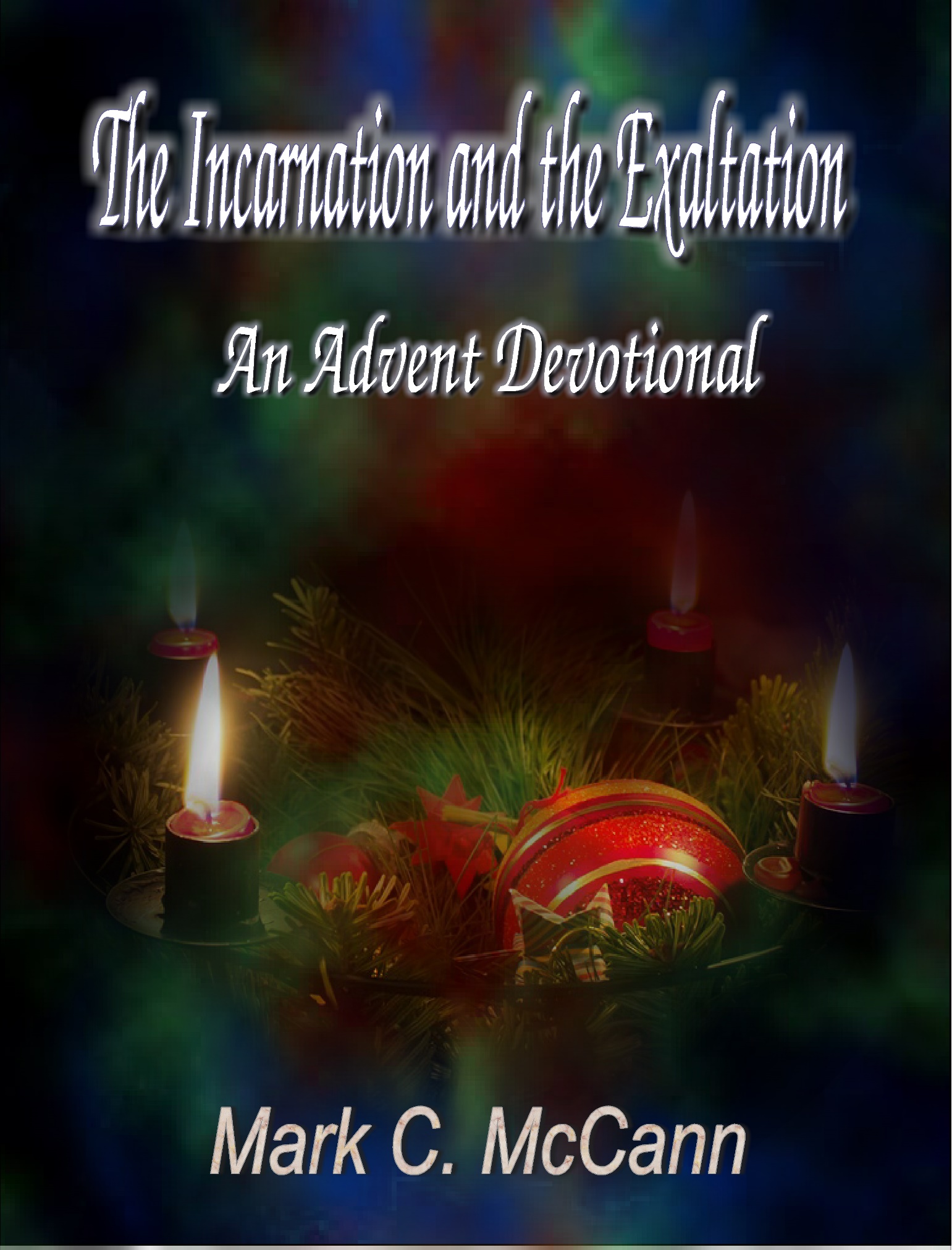
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*The Incarnation*

*and*

*the Exaltation*

An Advent Devotional

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An Advent Devotional

Mark C. McCann

2022

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Copyright © 2022 by Mark C. McCann ***The Incarnation and the Exaltation: An Advent Devotional***

**Introduction**

*Of the Father's love begotten,*

*Ere the worlds began to be,*

*He is Alpha and Omega,*

*He the source, the ending He.*

*Of the things that are and have been,*

*And that future years shall see,*

*Evermore and evermore.*

The mystery of the incarnation is something so perfect in its profundity; and yet we who believe dare to grasp its pure simplicity in the image of the innocent baby resting peacefully in the Virgin’s arms on that first Christmas night. That the Son of God would take on flesh to dwell among men should cause us to drop to our knees in holy fear and weep tears of joy. This same baby of Bethlehem is the One who was born to die the ignominious death on the cross for the sins of the world. It is the incarnation that makes the sacrifice of the cross and our salvation the joyous reality it truly is.

Advent is both the season of incarnation and the season of exaltation, the time when the heavenly curtain is pulled back and we witness the coming of the Savior into the dirty mangers of our hearts. It is the celebration of the sacrament of our salvation, the perfect sign of God’s eternal love manifested in the world. We wait with joyful expectation for the coming of Christmas, even as we look forward to the Second Coming, the final advent when the King of kings and Lord of lords will return to call his people home.

Every word in the Old Testament points forward to the coming of the Messiah into the world and every word in the New Testament points forward to the day when our faith shall be sight and the Bride of Christ will be with the Bridegroom forever. As we breathe in the word that was breathed out in love for us, we experience a sense of joy in this expectant waiting, like a woman anticipating the birth of her child.

There is a profound beauty in the readings of Advent, and we would be wise to meditate on their meaning. In allowing the Advent Scriptures to wash over us, we become keenly aware of how this sacred season calls us to look inward to examine our hearts and our relationship with the Almighty. Advent is not just a time of expectation, but it is also a time of turning our hearts more fully in God's direction. It calls us to repentance and reconciliation, restlessness and rest, renunciation and restoration. It is a time when we come into a deeper and more personal bond with the One who took on flesh so that we could one day rise with Him in the glories of the Kingdom of Heaven.

This Advent devotional reflects on the scriptures of incarnation and exaltation in order to take you on a journey of thoughtful self-reflection. It is meant to draw you more deeply into the mystery of Christ’s coming into the world to help you walk your own inner path toward the season of Christmas. As you celebrate the coming of Christ into your lives during Advent and spend time reflecting on the readings in this devotional, may the light and love that entered our world lead you to the cross in wonder and thanksgiving. May you find joy and discover strength as you walk this wondrous journey to Bethlehem, always holding within your heart the image of the Hill of Calvary and the hope of the Age to come when Christ will return to call his people home!

***The First Sunday of Advent***

***Theme for the Week: Longing for Hope and Home***

***Incarnation –*** *The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined. (Isaiah 9:2)*

***Exaltation –*** *Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, “I am the light of the world; he who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” (John 8:12)*

The season of hope and expectation is here. All around us are lights in the darkness, candles in windows and tiny luminaries wrapped around wreaths and Christmas trees. They remind us that in a world filled with hatred and hopelessness, where nations war and children weep, where sickness and sin abound, there is still hope. That hope is found in the little baby of Bethlehem. In him, the light of heaven has burst forth upon our dark and weary world.

The blackest night can be broken by the smallest flicker of light. The light brings a feeling of safety and strength and reminds us what it means to heal and to hope. As a single light can cut through the darkness, the hope of one longing soul can pierce through the despair of this hurting world. As we light the first candle of the Advent wreath, we join with all those throughout the ages who have longed for the coming of Christ. He is the light in our darkness, the hope in our despair. He broke into a world of sin and sorrow to restore our vision of what is to come.

For the one who travels the path of life in the darkness of despondency, each day can be a lonely journey. So many walk this way alone, afraid to share their deepest sorrows with those around them. But we can be a light shining in their darkness. We can bring the radiance of Advent into the shadowy world of hopelessness for each person we meet. When others see the light of Christ shining in us, they will be drawn to the hope that light brings. Let us work this Advent to be a beacon of hope each and every day.

***Prayer:*** *Heavenly Father, may I take time this Advent to peer into the radiance of your love as I reflect on those passages that speak of light. May the wisdom of your grace shine in the darkness of this world, and may I strive to bring the light of your love to others today…Amen!*

*In the fullness of the ages,*

*Word of God in flesh was born.*

*God from God, the light of Heaven,*

*Came to earth on Christmas morn.*

***Monday, First Week of Advent – A Place of Peace***

***Incarnation –*** *I was glad when they said to me, “Let us go to the house of the LORD!” (Psalm 122:1)*

***Exaltation –*** *On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being shut where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.” (John 20:19)*

There exists for every believer a place we long to enter, the Holy City where we may experience peace and unity forevermore. We long to know the safety and security of being with those who love us and accept us for who we are. We want to be able to stand before a just judge rather than face the criticisms and cruelty of fallen humanity. We seek a refuge from the harshness of the world, a place where we may prosper in our souls and experience the rest we so desperately long to have.

The beautiful Christmas Hymn, *"Good Christian Men Rejoice"* is meant to be sung slowly and deliberately, with a sweet and somber voice and a surrendered heart. One can envision the saints dancing in delight before the throne of heaven, caught up in the joy of perfect submission to the One who came to save the souls of men. It reminds us of the sacred movement of Worship, the joyful dance of the Church in sweet communion with Christ. We are being drawn ever nearer to our heavenly city in a spirit of unity and peace. As we journey together, taking each step with joyful anticipation and heartfelt hope, we bring alive the peace that awaits us in eternity yet lives within us in the here and now.

The Church should be our refuge, a place of peace where we can be vulnerable and yet find security, sorrowful and yet find joy, weak and yet find strength. Christmas is the culmination of that slow and steady march towards the miracle of the incarnation. Let us walk the road together as we keep the baby of Bethlehem and the Holy City of the King ever before our eyes!

***Prayer:*** *God, my rock and my refuge, may I meditate on what it means to rest secure in your presence, filled with expectancy and hope. And may I lead another through the rough ways with deliberate and joyful steps toward the Kingdom, our heavenly Jerusalem…Amen!*

*God with us, securely dwelling,*

*In the manger of our hearts,*

*Holy solace, sweet communion,*

*Love incarnate now imparts.*

***Tuesday, First Week of Advent – Our Home Established***

***Incarnation –*** *It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the LORD shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; and all the nations shall flow to it… (Isaiah 2:2)*

***Exaltation –*** *“…he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away.” (Revelation 21:4)*

Advent brings to life the truth that Jesus has established the Kingdom of God on earth and in heaven. It offers us the hope that one day, believers from all nations shall stream to the New Jerusalem to worship forever the One who has set us free. Our sorrow will find comfort, our mourning will be given meaning, and our tears will be wiped away. Though it may seem so far in the future, it is truly a sacred reality that we can experience today. In Christ, we have been lifted to the heavenly places, even as we live out our faith in a world that is passing away.

In these chaotic and uncertain times, we seek stability and rest. Though the world may be crumbling around us, caught up in selfishness and all kinds of evil, in Jesus, we experience the eternal sign of God's covenant with all creation. Through his life, death, and resurrection we see his perfect love poured out on our behalf. He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life, the One who draws us with great love toward our heavenly home.

One day believers will share in the resurrection of our mortal bodies. For now, we share in the resurrection life of Christ through the sacraments and our fellowship with the Holy Spirit. Let us wait with joyful hearts for the day when the former things will pass away and we will live in eternity with Christ!

***Prayer:*** *Father, I rejoice in the resurrection, the future reality for all who hope in your Son. May I live out this incarnational hope in the here and now, knowing that your kingdom is among us, manifesting itself in our actions of love for you…Amen!*

*Hope of heaven, highest mountain,*

*Nations flowing to the throne.*

*Former things are gone forever,*

*Grace and mercy God has shown.*

***Wednesday, First Week of Advent – Rescued by the Royal Son***

***Incarnation –*** *And the angel said to her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God.” (Luke 1:38)*

***Exaltation –*** *May he have dominion from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth! May his foes bow down before him, and his enemies lick the dust! May the kings of Tarshish and of the isles render him tribute, may the kings of Sheba and Seba bring gifts! (Psalm 72:8-10)*

Advent is a time to remember that we are travelers on a desert road, walking our way in a weary world. It is a time to remember also that the Second Person of the Trinity came to walk that lonely path with us. Just as the Holy Spirit overshadowed the Blessed Virgin, causing her to conceive the Son of God, so too, does that same Spirit enter into our lives so that Christ may be birthed in us.

Jesus comes into our world to bring justice, righteousness, prosperity, and peace, defeat to his enemies and joy to his redeemed. He is our rescuer. This mighty King, the royal son who comes to wipe out his enemies and usher in a period of profound peace, is also the gentle Savior who comes like a soft rain upon a dry and weary land. He defends the poor and the needy, the outcasts and the unloved.

Jesus spreads his love upon the earth and hope blooms. His ears hear the cry of the one who has nowhere else to turn. He receives royal tribute from those who bow down before Him. Compassion and tender concern are the hallmarks of his ministry; hope his promise for all who will believe. Though he is mighty, he comes in gentleness, bringing grace so subtle and so quiet as to go almost unnoticed. And yet, it is a mighty power, capable of changing lives and restoring the earth and its inhabitants.

We see in the poor and helpless baby of Bethlehem, the mighty king who has come to save those held in the grip of oppression and sin. Let us imitate his meekness and go forth in boldness to love a world so in need of the rescue of the Royal Son!

***Prayer:*** *My God and King, I marvel at both the might and the meekness of your beloved Son who came among us as a man and suffered that we might be saved. May I seek to show that same powerful and tender concern to another today…Amen!*

*Holy Spirit Overshadows.*

*Virgin bears the Royal Son.*

*Peace and Justice Christ bestowing,*

*He the holy Righteous One.*

***Thursday, First Week of Advent – Hoping in the Promises of God***

***Incarnation –*** *On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of fat things, a feast of choice wines—of fat things full of marrow, of choice wines well refined. And he will destroy on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations. He will swallow up death for ever, and the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the LORD has spoken. (Isaiah 25:6-8)*

***Exaltation –*** *In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard for his godly fear. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and being made perfect he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him, being designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchiz'edek. (Hebrews 5:7-10)*

Life is often difficult. Though struggles are inevitable, we still find them hard to accept. We want our way to be easy and safe. And when it is not, we rage against God and cry out, "Why me? Why Now?" But there is a danger in such thinking.

It is not wrong to want our lives to be at peace, but it is wrong to seek the kind of safe, secure, and trouble-free life that avoids pain at all cost. We cannot huddle with our possessions in our self-made fortresses and place all our hope in the here and now. When we tie ourselves to what is fleeting, we miss the hope that is ours in the Savior and turn away from the rugged road that leads to salvation. Jesus did not choose an easy life. Rather, he embraced suffering, not because he enjoyed it, but because he knew that he was being "trained" by it.

Christ did not shy away from the cross; and because of his sacrifice, we will one day enjoy the rich feast of our salvation on the Mountain of the Lord. Jesus had his eyes fixed on the purposes of his Father and he made the journey from the manger to the cross for us all. During Advent, we are called to reflect on this great truth and walk the road of expectation and hope, not trusting in our self-worth, our possessions, or our circumstances, but trusting in the promises of the One who made the journey to Golgotha in obedience and love – for us!

***Prayer:*** *Father, in the midst of my everyday circumstances, I offer up my joys and my sufferings as a fragrant gift to you. May the hope of Christmas guide my life, and through me, bring hope to others…Amen!*

*Suff’ring Servant, Our Messiah,*

*From the manger to the tree.*

*Source of reconciliation,*

*Wedding Feast and Victory!*

***Friday, First Week of Advent – Bringing the Good News!***

***Incarnation*** *– The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good tidings to the afflicted; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound… (Isaiah 61:1)*

***Exaltation –*** *But how are men to call upon him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without a preacher? And how can men preach unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach good news!” (Romans 10:14-15)*

Advent is not just a time of quiet contemplation and prayerful reflection. It is meant to be a time of action as well. The insight and spiritual growth we gain from every moment with God should spill out into action on behalf of the Gospel. This is a wondrous time! The Son of God entered our world in the form of a helpless baby, putting on a dwelling of flesh so that he could bring us the Good News of salvation. His whole life was an act of supreme love for his people.

The true joy of Christmas lies not in the warm feelings we share with family and friends or the sense of generosity we feel in our giving. Those are the result of the Good News that has come alive in our hearts through the incarnation of Christ. It is this greatest of gifts that should compel us to share this Good News with everyone we meet.

Bringing the grace of God's love to others involves words and actions. What better testimony of love can we speak than to tell the Christmas story of God breaking into time? It is the precious tale of our Savior coming, not as a mighty king in a palace, but as a helpless baby in a manger. That baby would grow up to walk the dusty roads of Palestine, heal the sick, raise the dead, and bring salvation to the world! It is truly astounding to think that God would put on our humanity and breathe our air, touch our broken bodies, feed our hunger for bread and beauty, and show us the way to heaven through the cruel cross. We can do no less than to follow his example.

Let us remember during Advent that there are lost and lonely souls out there, waiting for someone to come to them. They are longing to hear the Good News, looking for those who will walk the road with them to the place where God will call them out of darkness into his marvelous light. Be that person today!

***Prayer:*** *Almighty Father, I am overwhelmed at love so pure, that it brought your Son to earth to take on human flesh, live among his people, and ultimately die for our salvation. Thank you for this perfect gift. May I share this Good News with another today…Amen!*

*Spirit of the Lord descending,*

*Sets the broken captives free,*

*Good News preached to mankind grieving,*

*Calling forth the Jubilee!*

***Saturday, First Week of Advent – Unto Us a Son is Given***

***Incarnation –*** *For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government will be upon his shoulder, and his name will be called “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, upon the throne of David, and over his kingdom, to establish it, and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and for evermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this. (Isaiah 9:6-7)*

***Exaltation –*** *Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I send you.” And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” (John 20:21-23)*

As we come to the close of the first week of Advent, let us rejoice in the light that burst forth into the darkness of this broken world. Let us meditate on the baby who is called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace. Jesus, in coming to the earth, brings us these great gifts and sends us forth as the Church, the Body of Christ:

***He is Wonderful Counselor.*** Jesus brings us his wisdom. He is the Word made flesh, the power that created the universe, speaking truth, love, and healing into our lives.

***He is Mighty God.*** No matter what we are going through, we know we belong to the One who knows us and causes all things to work for our good and his glory.

***He is Everlasting Father.*** Jesus reveals the eternal mystery of salvation as he teaches us, trains us in the faith, disciplines us, and helps us to grow. He will never leave us nor forsake us.

***He is Prince of Peace.*** Jesus is the One who will destroy all selfishness, conflict, and evil. Though the world is in chaos, he is our ultimate peace and our perfect rest.

Jesus, God's Son, has come into the world. As we celebrate his birth, let us not forget that while he came in humility, poverty, and meekness, he never ceased to be the Lord of the universe, the perfect lover of our souls, and the God who will bring about a the Great Day of peace and joy!

***Prayer:*** *Great God of heaven, may I meditate on these titles for the Son who was given for our salvation. May I rest in that perfect peace and carry that same peace to a broken and weary world…Amen!*

*Mighty God, Forever Father,*

*Wonder Counselor, Prince of Peace.*

*Sent to earth for our Salvation,*

*Sin and Suffering shall cease.*

***The Second Sunday of Advent***

***Theme for the Week: Repent! A Voice Cries Out for Restoration and Peace!***

***Incarnation –*** *And he closed the book, and gave it back to the attendant, and sat down; and the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. And he began to say to them, “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” (Luke 4:20-21)*

***Exaltation –*** *In those days came John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judea, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said, “The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.” (Matthew 3:1-3)*

Advent is an exciting time – a time of expectation and a time of hope. As we light the second candle of the Advent wreath, we join our hearts to humanity’s longing for peace throughout the ages. We reflect on the power of the incarnation and the beauty and utter perfection of God’s plan in sending his Son to be our flesh-and-blood Savior. Like children waiting breathlessly for Christmas, we take hold of our restless souls and fix our eyes on the peace that is ours in Christ. But Advent also calls us to look deeply into our hearts and turn from those things which rob us of the joy of our salvation in Christ.

John the Baptist lived in the wilderness, calling the people to turn from sin and prepare for the coming of the Messiah. In ancient times, when a king visited a city, the people would go out to the roads, remove the rocks, and fill in the holes to make the way smooth and straight for the grand entry of the king. We are like those roads. We are called to straighten out the paths of our lives so that our King, Jesus Christ, may enter our hearts and make a way for us in the Kingdom of Heaven. We remove the obstacles of sin – pride, envy, selfishness, lust, anger, and fear – and fill in the holes in our hearts with truth from God’s word, humble prayer, and mountain-moving faith.

John the Baptist came in the spirit and power of Elijah the prophet. His calling was to prepare for the coming of the One whose sandal he was unworthy to untie. He spoke with passion about the judgment to come and the need to turn from the way of sin to the way of repentance. It is that spirit that will carry us all the way to Christmas. Let us be open to God’s promptings of love and his radical call to transformation so that Christmas may be an experience of rebirth and rest for us.

***Prayer:*** *Father, thank you for all the blessings that have come into my life through the incarnation of your Son. Teach me to bring my sins and struggles to Christ so that I may live more fully for you each and every day, in your peace…Amen!*

*In the wilderness preparing,*

*Way made straight and hill brought low,*

*Broken reed his life repairing,*

*Seed now planted, soon to grow.*

***Monday, Second Week of Advent – Do Not Be Caught Unaware***

***Incarnation –*** *“Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel” (which means, God with us). (Matthew 1:23)*

***Exaltation –*** *“But take heed to yourselves lest your hearts be weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and cares of this life, and that day come upon you suddenly like a snare…” (Luke 21:34)*

Advent is a time of waiting but not a time of idleness. The Scriptures celebrate the coming of God among us in the baby Jesus; and yet, they also call us to prepare for the day when that same Jesus will come again to judge the living and the dead. We must not allow the temptations and laziness of sinful living or the fears and anxieties of the world around us to get in the way of our vision of the One who came to set us free. When we take our eyes off Jesus and the true meaning of Christmas, we run the risk of letting life hold us in bondage, locking us away from true happiness, and putting out the Holy Spirit’s fire.

The joy of Christmas, the pleasures of life, and the anticipation of the coming kingdom can fill our hearts with hope; but if we become too complacent in our safe little worlds, we may not recognize when our focus turns to self and away from our calling to love as he has loved us.

We may not consider the pleasures of life to be a snare to our souls. After all, what is the harm in doing what makes us feel good and happy? However, we must remember that what feels good may not be what is good for us. Enjoying too much Christmas cheer can lead to gluttony or drunkenness. Giving and receiving gifts may cause us to forget that the greatest gift of all is Jesus. Family visits and holiday parties may keep us from more spiritual activities or lead to words and actions that are unwholesome and sinful. In the end, it is our attitudes and our focus that will determine where we our hearts will be.

Advent is a sobering reminder that our lives should be ever moving in God’s direction. As we meditate on the wonder of the incarnation, its power should show itself in everything we do. As we keep our eyes fixed on what is truly important, we bring a deeper meaning to our lives and to the lives of others around us. We avoid the snares of commercialism, cynicism, and self-centeredness as we become channels of the Savior’s great love to the world!

***Prayer:*** *Father, grant me a deep and holy awareness of your calling so that I may truly know what it means to live a meaningful life focused on a heavenly kingdom manifested in charity toward others for the sake of the Lord Jesus…Amen!*

*Lo the Virgin, hour nearing,*

*Calls his name Emmanuel,*

*King of kings in flesh appearing,*

*Saves us from the pow’r of hell.*

***Tuesday, Second Week of Advent – The Redeemer and Judge***

***Incarnation –*** *“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people, and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David…” (Luke 1:68-69)*

***Exaltation –*** *And his delight shall be in the fear of the LORD. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; and he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall slay the wicked. (Isaiah 11:3-4)*

It is a profound and sobering thought to consider that the One who came to redeem the lost is also the One who will judge the wicked. In the quiet of the incarnation lies a power that overwhelms the world. The little baby of Bethlehem is the all-knowing, perfect, and righteous judge of humanity. He considers the struggle of the poor and oppressed and makes compassionate decisions about them while striking down the wicked in the end. God will judge by what is right as he redeems his chosen ones with perfect love.

Such marvelous truth should motivate our love for others and guide our treatment of the poor. Our righteousness must exceed mere religiosity and reveal itself in true compassion that breaks our hearts with love for the lost. Those who have come to see the truth of the incarnation must live courageous lives in service to the cause of charity in this world.

The incarnation and entire life of Jesus appear counter to the culture in which we live. We want to be rich; he was born in poverty. We strive to be strong; he came in weakness and humility. We seek to satisfy our own needs; he came to surrender his life for the world. God saw and judged his Son as worthy to receive the glory of heaven, and he looks upon our lives and judges us through Christ’s mercy. That reality should overwhelm our spirits and spill out in words of truth and acts of love to a broken world.

***Prayer:*** *Oh Great God, teach me of the weakness that is strength, the surrender that is victory, and the death that is life so that my every word and deed may mirror the righteousness of Christ every day of my life…Amen!*

*Our Redeemer raised to render,*

*Hope for every suff’ring child.*

*Righteous wrath for wicked sinners,*

*Mercy for the meek and mild.*

***Wednesday, Second Week of Advent – Who Shall Enter?***

***Incarnation*** *– For God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16)*

***Exaltation –*** *“Not every one who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.” (Matthew 7:21)*

Jesus came into the world to bring eternal life to all who would believe. He walked the sinless path of salvation and gave his life for fallen humanity so that all who would call on his name would be born from above. He lived in perfect submission to the Father’s will, obedient even to death on a cross *(Philippians 2:8)*. He told his disciples, *“I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life.” (John 14:6)*. He followed the narrow road from the manger to the cross so that we could be set free.

Salvation is our joyful journey along that same narrow road where we walk the path of righteousness with our Lord. What does that truly mean? Advent is a time when we are reminded that Jesus entered into this world as a helpless baby so he could grow to be a man, walk the rugged roads among his people, touch their lives, and speak the word of truth to them. Then, when the hour had come, Jesus laid down his life in perfect obedience to the Father’s will, opening the gates of heaven and leading the way for all of us to follow.

All our works cannot purchase our way into heaven. And yet, our Christian walk is a journey of faith living itself out in love. All our actions on behalf of the Gospel are part of God’s perfect plan for our lives. In Christ, our good works are grace-inspired and grace-enabled manifestations of love, allowing us to produce the fruit of our faith. The incarnation shows us the salvation that is ours and the calling we have been given to reach the world for Christ. It is a life-long love relationship with the One who left his throne in heaven to make his dwelling among men.

***Prayer:*** *Father God, you have blessed me with your Son who walks this journey of faith with me. May I live out my salvation in faith, hope, and love, so that all I say and do will be for the sake of Christ, my Savior and King…Amen!*

*Men rejoice for your salvation,*

*As our God breaks into time,*

*Fall before the child in worship,*

*Pure transcendent truth sublime*

***Thursday, Second Week of Advent – Vindication and Joyful Leaping***

***Incarnation –*** *The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom…Say to those who are of a fearful heart, “Be strong, fear not! Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God. He will come and save you.” Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert…**(Isaiah 35:1, 4-6)*

***Exaltation –*** *Then he showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb...There shall no more be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it, and his servants shall worship him…**(Revelation 22:1, 3)*

When we are suffering, cast down and longing for hope, we look for vindication and cause for rejoicing. The prophets understood this and shared the powerful message of restoration that would come with God's appearing. The people of God heard these words and looked for a Savior to come to their rescue; but many missed the deeper meaning in the message. They looked for one who would destroy their enemies and grant them power, position, and abundant provision. Christ had a different answer. If we look more deeply into the words of the prophets, we witness something more personal.

A flower blooming in the desert symbolized that the people of God would be transformed from arid hopelessness to blossoming faithfulness. They would experience the glory of the Lord, the majesty of his presence, and the splendor of his abundant joy. Their feeble fear would give way to ecstatic leaping in celebration. Their eyes would be open to the truth, their ears would be ready to hear the Word of hope to be spoken, and their tongues would overflow with praise. The Water of Life would spill into the desert of their souls and cause new life to flow from them into the lives of others.

This is what Advent is all about. As we wait for the coming of the Messiah and long for the restoration he will bring, we experience a transformation in the wilderness of our empty souls that is like springtime following a long and empty winter. Like John the Baptist who leapt in the womb at the greeting of the mother of his Messiah, may our hearts leap for joy at the message of restoration, hope, and peace as it fills us with to overflowing at Christmas!

***Prayer:*** *Father, may the words of the prophets speak eternal truths to my heart, so that I may grasp more deeply your Son’s coming into the world at Christmas. May your love flow through me into the lives of others who are seeking your truth…Amen!*

*Wand’ring children, hopeful longing,*

*Vindication through the Son.*

*Blind are seeing, lame are leaping,*

*Greeting now the Holy One.*

***Friday, Second Week of Advent – The Vine and Restoration***

***Incarnation –*** *Turn again, O God of hosts! Look down from heaven, and see; have regard for this vine, the stock which your right hand planted. They have burned it with fire, they have cut it down; may they perish at the rebuke of your countenance! But let your hand be upon the man of your right hand, the son of man whom you have made strong for yourself! Then we will never turn back from you; give us life, and we will call on your name! Restore us, O LORD God of hosts! let your face shine, that we may be saved! (Psalm 80:14-19)*

***Exaltation –*** *I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. (John 15:5)*

The symbol of the vine is a powerful one. Israel was planted in the Promised Land, cultivated and cared for, and raised up to produce fruit. And yet the disobedience and arrogance of the people led to their destruction and captivity. In their humbled state, they called out to God to restore them. That restoration would come at a heavy price, for the heavy hand of God came to rest upon the One at his right hand, the Messiah who came to earth to die on the cross, that same One who was raised up on the third day for our salvation. Advent is a time to remember the love that entered into the world to restore us from sin.

Jesus referred to himself as the vine and called us to be branches who draw our strength from him. Cut off from the vine, we produce no fruit. We are good for nothing but to be collected on the Day of Judgment and burned in the eternal fire. As we meditate on our restoration in Jesus, let us remember that without him we can do nothing, and with him we have all we need to find joy and strength in this world.

As believers, we are given the awesome privilege of looking upon the face of Love itself. In Jesus, we see the Father. All that the Father is, we can witness in the Son. As we continue in the vine, we draw from the power and purpose of heaven. Let this time of Advent help us to reconnect to the One who is our strength, our hope, and our joy. Let this period of preparation renew us and restore our love for the Savior who came to earth to live among us, to teach us his Word, and to die on the cross for our sins.

***Prayer:*** *Almighty Father, may I truly grasp the profound truth about the vine and the branches so that the incarnational power of Christ may produce fruit in me and lead me to love others in his holy name…Amen!*

*Holy wrath on him is resting,*

*God’s own Son at his right hand.*

*He the vine and we the branches,*

*Fruitful children, Promised Land.*

***Saturday, Second Week of Advent – Comfort and Restoration***

***Incarnation –*** *Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the LORD’s hand double for all her sins. (Isaiah 40:1-2)*

***Exaltation –*** *And behold, they brought to him a paralytic, lying on his bed; and when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, “Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven.” (Matthew 9:2)*

Forgiveness is a beautiful balm to the one made weary by sin, transformed by grace in the fires of suffering, and standing at the edge of rebirth. For those who have been touched by Christ’s mercy there is no bitterness over the trial, only joy in passing from death to life. In the coming of Jesus, the days of trial are over and we hear the tender voice of reconciliation. The Messiah has entered the world and salvation is at hand!

The rest of the reading from Isaiah goes on to talk about the voice calling, *“In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God." (Isaiah 40:3)* The way to heaven shall be smoothed over, the burden made easy and light. The glory is revealed and our fragile lives will be forever transformed. We are like the flowers that fade and the grass that is here today and tomorrow burned in the fire. And yet, in Jesus, we are given eternal life. Our meaningless, dead, sin-filled existence is transformed by the crèche and the cross and we are given new birth in Christ. As we await the coming of Jesus at Christmas, we are comforted by the hope of restoration that he brings.

No matter where we are in our walk today, through the incarnation of our Lord, God offers us comfort, restoration, and new life. Our time of turning back brings us to the place where we may receive the blessings that Christmas brings. Let us rejoice in that hope as we continue to reflect on the story of the birth of Jesus.

***Prayer:*** *Merciful Father, how great is your love, given to us by Christ in his perfect, complete, and total surrender through his incarnation and his suffering on the cross. May this truth prepare my heart so that I may make straight the way of the Lord for others who long to know the way home…Amen!*

*Comfort for the lost and lowly,*

*Warfare ended, sin removed.*

*Child of grace, God’s incarnation,*

*Healing balm, our way approved.*

***The Third Sunday of Advent***

***Theme for the Week: Signs of God’s Love***

***Incarnation –*** *“Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Imman'u-el.”**(Isaiah 7:14)*

***Exaltation –*** *But we see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for every one. For it was fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through suffering.**(Hebrews 2:9-10)*

There is a beautiful song by Peter Mayer called, "Love is Born Anew" (from the album, “Stars and Promises Alive”) which calls us to sing a song of praise as heaven and earth rejoice at the coming of love into the world through Jesus Christ on Christmas morn. It speaks of overflowing rivers, of blossoms blooming in the desert, of God's Living Water lifting us up in a flood of joy so that we may touch this gift of forever. Though the journey may be long, weary, and cold, we see that believers in Christ live out a prophetic vision that brings healing. The song is a beautiful poetic reminder of the eternal bond we share with God through Christ who holds us and guides us with his light to the dawn of Christmas – where love is born anew!

As we light the third candle of the Advent wreath the cause for our rejoicing is clear: God the Son came to earth and pitched his tent of flesh among us. He did not simply appear as a man, he was conceived in the womb of a virgin and born in the normal course of human events. He needed to be fed, changed, and kept warm. Through him, God became present to us in a way we could experience with our senses. He was Immanuel – "God with us." To share in the incarnation is a joy beyond anything we could have ever hoped for or imagined!

Perhaps we have grown so comfortable with the simple and beautiful Christmas story that we sometimes forget just how profound and wondrous and radically amazing it truly is. The God of the universe, the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, came to dwell with humanity. We sit in church Sunday after Sunday and sing the songs, hear the homilies, and celebrate at the Lord's Table. But what would we do if one day the Savior walked down the aisle and began to speak to us? Would we faint? Would we turn away in disbelief? Or would we fall to our knees in wonder and awe?

What is amazing is that our Savior is indeed with us every Sunday in the Word, the Eucharist, and at every moment in time. He made salvation possible through his suffering, tasting death and rising in glory so that we could discover love born anew. And yet, we may fail to respond to this awesome reality with true worship, true repentance, and true love. Let this week be a week of realization of what Christmas is truly all about!

***Prayer:*** *Father, pour out your grace upon my soul as I meditate on the greatness of your perfect love in sending your Son to be the substitute for our sins. May I share your song of hope and love made new with others today...Amen!*

*Spirit’s coming overshadows,*

*Virgin’s Son will suffer well.*

*Grace and glory for his people,*

*From the great Emmanuel.*

***Monday, Third Week of Advent – The Handmaid of the Lord***

***Incarnation –*** *And Mary said, “Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.” (Luke 1:38a)*

***Exaltation –*** *And a great sign appeared in heaven, a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars; she was with child and she cried out in her pangs of birth, in anguish for delivery. (Revelation 12:1-2)*

One of the most wonderful truths of Christmas is that Mary said, "Yes!" to the angel’s message and trusted in God to accomplish his purposes through her. She was overshadowed by the Holy Spirit and conceived the Son who came to free us from sin.

There are many who reduce Mary's role in salvation to that of a holy incubator, a vessel for the Christ child and not much more. Mary, however, had a far greater role to play. She cared for Jesus as his mother, pondering his mission in her heart. She was his first and best disciple, the Queen Mother of the royal Son, the one who was “full of grace.” The angel’s words were more than a greeting; they truly signified Mary’s place in the great mystery of the incarnation. In her loving response to God's call, she honored her Son’s kingship and became an example for all humanity, a sign of what it means to experience salvation.

Luke, in his Gospel, compares Mary to the Ark of the Covenant (see Luke 1:29-56) because she carried the Son of God within the vessel of her body, going to the hill country in Judea like the Ark in ancient times. There, John the Baptist leapt in his mother’s womb in the presence of the Lord as David danced before the presence of God in the Ark. Like the Blessed Virgin, Christians become vessels where God chooses to dwell. As Christ came to the earth in the womb of Mary, he also comes into each heart that believes. Our souls are mangers where the Christ child may dwell, and throne rooms where we may surrender our lives to his holy will.

Through the incarnation the Church was born and continues to groan inwardly as she awaits her transformation at the coming of Christ on the Last Day. Mary is the new Eve, reversing the first Eve’s disobedience through her humble submission to the Father’s call. Her offspring has crushed the head of the serpent and brought us redemption. Because she said, "Yes!" to God’s call to bear the King of kings, we too can open our hearts to allow Jesus to enter into our lives.

***Prayer:*** *Father, thank you for the Virgin and the grace that enabled her to say “Let it be!” in answer to your holy call. May her unique role as mother of Jesus lead me to share with the world the beautiful reality that Jesus was born of a woman, born under the law, to deliver us from all our sorrow and our sin…Amen!*

*Blessed virgin now surrenders,*

*“Let it be!” her answer true.*

*Bearing now the Lord of heaven,*

*Mother and disciple too.*

***Tuesday, Third Week of Advent – The Silence of Joseph***

***Incarnation –*** *When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took his wife… (Matthew 1:24)*

***Exaltation –*** *He who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and he who loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and he who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for my sake will find it.**(Matthew 10:37-39)*

If we are looking for signs of God's love for us at Christmas, perhaps one of the most powerful and yet most overlooked is the silence of Joseph. Though he is spoken of in the Gospels, the Bible never records a word he said. We read of the genealogy of Joseph that links Jesus through the ages to the royal line of David. We learn that Joseph was a just man, unwilling to expose Mary to the authorities when he discovered that she was with child. When he received the message in a dream about the true origin of Jesus, he spoke not a word, but awoke, took Mary as his wife, and became the earthly father of Jesus.

Joseph, the silent saint, stands as a model for all who believe. He was a strong man of faith who was willing to accept his place in the story of salvation, to assume his role as husband and earthly father, and to place the will of God before all else. He considered what was right for the Kingdom of God and lived out his calling wholeheartedly. He was a hard-working man who passed on his wisdom and skills to his son, for both Joseph and Jesus were known as carpenters. He lived a simple life in an obscure town, yet heard the voice of God and made the difficult journeys to both Bethlehem and Egypt. And finally, he was a man who knew that he needed to let go of the child as he saw him in the temple going about his Father's business.

Joseph’s life stands as a powerful lesson for us all. His attitude of faith and solemn surrender to God's will is a sign of what it means to follow Jesus and what the coming of Christ at Christmas is all about. His silence speaks across the ages to all who are called to surrender their lives to the Savior, the One who came to call humanity to put the Father and the Kingdom of Heaven first. Joseph teaches us that Christmas ultimately issues a call to take up our cross and follow in the footsteps of the Lord.

***Prayer:*** *Father, may my heart reflect the faith I see in the silence of Joseph so that I may listen to the call of Christ to take up my cross and live as a true disciple…Amen!*

*Gentle Joseph, strong and silent,*

*Takes the Christ child as his own.*

*Worthy husband, faithful father,*

*Humble full submission shown.*

***Wednesday, Third Week of Advent – O Little Town of Bethlehem...***

***Incarnation –*** *And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be enrolled with Mary his betrothed, who was with child. (Luke 2:4-5)*

***Exaltation –*** *But you, O Bethlehem Eph'rathah, who are little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days.**(Micah 5:2)*

Bethlehem – from that tiny insignificant town came the Messiah, the One who ruled over Israel and all the world. We sing sweet and somber words about this little village where Jesus was born. And yet, there is so much more to contemplate than its stillness, where the silent stars go by. Bethlehem was the "City of David" where that great King of Israel was born. Now, on that quiet night, in that humble stable, the true King of kings was born. Bethlehem was also the "House of Bread" – the place where the Bread of Life came to give his flesh for the world.

As we read the account of the birth of Christ we may pass over too quickly that God, from all eternity had determined exactly where his Son would be born, how it would take place, and what it would all mean for those who would believe. The Father orchestrated the pages of history to turn in such a way that Joseph and Mary would be called to come to Bethlehem to register for the Roman Census. This event in history was merely an instrument in the hand of the Almighty to bring about his purposes. It reminds us that God is forever in charge, all-powerful and perfect in his timing as he unfolds his wonderful plan of salvation for all humanity.

Like this obscure town, our insignificant lives have eternal value and great purpose in the ultimate plan of God. It is only for us to follow and obey as we live out our call as believers to carry the glorious message of Christmas to all the world!

***Prayer:*** *Father, your plan and your timing in sending your Son to earth was perfect. May the story of that tiny town where the infant Jesus was born, cause me to marvel at the mysterious ways of the One who loved us enough to send his only begotten Son to save us from our sins…Amen!*

*Bethlehem of Judah’s numbers*

*Not among the least you be,*

*In you now your ruler slumbers,*

*Man’s Great Shepherd God is He.*

***Thursday, Third Week of Advent – Tribute for the King***

***Incarnation –*** *Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, Wise Men from the East came to Jerusalem, saying, “Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the East, and have come to worship him.” (Matthew 2:1-2)*

***Exaltation –*** *May the kings of Tarshish and of the isles render him tribute, may the kings of Sheba and Seba bring gifts! (Psalm 72:10)*

There are those who reject the message of the incarnation, who celebrate the Christmas holiday without the belief that Jesus is God's promised Messiah. They fail to see the absolute absurdity of such a notion; for to keep Christmas is to witness to the birth of the One who saves us from our sins. We cannot have a "secular Christmas," for Christmas means more than warm feelings and good times with family. It is a celebration of the Son of God taking on flesh and manifesting himself to the world.

The incarnation of Christ led wise human hearts to seek out the One who came into the world as King, Priest, and Prophet. He is the perfect gift, who surrenders himself for the sins of humanity. As the rest of Psalm 72 tells us, Jesus is the Righteous One who rules from sea to sea and to the ends of the earth. He is the Just Deliverer who brings prosperity and gentle healing to his people. His power will call forth the rulers of the world who will come to offer homage and bring tribute. Such is the power of Christmas, the power of God's coming into the world.

One day, every knee will bow to the Messiah, when he comes again in glory to judge the living and the dead. One day every tongue will proclaim that Jesus is the Lord of all. What a joy and privilege it is for us who believe to follow the heavenly sign to the manger where we offer our hearts to the King. May our lives be a gift that truly honors our Savior as we celebrate the Light that has come down to earth at Christmas!

***Prayer:*** *God above, may I make an offering of my prayers, my works, my joys, and my sorrows, in praise to the One who deserves the tribute of my very life. May I lead others who are seeking salvation to your Son today…Amen!*

*Wisemen seeking, search the heavens,*

*Follow star to House of Bread,*

*Bowing low to new King rising,*

*At his feet their gifts they spread.*

***Friday, Third Week of Advent – A Servant’s Song of Praise***

***Incarnation –*** *And Mary said, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden. For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed; for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name.” (Luke 1:46-49)*

***Exaltation –*** *“For behold, days are coming, says the LORD, when I will restore the fortunes of my people, Israel and Judah, says the LORD, and I will bring them back to the land which I gave to their fathers, and they shall take possession of it.” (Jeremiah 30:3)*

The Magnificat was a personal prayer and a prophetic word that burst forth from the lips of Mary. She who had submitted completely to the call of God could not contain the profound truth and incredible joy that had filled her heart. Like the words of the prophet Jeremiah, her sweet song sang of coming home, of restoration, salvation, and eternal glory. It was a deep and profound message for all who would experience the Savior. Mary’s words echoed the words of the Old Testament saints; and yet, they were her own. Through her servant’s heart, these words have become our words as well!

Mary “glorified” the Lord. Her life and spirit reflected the grace she had been given and her words lifted that glory up to heaven. All that had happened or would happen had come from the power of the One she called, “Holy!” God had shown regard for the low estate of Mary and indeed for all who had waited for the coming of the Messiah. Now the ancient promises would be fulfilled. Mercy would be born, scattering the proud and filling the lowly with good things. God had remembered his covenant and would carry it out in a way that no one could have ever imagined!

These words teach us that we too need a Savior as we long to come home. They show us that God keeps his promises and works out his plan in the perfection of his great love. We become a link on the long chain of salvation history, connecting to the eternal through the coming of the baby of Bethlehem. We become God’s servants and carry the Christmas message to all the world as we live out the power and presence of the Savior in our lives. What a tremendous blessing that is!

***Prayer:*** *Father, teach me through Mary’s Magnificat how to place all things past, present, and future, in your hands. May the song of my heart reflect the wonders you have done in my life and lead me to praise your name to all the world…Amen!*

*Virgin Mother, lowly handmaid,*

*Sings a servant’s song of praise.*

*Man’s true home and restoration,*

*Holy Peace and End of Days!*

***Saturday, Third Week of Advent – A Shoot from the Stump of Jesse***

***Incarnation –*** *There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. And the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. (Isaiah 11:1)*

***Exaltation –*** *…and there was given to him the book of the prophet Isaiah. He opened the book and found the place where it was written, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.” And he closed the book, and gave it back to the attendant, and sat down; and the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. And he began to say to them, “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” (Luke 4:17-21)*

For the Jewish people, their nation and their faith had become like the dead stump of an olive tree. Their sin had brought suffering, defeat, and captivity. Far from their home, they had all but lost hope. But the Lord had not given up on them. That stump of Jesse – the father of David – represented the journey of God’s people from the beginning. It had strong roots that dug deep into the foundation of God’s promises and his love. There was still life there. From that stump, a shoot would come forth. That shoot was Jesus.

Many years after the prophet, the Lord stood up in the synagogue in Nazareth to read the word of God from Isaiah, chapter 61. Here before the people was the shoot from the stump of Jesse, proclaiming the acceptable year of the Lord, the favorable time that was now upon them. The tiny baby of Bethlehem had grown up to be the man whose wisdom, power, and submission to the Father’s will would bring salvation through the cruel cross. What a wonderful cause for rejoicing for all who believe!

Wherever we are in our lives, whether in the darkness of despair or the dawning of hope, the message of Christmas is clear: In Jesus, we see God’s plan in its fullness. All that came before was in the Father’s perfect, sovereign hand. From eternity, God knew he would raise up the Messiah from the line of David. The promise God made to the man after his own heart would be forever. Though David died, there would come a new eternal King, One who would bring the Good News and free us from our captivity. That One was Jesus Christ!

This Christmas, let the image of the tender shoot remind you that God keeps his promises, raising salvation from the deep roots of his everlasting love.

***Prayer:*** *Father, as I think about the image of the Christmas tree – forever green, filled with light, holding the memories of our lives and the promise of a future hope in heaven with Jesus – may I be reminded of the other tree, the one upon which Jesus hung to free us from our sins and bring us into the Kingdom of God…Amen!*

*Days are coming, branch increasing,*

*King from David’s royal line.*

*Righteous Judgment, never ceasing,*

*Sacred ever-living sign.*

***Fourth Sunday of Advent***

***Theme for the Week: God’s Gift of Joy!***

***Incarnation –*** *Have this mind among yourselves, which was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. (Philippians 2:5-7)*

***Exaltation –*** *And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, 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. (Philippians 2:8-11)*

During this week, we want to focus on the joy that is ours through the incredible miracle of God’s love that spoke itself into the world in the person of Jesus Christ. As we light the final candle of the Advent wreath, we meditate on the stories of Christmas. Here in this short passage from Philippians we have both the incarnation and the exaltation of Christ, a perfect summary of the purpose and pleasure of the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, who loved us enough to put on human flesh. What a glorious time we celebrate at Christmas!

The stories of the manger and the shepherds, the angels and the star, the wise men and the cruel king may bring us warm feelings at Christmas. But if we truly examine just how profound Christ’s coming into the world was as we look at the events surrounding his birth, we will be left in awe and wonder. Like the passage from Philippians, these stories contain both the incarnation and the exaltation of the One who came as the God-man, leaving his throne to be born as a child, so that he could one day suffer for our salvation.

Though Jesus was equal to the Father, he chose to live as a servant, in total submission and obedience to the Father’s will. He walked the paths of this broken world, experienced cold, hunger, sorrow, and all the same struggles that humanity has ever faced; and yet he never once sinned. His death on the cross, the cruelest form of torture ever created, has won for us our salvation and exalted Christ to the highest place in heaven, where all creation bows to his holy name. This is what salvation is all about. And though it is truly an incomprehensible mystery, it touches us with the greatest sense of joy!

This week, we will read the stories of Christmas with new eyes as we consider how the truths within them have been fleshed out in this devotional. Take time to pray in preparation for the days leading up to Christmas, and celebrate the birth of your Savior with fear and trembling, wonder and joy, meditating on the miracle of the incarnation and the majesty of the exaltation of Jesus Christ.

***Prayer:*** *Merciful God, may I reflect on the earthier aspects of the incarnation as I read through the stories of the birth of your Son. Let the sights, sounds, and scents of Christmas remind me of the great sacrament of our salvation that is ours in Jesus Christ…Amen!*

*Sinless Savior boldly enters,*

*Into flesh our souls to save.*

*Full submission to the Father,*

*From the cradle to the grave.*

***The Days of Christmas –* Day One*: The Word Made Flesh – Read John 1:1-14***

***Key Verse of Incarnation and Exaltation: 1:14 –*** *And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only-begotten Son from the Father.*

Of all the Gospels, only John takes us back to Genesis with his incarnation story. In the beginning, the eternal Word of God, the One through whom all things were made, the life and light that spoke creation into existence, came to earth to dwell among men. The dark and sinful world could not comprehend this great light, and ultimately rejected him. Yet, there were those who came to believe; and in believing they received the right to be called the sons and daughters of God. But our holy adoption was unlike our natural birth. In Christ, we were born from above.

Some scholars have proposed that Jesus was born in during the Feast of Booths (which is celebrated in September/October). This was the commemoration of the time the Hebrews spent wandering in the wilderness. In their celebrations, the Jewish people lived in shelters as a reminder of their total dependence on God. The week-long celebration was full of light and water imagery. Jesus made a bold proclamation in the temple in Jerusalem during the Feast of Booths:

*On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and proclaimed, “If any one thirst, let him come to me and drink. He who believes in me, as the Scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water.’” (John 7:37-38)*

It would certainly make sense that the Son of God should enter into his “tent of flesh” during the time when the People of God were recalling their wandering on the earth. Whether this is true or whether the bleak winter day of December 25th is the day of his birth, the image of the Christ breaking into the wilderness of our wandering is clear. Jesus has come into the world to offer us the Living Water of his Spirit. He longs to make his dwelling in the hearts of those who will invite him to enter in love!

***Prayer:*** *Father, may each word of this holy passage permeate my soul and cause me to drop to my knees in awe and wonder as I meditate on the infinite, all-powerful, and eternal Son of God taking flesh and dwelling among us. May it remind me of the first act of creation and point the way to the day when all things will be made new in Christ…Amen!*

*Our Messiah, King and brother,*

*Sinless Savior, One so mild,*

*Holy God alone, no other,*

*Born to us as lowly child.*

***The Days of Christmas –* Day Two*: No Room in the Inn – Read Luke 2:1-7***

***Key Verse of Incarnation and Exaltation: 2:6-7 –*** *And while they were there, the time came for her to be delivered. And she gave birth to her first-born son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.*

In the divine drama of the birth of Jesus, Luke showed us how little control the principal players had as the Father unfolded his divine plan. God led the Roman emperor to issue a decree that a census should be taken of all the Roman world in order to draw Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem. They came to the city of David to fulfill the prophecy about Jesus’ royal lineage. Joseph and Mary sought shelter in a stable because there was no room in the inn.

Jesus was not born in a palace or even a major city. He was born to parents with no status, no wealth, and no influence. Mary gave birth to Jesus in what was probably a dark cave, where a manger became a cradle for the Son of God after he was born. Why would the Father do this? The answer is simple. The birth of Jesus was significant not because of where, when, or how he was born – at least from a human perspective. But it *was* significant from a heavenly perspective.

Jesus did not need royal position, earthly power, or abundant possessions to live out the mission for which he was sent. He came in poverty that we might be made rich in faith. He came in obscurity that we might know him fully in our longing hearts. He came without position, that we might give him the highest place in our lives. He and he alone was the One – the only One – who could save the world!

Will you make your heart a manger for the Messiah? Will you put Jesus on the throne of your life so that he may be your Lord and Savior, the ruler of all you are? This Christmas, let him come to rest in your heart so that God’s will may unfold in your life according to his great love.

***Prayer:*** *Great God, in poverty your Son entered this world as a helpless baby, so that we could experience the riches of the kingdom. May the beauty of the incarnation spill over into my life and lead me to empty my heart of all but you…Amen!*

*Hope for man, our sinless Savior,*

*Infant child at mother's breast,*

*Sleeping still in straw-filled manger,*

*Holy Lord and Sabbath's rest.*

***Days of Christmas - Day Three: Lowly Shepherds and Angel Voices – Read Luke 2:8-20***

***Key Verse of Incarnation and Exaltation: 2:13-14 –*** *And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom he is pleased!”*

One of the most amazing events of the birth of Christ is the appearing of the angelic host to the lowly shepherds in the fields, who were keeping watch over their flocks by night. It is one of the greatest testimonies to the authenticity of the birth of Jesus. Anyone making up such a story would never feature shepherds as principal witnesses to the birth.

In first century Palestine, shepherds were considered outcasts, unclean and unworthy to give testimony in the temple. And yet, it was to such as these that God sent his angels to proclaim the miracle of the birth of the Savior. In truth, the shepherds were the perfect first witnesses to the incarnation of the Son of God.

Jesus was descended from the line of King David. David began his life as a lowly shepherd. He spent his early days out in the wilderness tending sheep, protecting them from the bear and the lion. David wrote the 23rd Psalm, comparing God's love for his people to the care of the shepherd for his sheep. He was a man after God's own heart and learned to care for God's people with that same tender love.

So who better to be the first to greet this newborn Shepherd King than the shepherds of Israel? They had a special connection to the words from the Scriptures concerning the coming of the Good Shepherd. Most likely they knew the prophecies that the child would be born in Bethlehem, the City of David. No doubt they knew exactly where a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger could be found. And these outcasts understood that they were the ones the Son of God was sent to redeem.

We can imagine the shepherds’ fear at the arrival of the angel, luminous and magnificent, appearing like a man, yet otherworldly, awe-inspiring, and full of love. The message, "Fear not!" spoke peace into the hearts of these frightened men. The Good News that humanity had been longing to hear was now being revealed in the angel's words, bringing glad tidings of great joy to all the people. The promised Messiah had finally come! The message of the angel was confirmed as the heavenly chorus proclaimed, "Holy, Holy, Holy!" to all mankind.

When the angels departed, these shepherds left their flocks in the wilderness and hurried to the place where the child was sleeping next to his mother. They had no concern for their sheep, only joy and amazement and a deep desire to see the child for themselves. They praised God as they experienced the fulfillment of the angel's message in this holy moment before the Christ child. Its profundity caused the mother of the Lord to ponder these holy circumstances in her humble heart.

***Prayer:*** *Father, may I be like the shepherds, bowing in awe at the incarnation, ready to leave all to witness the miracle of Christmas in my life…Amen!*

*Shepherds in the wasteland watching,*

*First to hear the angel's call,*

*Hasten now to lowly stable,*

*To their knees in reverence fall.*

***Days of Christmas - Day Four: Magi and a Mad King – Read Matthew 2***

***Key Verse of Incarnation and Exaltation: 2:11 –*** *…and going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh.*

Another magnificent chapter of the Christmas story is the visit of the Magi to the baby Jesus. They observed a "star" in the east and knew it was a holy sign from heaven that announced the birth of a great king. Tradition tells us there were three Magi. In most artistic depictions, they are of different races, from areas outside of Palestine.

They were "wise men" – acquainted with ancient writings, most likely even the Jewish writings. Matthew's story hints at this through their encounter with the evil King Herod. We know that God communicated with them to turn them away from this madman, who later sought to kill the new Messiah. The Magi were the first Gentiles God called to witness the birth of the Son of God. Their encounter with King Jesus was a foretaste of the Gospel's spread to the whole world.

Just what this star was has been debated by scholars through the ages. Some believe it was an alignment of planetary bodies. Others believe it was a comet. Matthew, who presented Jesus as the new Moses, understood that the appearance of the great light mirrored the fiery presence of Yahweh in the wilderness, the light that led the nation of Israel to the Promised Land. A new light was coming to reveal the Savior to the entire world, the One who would lead all humanity to the Promised Land of heaven. This light pointed the way to the very place where the child and his family were staying. It led the Magi there so they could bear witness to God's coming to the earth on behalf of all mankind.

The gifts of the Magi had a deep and rich spiritual meaning. Gold was a symbol of royalty and the purity of this newborn King. Frankincense pointed to the priestly function of the Messiah who would one day offer himself as the perfect sacrifice for all the world. And Myrrh was symbolic of the agony and death that this great prophet would suffer after bringing his message to the people. These men understood that this was no ordinary king but a King who was also Priest and Prophet – the ruler, the presider over the sacrifice, and the sacrifice himself!

***Prayer:*** *God of heaven, I praise you for revealing your great love to us in the incarnation of your Son, Jesus. May the wisdom that spoke Christ into the world turn my life into a shining testimony of love to lead others into your presence…Amen!*

*Star shines brightly, Sacred Godhead,*

*Fills the sky with radiant light,*

*Perfect peace and Holy Power,*

*Bringing day to darkest night.*

***Days of Christmas – Final Thoughts – Come Let Us Adore Him – Read Isaiah 9:6-7***

***Key Verse of Incarnation and Exaltation: Isaiah 9:6a –*** *For to us a child is born, to us a son is given…*

This is a reading that was featured earlier in the devotional, but it bears repeating as we as we come to the close of this holy season. We have moved through the days of Advent, discovering just who the Messiah is and how the truth of his coming was revealed to us through the ages until the Father spoke his final Word into the world. That Word was Jesus. The Bible says that “to us” a child is born, “to us” a son is given. He is God’s gift – God’s perfect gift – of love – to us! God loved the world so much that he gave us his only begotten Son!

Jesus took the government upon his shoulders. He bore our burdens and carried them to the cross so that he would rule the world and bring peace to the disorder of sorrow and sin. He was known by four marvelous titles. Let us revisit them in a new way, having made our way through this Advent journey:

***Wonderful Counselor*** – He is the One who brings us the Good News, who helps us to recall and understand the message of salvation! All that happened from the dawn of creation to the incarnation and forward to the End of Days is in his hands. As we receive him into our hearts, the wisdom of God is made known to us. We grasp the awesome truth of the incarnation, which settles in our souls and brings us peace!

***Mighty God –*** Though Jesus was a man, he was also God, the Second Person of the Trinity, the Son of the Father. John tells us in the first chapter of his Gospel that Jesus was with God in the beginning, and through him all things came to be. Jesus had at his disposal the power of heaven to calm the seas, drive out the hosts of hell, heal the sick, and raise the dead. Though he was a man, his Godhead was not diminished – only put aside so that he might live a life of service for us!

***Everlasting Father –*** We are the children of his promise. We are under his care. In Jesus, we have been given all the universe as an inheritance. We have been adopted as sons and daughters of the King. His reign will be without end and we will live in joy with him forever. What a privilege, what an honor, what a joy!

***Prince of Peace –*** This is perhaps the title that means the most to us. In Jesus, we have forgiveness of sins, salvation from hell, and peace in the Kingdom of God. Our Prince has taken our place at the cross and given us what we could never have earned ourselves. We have now and forevermore, peace, rest, and everlasting joy in the presence of the King of kings!

***Prayer:*** *Father, may all that I have meditated upon in this season of Advent remain in my heart as I walk in the kingdom of your Son day by precious day, from now until he comes again…Amen!*

*Sing with joyful hearts surrendered,*

*Praise the babe on manger throne,*

*All creation in submission,*

*He is God and God alone!*