

Advent
Devotional

Westminster Presbyterian
Church

Seasons of Christmas

The Christmas Story has been called the greatest story ever told. It is the story of presence, grace, and salvation. Through the birth of Jesus Christ, God brought this story to all of humanity. The little child in the manger is the author of the greatest act of sacrifice and love that has ever been given. This story is not over. It lives on through the power of the Holy Spirit and it lives on in believers everywhere.

During this Advent Season we invite you all to hear each other's stories: each uniquely inspiring; each touched and blessed by the Season of Christmas; each a reflection of the power and the presence of Immanuel. We pray that as you read these stories of Christmas Hope, Christmas Courage, Christmas Wisdom, and Christmas Love you will be inspired to receive the Christmas story in a new and fresh way.

Merry Christmas and May God Bless us All!

Season of Hope

Psalm 62: 5-6

*"Yes, my soul, find rest in God;
my hope comes from him.*

*Truly he is my rock and my salvation;
he is my fortress, I will not be shaken."*

November 30

Luke 1:37 "For nothing is impossible with God."

The weeks leading up to my daughter's death brought out the best and the worst: the best in her as she lived those last weeks still interested in others, gracious and loving, making it as easy for the rest of us as she could; the worst in her husband and in me as we exchanged many hurtful words. The stress and sadness was making him more and more controlling and angry and I was critical and judgmental of him. By the time of the funeral, he was not even speaking to me. A few months after her passing, he announced he was taking their two young children and moving to a place 10 hours away; to a community where they knew no one. I was devastated! Would I ever be allowed to see these children again?! How could there ever be healing after such hateful words?

After some days of fear and anger at the prospect of my grandchildren having to cope with the loss of their mother, without extended family or familiar community to offer them love and support, the Holy Spirit led me to thank God ahead of time for the people in this new community who were going to offer love and support to this family. It gave me comfort to pray this prayer over and over, remembering that God loved these children even more than I did and that He had a plan for this family. My heart still wasn't very loving toward my son-in-law, but somewhere I had read that if one just said the words in prayer, God would give the feelings to go along with the words. I prayed for blessings and protection for him as well as for the children.

In the months after their move, the Holy Spirit led me again—this time to start writing short letters with topics that children might find interesting. I told them about the tadpoles we had that miraculously turned into tiny neon green tree-frogs, the bearded dragon someone had given us the white lobster with eggs on it's tail—eggs that one day hatched into 50 teeny tiny white lobsters! These letters allowed me to focus on the wonders around me, and this sharing became part of my own healing.

After some months, my son-in-law brought the family to town because he had business to attend to here. I was able to spend two whole days with my

grandchildren. They looked good and seemed to be doing well. They played with cousins, saw aunts and uncles, went shopping and picked out awesome Halloween costumes, and sang with me ("Old McDonald Had a Farm" was their favorite). It was such a happy time!

On the day they were to return home, my son-in-law surprised me with one of the most precious gifts ever given to me. It was an urn containing my daughter's ashes, but not just any urn. It was a work of art—a beautiful angel bending over a stone memorial with her arms outspread as if in prayer. His words to go with this gift were even more amazing than the gift itself: "Our darling ____ is not in that box. WE are in that box—the children and I, you and your husband—and that is our darling ____ with her arms around all of us."

My reply to him: "Our darling ____ was one of the most loving, generous people I have ever known. Thank you for the reminder that death did not destroy that love. She is indeed still loving us and we WILL see her again."

Dear Heavenly Father, source of all love and goodness. We stand in awe of Your power and glory and the way You work for good in all things—the way You can bring healing into the most seemingly hopeless situations. Help us to be faithful and obedient, trusting that You are able to do immeasurably more than we can ever ask for or imagine. In Jesus' precious name, Amen.

December 1

1 Peter 1:3-4 "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead and into inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade..."

The dictionary defines the word "hope" as follows: (noun) the feeling that what is wanted can be had or that events will turn out for the best; (verb) to look forward to with desire and reasonable confidence; to believe, desire or trust; to feel something desired may happen; (archaic) to place trust, rely (usually followed by the word in).

I prefer the archaic definition "to place trust". My definition would include the words "in God". In the Bible, hope is not wishful thinking or a feeling, but a firm conviction—to place trust in God that the resurrection of Jesus Christ secures for his people their new birth and the hope that they will be resurrected just as he was.

God doesn't promise that we will have a plate full of fruit, vegetables a juicy steak and a yummy dessert at each meal for each day of our life here on earth. He doesn't promise us a life without challenges. He certainly doesn't promise us a life without pain or loss or suffering. We will all surely face difficult times.

Jesus, while he lived on earth, experienced thirst, hunger, and he surely suffered immense pain. He did so in order to establish trust. He wanted us to trust him. Like Jesus, the disciples also experienced very difficult times. Even though they were "close friends of Jesus", they each suffered. There is nothing we could ever experience in our lives that Jesus and/or the disciples didn't experience before us.

God's plan was perfect. He knew we would face all kinds of hardship, temptation, doubt—just like the disciples. But he made it possible for us to put our trust in him so we could have hope for a future of eternal life in Heaven without hardship pain, suffering, and sin.

Recently, when I faced the most difficult time in my life, I put my trust in God,

knowing I needed his help to go on. He answered my prayers and used the hands of many, giving me “hope” for the future.

Dear God, our Heavenly Father, I pray that we can accept your perfect plan for us. Help us to keep our eyes on you when we are experiencing difficult times, in lieu of seeking worldly devices to alleviate the challenges we must face. Let us trust that you will be with us each step that we take (forward or backward), and that our prayers to you will be answered—maybe not immediately in worldly terms, but surely eternally. Thank you for the gift of hope. In the name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

December 2

Psalm 33:20-22 "We wait in hope for the Lord; He is our help and our shield. In Him our hearts rejoice, for we trust in His holy name. May your unfailing love rest upon us, O Lord, even as we put our hope in you."

My path to knowing Rose Ann as a treasured friend is unique and unforgettable. She has become a source of wisdom in my life.

Not too long ago I visited her at her home. She has a garden that she fills with hope and love. Anything that can be put into soil and watered, she planted. She was especially proud of her celery plant. It was HUGE! I had never even seen a celery plant before this day!

"Do you know how I got this plant?", she said to me. "I was cooking dinner and chopping celery. All that was left was the celery stump. I wondered to myself, what would happen if I put this old stump in the ground and covered it with dirt? Well, now I have a beautiful celery plant!"

I thought about Rose Ann's outlook. She saw a celery stump that I would have tossed away. She saw potential and hope. She had hope in such an unlikely place. She had no doubts! Just hope for a new life!

Do I have such an outlook? Do I see hope in unlikely places? Well, no. There have been many circumstances in my life that have worn away at my hope: loss of my mom, miscarriages, the death of a precious girl in my husband's youth group.

That day with Rose Ann, God spoke to my heart...*Hope was there in those times of such pain. Look for me. I am in every place that your heart is.*

I stood amazed that God would reveal Himself through a celery stump. From that moment, as I have turned these painful times over to Him, Hope has sprung forth. He planted these painful times in the soil of His grace and hope has grown. Hope is Christ.

Christmas brings us to an unlikely place of Hope.

Who would have thought hope could be found in a manger, surrounded by farm animals?

God. God did that. God brought hope. God brought peace. God brought His Son. God brought a Savior.

Jesus Christ is our Savior. He is our hope. He is our peace. He is the well spring of our joy. He is love.

Always see and choose hope...even when you have a celery stump in your hand.

Lord, bless us today with the power and presence of hope. A hope that has been revealed to us through our Savior and Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen.

December 3

Luke 10:38-42 "Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has let me do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

I can relate to Martha! Guests are coming! There are preparations to be made! The Christmas season of Advent is a joy, but a overly busy time.

There are presents to buy and wrap. There are the children's programs too precious to miss. There are the shut-ins to visit; the cards to send; baking, etc., etc. Yes, I can relate to Martha, who was also preparing for the coming of Christ in her home. Martha was distracted and anxious and probably tired. She didn't think she had time to sit at the feet of Christ as her sister did. She had a meal to prepare and serve.

Jesus told Martha that she was anxious over the wrong things. Further, he said, "Mary has chosen the better thing." There's a message for me. I have been distracted and anxious trying to make everything perfect for my family and my guest's Christmas celebration.

How can we find more time to "sit at Jesus' feet" during Advent? Apparently Martha did. She found time to open her heart as well as her home to Jesus. Martha is mentioned a second time in the book of John when she confesses, "Yes, Lord: I believe that Thou are the Christ, the Son of God."

Let us determine to find time to prepare for the One who was sent from God and in whose name we prepare for the celebration of the Christmas season.

Come Lord Jesus, be our guest. Amen.

December 4

Romans 14:7-9 "For not one of us lives for himself and not one dies for himself; for if we live, we live for the Lord, or if we die, we die for the Lord; therefore, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord. For to this end Christ died and lived again, that He might be Lord both of the dead and the living."

As we draw closer to Christmas, let us be reminded that God is the source of all things and the sustainer of all things. It is God who created us, who calls us to Himself, and sanctifies us to be ready for the day when He calls us home and He causes us to breath our last breath. We know God as the Source for He is the One from whom we came. As the One who keeps us alive, He is the Force in every dimension of our lives. As we move closer and closer to Him, we recognize Him as the Course of our lives. It is to God that glory rightfully belongs.

During the Fall of 2009, our son-in-law, Alan, was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. It is one of the most deadly of cancers and the mortality rate is very high. Usually by the time of the diagnosis, the cancer has spread to other parts of the body

This was the case with Alan. The diagnosis was given shortly after Thanksgiving that he only had a few months to live. Christmas was very hard that year knowing it would probably be his last with us. We came to see God as the Source who kept him alive for the few remaining months that he would live. Through his treatments, God was the Source of his strength, as he sought a healing in the hope of finding a regimen that would change the course of the disease.

As he became weaker, it was apparent that his life would be ending soon. His prayer was for God to grant three wishes: to be able to walk his daughter down the aisle on her wedding day, to die at home, and to not be alone. God, our Force, granted Alan his prayer requests. Alan's daughter could see how ill her father was and that the wedding date needed to be changed. With the evidence of God's plan, the wedding was quickly arranged for Saturday, February 20, 2010, for God always has a will, a plan, and a purpose for our lives. With God's grace, Alan was given the strength to walk her down the

aisle that day. The following Monday, February 22, Alan died at home and not alone, just two days after the wedding. Every challenge presents an opportunity for the Lord to display His faithfulness and love.

"All the trials of this world are not worthy to be compared with the glory for which we hope." Romans 5:2

We thank you Lord for the magnificent displays of Your uncontainable power which are reflections of Heaven unleashed and are reminders of Your love that comes each Christmas in the birth of our Savior. Your love is mighty, moving, and endless. In the name of Jesus, Amen.

December 5

Psalm 61:2 "When my heart is overwhelmed, lead me to the rock that is higher than I."

Sometimes I find myself catching my breath during the day and I have barely moved. There's enough going on in my head to literally leave me winded. I don't notice that I do this until I grasp a breath that's a lot longer and deeper than it should be and someone asks me what's wrong. "Nothing, just breathing," is my common response. In fact, the more I think about it, most of my days are filled with these heavy sighs.

When I was a kid I never tried to believe in Jesus; I just did it. There was no question of whether or not God existed. Sure, like any child I wondered what God looked like, whether or not He had a wife, or maybe She had a husband? I pondered God daily, but never His existence. As I grew older I kept pondering God, and with the support of friends and family, our relationship grew.

I didn't really wonder what He looked like anymore. More of me wondered what He really wanted from me and how I was supposed to know. I looked for His answers in my daily life, and when I didn't find them right away, I had faith in God and His timing. So often people say, "Everything happens for a reason." My theory on faith was that 'everything happens for a reason' and that reason is that God has a plan for me. This kept my belief in God strong and true, but as I grew more independent I found our relationship dwindling.

I went to college and too many things were occupying me to make time for my faith. I became selfish and overwhelmed with daily routines and habits. I knew God had a purpose for my life, but I was extremely frustrated with his timing and extremely impatient for His answers. It was hard not being surrounded by my parents, friends and familiar church. I couldn't remember how I believed so strongly and loved so deeply. I kept thinking that this mindset was ok. If He will always love me then I have a lifetime to regain my faith. I continued to cram my mind with selfish thoughts, and my time with selfish motives.

College is an easy place to feel lonely. Soon enough, my new way of living was leaving me empty. I knew whom to turn to but forgot how to turn to

Him. I think part of me knew the capabilities of God's love, and that if I chose to turn to him, it was a commitment to change. In the midst of my debate and the middle of scanning the radio in my car, a song that our youth band used to sing came on. I sang every word and by the end I realized I was crying and breathless. It was the first time in a long time that I was catching my breath because I was relieved. This was breathing. I realized my heavy sighs were filled with strife and that with God I can breathe easier.

This bible verse always struck a chord in me because I realized how often I overwhelmed myself with less important things in life. I realized how much I put myself before God, and in many instances like the one above, how much better I felt when I put God before me.

Dear Lord, I pray that You lead us to You, whether we be lost or just troubled. I pray that we're reminded of Your love and seek Your word when we are overwhelmed. Help us to remember Your mercy and delight in your grace. Amen.

Season of Courage

Joshua 1:7

"Be strong and very courageous. Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go."

December 6 & 7

Luke 1:38 "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word."

It was mid December, with below zero temperatures and a fresh coat of snow on the ground. I was 17 years old. My older brother had found a stray kitten hiding in the wheel well of his old, beat up truck. He carelessly scooped up the kitten, brought it inside, and handed it to me, preventing it from freezing to death. The kitten was all gray with green eyes, so small that it could fit in the palm of my hand. It shook with fear when it realized that it was inside a house with five people and two dogs.

To no one's surprise, I instantly fell in love with this kitten. I am and always have been a huge animal lover. Upon instantly comforting the kitten, I decided that it was mine. I didn't care that it drove my dogs up the wall, literally. I didn't mind that it was tearing down curtains, hissing at everyone, or keeping me up all night as it purred in my ear. It belonged to me, or so I thought.

On Christmas Eve my brother informed me that he had advertised the kitten on freecycle.org, a website that gives away things you don't want. Someone wanted the kitten as a Christmas gift for their young child, and my family told me that we were driving the kitten over to their house immediately. I was heart-broken and defiant. Everyone in my family agreed that it was what was best for the kitten, which it was, but I was not convinced.

With tears streaming down my face, I held the kitten tightly, hoping that I'd never have to let him go. Unfortunately, I didn't have a choice and my family piled in the car to drop him off before the annual Christmas Eve church service. I sulked for the remainder of the night and still woke up bitter on Christmas morning, despite the fact that I had blessed another family and had given a small child one of the best Christmases he or she had probably ever had.

I realize now, that this reaction to doing something God has led me to do is not uncommon. In fact, I'm not sure if there's ever been a time in my life when the Lord asked me to do something and I just said yes.

Well, that's exactly what Mary did when the angel Gabriel explained how

she, a virgin, would give birth to a baby boy and He would be the Son of the Most High. Mary replied, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord, let it be according to Your word."

Wow! I just can't get over how courageous that seemingly simple attitude of obedience was. She could have worried about her reputation, the risk of losing Joseph, or even just the discomfort of being pregnant, but she didn't. She simply said yes.

Lord, thank you for gifting us with Your son. For having a master plan to save the world, starting with this one courageous, obedient response from a common girl who's spirit was willing to be Your true servant. Amen.

December 8

Philippians 4:6-7 "Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

Over the last three years, my faith has been tested immensely. In particular, the worst event of my lifetime occurred three years ago this Thanksgiving. I love the holidays and the good feelings of faith and family they bring. I always feel extra cheerful and appreciate the people in my life and the things I am lucky to have. The week before Thanksgiving 2010, my mother was told she had very little time left to live. The cancer she had spent three years fighting was back and gained the upper hand. I was devastated. I didn't know what to do or say or even how to function with daily aspects of life. I prayed every day and night, even though my mind would tell me it was fruitless.

Thanksgiving came and went and Christmas approached. Since it was to be her last Christmas, we tried to make it the best one ever. Somehow, and I believe through faith and prayer, I was able to let go of the worry and enjoy it. Three days after Christmas, my mom returned to the doctor for a follow-up test. The test showed the chemo had a positive effect against all odds and the cancer was diminishing. I will never forget how in awe I felt when I heard the news. I truly felt as if all my prayers had been answered and it was the first time I truly felt God's presence and felt like I mattered and he was listening to me.

The cancer stayed at bay for several months, only to return in late March 2011. Six months later, my mother passed away. Through that time, I was never once angry with God or really questioned why. I just comforted myself with the knowledge that he had a plan and I just had to trust and have faith. The night she died, I was with her. She was so sick and in so much pain. Something in that hospital room gave me strength and courage to let go. It truly was God. There is nothing on this planet that could have helped me that night other than God himself. I told her I loved her and I walked away, knowing in my heart that she was going to let go when I left...and she did.

I now have seen parts of that plan and understand why things happened the way they did. Since that trying experience of my faith, I became a stronger person and I have a stronger belief in God. Because of the strength I gained, I was able to weather some terrible events that followed her death. Her death showed me how to have courage and be brave and always rely on prayer and faith. I could look at the holidays and Christmas as a source of pain, but I don't. I continue to look at it as a wonderful time of year, a time to celebrate God, Jesus, and our families and friends. It's also a time to remind me when I am feeling upset or confused about something, to have faith and courage because God is listening.

Lord, give us strength to face difficult challenges and to keep our hearts safe and open. Amen.

December 9

Deuteronomy 31:6 "Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified because of them, for the Lord your God goes with you. He will never leave you, nor forsake you."

My son was nine, I was a single parent and I was still working for minimum wage. I had talked about going to college, "When I get older!" I was now 38 and knew it was time. I quickly understood why I had put this off. This courageous challenge would require me to stop working and apply for welfare. I could hear my Dad saying, "Welfare is something that other people use." I would have to challenge his value for the sake of my own.

Mary and Joseph had no way of knowing what challenges they would face in the days before Jesus' birth. It had to take a tremendous amount of courage for them to be traveling so late in Mary's pregnancy. The Bible tells us they trusted God, they believed He would never leave them nor forsake them and they knew He was leading their way.

My son and I moved closer to campus. Now the biggest hurdle; I would need to study, write papers and take tests. I prayed nightly for strength and courage and when God's Grace came, I attributed it to my own determination. My freshman year was coming to an end and like an engine that had run out of oil, my determination could no longer sustain me. One morning I became very upset with my son's behavior. I was now taking out my anger on the person I loved the most. I fled from the apartment and took a long drive. I felt so alone and afraid, I cried out, "God, help me!" That night, in prayer, I admitted to myself that I was depressed. The next morning I made an appointment to see my Doctor. That little pill he prescribed was not a magical cure, however I believed that with time I would begin to feel better. God asks us to not be afraid or terrified for He goes with us, He will never leave, nor forsake us. I now gratefully understand, like "Footprints in the Sand", God has carried me through all of these times in my life.

Dear God, help us to be strong and courageous and to remember that your Love and Grace will always be here for us, all we have to do is trust you. Amen.

December 10

Luke 2:8-14 "The shepherds had set night watches over their sheep. All of a sudden God's angel stood among them and God's glory blazed around them. They were terrified. The angel said, 'Don't be afraid. I'm here to announce a great and joyful event that is meant for everybody, worldwide. A Savior has just been born in David's town, a Savior who is Messiah and Master. This is what you are to look for: a baby wrapped in a blanket and lying in a manger.' At once the angel was joined by a huge and angelic choir singing God's praises: 'Glory to God in the heavenly heights, Peace to all men and women on earth who please Him'."

Christmas is magic. I remember the annual Christmas program that we put on in our one room school house, the old Woodson School, situated one mile south of the present day Woodson School. Our teacher was a very particular school taskmaster and because of that, we put on a class one Christmas program every year. Our program consisted of plays by every grade and the whole school sang the Christmas carols. When we were practicing our Christmas carols she said, "Someone is out of tune here." She went around and listened to all of us sing. It was me that was out of tune! I had always been tone deaf. My teacher told me to just mouth the words. Later, as I was growing up, I sang all of the beautiful Christmas carols out loud. I enjoy singing the old familiar carols and on Christmas Eve, "O Holy Night" truly makes us all closer to that little baby in the manger, Jesus Christ.

Lord, help us to hear the Christmas songs anew and give us courage to add our songs of praise and deeds of justice to yours. Amen.

December 11

Luke 1:38 "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me as you have said."

Philippians 4: 12-13 "I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength."

I have to admit it. During the Christmas season I find myself thinking more about Mary than about the baby Jesus. Don't get me wrong--Jesus is our Savior, our gift, and the ultimate model for our faith, but the young mother in me is drawn to this much younger girl, Mary. I imagine Mary was full of life, excited and probably nervous about her engagement to Joseph before the angel appeared to her and told her of God's plan. Maybe she didn't feel very courageous upon hearing the angel's news, but I can't help but think that a main reason God chose Mary was because of her courage. A young girl engaged to be married, anticipating what life had in store in the coming months and years, not expecting a celestial visitor with this frightening and amazing news --and what was her response? "I am the Lord's servant...May it be to me as you have said."

Now, I am no Mary. Often I am weak, unwilling, and downright rebellious when only nudged by God towards an act of service, an opportunity to grow spiritually, or simply an attitude adjustment. Many times I have rejected what I know God has for me, and instead of responding, "May it be" as Mary did, I have responded, "Why me?" A couple of years ago around Christmas time, I experienced a miscarriage. It was so difficult, and I struggled spiritually. It took months to embrace the peace that God was offering, and just when I had accepted the Lord's reassuring hand on my shoulder, I found I was pregnant again. God had a different plan, one that took me around a dark curve before I could respond to him at all.

Looking back, it was during this dark curve that God taught me how to trust him more fully, how to lay my own plans aside and surrender to his. I am still learning. Many of us experience struggle, loss, and difficulty that we feel might hold us under. And I believe that while God is patient with our

response, he invites us to respond as Mary did. After all, he chose us just as he chose her--to be his servants, to house his Holy Spirit (and open the windows)! As Christmas approaches, may we, like Mary, draw on the courage that God sees in us. And if we but only whisper, "I am the Lord's servant...May it be to me as you have said," may we move forward to a deeper relationship with our Savior.

Dear God our Heavenly Father, Thank you for believing in us, and for placing great courage within us when you made us. Through the good times & the struggles, give us the courage to trust you--the maker of the best plan of all, the plan of salvation through our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

December 12

How many of you struggle with fear? Fear of the unknown, fear of another individual, fear of mortality, fear of losing a job, fear of losing a spouse, fear of a terminal diagnosis, fear of change, fear of your circumstances? At some time or another we have all struggled with the feeling of fear. Well, our Gracious and Holy God has revealed the anecdote for fear in His Word. As you immerse yourself in His life-giving Word, God shows you that trusting Him – our Mighty, Faithful and Gracious God – is the only way to find deliverance from fear. God’s Word gives you the courage you need to face life’s difficulties.

Proverbs 3:5-6 says “Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths straight.”

So when you are fearful that your marriage may fail, or you may lose your job, or that someone you love is going to betray you, or that your depression might come back, or that the unsaved in your life will never be ready to receive Christ...instead of immersing yourself in these fears, choose to trust in the Lord with all your heart. That doesn’t mean trusting God with only a little part of you. No, that means with ALL your heart. And then choose to not lean on your understanding of the situation but instead to give it all up to the One who can do something about it, the One who knows all things. And what is God’s promise when you do that? Proverbs says, “He will make your paths straight.”

Psalms 27:1 “The Lord is my light and my salvation – whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life – of whom shall I be afraid?”

Psalms 56:3-4 “When I am afraid, I will trust in you. In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust, I will not be afraid. What can mortal man do to me?”

Isaiah 41:10 “So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.”

The Lord Almighty is concerned about you when you are afraid. The Creator

of heaven and earth is with you in these moments of gut-wrenching fear. Your heavenly Father reminds you, "I am your God"...what a personal touch. He is yours to call upon any time, day or night. He is your God. He promises "I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you." You do not have to muster up your own strength to overcome your fears. No, you can call on the One who is able to give you strength, and who is always walking with you. What comfort there is in God's Holy Word. What courage you can have once strengthened by our Mighty God.

His Word is the only truth we have, and the only way to know the truth is to spend time in the Word. The only way to know the promises of our Loving, Merciful Father is by spending time in His Holy presence.

Psalm 46:10 says, "Be still and know that I am God."

It is in quiet and calm that you can hear God's still small voice directing you and leading you. It is in quiet trust that you can wage war against the evil one as you turn your eyes to Jesus, continually giving him all glory, honor and praise. It is in stillness that you can experience God's great Power and Amazing Grace. It may not be well with your circumstances, but it can still be well with your soul. Now that, my friends, is all the COURAGE we need.

Dear Lord, in this holy place, in this quiet moment, let us catch our breath, connect to your spirit and let love, joy and hope take root in our hearts. Grant us the courage to walk fully and faithfully with you during these days of joyful anticipation of your birth. Amen.

Season of Wisdom

Colossians 2:2-3

"My goal is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. "

December 13 & 14

Matthew 22:37-39 "Jesus replied: Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself."

I was nervous. I was afraid. There was an uneasiness that filled my 10 year old mind. I was entering a new and frankly terrifying world. As our "church caravan" crossed over the Mexican border and we drove into the heart of the impoverished border town of Tijuana, Mexico, there was no doubt that I was outside of my own little comfortable world. In my eyes we were driving directly into despair and darkness.

As we drove to Futuro del Oro Church and Orphanage on that December morning, I began to see things, places, and people that my sheltered world had never revealed to me before. Cardboard houses dotted the hillsides, wild dogs roamed the streets freely, and a certain unforgettable smell filled the air. It was only a two hour drive but it literally felt like we had been transported into a world that seemed a million miles away.

But then I saw a familiar site. Hundreds of children my age gathered together laughing and playing with each other, joyfully anticipating their Christmas celebration. As they shared their smiles, their excitement, their joy with us, I realized that maybe there was a connection that we shared that was not so foreign or so far away. Maybe we were more alike then I knew.

Our church had spent weeks and months gathering toys, clothes, and food that had been wrapped and prepared with love, and it was now our job, my job, to pass these gifts out to these children. My fear was gone. I was no longer nervous. No longer did I feel like a stranger in a foreign land. Gone was the feeling of anxiety, and in its place was planted seeds of service, mission, and love. God laid upon my young heart, for the very first time, the need to love and to care for others. No longer could I ignore the sufferings of those around me.

That Christmas I received the greatest gift of all. God planted in my heart the gift of service. My young life had been changed. This trip was followed up with many more trips to Futuro del Oro, but it was this first one where Christ

truly showed me what it meant to love and to serve others. Christ revealed Christmas Wisdom to me...the wisdom to love your neighbor as yourself...whoever that neighbor is and wherever that neighbor may be.

Lord help us to see the struggles of others. Help us to know their fears, their pain, their sufferings. And give us the wisdom to know how to respond just as You have responded to us. Let us share Your love with Your children wherever they are and wherever they may be. Amen.

December 15

Matthew 1:20 "But just when Joseph had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream."

When I was a senior in college, I had a vivid dream. I went to a small private college in Kansas. My mom had died two years earlier and my dad and his new wife had moved to the town where my college resided. I loved my family, but I wasn't sure if I was meant to live near them. I was struggling with so many different thoughts, especially trying to figure out who I was and what life was about. I wasn't sure what to do.

Then I had the dream. In the dream, I was on the Interstate headed towards Kansas City and the cloverleaf highway took my car to Minnesota. It was so clear and vivid I can still see the images today as they are seared in my memory.

I talked to friends and family, not sure what to do, knowing in my heart that God had given me clear direction. I struggled with moving so far away from my family. At the same time, I was intrigued with the adventure of going to a new place. My mom had been born and raised in Minnesota. I was drawn to it.

Finally, as Spring came, I made the decision to move to Minnesota. I felt at peace and ready for this adventure. I didn't really know anyone there but it was where God had led me in my dream. At the end of summer, another friend from college and I packed up our cars and took the road to St. Paul. Within three days we both had jobs in our fields and an apartment to rent. I still made it home every Christmas. Two of my siblings followed me a few years later. I met my husband here and am still here many years later.

Dreams are mentioned over a hundred times in the Old and New Testaments. Dreams were seen as a way God spoke to his people. Within the Christmas story itself, Joseph was met by an angel in a dream several times to make sure that what was to take place happened. Joseph married Mary because of a dream. Joseph took Jesus and Mary to Egypt because of a dream. The wise men were spared when God warned them in a dream not to return to Herod. Joseph went back home when the Lord came to him in a dream. God warned him again and he went to the district of Galilee.

Since college, I have had dreams during important turning points of my life, especially when God wanted to give me peace about the hard challenges that would lie ahead. My peace came in knowing that God had placed me in this situation for a purpose and God knew what that purpose would be, even when I didn't understand. God would keep me safe.

To this day, dreams continue to be one of the ways God guides me and others I know. God loves His own. Like Mary, Joseph and baby Jesus, God will always find a way to protect us, even through dreams.

Dear Lord, thank You for Your ever loving care and protection of Your children. Teach us to attune our hearts to Your voice, especially in the night seasons. Amen.

December 16

Job 12:12 "Is wisdom not found among the aged? Does not long life bring understanding?"

Our wisdom comes from not only what we've been taught along the way, but also through our life experiences. I believe it comes from "what's written on our slate" with age. The things that are written on our slate define us because they're all of the events, experiences and people in our lives which have molded us into who we've become, not only as individuals, but as Christians and true believers in Christ Jesus.

I think of my own life. The fact that I have experienced a great deal of death from a very early age on has definitely written on my slate. What affect did that have on me? When I was younger, I wanted answers and wanted to know why so many important people in my life kept dying. My faith was tested time and time again. It wasn't until I became older (and wiser) that I was able to turn to God in prayer to help see me through. I believe it was during these times that I learned the most about myself and my relationship with God.

It says in Proverbs 19:20, "Listen to advice and accept instruction and in the end you will be wise." It was through prayer that I received God's advice and instruction, realizing that I was not in control...HE was and all I needed to do was TRUST and He would see me through.

Life is a journey...not a destination! On this journey, if we choose to be followers of Christ and center Him in our lives, we'll never walk alone. He'll walk beside us every step of the way, guiding us with His wisdom, grace and love, reminding us of the blessings we receive when we trust in Him.

May God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; change the things I can and have the wisdom to know the difference. Amen.

December 17

Galatians 5:22-23 "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, long suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance."

One year, while I was teaching a health class to adult teens, I found myself in a quandary regarding a change in the curriculum. The new book and course plan included a unit on Spirituality and health. Since I was teaching in a public school, I could not fall back exclusively on my Christian upbringing. While reading about the beliefs of other religions and their cultures of health, I realized that our beliefs have a great deal to do with our health. Do we believe in things we cannot see, such as germs, and the power of vaccinations to protect us? Do we have faith in the staff of health care facilities? We act on what we believe...we do what we believe. What we believe impacts our lives. I have a Christian friend who once said, "I don't only believe, I know."

Oh Lord, This Advent, help us to move from believing to KNOWING, knowing You and Your plan for our lives. Amen.

December 18

Luke 1:46-48 "And Mary said: My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for He has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed."

A crudely carved pine wood lamb takes its place in our crèche each Advent season. We remember how important our eight-year-old son felt when he shaped the block of wood into a little lamb as his contribution to the crèche and our family worship. Thinking of the way our young son was inspired to serve brings to mind how God elects each of us, regardless of age or importance or strength or size, to do His work.

God chose the unlikely, even frail, as in an old man named Zechariah, and his elderly wife Elizabeth, to be parents of a baby named John. John would grow into John the Baptist, who would "...go before the Lord to prepare the way for Him." John's cousin, Jesus, was born to a humble young girl, Mary, a self-professed servant of the Lord, but felt to be the unlikely choice as the mother of baby Jesus—"the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world."

All powerful God chooses to work through us even with our human weaknesses. He accepts us and uses us in the most unexpected ways. Mary, the mother of Jesus, had a servants heart, glorifying the Lord and rejoicing in her Savior.

We thank You, Lord, for exalting the humble and using the frail. May we glorify and rejoice in You, being driven by Your love to have a humble and serving heart to do your work, but remembering that our work can never be substituted for Your grace. Amen.

December 19

Luke 2:13-14 "Suddenly a great army of heaven's angels appeared with the angel, singing praises to God, 'Glory to God in the highest heaven and peace on earth to those with whom he is pleased'."

Children's Christmas pageants continue to be one of the events of Advent that I look forward to. Watching the children retell the wondrous story of Jesus' birth, my mind and heart ravel back to the years when my children participated in pageants.

One significant year rushes back to stir my emotions. Our seven year old daughter Sherri had missed being in the pageant the previous year due to her diagnosis of leukemia. After months of chemotherapy, she was in remission and excited to participate this year. Sherri and little sis were going to be angels! She talked endlessly about wearing a white robe, golden sash and sparkling halo. She loved to sing, often making up songs. However, "Silent Night" became her song choice while the "angels" practiced walking, heads held high.

Pageant night was a beautiful crisp, clear winter night, a sky filled with sparkling stars. The ground was covered with a fresh layer of snow, creating an air of magic. A full congregation watched as costumed children were ushered in at the perfect (almost perfect) time. Their singing was charmingly familiar; some too loud, some off key and others barely a whisper. The angels were the last to appear, proclaiming the birth of Jesus. The children marched out of the candle-lit sanctuary as the congregation sang "Silent Night". As a truly emotional mom, I felt tears roll down my cheeks, struggling to sing as I watched our "shepherd" son and two "angels" march out.

Celebration followed, alive with smiles, laughter, hugs and thanks. Everyone enjoyed cookies, hot chocolate and goodie bags to take home.

The ride home began with silence, each one lost in thoughts, eating goodies or being just plain tired. About half way home, Sherri said calmly, "Mom, I cried tonight when I was walking down the aisle." I asked, "Do you feel O.K.?" "Yes," she reassured. "What made you cry?" I wasn't sad, Mom. I really felt like an angel." she responded. My thoughts flooded with anxiety

about what may be ahead. With a huge lump in my throat I managed to confess, "I cried too. You really looked like an angel."

Through the years I have pondered that night and that conversation hundreds of times. Wondering about her feeling and trying to understand. My faith has led me to believe God was reaching out to Sherri, giving her strength and courage to endure the months ahead. God was reassuring her he would give her peace and welcome her to his heavenly choir.

Heavenly Father, we give praise that You are always with us. Your spirit watches over us on our journey. Open our hearts and minds to accept the grace and peace given through Jesus. Amen.

Season of Love

1 John 4: 7-11

"Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, 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. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another."

December 20 & 21

Galatians 6:10 "Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers."

Christmas has always been a very special time for my family, especially Christmas Eve. When I was a little girl, our whole family would gather at my grandparents' house for a lovingly prepared meal of oyster stew (the only thing I really didn't like about the evening), as well as every kind of treat my grandma could possibly think of to make.

After supper, we would squeeze into the living room and sit quietly while one of my aunts read the Christmas story from the gospel of Luke. We always had the "perfect" tree because if it wasn't, my grandpa would haul it to the garage, drill holes in the trunk and add branches until my grandma was satisfied. (I tried that with my husband once. The next year we purchased an artificial tree.)

Next came the big event! Presents! We each received three gifts. If we had outgrown last year's boots or even something as expensive as a winter coat, that was gift number one. One year, my aunts got a yard of material to sew a skirt, along with a matching sweater. Gift number two was a toy, often a game that we could share. The third gift was our "name drawing gift", the cost of which was not to exceed \$1.00 or be less than 50 cents. We had so much fun trying to find something special for the person whose name we had drawn on that kind of a budget!

The evening wrapped up around 10:00pm because it was time to get ready for church. The candle light service started at 11:00 o'clock and believe me, you had to get there early if you wanted to sit together!

I love the memories of those Christmas Eves especially of all the work, time and energy my grandparents put in to make it so special for my three aunts and myself. Of course things change. As each of us married and had our own families the gatherings were different, we had in-laws and needed to share the holidays. I was the fortunate one who always got to have my grandparents on Christmas.

The last year I spent Christmas with my beloved grandpa was 1993. He, Grandma, and a great uncle were coming for Christmas Eve. The minute they walked in the door I knew something was wrong with my grandpa, but when I asked him, he assured me that he was okay. As the evening progressed however, it became apparent that he was in trouble. We took him to the hospital and they quickly called Mayo One. He had suffered a heart attack and the ER doctor felt that he was building for a major event. By the time we got to Rochester, my grandpa had been stabilized and was able to talk to us. His doctor said that he had been suffering the attack for hours. When I asked grandpa why he hadn't said anything, his reply was, "I didn't want to ruin Christmas for you."

John 15:13 tells us "Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his brothers." I had my grandpa for three more months. I will always be thankful to God for not taking him home on Christmas Eve. So often, God shows His love for us, through the love, sacrifice and thoughtfulness of others. And we have a call on our lives to show God's love to others by the way we treat them.

Father, Your love is perfect, even when You present it through imperfect people. Thank You for those You put in our lives who, through the Holy Spirit, direct us to You, In the name of our precious Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, the greatest gift of all. Amen.

December 22

Luke 2: 51-52 Then he returned to Nazareth with them and was obedient to them; and his mother stored these things in her heart. So Jesus grew both in height and in wisdom, and he was loved by God and all who knew him.

We don't really know anything about Jesus' childhood. We know about his birth and his family's escape to Egypt when he was around 2 years old. We know about his Passover "escape" when he was twelve. The scripture above tells us what happened after Jesus was found in his "Father's house". But the years in between these two recorded events and the years until he began his public ministry are a mystery to us.

What was Jesus like as a child? I imagine him playing with his siblings and neighbors, learning to read and write, performing family chores around the house with and for Mary. I imagine him working alongside Joseph and being taught the skills of carpentry. A father imparting knowledge to his son about his profession and about life. Ordinary experiences, and yet Jesus was no ordinary boy. Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of God. As he grew in height and wisdom, did Jesus always know of his plan and purpose? Or did God, his Father, reveal all to him on a need to know basis?

The gospels share his ministry. Jesus performed miracles, gathered disciples, and taught about the love of God through parables and through every word and action. He challenged the spiritual status quo and fulfilled the law. All too soon, however, Jesus was betrayed, arrested, tried, and condemned to death.

How profound it is to realize that the baby that was placed in a manger would one day be placed on a cross. How profound that the hands that worked with wood from a young age would one day be nailed to a tree. How profound that in obedience to his heavenly Father the one without sin became the sacrifice for my own sin, and took the cross to Calvary on my behalf. It didn't end there, though. Jesus conquered death so that I can have eternal life. What greater love can there be?

We all have childhood memories. Like Jesus, much may not be revealed to the world. But thankfully our past is known by God. Intimately. Our present

is also known by God, and so is our future. As Christians, we may never fully understand the intricacies of our lives but we have God's promises and we know the ending.

Lord, thank you for all of you, known and unknown. Through my relationship with you and through your word, help me to know you more. Help me to carry my cross and follow you. Amen

December 23

1 Corinthians 13:4-8 "Love is patient, love is kind. It does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails."

God was with my family and I on Thanksgiving of 2013. He brought our family and relatives very close. God helped us unite and come together in a powerful way. We were also blessed to see how our children loved playing together. It was always hard to get them to stop. God brought our families together as we sat down and got to know one another. We got to know God better with prayer and we know God loves us all!

Holy God, in this quiet moment, we rest in your gracious love. All the things that divide us, separate us and pull us apart in our families and relationships, we place on your altar. Sift through our worry and let us see what is necessary. Remind us that you carry our burdens and forgive our sins, you heal our wounds and dry our tears. Let us always find our love in you. In Jesus' name. Amen.

December 24

II Timothy 1 "For God has not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind."

Driven to my knees, I was "praying without ceasing". But it was the wrong kind of prayer. I am ever so good at petitioning God to do my will. "Please save my loved one from himself...please, please, please."

Desperate, I was finally able to remember that though I stood watching "a far way off", God the Father loved this child of God's even more than I did.

With great joy I was finally able to return my child to God's care and to pray "Thy will be done." I released my child to God and gave God my burden of fear. A great warmth encased my whole body. I cannot put in words the joy I felt as God's Holy Spirit lifted the burden of fear and replaced it with love.

Being free of fear left me to no longer feel responsible but rather free to simply accept and love my child.

God has worked his power in our lives and has changed my desperation and replaced it with a "sound mind". We pray the Lord's Prayer every Sunday, but are we really able to pray "Nevertheless not my will, but thy will be done."?

During Advent we rejoice in His great love and remember when the angels greeted the shepherds saying, "Fear not...for unto you is born this day a Savior which is Christ the Lord."

Release us, oh God, from the spirit of fear and discouragement. Grant us the power of love so willingly offered to us this Christmastide. Amen.

December 25

John 3:16a "God so loved the world that He gave His son."

Every Christmas, my sister and brothers and I got new pajamas. We never had to snoop to find our gifts because we knew what we were getting. When we were busy somewhere else, Mother went alone to choose the flannel—usually striped, which is good for both boys and girls. Then, while we slept, Mother stayed up sewing the pajamas. On Christmas morning, there were the pajamas around the tree. Now, all the pajamas were the same stripe, but each had some special feature and was just the right size for the recipient. I knew which pajamas were mine and never got them mixed up with any other. Christmas night we slept, warm and beloved, in new flannel pajamas.

Even now, at the beginning of Advent every year, we sing "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" knowing certainly that Jesus will come. And we sing on Christmas Eve "How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given." And through out the year we know God's love—custom made to fit us just as we need that love, and also shared with all our sisters and brothers in Christ.

Beloved Heavenly Father, We thank you for the love that is made known anew at Christmas. We thank you for the gift of Your Son, Jesus Christ, who has shown us how to love and has saved us by grace. We thank you for the Holy Spirit who comforts and strengthens us all year. And we earnestly pray that your love, grace and strength will be made known to all the world. Amen.

Seasons of Christmas

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