

# **Socially Distant, Spiritually Close**



**A 2020 Advent Devotional**

**by**

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Dear Bible Study Friends,

It is with great joy and humility that we share this advent devotional with you! The pandemic of 2020 has changed many things in our lives, and we expect it will alter the way we celebrate Christmas in 2020.

As we were writing this devotional, our nation moved from red to yellow, and in some cases, to green phases of reopening! Maybe by Christmas Day we will be totally green, but then again, maybe not. Therefore, anticipating that we will still be socially distant during the holiday season, we wanted to encourage you to remain spiritually close. *Socially Distant, Spiritually Close!*

Many Christian families, churches, and individual followers of Jesus, observe the annual season of Advent, even though no biblical mandate exists to do so. It is a time of preparation for Christmas Day, as the English word, "Advent" originates from the Latin word, "Adventus", which means "coming". The first coming of Jesus was two millennia ago, and it is that first coming we have in view each Advent season, although Jesus' second coming is in sight as well.

Advent begins the fourth Sunday before Christmas and ends Christmas Eve. This means the earliest it starts, depending upon where that Sunday falls on the calendar, is November 27, and the latest it begins is December 3. Advent 2020 begins on November 29, and ends December 24.

Christians celebrate Advent in different ways: some light candles, some sing songs, some eat candies, and some give gifts. What an enjoyable and spiritually profitable way to extend celebrating Jesus' coming beyond the short 24 hours of Christmas Day! After all, the birth of Christ, and the incarnation of the Son of God is too great an event to accomplish in only 24 hours!

Please join us as we anticipate and celebrate the coming of Christ this Christmas, 2020! The *GIVING*, the *GATHERING*, the *GAIETY* of celebrating may require some social distancing, but *GOD WITH US* has made it possible to remain spiritually close to each other and to our heavenly Father! *Socially Distant, Spiritually Close!*

*Sheryl and Sue*

*“Socially Distant, Spiritually Close”*

*Week 1: GIVING by Sheryl Vasso*

*November 29 - December 5, 2020*

*Week 2: GATHERING by Sue Weber*

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*Week One*  
**GIVING**



*Sheryl*

# Giving

Netflix bingeing has most likely replaced baseball as America's favorite pastime during the pandemic of 2020. I have certainly done my share of watching Netflix, however, the watching of American Sitcoms from the 60s has surpassed my Netflix viewing. One sitcom, in particular, captured my attention – "Father Knows Best"!

In one episode, Jim, the father who typically knew best about any situation, was disappointed in his family's attitude toward Christmas. His oldest daughter was attempting to drop a hint to her boyfriend as to what she wanted for Christmas, while his youngest daughter wanted a pink tree instead of a traditional green tree. Above all, his son was blasting Christmas carols as an advertising scheme to sell used cars because his boss claimed, "Christmas was the best time to sell stuff!"

In frustration, Jim exclaimed, "Why can't we have Christmas the way it used to be? Quiet! Simple! A few friends and family sitting around the fire, kids hanging their stockings over the fireplace, Christmas bells ringing on Christmas Eve, carolers singing! Have you forgotten everything you learned in Sunday school? ALL THIS FOLDEROL! Why not grab an ax, go out into the country, and chop down our own Christmas tree?"

That is exactly what the family did, amidst the children's protests that they needed to be back in the early evening for various activities. However, the family encountered an unexpected snowstorm which kept them stranded in a cabin in the middle of nowhere without all the frills or FOLDEROL of Christmas. It is in that cabin, and during that Christmas Eve, that the family adjusted their attitudes and remembered what is most meaningful about Christmas.

It is quite easy for all of us get lost in ALL THIS FOLDEROL of **GIVING** presents, of **GATHERING** with family and friends, and of traditions of **GAIETY** that surround Christmas. While much of what Jim Anderson calls "folderol" is perfectly acceptable and exciting, it is good for all of us to remember the true meaning of Christmas, that **GOD IS WITH US**, and how His presence began with **GIVING!**

*"For to us a child is born, to us a son is given;"*

**Isaiah 9: 6**

*"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."*

**John 3: 16**

## ***“No Good Thing”***

**November 29, 2020 – First Sunday of Advent**

Do you remember Santa Claus riding through the neighborhoods on a fire truck during the weeks before Christmas? The first hint that he was coming was the din of sirens in the distance, which did not indicate an emergency alarm, but rather, the arrival of Santa Claus.

Santa’s coming to town on a firetruck stirred up a mix of emotions within my young heart—a mix of fun and fright. The fun was that Santa was paying a visit; the fright was that “he knows what you’ve been doing” and “whether you’ve been bad or good”! It was frightening enough to give even a small child high blood pressure! Regardless, I can remember grabbing a coat and hurrying to get outside so as not to miss the “candy toss” that Santa would perform. In addition, I can remember jockeying for position and getting in line with Santa’s pitch so I would not miss catching any of what Santa was throwing.

My childhood memory is refreshed each Christmas season when Santa comes through the neighborhood, in which I now live. I hear the sirens in the distance, and even though it has been years since I was a child, I can still distinguish the fire alarm from the alarm signaling Santa’s arrival. Each year, I still run outside, not to catch my own candy, but to catch a view of my neighbors gathering their children and lining them up closely for the Santa “candy toss”. It is still great fun to see Santa come to town!

However, it is no longer frightening when he comes because my mind goes to a different place than when I was a child. My mind ponders **Psalm 84: 11b**:

*“No good thing does He withhold  
from those who walk uprightly.”*

As God’s children walk sincerely and rightly, God will withhold no thing that is valuable, good, and merry from them. Never do God’s children need to jockey for position, or make sure they get in the line of God’s giving of good things. If we are walking uprightly, we need not fear that anything good for us will miss us—a job, a promotion, a spouse, etc... What a comfort to know that the God who knows all of what I have been doing, whether bad or good, will never withhold that which is good for me as I walk rightly with Him!

**Read:** Psalm 84

**Reflect:** Are you being careful to walk uprightly before the Lord? If so, are you trusting Him to give you everything that is good for you? How does Psalm 84 cause you to trust the Lord to satisfy your longings?

***“Batteries Not Included”***  
**Monday, November 30, 2020**

One of my favorite places to do my Christmas shopping is Bed Bath & Beyond because of one of their most endearing consumer friendly services. At checkout, they provide notification of how many batteries your purchase requires. Not only do they do the battery alert thing well, they make the purchasing of said batteries very convenient. Visibly hanging next to the cash register, alongside Orbit and Trident gum packs as well as the latest People Magazine, are a variety of battery sizes and quantities for your automatic hand soap dispenser, electric toothbrush or toy just purchased!

After years of buying battery operated toys for my nieces and nephews, especially at Christmas time, I finally caught on to how annoying my gift giving was to my brothers and sisters-in-law because of failing to include the necessary batteries with my gift. My forgetfulness in the power supply area placed a huge burden on my relatives to find batteries IMMEDIATELY lest their children be surrounded by useless, non-functioning toys! I had good intentions in the AA and AAA area and often remembered to buy the batteries, but just as often, forgot to wrap them up with my gifts or bring them along to the family gatherings. I now understand the frustration I caused because I know what it is like to buy something for myself and be “battery-less”. The item is useless without the power!

God gets this too! In **2 Peter 1: 3** we read, *“...seeing that His divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness...”* He provides everything we need, not some of what we need, or most of what we need, but ALL that we need to live a godly life. He gives us the power and then tells us, in the following verses, to be diligent and make haste to add qualities of moral excellence, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, brotherly kindness, and love to our faith(**2 Peter 1: 5-7**). His divine power empowers us to live a godly life that will make us useful and fruitful for His purposes and glory.

It would be wonderful if vendors, instead of going to the trouble of printing “requires 2 AA batteries not included” on the package, would just include them in the first place! Life would be so much easier if **ALL** the power needed to make our gadgets useful and fully functional, were provided at point of purchase!

*“For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they render you neither useless nor unfruitful in the true knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.”*

**2 Peter 1: 8**

**Read:** 2 Peter 1: 1-25

**Reflect:** What areas of your spiritual life feel powerless or run down (knowledge of His word? Kindness towards others?) What has God promised He would do to empower you?

***“Every Good and Perfect Gift”***  
**Tuesday, December 1, 2020**

Do you struggle every Christmas with finding good and perfect gifts along with the perfect balance of gift giving? Do you struggle with what to give to the person who has everything, or how much to give to express how much someone means to you? How do you give the good and perfect gift without breaking the bank, and without being caught up in materialism and consumerism?

Year after year, I would struggle with this, until finally one year I saw what I thought was the perfect and good gift-giving guide! The article I saw was entitled something like, *Simplify Gift Giving this Year* and the suggestion was to give to your children, in particular, a gift in each of four categories—something they WANT, something to READ, something to WEAR, and something they NEED. I thought it was great and so I followed the advice and it made gift giving so much easier. It helped me to give meaningfully, significantly and abundantly without going *overboard*, if you know what I mean.

When I was a little kid, my best friend next door had what I would consider an overboard Christmas each year. It started with their Christmas tree, which could have been the perfect substitute for the Trafalgar Square tree given by Norway each year to England. Under the enormous tree were so many piles of gifts that it looked as though their living room was a Macy’s store location!

Speaking of Macy’s, who of us has not camped out at a department store or two in order to buy the gift of the year for our kids? I remember when Cabbage patch dolls were all the rage—the demand for them was high but the birth rate was low. So parents stood in lines waiting for the doors of the store to open and all the fruit of the Spirit went by the wayside as the dark underbelly of our personalities took over. We yanked gifts out of people’s hands and stomped all over other human beings –whatever it took to get the gift!

The Bible compares our giving of gifts to our children to how God gives gifts to His children.

*“Or what man is there among you who, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will he give him a serpent? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him!”*

**Matthew 7: 11**

Even in our human frailty and finiteness, we know how to give appropriately—bread instead of stones. We know how **not** to give inappropriately—we do not give a serpent—something harmful—in place of fish—something helpful to our children. However, **HOW MUCH MORE** will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him! God, who does not



need a gift-giving guide from Pinterest, knows how to give bread and good and perfect gifts to us.

**Read:** James 1: 17

**Reflect:** From whom do we receive every good and perfect gift? What characteristic of God makes His gifts so amazing and valuable?

***“Regifting or Degifting?”***  
**Wednesday, December 2, 2020**

**Regifting** is the act of taking a received gift and giving it to somebody else, often in the guise of a new gift. It has become such a practice that the USA has declared December 18 as “National Regifting Day”, and Canada has marketed December 26-30, as “National Regifting Week”! Today, there are even websites and apps available to assist you in turning your unwanted gifts into cash! In case you are interested in a side job this year, candles, picture frames, and yes, fruitcake, make the top 10 list of the most **regifted** presents.

I am not a Seinfeld Sitcom buff by any means, but I recently caught an episode from Season 6, entitled, “The Label Maker”, which apparently popularized the term, “**regifting**”. Jerry had Super Bowl tickets, which he could not use because he was in a wedding on Super Bowl Sunday. Therefore, he gave his tickets to his dentist friend, Dr. Tim Whatley, who in turn thanked Jerry by giving him a label maker. One day, Elaine, Jerry’s friend, visits Jerry in his apartment, sees the label maker, and exclaims what a great gadget it is and how she had given one recently to Dr. Tim in exchange for free dental work he had performed on her impacted molar. Learning that Dr. Tim is the one who sent Jerry the gift, and why, Elaine connects the dots and declares that Dr. Tim is a “**regifter**”! As the story continues, the wedding on Super Bowl Sunday gets canceled, which frees Jerry to go to the game for which he no longer has tickets. Therefore, Jerry’s friends encourage Jerry to call Dr. Tim and ask for the tickets back because “if he can **regift**, you can **degift**!”

Whether you are a **regifter** or not, one thought that brings great comfort is that God is neither a **regifter** nor **degifter**. In **Romans 11: 29**, Paul states this principle:

*“For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.”*

While the context of this verse is particularly relevant to the nation and ethnicity of Israel, the application is still true for those of us who have accepted the greatest gift ever given—the gift of eternal life through Jesus Christ the son of God!

*“For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”*

**Romans 6: 23**

*“For all the promises of God find their Yes in him (Jesus Christ). That is why it is through him that we utter our Amen to God for his glory. <sup>21</sup> And it is God who establishes us with you in Christ, and has anointed us, <sup>22</sup> and who has also put his seal on us and given us his Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee.”*

**2 Corinthians 1: 20-22**

Take comfort this holiday season – once you receive the gift of eternal life through Jesus Christ, God will never “**de-gift**” you!

**Read:** Ephesians 1: 13-14; Romans 8: 39

**Reflect:** Who seals our salvation? For how long? What can separate us from the love of God?

**“God’s Christmas List”**  
**Thursday, December 3, 2020**

What if God were to follow the *Simplified Gift Giving Guide* I mentioned previously? What would that look like? What would God give to us that we **NEED**, that we could **WEAR**, that we could **WANT**, and that we could **READ**?

Here is what I think. God wrapped up one gift for all humankind, and it accomplished fulfilling all four categories. In **2 Corinthians 5: 21** we see how God did this:

*“God made Jesus Christ who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him. The perfect Righteousness of Christ is imputed or placed on us by Jesus Christ’s sacrifice on the Cross.”*

Because of this, God gives to us what we **NEED**-payment for our sins, and something to **WEAR**-robes of righteousness. God gives us salvation, our daily bread, the desires of our hearts-what we **WANT**, and His Word of Truth, which is His Son, to **READ**.

He gives every good and perfect gift and He wants us to enjoy His gifts:

*“<sup>17</sup> As for the rich in this present age, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy.”*  
**1 Timothy 6: 17**

What will we do with all the gifts we receive on Christmas day? We will enjoy them and spend time with them. Remember how that was when we were children? We wanted to play with our toys and gifts all day long.

I remember reading about a family in which all the kids received at least 15 gifts for Christmas. A year later, when asked to recall those gifts, they could only remember two out of fifteen. Yet when the parents asked their children to say what they remembered about their last vacation, there was no end to what they recalled. It makes me think that time together, in relationship, is more affecting than opening up gifts.

So how is your relationship with God going? Are there things you need from Him for which you are not asking Him? Are there things you want? Are you wearing some unattractive characteristics that you need to shed? Are you reading His Word and spending time with Him? Do you even have a relationship with God and His Son?

Unfortunately, there are many people who do not want to let God into their lives because they fear God will make them give up anything that is fun, and that to be spiritual is to be miserable. If that is true for you, why not invite Jesus into your heart and then enjoy the best relationship you will ever have? **ASK** Him and then **ENJOY** His presence in your life.

If you have already invited Him into your heart, make more room for Him in your life. Then, you will never lack in any of the four categories of the *Simplified Gift Giving Guide*.

**Read:** Ephesians 4: 22-24; Colossians 3: 2-10

**Reflect:** What does Ephesians 4: 22-24 say about what we should wear? What specifically does Colossians 3: 2-10 tell us to wear?

***“But where are the Nine?”***  
**Friday, December 4, 2020**

“In everything give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you.”  
**I Thessalonians 5: 18**

“For everything write thank you notes: for this is the will of your Mother concerning you.”  
**The Book of Gloria Vasso**

My mother is a devout believer in writing “thank you” notes. Every birthday and Christmas, my mother would prompt my writing of “thank you” notes for all the gifts given to me on those occasions. It was something she has instilled in me since I was very young and I am most grateful, because giving thanks is the will of “God in Christ Jesus concerning you”.

In **Luke 17: 11-19**, we read of ten lepers, who lifted up their voices and said,

*“Jesus, Master have mercy on us.” In His generous graciousness, Jesus did have mercy on the ten and cleansed them of their leprosy. “And one of them, when he saw that he was healed, returned and with a loud voice glorified God, and fell down on his face at His feet, giving Him thanks. And he was a Samaritan. So Jesus answered and said, ‘Were there not ten cleansed? But where are the nine?’”*

In addition to mothers around the world, God desires for His children to possess an attitude of gratitude, as it is a key ingredient for joyful living. However, if gratitude is so vital why is it that not everyone is grateful? Many obstacles exist to being grateful, and chief among them may be a sense of entitlement, which suggests that others owe us, or that we deserve something from somebody else. With this mentality, even if we receive something, it is not a *gift* but a *right*.

Another obstacle to gratitude is familiarity. The more we have exposure to a particular blessing in life, the more likely we are to take it for granted. Again, as a result, we begin to feel entitled and less grateful. Even though we may delight in the Word of God daily, we need to guard against feeling overexposed to it, or taking it for granted.

I hope that this Christmas season of giving, we will purpose in our hearts to express our thankfulness. Never do we want to be like the nine who failed to glorify God by returning thanks to Him for His unending mercies.

**Read:** Psalm 103

**Reflect:** What blessings from God cause you the most gratitude? How do you express your gratefulness to God? How can you have a more expressive attitude of gratitude towards God and others? Are there some “thank-yous” you need to write or say in person?

***“The Great Exchange”***  
**Saturday, December 5, 2020**

Exchanging Christmas gifts, we have received from others, is almost inevitable. Even though great thought may have gone into choosing the perfect gift for someone, our gift may not completely satisfy the recipient. The gift may not be the proper fit, color, brand, or model. Perhaps the recipient of our gift is not a “regifter” or “degifter”, but, rather, an “exchanger”. Nowadays, retail stores, even those online, make exchanging very convenient and private, thanks to gift receipts! The giver of the gift does not even have to know. Could it be any easier?

Even though exchanging gifts during the Christmas season is almost inevitable, there is a “Great Exchange” that may go unnoticed. It is the exchange that Jesus Christ made for the world! In **John 3: 16**, we read of God’s extraordinary love for the world:

*“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”*

Jesus Christ exchanged His life for our sins so that we all may have eternal life! All of us have said things, done things, or thought things that are wrong, and in so doing we have sinned (**Romans 3: 23**, “...for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,”). Scripture tells us there is a penalty to be paid for our sins, and that penalty is death.

*“For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”*  
**Romans 6: 23**

Notice the free gift of eternal life mentioned in that verse! Jesus Christ shed His blood on the cross for our sins, paid our penalty in full, so that we could have eternal life! What a great exchange! Jesus’ blood for our sins! Eternal life in exchange for death!

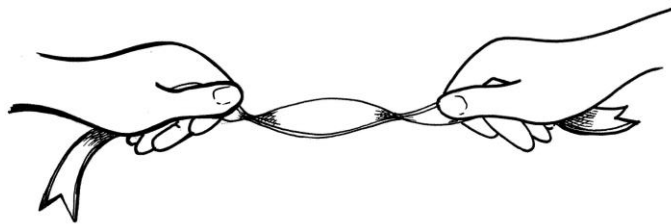
Whether you have ever made a Christmas gift exchange or not, please do not miss the Greatest Exchange - God’s free gift of eternal life through the shed blood of His only Son, Christ Jesus our Lord!

If you have already made this exchange, why not pass on the good news to someone who has not! It will be the greatest Christmas gift ever given and received! It cannot be **degifted** once received, and there will never be a desire to exchange this free gift once accepted. It is truly a gift that will keep on giving for all eternity!

**Read:** I John 5: 13-15

**Reflect:** How do these verses encourage us to abide by what we **KNOW** rather than by what we **FEEL**? What is it that we can **KNOW** for sure?

*Week Two*  
GATHERING



*Sue*



# Gathering

Christmas is a time for gathering. We gather at church for Advent services, Christmas Eve and other special events. We gather in our homes with family and friends. We gather in our communities for tree lightings and concerts. We love to share the joy of the holidays with others.

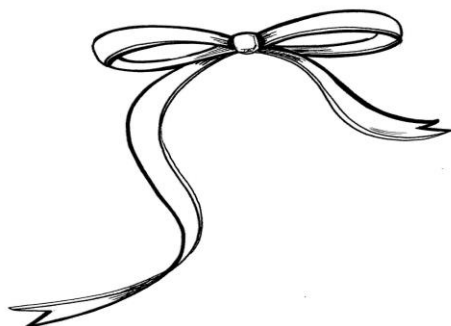
This year may be different. We may not be able to gather as we have in the past. In order to stop the spread of the pandemic, we are restricted in numbers and places we can meet. In London, it is now illegal to visit in another person's home or even to dine with people with whom you do not reside in a closed space. These regulations, and becoming depressed, fatigue us.

It may be difficult this year to keep our joy as we try to duplicate our traditional gatherings. I am reminded of Paul's words in **I Thessalonians 5: 16-18**. He wrote:

*"Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you."*

Our joy in this holiday season does not lie in gatherings at church or with family or friends. Our joy is in the good news that the Christ has come to save the world. Rejoice in that and give thanks.

Use this season to refocus your Christmas on Christ.



***“Christmas is a Time for GATHERING”***  
**Sunday, December 6, 2020 - Second Sunday of Advent**

This week of Advent, we are focusing on Gathering. One of the frustrations of the Covid pandemic is the restrictions placed on us to gather. Our society places great emphasis on holiday parties. They occur with family and friends, at church and the office, in our neighborhoods and social organizations. Every group seems to designate one meeting as a holiday party. Our calendars are packed with holiday gatherings. However, this year we are warned that social meetings may put us at risk. We need to be very careful about how many people gather, and with whom we gather.

We naturally miss all these social opportunities. We were created to be a community. It is easy to focus on what we are missing. Instead, let us turn our thoughts to what we are gaining. Many of our social events are secular events and not spiritual events. They focus on the holiday and not on Christ. This year gives us an opportunity to be intentional about gathering and the purpose of our celebrations. This week of Advent, we will be focusing on gathering to celebrate Christ’s birth.

On the Second Sunday of Advent, traditionally churches light the Bethlehem Candle or the Candle of Preparation. It is also the candle of hope. Instead of preparing your calendar for various gatherings this year, turn your heart toward receiving the gift of God’s Son and sharing the hope we have in Him.

I am reminded of God’s servant, Simeon, in **Luke 2: 25**:

*“Now there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon, and this man was righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him.”*

Simeon was waiting for God to send his Messiah, and Simeon was rewarded at Jesus’s dedication in the temple. God opened his eyes to see His hand at work.

So today, think on this verse as we gather together with our Lord. May we be like Simeon this Advent season. May we also be waiting to witness His coming and have our eyes open to what He is doing.

**Psalm 119: 18**

*“Open my eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of your law.”*

When I think of this verse, I think of this hymn by Clara H. Scott:

Open my eyes, that I may see  
Glimpses of truth Thou hast for me;  
Place in my hands the wonderful key  
That shall unclasp and set me free.

Silently now I wait for Thee,  
Ready my God, Thy will to see,  
Open my eyes, illumine me,  
Spirit divine!

**Read:** Luke 2: 22-32

- Just as Simeon was awaiting the coming of the Messiah, how might we await the approach of this Christmas?
- How might we await the second coming of Christ?

**Reflect:** Think about the gatherings you plan to attend. How does this gathering help you celebrate the birth of Christ? How can you be intentional in focusing on Him at this event?

***“What are you waiting for?”***  
**Monday, December 7, 2020**

Today is the 100th anniversary of my Mom’s birth. Last week we celebrated my two grandsons’ birthdays. All these celebrations looked different this year: fewer parties, more drive-by events, candles fanned out instead of blown out, and families gathered over Zoom, instead of in person.

We enjoy celebrating family events. As Moms and Grandmas, we want them to be perfect. We spend endless hours preparing. We often times have high expectations for the event itself. Now we are preparing to celebrate Christ’s birth as a family.

My family event is on Christmas Eve day. That is when I gather with my sons and their families. I spend weeks planning the menu, decorating, and purchasing gifts. I begin early in December by hanging twelve stockings on the mantle. The stockings are a daily reminder of the joy we will find in celebrating Christmas and being together. Part of the joy of Christmas is anticipating the big day.

Anticipating is a key word. Yesterday we read about Simeon waiting expectantly, anticipating the coming of the Messiah. He was described as devout and righteous. Daily he went to the temple expecting to see the Messiah. The Holy Spirit had assured him he would. The focus of his heart was evident to others. They knew that he was holding onto the promises of God and was expectant.

Anna, prophetess and widow, was also there. She was also anticipating the birth of the Messiah. **Luke 2:38** says: *And coming up at that very hour she began to give thanks to God and to speak of him to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem.* Anna, as well as Simeon, was waiting for the promised Savior.

What are you anticipating this Christmas? For some of us, the pandemic will curtail family gatherings. Those events we anticipated in the past may be cancelled or postponed. This may have us feeling depressed or lonely. However, there is still much to anticipate, Christ has come to save the world, and He is coming again. Do not sacrifice the anticipation of Christ for the anticipation of an event.

I hope your Christmas this year does include special time with family. God gave us families to love and to nurture. They are an important part of our Christmas traditions. However, the birth of Christ is the focus of Christmas. His name and remembrance must be our desire for the holiday.

**Isaiah 26: 8**

*“In the path of your judgments, Lord, we wait for You;  
Your name and remembrance are the desire of our soul.”*

Martin Nystrom, in the following chorus, expressed the anticipation found in **Psalm 42**:

As the deer panteth for the water  
So my soul longeth after Thee  
You alone are my heart's desire  
And I long to worship Thee

**Read:** Luke1: 46-55.

- This is Mary's reaction to the birth of Christ. What is yours?
- How do you show your desire to remember Christ at Christmas?

**Reflect:** Think about your family's favorite ways to glorify God. How might you incorporate them into a family gathering this year in person or virtually?

***“Spending Time with a Friend”***  
**Tuesday, December 8, 2020**

Are you missing your friends during this pandemic season? I received a group text this morning from a friend. It was a picture of the Mona Lisa with a facemask on, the tag line was I miss your smiling faces. We do miss our friends during this Covid time; especially now when it is the Christmas season.

Covid has changed how we can celebrate and gather with friends. The Covid restrictions we might ease with family, are often times still strictly followed with friends. We are encouraged to limit the size of our indoor gatherings and we are reluctant to share our homes. As the weather gets colder, our ability to meet with friends may become more limited. We miss our friends.

However, we often overlook one friend at Christmas. This is odd because it is His birthday. In **John 15**, Jesus talks about friends and calls us his friends. In verses **13-15**, Jesus says-

*“Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you.”*

Christmas is the birthday of our friend. He demonstrated his friendship by giving His life for us. We show our friendship by obeying his commandments. He calls us friends and makes known to us all that God has revealed to him. Christ holds nothing back from us.

So how can we celebrate our friend on His birthday this year? The last verse in Christina Rosset’s poem reads:

What can I give Him,  
Poor as I am?  
If I were a shepherd  
I would bring a lamb,  
If I were a Wise Man  
I would do my part,—  
Yet what I can I give Him,  
Give my heart.

Perhaps you have done that. You have given Christ your heart. If so, then spend more time with Him. We love spending time with friends. Jesus loves spending time with you. Open up His Word and get to know Him better. Is there any better way to celebrate a friend’s birthday than spending time in their presence or giving them the gift they most want to receive?

**Psalm 25: 14**

*“The friendship of the Lord is for those who fear him, and he makes known to them his covenant.”*

Joseph Ludgate wrote the hymn, *Friendship with Jesus*, in 1898, which says:

A friend of Jesus! Oh, what bliss  
That one so weak as I  
Should ever have a Friend like this  
To lead me to the sky!

**Read:** John 15: 13-15

- How has Jesus been a friend to you?
- How might you demonstrate your friendship with Christ?

**Reflect:** This Christmas focus on celebrating your friend Jesus’s birth. What can you do to honor him this year? Some friends post messages on Facebook, give to a charity in their friend’s name, or simply create a special time to share together. How can you honor Christ on His birthday?

***“Observe CHRISTmas”***  
**Wednesday, December 9, 2020**

I was recently watching an episode of the Office, and on that show the work force is constantly having a party. Holiday parties have indeed become part of our Christmas traditions. These parties are quite interesting because, although intended to be Christmas parties, not all of the workers are Christians. Nevertheless, celebrating Christmas in the office has become a holiday event.

However, this year, we are not going to the office, or to schools, or to colleges and universities. The work force is no longer gathering in person. Most of these contacts are now virtual. We have lost another way to share Christ’s birth with our colleagues who may or may not know Christ. An opportunity to share the good news of Christ’s birth is gone.

Or is it? Perhaps in past years, that was not even a concern. I know I was so wrapped up in Christmas preparations that office cookie exchanges, purchasing gifts for colleagues and preparing my contribution to the Christmas party were merely tasks totally unassociated with celebrating Christ’s birth. That would come later at the Christmas Eve service. Sometimes it seems we spend a whole month celebrating Christmas, but only one day celebrating Christ’s birth. This year we have time to be intentional about including Christ in every element of our celebrations.

We were given an assignment as workers in God’s kingdom. **Matthew 28: 16-20** says:

*“Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. And when they saw him they worshiped him, but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.’”*

We have the task of teaching others to observe all that Christ commanded and that would include teaching who Christ is. The miracles surrounding his birth are a testimony to who Christ is and this is an opportunity to remind others of what we believe.

So this year think intentionally of how you can include Christ in the contacts you have with your colleagues. In the past, were you careful to send “holiday” cards so as not to offend others? Perhaps this year your greeting should include Biblical references and not human traditions. Maybe you could invite them to attend a virtual service with you. Think of ways God is opening doors at this time, and not closing them.



## I Corinthians 3: 9

*“For we are God's fellow workers. You are God's field, God's building.”*

This chorus, by Ruth Harms Caulkin, was a favorite of mine at Vacation Bible School:

Do you know, Oh Christian, you're a sermon in shoes?

Do you know, Oh Christian, you're a sermon in shoes?

Jesus calls upon you, to spread the gospel news,

So walk it, and talk it.

Live it, and give it.

Teach it, and preach it.

**Know it, and show it.**

**A Sermon in Shoes.**

**Read:** Matthew 28: 16-20

- What task did Christ give to his followers?
- How are you doing with this task?

**Reflect:** Be intentional this year to let others know you are celebrating Christ's birth. This is not a holiday about love, but God's Love. This is not a holiday about gifts, but God's gift. This is not a holiday about good times, but Good News. Be intentional to share that with others.

***“Vain Celebrations”***  
**Thursday, December 10, 2020**

I am missing the Daughters of the American Revolution Christmas luncheon this week. It is amazing how every organization features a holiday event this month. From Spin classes to national organizations, every group celebrates the holiday season. Many are celebrating the “spirit” of the holiday while managing to remove Christ from the event. Is it Christmas without Christ?

I was recently studying Tony Evans work on the power of God’s name. He refers to **Exodus 20: 7**, which says,

*“You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain, for the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain.”*

I wonder if each time we celebrate Christmas, without focusing on Christ, we are taking His name in vain?

In **Matthew 1: 21**, an angel appears to Joseph and says that Mary “... will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” The name of Jesus means Savior. He is the Christ, the Messiah, the one who came from God to save us from our sins. Each time we celebrate Christmas without focusing on Christ, we are overlooking the wonderful sacrifice of our Lord. There is no Christmas without Christ, and to celebrate otherwise is vain.

The world focuses on a “spirit” of love at this season. We choose to focus on ways man can show love and often forget the great love of God. **John 3: 16** reminds us “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life”. The love of God needs to be the focus of our celebrations this year and every year.

**Philippians 2: 9-11**

*“Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”*

Bill and Gloria Gaither gave us this song to remind us of Jesus’ name:

Jesus, Jesus, Jesus; there's just something about that name.  
Master, Savior, Jesus, like the fragrance after the rain;  
Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, let all Heaven and earth proclaim  
Kings and kingdoms will all pass away,  
But there's something about that name.

**Read:** Isaiah 9: 6

- What does the name Jesus mean to you?
- How can you promote His name this Christmas season?

**Reflect:** - Keep Christ in Christmas. Avoid the short cut of *Xmas* and the use of secular images to denote the holiday. Bring Christ to every holiday event.

***“Sing His Praise”***  
**Friday, December 11, 2020**

The Women’s Christmas Tea is scheduled for tonight. As I write this, I do not know if it will occur in person, virtually, or not at all. It is uncertain times. Perhaps of all the gatherings that occur at Christmas, the ones at church are significantly important because those focus on Christ.

Perhaps events will occur at the church, but due to health concerns, you cannot go. I feel your pain. We love to gather and sing the “carols” of Christmas. Christmas songs are fun, but the carols remind us of that Holy Night when Christ was born. We join the herald angels in proclaiming God’s great love in sending his son. A child was born to us that silent night. Each Christmas, we come faithfully, once again to Bethlehem, to welcome Immanuel who has come to be with us.

But singing spreads the virus, so in public we don masks and sing more softly. However, at home, we can enthusiastically praise God. (I love to bellow “Go Tell It on the Mountain” with James Taylor). **Psalm 96** tells us:

*“Sing to the Lord a new song;  
sing to the Lord, all the earth.  
Sing to the Lord, praise his name;  
proclaim his salvation day after day.  
Declare his glory among the nations,  
his marvelous deeds among all peoples.”*

Christmas declares the marvelous work of God. That in Christ, God became man to dwell among us. Christ became a man to teach us how to best love God and one another. Then because we cannot save ourselves, Christ suffered death on a cross to pay for our sins. He arose victorious over death and conquered that for us all. How marvelous is this work of God?

So sing this Christmas. Sing his praise. Fill your house with music proclaiming the birth of our Lord.

**Colossians 3: 16**

*Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts.*

Go tell it on the mountain  
Over the hills and everywhere  
Go tell it on the mountain  
Our Jesus Christ is born

**Read:** Ephesians 5: 15-20

- What role does music play in your spiritual life?
- How can you use psalms, songs, and hymns to encourage others this Christmas?

**Reflect:** Sing. Do not let the isolation of this Covid season stop your Christmas joy. Find your favorite carols online and share them on social media or email to a friend. Send cards with the words of your favorite carols to encourage others. Or just do it for yourself. My Grandmother stayed up after the Christmas Eve midnight service and played Christmas Carols on her record player into the early hours of Christmas morn.

***“Gather with Christ”***  
**Saturday, December 12, 2020**

One gathering at church, that seems essential, is the Christmas Eve Service. It is difficult to imagine Christmas without it. I must admit that my birth family did not have this service at our church. We had a Cantata earlier in the month that was similar to the traditional Christmas Eve event.

As a teen, I started attending midnight services with my grandmother at the Lutheran church near her home. She had a tradition of carrying her lighted candle as we walked home so that she could light her bayberry candle from that flame. I have tried to copy that tradition, but my son, Mark, successfully extinguishes it each year. That is his tradition.

We all have special memories we associate with Christmas Eve. It is hard to imagine this Christmas that they might not happen in the traditional way. Despite our current situation, if we celebrate in public or at home, the following, found in **Philippians 2: 6-8**, is true.

*“Who, being in very nature God,  
did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;  
rather, he made himself nothing  
by taking the very nature of a servant,  
being made in human likeness.  
And being found in appearance as a man,  
he humbled himself  
by becoming obedient to death—  
even death on a cross!”*

We are celebrating the birth of God as a man. God, limiting himself in ways we cannot comprehend, in order to provide salvation for a sinful people. The pandemic has not changed that fact. We need to focus on the gift, and not the situation. We may need to give up some traditions this year. Remember Christ also gave up much that first Christmas that we might gain life.

**John 1: 1, 14**

*“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”*

*“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.”*

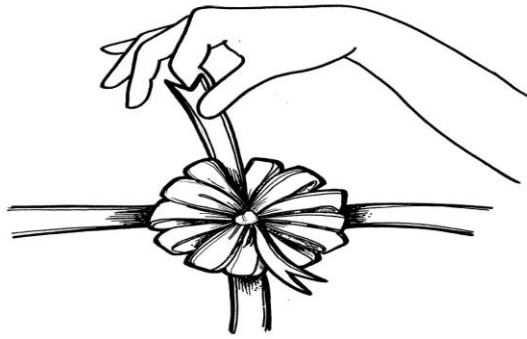
O come, o come Emmanuel  
To free your captive Israel  
That mourns in lonely exile here  
Until the Son of God appears  
**Rejoice! Rejoice! Immanuel**  
**Shall come to thee, O Israel.**

**Read:** Philippians 2: 6-8.

- How is Jesus both God and Man?
- How did Jesus limit himself?

**Reflect:** Plan now for your Christmas Eve at home (just in case). Perhaps have candles ready to light as you sing “Silent Night”. Ask others to plan to participate, reading scripture or devotional. If need be, do it on Zoom. However, do not ignore worshipping our Lord this Christmas Eve. Gather with Christ this Christmas Eve.

*Week Three*  
**GAIETY**



*Sue*



# GAIETY

Christmas is the most wonderful time of the year! Many people are happy at Christmas. There are so many things to look forward to and to participate in. Everything is decorated, people wear festive clothing, and there are delicious treats surrounding us.

In fact, the gaiety of Christmas has started to overshadow the real reason for the season. We see more secular signs of the season than we do of the real reason for the season. The one thing that the Covid-19 pandemic has done is given us time to rethink how we celebrate Christmas. We are not as busy or overwhelmed or surrounded with the world's message. We have a chance to pause and consider how we can best celebrate Christ's birth. We can choose to put Christ in the center of our festivities.

I know I am trying to do that. Several years ago, I was inspired to decorate with nativities, instead of Santas. Therefore, I had to start thinking spiritual, and not secular, and I am sure there is more I can do. I plan on using this pandemic isolation time to rethink Christmas festivities. My goal is to celebrate more Christ in all I do this year.



***“Gaiety or Great Joy?”***  
**Sunday, December 13, 2020 - Third Sunday of Advent**

The third Sunday of Advent marks the lighting of the Shepherd’s candle or the candle of Joy. I relate very well to today’s theme. My maiden name was Sheaffer, which is German for shepherd. Therefore, these verses from **Luke 2: 8-12** resonate with me:

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

The birth of Christ was a cause for great joy two thousand years ago and it is a cause for great joy today. The world pandemic of 2020 has brought many disappointments. Lives have been lost, milestone events have been ruined, jobs have disappeared, school terms have been disrupted, vacations were postponed; many of our plans are effected. However, despite all these sorrows, the news of Christ’s birth is still a cause for joy.

It is easy after all that has happened to become depressed. So much has been lost. Now winter is coming. The days are also getting shorter and the nights are colder. We are more isolated and feeling alone.

Remember, it was likely a cold dark night on the hills of Bethlehem when the angels appeared to the shepherds. However, in the midst of their situation, they heard the message of great joy and responded. We need to respond also.

So instead of focusing on what we lost this year, let us focus on the great joy. Focus on this great joy proclaimed by the angels. Put aside your feelings of loss and disappointment and be renewed by the story of our Savior’s birth.

**Luke 1: 14**

*“And you will have **joy** and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth,…”*

Joy to the world, the Lord is come  
Let earth receive her King  
Let every heart prepare Him room  
And Heaven and nature sing  
And Heaven and nature sing  
And Heaven, and Heaven, and nature sing.

**Read:** Luke 2:8-12

- What worries might the shepherds have put aside to receive the joy of Christ?
- What do you need to set aside to receive the joy of Christ this Christmas?

**Reflect:** Put yourself in a joyous mood. Play your favorite Christmas carols. Put on your favorite Christmas sweater. Make your favorite Christmas treat. Share the joy with a friend or neighbor. Spread the joy.

***“Let your CHRISTMAS Lights Shine”***  
**Monday, December 14, 2020**

My radio is blaring, “It’s the Most Wonderful Time of the Year”. The song lists jingle bells, good cheer, marshmallows, mistletoe, parties, ghost stories, and tales from long ago as signs of the season. Notice there is no mention of Christ, unless you count the good news of our Savior as a tale from long, long ago.

The gaiety of Christmas is expressed in many ways. From parties, to decorations, to fashion, written greetings and special holiday foods, all these are ways we express the joy of the holiday. In our culture, all these are synonymous with Christmas, and yet, many of these traditions have no real connection to the Biblical account of Christ’s birth.

This year, when our ability to celebrate is limited by the pandemic, we have an opportunity to reflect on how we celebrate and how we might refocus our celebration on the real source of joy, the birth of Jesus.

I am thinking of outdoor decorations today. Many of us place candles in our windows and decorate our bushes and trees with holiday lights and lawn ornaments. Lights are an appropriate symbol of Christ. As recorded in **John 8: 12** - *Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life. John 1: 4-5* says, *“In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.”*

Jesus came to shine light into the darkness of the world. The world is dark with sin, but Christ shines His light into that darkness that we might have life. That is the sweet message of Christmas, and is often overlooked in the secular displays of the season.

Perhaps this Christmas is the year we abandon lawn ornaments, that are secular, and make our lawns and homes bright, proclaiming Christ, Who is the light of the world.

**Isaiah 9: 2**

*“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great **light**; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has **light** shone.”*

The whole world was lost in the darkness of sin,  
The Light of the world is Jesus!  
Like sunshine at noonday, His glory shone in;  
The Light of the world is Jesus!

Come to the light, 'tis shining for thee;  
Sweetly the light has dawned upon me;  
Once I was blind, but now I can see:  
The Light of the world is Jesus!

**Read:** Matthew 5: 14-15

- Christ is the light of the world, but he has charged us to be light also. How can you show Christ's light this Christmas?
- In what ways is your light under a bushel? How can you reveal it?

**Reflect:** Consider how you can decorate the entrance to your home to invite others to see the light of Christ this year. How can you demonstrate your belief that Christmas should be about Christ?

***“Mixed Messages”***  
**Tuesday, December 15, 2020**

Yesterday, we talked about our outdoor decorations. Today I would like to consider our indoor ones. Perhaps, since we have fewer visitors in our homes, you are thinking of minimal decorations this year. Whether you choose to do little or much, it is important to remember that our decorations communicate what we like and think is important.

I visited the Holy Land during December in 2013. We visited the synagogue in Nazareth where Jesus worshipped as a child. They had a manger scene near their altar, but instead of a star atop the stable, there was a Santa Claus. Wow, that was a mixed message!

What mixed message do we send when we place Santa more prominent in our homes than we do Christ? Do not misunderstand! I have nothing against St. Nick, but the holiday is not about him. I do not want my holiday decorations to proclaim Santa over Christ. Perhaps this year when we might be less elaborate in our decorating, we can choose more wisely which decorations to use.

**Ephesians 5: 8-10** says – *“...for at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true), and try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord.”*

As a child, Santa was an important part of Christmas, and although I was a believer, the secular parts of Christmas appealed to me. As an adult, I am still surrounded by the secular signs of the season everywhere I go. However, I can choose what is in my home. I would like to surround my family and visitors with symbols of the Biblical account of Christmas. Those symbols include light, angels, stars and nativities. We have many choices. Think of symbols that proclaim the Lord and are good, right and true. I am sure it will please Him.

**Philippians 4: 8**

*“Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things...”*

Hail, the heaven-born Prince of Peace!  
Hail, the Son of Righteousness!  
Light and life to all He brings,  
Risen with healing in His wings.  
Mild He lays His glory by,  
Born that man no more may die,  
Born to raise the sons of earth.  
Born to give them second birth.

**Read:** Proverbs 3: 1-4

- How can you write God's love and faithfulness on your hearts?
- How can you keep God's love before you throughout this Christmas season?

**Reflect:** Think about your Christmas decorations. How can you focus your displays on Christ and not secular expressions of the season? Think of things that will focus those in your home on the Lord.

***“Food for Thought”***  
**Wednesday, December 16, 2020**

What is a celebration without food? Food certainly has a special place in Christmas preparation. I am sure we all have wonderful memories of rolling dough, and cutting out shapes, and decorating sugar cookies. Every house has their favorite Christmas goodies. Then there are the holiday feasts. When I was a child, it was a Christmas Day turkey dinner and now with grown children, it is Christmas Eve beef tenderloin.

So who are you baking those cookies for this year? There are only so many you can eat yourself, and with the virus, folks are suspect of any homemade goods. So what do we do with the extra baking/cooking time? And those of us who show love by baking, what do we do?

I would like to suggest you exchange some of your baking time for meditating time. The pandemic gave us lots of time to develop new habits and a habit of meditating on God’s Word is an excellent one. In fact, with 2021 two weeks away, this gives you a chance to get a jumpstart on a New Year’s resolution. **Psalms 119: 7-8** says-

*“I will praise you with an upright heart,  
when I learn your righteous rules.  
I will keep your statutes;  
do not utterly forsake me!”*

There are three key things the psalmist pledges to do: praise God, learn His rules, and keep them. Taking some of the extra “Christmas prep” time to prepare your heart for 2021 may be what you need to be ready for the challenges of a new year. So bake a small batch of cookies, grab one and a cup of coffee or tea. Snuggle into a comfy chair and open up God’s word - He has prepared many goodies for you there.

**Psalm 34: 8**

***“Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good!”***

The Lord is good, the Lord is good  
And blessed is the man, who puts his trust in Him  
The Lord is good, the Lord is good  
Taste and see that the Lord is good.  
Taste and see that the Lord is good.



**Read:** Psalm 119: 1-8

- What would you have to do to seek the Lord with your whole heart?
- Have you been steadfast in keeping his statutes?

**Reflect:** Carve out time to spend more time with Christ this Christmas season. If you like giving home baked goods to friends and neighbors, how can you share Christ with them this year? I am considering a Christmas cactus for my neighbors. I love when they bloom at Christmas and Easter.

***“Send the Right Message”***  
**Thursday, December 17, 2020**

One Christmas tradition that may not be affected by Covid-19 is sending Christmas greetings. In fact, perhaps this is one way we can encourage others at this time and help them focus on Christ’s birth. Recently, our culture has moved away from the traditional Christmas card to a card with a family portrait and a long letter giving an account of the past year. These Christmas greetings help people to stay in touch. However, I am wondering if they help people to celebrate the joy of Christmas for the receiver.

Look at this greeting from the letter to the **Philippians**:

*“Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons: ‘Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

*I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, **always** in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ’.”*

Notice what Paul included in his greeting. He notes who is writing the letter, Paul and Timothy, and that they are servants of Christ. Then he identifies the recipients: the believers in Philippi. He sends them grace and peace from God. Finally, he thanks God for all He is doing in the lives of the Philippians. Interesting, the greeting is more about the recipient, than the sender. Whereas, our current holiday cards tend to be more about the sender than the recipient.

What if this year, we made our greetings about the recipient and what we see the Lord doing in their lives. Showing thankfulness for how the Lord is using them. It would take us back to the days before we could mass print and made hand written notes in cards instead. That is a lot of work, but we have a lot of time. It would also encourage our fellow believers.

**I Thessalonians 5: 11**

*“Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing.”*

Now to the Lord sing praises,  
All you within this place,  
And with true love and brotherhood  
Each other now embrace;  
this holy tide of Christmas  
Doth bring redeeming grace.

**Read:** Romans 16: 1-17

- What do you learn from these personal greetings?
- How might you encourage others in their walk of faith in your cards this year?

**Reflect:** Focus on the receiver as you write your cards this year. Choose greetings this year that focus on Christ. Think of ways to encourage others in their walk with the Lord.

***“Let Your Heart be Light”***  
**Friday, December 18, 2020**

We all like to have festive clothes for the holidays. However, what each of us thinks is festive can be very different. Some like sparkly clothes with lots of sequins; others prefer cozy ugly sweaters. There is a wide range of outfits people choose to celebrate Christmas.

I am thinking of the song “Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas” today. Look at this verse:

Have yourself a merry little Christmas  
Let your heart be light  
From now on  
Our troubles will be out of sight  
Have yourself a merry little Christmas  
Make the yuletide gay  
From now on  
Our troubles will be miles away

I am not thinking of what you are wearing on the outside of your body this year, but about your heart this Christmas. Is it light? Are you burdened by what cannot happen this year, and overlooking what can?

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

If your heart is heavy this year, cast those cares on Jesus. Lay them down at his feet and let your heart be light so that you can rejoice in this season. Our joy does not lie in our circumstances, it lies in the good news that the Savior has come. Christ is born.

**I Peter 5: 7**

*“Casting all your care upon him; for he careth for you.” (KJV)*

David Slater, in his chorus, wrote:

I cast all my cares upon You  
I lay all of my burdens  
Down at Your feet  
And any time I don't know what to do  
I will cast all my cares upon You

**Read:** Matthew 11: 28-30

- Is your heart light this Christmas?
- What burdens do you need to lay at Christ's feet?

**Reflect:** Plan a festive outfit and wear it. If you are not going anywhere, take a picture and post on social media.

***“Spread JOY”***  
**Saturday, December 19, 2020**

There is a difference between gaiety and joy. I think that is the difference between how the world celebrates the holiday season and how it was intended. Christmas has become a season of happiness, but it was intended as a season of great joy. Look at what the Bible says:

In **Matthew 2: 10**, the magi see Christ’s star and their reaction is great joy. *When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy.* And the angels announcement in **Luke 2: 10** says, *“Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.”* The response to the birth of Christ is joy. The promise of Christmas is the birth of a Savior.

We have changed the holiday into one that focuses on happiness and gaiety. There is nothing wrong with happiness and gaiety. However, happiness and gaiety depend on the situation and circumstances and great joy does not. We can have great joy this Christmas despite a virus, loss of income, poor health, or loss of loved one, because independent of our circumstances we can rejoice in the hope found in the birth of a Savior. He is the one who came to save the world from their sins and will reconcile them with God to live with Him forever.

Although their circumstances were humble, Mary and Joseph had great joy in the birth of a son. They were in a stable, far from their home city without friends or relatives with them. Soon after their child is born, they must flee Herod’s edict to kill male children under the age of two. They become refugees in a foreign land.

The Shepherds who first heard of our Savior’s birth also did not have the best circumstances. They had one of the lowliest professions. They spent nights outdoors on the hillside. They risked their lives to protect the sheep. Yet, they were the first to hear of the Savior’s birth, and went and worshipped Him, and embraced the great joy.

Perhaps you are not happy this Christmas. However, do not let your situation deny you the great joy found in the good news that Christ is born.

**I John 4: 14**

*“And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world.”*

God rest ye merry gentlemen  
Let nothing you dismay  
Remember Christ our Savior  
Was born on Christmas Day  
To save us all from Satan's pow'r  
When we were gone astray  
Oh tidings of comfort and joy  
Comfort and joy  
Oh tidings of comfort and joy

**Read:** Matthew 28: 7-9

- Why were the women filled with great joy?
- Are you filled with great joy this Christmas?

**Reflect:** How can you share the great joy of our Savior's birth? It is one thing to spread happiness during this season, but a greater blessing to all to spread the great joy of knowing Christ.

*Week Four*  
*GOD with US*



*Sheryl*



# ***GOD WITH US***

Did you know that it is God's desire to be with you? It may be difficult to realize this because it seems too good to be true. What the almighty and powerful Creator wants is to be with us! This is the theme of the Bible: God created us, He loves us, sin **separated** and **distanced** us from Him, and then God brought us **spiritually close** again through His beloved Son, Jesus Christ!

*The LORD is near to all who call on him,  
to all who call on him in truth.*

**Psalm 145: 18**

During this final week of Advent, we are going to consider various aspects of what it really means that **God is with Us!** So many people are living life without all God came to give, and my prayer is that you are not one of them. May you walk in greater fullness of His presence and purpose!

*Father, thank You for **GIVING** your Son, Jesus, to be with us. Thank You that you did not stay distant, but You left the magnificence of Heaven to come to Earth to rescue and **GATHER** us close to Yourself again. Holy Spirit, teach us what it fully means that You are with us. Give us the joy and **GAIETY** of the promise of **GOD with US!***



**“God with Us”**  
**Sunday, December 20, 2020 – Fourth Sunday of Advent**

It makes sense that God would use a star to guide the Magi, who were astrologers, to Jesus. He knew how to get their attention. While many theories exist about the ethnicity and background of these men from the East, one thing we know for sure is that they were not Jews. They were Gentiles.

For centuries, people assumed the Savior would come specifically to deliver the Jews, God’s chosen people. However, when God revealed the significance of Jesus’ birth to the magi, we received our first tangible glimpse of His desire to reconcile with the entire world, no matter our background or depth of depravity. He closed the gap and reduced the distance!

While Jesus was born with a pure Jewish lineage, and certainly came to redeem the ones He had chosen from the start, He also came to bring ALL people back into relationship with their Creator. He reduced the distance between and drew us spiritually close!

In **Acts 15: 7-9**, we read how the Holy Spirit no longer distinguishes between Jew and Gentiles.

*“<sup>7</sup> And after there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, “Brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. <sup>8</sup> And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us, <sup>9</sup> and he made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith.”*

Anyone who has faith in Jesus has become a chosen child of God! Jesus’ heart is for the world and He desires all nations to know Him! Jesus’ heart is for the world to draw spiritually close to Him!

**Read:** Matthew 2: 1-12; John 3: 16

**Reflect:** What did Herod request of the wise men after they found had found Christ in Bethlehem? What did the wise men do and why? (Matthew 2)

For whom did Jesus die? (John 3: 16)

***“Then it was ‘GO’, now it is ‘COME’”***  
**Monday, December 21, 2020**

*“He has raised up a horn for his people,  
praise for all his saints,  
for the people of Israel who are near to him.  
Praise the LORD!”*  
**Psalm 148: 14**

Two marks of the old covenant were distance and separation. Does that sound familiar? Does that sound descriptive of 2020?

When God appeared to Moses, His servant, He said, “Do not come near; Take your sandals off your feet.” When He revealed Himself on Mount Sinai to His own chosen and separated people, He said, “You shall set limits for the people all around.” Distance was always prominent in the sacred worship of the tabernacle and the temple. The majority of the people did not even enter the outer court. While the priests could enter the inner court, only the high priest entered the innermost place, or the holy of holies, and then but once a year. Sin was so loathsome to the LORD that He treated men as lepers who were put outside the camp!

However, when the Gospel came, the word “GO” was replaced with the word “COME”, and as a result, distance was replaced with nearness. Thankfully, God has bridged the gap between distance and nearness in our spiritual relationship with Him. However, we still long for distance to be replaced with nearness to each other during these days of COVID-19!

The blood of Jesus Christ brought God’s people, who were previously far away, nearby. There is no social distancing, or distancing of any kind with the Godhead. We have safety, privilege, and proximity to God through Jesus Christ. The best room in the house is your heart. We cannot get any closer to Jesus than to have Him in our hearts. Jesus’ dwelling in our hearts makes Him much more than a casual visitor who may stay overnight. It makes Him a permanent resident of our inmost being, never to leave again.

Imagine! This closeness will be followed by a greater nearness still when it will be said:

*“And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God.”*

**Revelation 21: 3**

Lord, haste the day!

**Read:** Ephesians 3: 17

**Reflect:** Ponder the word, “dwell” and reflect upon the gift of God’s permanent residence in your heart! How does God dwelling in your heart give you great joy in the midst of various trials and difficulties, especially during a COVID Christmas?

***“The Vast Sum of Them”***  
**Tuesday, December 22, 2020**

“The weather is here. Wish you were beautiful.” This is my classic line on any postcard I send to family or friends. Somewhere on the three-inch space on the back of a postcard, I will pen these words. It is expected. However, in my playfulness, my loved ones know that while away, I am thinking of them! My mom will say to me, before I leave on a trip, “You’ll be too busy to think of me.” However, I always respond, “Of course I’ll think of you. You are in my heart!” And while this is true, and while I do daily think of her and many others, I am sure I fall short of the vast sum of the thoughts that God has towards us.

We read in **Psalm 139: 17-18**:

*<sup>17</sup> How precious to me are your thoughts, O God!  
How vast is the sum of them!  
<sup>18</sup> If I would count them, they are more than the sand.  
I awake, and I am still with you.”*

David marveled about the preciousness of God’s thoughts toward him and the VAST amount of those thoughts. The psalmist was always on God’s mind and he knew that God was always with him and knew him so well. Just as David mattered to God, we also matter to God. He knows us infinitely and has countless thoughts about us. He understands and cares for us beyond our understanding. God has eliminated all distancing between Him and us!

God further assures us that He will not forget us by engraving us the palm of His hands.

*<sup>17</sup> Can a woman forget her nursing child,  
that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb?  
Even these may forget,  
yet I will not forget you.  
<sup>16</sup> Behold, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands;  
your walls are continually before me.”*  
**Isaiah 49: 15-16**

It is unlikely that a woman nursing her child, could possibly forget that child. However, God is saying that even if this unlikely occurrence were to happen, He will never forget us!

In my finite thoughts about God, I think of Him as being very busy. I cannot fathom, just as my Mom could not fathom about me, that He has time to think about ME and the other 7 billion people in the world. Yet, He tells us in this Psalm that He not only thinks of us, but His thoughts about us are infinite and eternal. His thoughts and remembrance of us are more than the sand! Even after a night’s sleep, or a nap on the innumerable granules of sand on the beach, we are still with Him and never have to wish He were here, beautiful weather or not!

**Read:** Romans 8: 38-39; Philippians 2: 13

**Reflect:** Do you struggle sometimes to believe God is with you? Why or why not? What is one way you can remind yourself that God is with you?

**“A Standing Invitation”**  
**Wednesday, December 23, 2020**

There is something about an invitation, which makes us feel accepted, wanted, special, and included. Having a *standing invitation* makes us feel even more accepted, wanted, special, and included. A standing invitation means we are always welcome and invited to visit at any time!

Invitations are powerful, both in this life and in the Bible. In Esther 4, we learn that Queen Esther received a copy of the decree to exterminate the Jews, and her cousin, Mordecai, challenged her to intercede on behalf of her people before the king. Esther explained the difficulty behind Mordecai’s prompting:

*<sup>11</sup> “All the king’s servants and the people of the king’s provinces know that if any man or woman goes to the king inside the inner court without being called, there is but one law—to be put to death, except the one to whom the king holds out the golden scepter so that he may live. But as for me, I have not been called to come in to the king these thirty days.” (Esther 4:11, ESV)*

The only confidence Esther had about going before the king, without an invitation, was that she was breaking the “one law” which could result in her death! Esther did not have a standing invitation to come before the king.

However, as we read further in chapter 4, Esther determined to go before the king without his bidding, and with great courage she declared, “*If I perish, I perish*” (4:16). I can only imagine what she wondered as she stood before the king. Would the king hold out his scepter and grant her approach? Would she live to see another sunrise?

What a comfort it is for us to know that we have a *standing invitation* with the King of Kings! Unlike Esther who could not approach her king, we may approach our King with surety:

*“Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”*

**Hebrews 4:16**

What a wonderful confidence we have, that not only may we confidently approach the King without fear of death, but we may be confident to receive mercy (*not getting* what we deserve) and find grace (*getting* what we do not deserve) to help in our **time of need**! God wants us to come into His courts; He desires for us to draw close to Him and not stand at a distance!

Thankfully, God provides help in our time of need and no request is too small, because He wants us to “...*let your requests be made known to God.*” (Philippians 4:6).

There is something about an invitation that makes us feel accepted, wanted, special, and included. Having a *standing invitation* makes us feel even more accepted, wanted, special, and

included because a standing invitation from someone, means we are always welcome and we are always invited to visit at any time! We are always welcome to draw near to the throne of grace with the confidence that our Father wants to help in our time of need!

**Read:** Esther 4

**Reflect:** What must it have been like to be Esther and not know if her husband, the king, would grant her access to his throne? How courageous she must have been to approach him without an invitation! Fortunately, unlike Esther with her king, we have a standing invitation with our King! How are you taking advantage of that invitation? Are there times you refrain from approaching Him? Why or why not?



***“Our Father Comes Alongside”***  
**Wednesday, December 23, 2020**

The Greek word for “comforter” is parakletos, which literally means, “one called alongside to help”. This concept was beautifully illustrated in the 1992 Olympics during a track-and-field event. As the runners in the 400-meter race flew around the oval track, one of them suddenly pulled up on the backstretch, one leg held up and dangling as he lunged to a stop. He had pulled a hamstring! While the crowd stood holding its breath, a man ran out of the stands to the young athlete. It was his father! As the television crew relayed the moving scene to the watching world, the microphone picked up the runner’s words: “Dad you’ve got to help me across the finish line. I’ve trained my whole life for this race!” Therefore, the father put his arm around his son, and together, they limped across the finish line to a standing ovation!

A verse of Scripture which reassures us of this kind of help may be found in **John 14: 15-17**:

*“<sup>15</sup>If you love me, you will keep my commandments. <sup>16</sup>And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, <sup>17</sup>even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you.”*

In the race of life, God, our Heavenly Father, comes alongside us through the person of the Holy Spirit. When we think we cannot go one more step, He puts His everlasting arms around us, and gently walks us to the finish line!

**Read:** John 14: 16-26

**Reflect:** Notice John 14: 23 in particular. The triune God has taken up residence in those of us who have received Christ’s forgiveness and salvation. Yet, there may be situations where we feel really close to Him, while on other occasions, He might seem distant and uninvolved in our life. When do you most feel God is distant and uninvolved? How can we remind ourselves of the Godhead’s presence in our lives so we can discern His work and comfort in our lives?

***“Peace on Earth”***  
**Thursday, December 24, 2020**

My answer to the question, “What do you want for Christmas?” has been a running joke among my family, friends, and me for years! My answer was always the same: “I want peace on earth!” As a result, of answering this way, I have been gifted numerous ornaments in the shape of the world with the words, “peace on earth”, scrawled across the world. It is probably safe to say that during this season of COVID-19, we have not experienced much peace in the world.

I imagine we are saddened by the strife, discord, fear, anxiety, and overall lack of peace we have seen, and maybe even personally experienced, during 2020. Lack of peace is the complete antithesis of what Jesus said to the apostles in **John 14: 27**.

*“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.”*

Jesus grants peace unlike any peace the world can offer! Based on the peace Jesus grants, our heart are not be troubled or afraid-

*“I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.”*

**John 16: 33**

Once again, Jesus promises peace in the midst of tribulation. The reason is that He has overcome the world. Jesus declares this peace again, on the evening of His resurrection when His first words to the gathered disciples were *“Peace be with you.”*- **John 20: 19**. These words are full of meaning because of Jesus’ death, burial, and resurrection.

Jesus last words from the cross and first words to His disciples are connected. It makes sense that Jesus’ last words, “It is finished”, which reflect the completion of the earthly work Christ came to accomplish, are followed after the resurrection with, “Peace be with you.” The death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ is the ground by which our sin and rebellion against God is reconciled. We have peace with God because of what Jesus did on the cross. It is by faith that we receive the finished work of Christ in our lives. If we truly understand Jesus’ final words from the cross, we would expect Jesus’ first words to the disciples to be, “Peace by with you.”

**Read:** Romans 5: 10-11; 2 Corinthians 5: 18-20

**Reflect:** How do these verses of Scripture tell us we have reconciled, made peace, with God? How should making peace with God translate into making peace with others?

# Concluding Thoughts

If I were to sum up Christmas in one word, it would be “Immanuel” (God with us). The prophet, Isaiah, is the first to introduce us to this glorious name:

*“Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.”*

**Isaiah 7: 14**

We know, without any doubt, that this prophecy concerns Jesus Christ, because in the opening chapter of the New Testament, Matthew makes this connection:

*“<sup>20</sup> But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. <sup>21</sup> She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” <sup>22</sup> All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet. <sup>23</sup> “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel.”*

**Matthew 1: 20-23**

One of the most comforting names of Jesus is “Immanuel” which literally means, “God is with us”! This title captures the mystery and the miracle that is Christmas. The Almighty God, who crafted the galaxies with His bare hands (Genesis 1:1), the Eternal Word, Who always was and always will be (John 1:1), came to Earth in the form of a helpless baby. Why? Because our sins made it impossible for us to come to Him. God took the extravagant, most loving step of coming to us, of making Himself susceptible to sorrow, familiar with temptation, and vulnerable to sin’s disruptive power, in order to cancel its claim. God did not remain in Heaven and love us from a distance.

The fact is, God is with us, and the command given to Joshua is the command to us as well:

*“Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened; do not be dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go.”*

**Joshua 1: 9**

The more I think about the fact that the God of the Universe became our “Immanuel”, the more I experience an overwhelming sense of calm. No matter where I go or what I face, He walks beside me, offering me comfort, wisdom, and strength. This is nothing short of a miracle... and this miracle is the key to the magic and beauty of Christmas.

How have you experienced *Immanuel* — God being with you, in your life thus far? It is interesting to note that Matthew begins (Matthew 1: 20-23) and ends his Gospel with the promises God is with us.

*“<sup>19</sup>Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, <sup>20</sup>teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”*

**Matthew 28: 19-20**

How will Christmas 2020 be different if you began and ended your day with the firm belief that God is with you? How would your life be different if you began and ended each day with the firm belief that God is with you?

Merry, Mighty Christmas to you and your loved ones! May Christmas 2020 be a Christmas of being spiritually close while socially distancing! May you **GIVE, GATHER**, and have **GAITY**, unlike any other Christmas, because **GOD IS WITH US!** *Socially Distant, Spiritually Close!*

**Read on Christmas Morning:** Luke 2



## *The Cast of Characters*

### **Karen Kownurko**

A special thank you to our special friend, Karen Kownurko, for creating the graphics for this devotional! Karen listened to us describe our intentions for this advent devotional and then did her magic in aligning our thoughts with her artistic creativity! Karen did not want any recognition for her beautiful art, but how could we pass up an opportunity to give credit to her and praise God for the wonderful talents He has given to her!

### **Sheryl Vasso**

Dr. Sheryl A. Vasso is a professor in the Master of Science in Education program at Cairn University where she has been teaching and administrating since 1990. She is a graduate of St. Joseph's University (B.S.), The College of New Jersey (M.A.), and Immaculata University (Ed.D.).

Sheryl believes she has the dream job—teaching teachers! As a little kid, she spent every day of summer vacation “playing school” so small wonder that her vacation became her vocation!

In addition to teaching, Sheryl is Founder and President of Words of Worth, Inc., a non-profit incorporation that provides Biblical teaching for retreats and conference settings as well as professional development for educators, both nationally and abroad. Sheryl has co-authored several Bible studies and more about her ministry can be found at [www.wordsofworth.com](http://www.wordsofworth.com).

Born and raised in Bucks County, PA, Sheryl is Italian by family heritage, is in God's family, and enjoys chocolate. She believes, “In addition to God's Word, chocolate solves most any problem in life!”

### **Sue Weber**

Susan Weber was raised in Central Pennsylvania. She went to Bloomsburg State College where she met her husband, Jim. Upon graduation, they settled in Bucks County and taught in the Neshaminy School District. Susan retired after 30 years in education having taught all grades 9-12, served as the Lead Teacher for Social Studies, and as the district's leader for professional development. She also earned a Master's degree in Educational Psychology from Temple University.

Since Sue's retirement, the couple has enjoyed traveling to Europe and within the United States. Sue's favorite vacation destination is to visit her grandchildren and in the summer may be found on the sand in Bethany Beach, DE.

In addition to travel, Susan fills her days serving on several boards for local community non-profits, including Words of Worth, Inc., Hope for Youth, and the Neshaminy Education Foundation. She is also active in her church serving on the GO Team and co-teaching a Bible Study on Wednesday morning. Susan and Jim have a great regard for missions and have traveled to four continents on missions' trips. Sue is also an active member of the Washington Crossing Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution.

Her greatest blessing is her family. Susan and Jim are the parents of two sons, and grandparents of six beautiful grandchildren. Susan's hope is to serve the Lord fully during her retirement years. She has been greatly blessed, and in turn hopes to bless others!