ask from God,
God will give you.” – John 11:22*

Lazarus was dead. His sisters and friends were grieving. Jesus went to comfort the sisters. The belief that Jesus saw in Martha as she greeted Him convinced Jesus to raise Lazarus from the dead. She knew that God would allow whatever Jesus asked.

Martha did not go to Jesus and ask, “Why is Lazarus dead?”, which is what most of us ask when someone dies. Instead, she went right to the Who (in this scenario, God). She knew the Lord and what He could do.

There is no place in the Bible that answers that question we all ask - “Why?” “Why did he die?” “Why do bad things happen to good people?” “Why do we have struggles?” We don’t have the answers; all we can do is trust God. The only one that has the answer is the “Who” - God! We have to hold strong to our faith in God and His Word.

So the next time you’re struggling, and thinking about asking God why, stop and focus on the Who. He is in control, and He knows the why, but we will only learn why when we’re with Him in glory. He does not want us to worry about the why, but to trust in the WHO, God.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, help me not to focus on why things happen to me, but to focus on the Who. I know that You are in control in every moment of my life, that You love me and care for my every step. You are my God, and I trust Your guiding hand in my life. Amen.

-Mike Asmus

Day 23 – December 19 – Read: John 11:27-37

Live Like You Believe

“They said to him, ‘Lord, come and see.’ Jesus wept.” – John 11:34-35

What are we ready for? Are we ready to die? As a Christian - because of the miracle of Christmas and, most importantly, the sacrifice of the cross - death means eternal life with our Lord and Savior.

In today’s reading, Mary and Martha mourn Lazarus’ death and, knowing Jesus is the Messiah, wonder why He did not come sooner to help them. John 11:35 is a great reminder for us as Christians that Jesus loves us and is with us when we go through hard times. Then Jesus performs an amazing miracle, raising Lazarus from the dead just by speaking. Had Jesus come sooner and healed Lazarus, we would have missed out on the amazing miracle of Jesus calling him back to life.

If we, like Martha, know that Jesus is the Messiah, capable of amazing miracles, and we believe that He gave His life for us so that we could be free from the bondage of sin, what are we called to do? Tell everyone about Jesus! Acts 4:13 says that Peter and John were ordinary men with no special training (sounds a lot like me). Yet they amazed the members of the council with their boldness. “They took note that these men had been with Jesus.”

Do others know by our words and actions that we have spent time with Jesus? Our life is a ministry. As Paul David Tripp says in his devotional New Morning Mercies, “There is no real separation between life and ministry. That means we live, work, relate, play and relax with a ministry mentality.” What a privilege it is to serve God wherever He has placed us. The greatest accomplishments of this life will never be seen until the next!

May these questions create space for the Holy Spirit to work in your life today:

- Are you ready?
- How will you allow God to use you this year?
- Who will thank you in Heaven for telling them about Jesus?
- Whose salvation are you praying for most this year?

Prayer: Father, help us to make the most of every opportunity to share Christ with others, relying on your Spirit to guide us. Help us to make our lives count for You. Amen.

-Krista Smith

Day 24 – December 20 – Read: John 18:28-37

Christmas Gave Us Easter

*“For this purpose I was born...to bear witness to the truth.
Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice.” -John 18:37*

God came to earth in a very quiet, modest way. The leaders heard about this new King and immediately tried to find Him and kill Him. So Jesus was seen as a threat from the beginning. Little did they know that this Jesus was to be the King of the Jews and the world. He grew as a carpenter's son and began His ministry. In three short years, He was able to change the hearts and minds of thousands. God had a plan since the creation!

As His ministry grew, Jesus became a real threat, and the Jewish leaders and priests began to plot against Him. He performed many miracles, and healed and resurrected people, yet God's plan was to be culminated in a cruel, deceiving way. Life was not fair. We often think our life is unfair or difficult, but nothing compared to Jesus's life. Why was this? God's Plan!

Christ was arrested, falsely charged, and brought to Pilate's court of so-called justice. Pilate did not want to deal with Him; he returned Him back to the Jewish council, who said they lacked the power to put Him to death. Pilate chickened out and let the people decide.

In verse 37 and 38, Jesus tells Pilate, “You say that I am a King. For this purpose I have come into the world, to bear witness to the TRUTH. Everyone who is of the TRUTH listens to my voice.” Pilate replies to Him, “What is TRUTH?”

The TRUTH is that God had a plan from the beginning. From Christmas to Easter, Christ fulfilled that plan. And He will come again!

Prayer: Dear Jesus, thanks for coming to earth! Bless us as we celebrate Your birth, the beginning of God's plan for salvation. Thank You for fulfilling Your plan for us while You were on earth, and for Your promise to return. Amen.

-Bob Polly

Day 25 – December 21 – Read: John 13:12-17

Washing Others' Feet

"If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you." – John 13:14-15

How wonderful is this verse? The most amazing, powerful leader that the world has ever seen is truly a servant at heart for His people. Jesus knows that to be a true leader of the people, you need to first serve them. In order for Christians to show the love of Jesus to others, we must serve them.

When you have the heart of a servant, God will show you how to lead His people in His glory. The more I go on mission trips and do outreach projects around Mitchell, the more I see the glory of God when we are helping out others. From working on people's homes and serving at soup kitchens, to just walking through parks and handing out bags to help the less fortunate...There are so many ways in this world to help serve others, and never once have I been disappointed in doing God's work. I feel that I have always received more than I have given.

I wonder if that is how Jesus felt when He washed the feet of His disciples. The disciples were amazed and felt unworthy of Jesus doing this for them, but did Jesus feel the warmth and love of His disciples by serving them? Did He feel like He was being rewarded by the love of His fellow men? This makes me wonder: when I get to heaven, will Jesus wash my feet and say, "Good job, My faithful servant?"

Prayer: Lord, I pray that while we are on this Earth, we can help serve Your people. To show others the love You have for them, that You have not forgotten them, and they are all precious in Your eyes. If Jesus could wash His disciples' feet, there is nothing too low for any of us. In the Lord's name I pray. Amen.

-Scott Pietz

Day 26 – December 22 – Read: John 14:1-6

We are Not Alone

“Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me.” – John 14:1

Back in the 1990's I was part of a group from First Reformed Church who traveled to Denver to attend a gathering sponsored by Promise Keepers, a Christian men's organization. At the time, I was worried about taking care of my family – being a good husband to my wife, and a good father to my children.

The conference was a huge success, but I also learned a great deal from the fellowship time we had in the van during the journey. I discovered I was not alone. There were other husbands and fathers in our group who shared the same concerns.

That trip to Mile High Stadium 30 years ago showed me that I can lean on my Christian friends for reassurance when I am worried. I'm so glad I stepped out of my comfort zone and became part of a men's group at church.

During the Advent season when we try to prepare our hearts and our homes for Christ's birth, it can be difficult. I know I'm worried about the world we currently live in. In the Scripture passage for today, the disciples are also worried. They're upset by the talk of betrayal and the thought of Jesus leaving them. Jesus offers them (and us) great words of reassurance: “Do not let your hearts be troubled; I will come again.”

Prayer: Father, please help those of us who worry. Please help those who experience increased levels of stress and anxiety this time of year. Thank You for Your words of reassurance.

-Dave VerSteeg

Day 27 – December 23 – Read: John 12:44-50

Speak the Father's Words

“What I say, therefore, I say as the Father has told me.” -John 12:50

I would get in a lot less trouble if I let God use me as His ventriloquist dummy, saying His words instead of mine. If, like Jesus, everything that came out of my mouth was directly from my Father in heaven (vv. 49-50), I would be brilliant. I would always say the right things at the right time in the right tone and with a loving and approachable attitude. WOW! Wouldn't that be much simpler? I like simple.

The world right now would be far better off using Jesus's example, allowing God to speak through them, using His words. To be saved, we must accept Jesus and His words.

We need to show more love to people too, so that we are good examples of a loving brother or sister in Christ, being that light that Jesus wants us to be.

This passage is so inviting and not condemning, as many people say that Christians are. Jesus came to save the world and be the Light of the world (v. 46) and then asked us to be a light like Him after He went back to heaven. He pointedly said that all of His words were from His Father. Well, the Word is right here for us to study, share, and live. If we open our ears and hearts, the Holy Spirit will guide us down that narrow but lighted path.

Let's be examples for Christ and heap some burning coals on our enemies with some serious love this Christmas season (Romans 12:20). Have some fun giving coal!

Prayer: Lord God, help us to use Your language of true love in this Advent season and the rest of the year. You sent the perfect example for us to live by. Thank you. In Jesus's name. Amen.

-Wayne Klinger

Day 28 – December 24 – Read: John 20:24-31

Do You Believe?

“Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” – John 20:29

Do you believe? This is the question for us as we come to Christmas. Thomas had to have proof that Jesus was alive. How many of us want that same proof? Yet if we are willing to believe, we are going to be blessed beyond measure by being with Christ for all of eternity.

I was asked one time what was my favorite holiday. I responded that it was Christmas and Easter. You see, without Christmas, we have no Easter; and without Easter we have no hope for what is to come. So my belief system has to include both of these holidays. I believe that Jesus was born of Mary in a miraculous way. God became flesh, Emmanuel, so that He could become the sacrificial lamb for all of humanity.

We may not see the nail prints, but we believe because we have experienced the love of God, as well as the hope that comes from believing. Christmas should be a time of hope for what God was willing to do for all of us. He didn't come to the elite, but to the common person by means of a young couple, born in a barn. Jesus' birth is for all humanity. It is open for all who are willing to believe and accept what Christ has done for us. I am willing to believe that God loves us for who we are, not for what we do. He has made a way for us to come back to Him.

It saddens me when people are more willing to believe in Santa Claus than they are to believe that God came as a baby, taking on our flesh, so that we can be brought back to God again. This Christmas, believe in what God was willing to go through for you. Believe in His love for you and the greatest gift He has given you - the saving grace that comes through Jesus Christ.

Prayer: Thank You, Father, for sending Your Son to pay the penalty for our sins. Help us to be people who believe and who share Your hope with all the world. Amen.

-Pastor Leroy Boender