

Happy Advent !

This is Len from International Friends - and tomorrow (Dec. 1) is the beginning of Advent -- which is the 24 days before Christmas. One church/Christmas tradition is to read a short bible passage each of these days which helps us to understand and appreciate Christmas. The idea is that this makes every day of December part of the celebration -- and when we finally come to Christmas day, we are more able to understand and appreciate the celebration of Jesus' birth.

I have written a series of these small daily readings so that international students who are not from a Christian background could learn about Christmas and experience the feeling of this special Advent season. Each reading is a short passage from the Bible and then a few sentences of explanation.

If you would rather not get this added email, just let me know. Otherwise, I hope you enjoy these daily readings. They will start tomorrow.

Len

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International Friends

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Welcome to our Advent readings.

During these first six days, our theme is "Waiting".

The people of Israel experienced two serious disappointments in their long history before Jesus. These disappointments led them to hope that God would send his Savior to make things right.

The first disappointment concerned Israel's kings. Most of their kings were terrible. But, many of the prophets predicted that one day God would send a special king who would rule with justice and compassion.

The second disappointment came when the nation was conquered and most of its people were forced to be refugees in other countries. They lost hope for their future or their children's futures. But the prophets told them that God still had a good plan for their future. They must wait for that time when God would send the Savior.

December 1

Waiting for the New Covenant (or agreement)

Jeremiah 31: 31-34

The Lord says, "The time is coming when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah. It will not be like the old covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand and led them out of Egypt. Although I was like a husband to them, they did not keep that covenant. The new covenant that I will make with the people of Israel will be this: I will put my law within them and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people."

God's covenant (or agreement) was his promise to always take care of his children, Israel. And Israel's responsibility was to trust in God and obey him. This covenant was written on stone and given to Moses (1500 BC). But by the time Jeremiah (600 BC) wrote the Bible passage we read today, people were not taking God's covenant seriously. They were not obeying God -- and were suffering because of their disobedience.

But God still loved them and so he promised a new covenant -- not a different one, but a 'grown up' covenant, an improved one. The new covenant was to be written on people's hearts instead of on stone. Jeremiah said "the days are coming"... so the people of Israel knew this meant that they would have to wait for this new covenant which would bring new hope to their nation.

Prayer: God, please help me to honor you as I wait and listen to you this month.

December 2

Waiting for Justice

Isaiah 11: 1-4

"The royal line of David is like a tree that has been cut down; but just as new branches sprout from a stump, so a new king will arise from among David's descendants. The spirit of the Lord will give him wisdom and the knowledge and skill to rule his people. He will know the Lord's will and will honor him. He will not judge by appearance or hearsay; he will judge the poor fairly and defend the rights of the helpless. At his command the people will be punished, and evil persons will die"

In the days of Isaiah the prophet (700BC), almost no one was obeying God. People in government cheated and took things that belonged to others. Even people who were in charge of worship in the temple could not be trusted. People who bought and sold the food and animals raised by the poor were often dishonest and took advantage of them by giving them less money than the goods were worth.

Because of this unfairness, many people were angry and disappointed. They wanted fairness and justice. Isaiah was talking to these people. He promised that God had not forgotten them: God would send them a King who would make sure that justice would be practiced by all people. This promise of a new King was good news for the troubled people of Isaiah's day. They knew God would help them. But first, they had to wait. God's plan would take time. They were waiting for the justice that Jesus, the Savior would bring.

Prayer -- Lord, thank you that you care about the injustices in our lives now. Please comfort all those in the the world who suffer in this way. Thank you that you hate evil and will bring justice for everyone at the end of this life. Help me to be just and fair this month as I listen to your word and wait on you.

December 3

Waiting for the Hurt to Stop

Isaiah 40: 1-5

"Comfort my people," says our God. "Comfort them! Encourage the people of Jerusalem. Tell them they have suffered long enough and their sins are now forgiven. I have punished them in full for all their sins."

A voice cries out, "prepare in the wilderness a road for the Lord! Clear the way in the desert for our God! Fill every valley; level every mountain. The hills will become a plain, and the rough country will be made smooth. Then the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all people will see it."

587 years before Jesus was born, the powerful nation of Babylon defeated Israel and took many of the Israelites back with them to Babylon to work as slaves. They were forced to leave their homes, and farms and live in a foreign land. They were held against their will for over 70 years. God had let this happen to punish their nation for continually disobeying him. However, God used Isaiah the prophet to tell them that their punishment was now over. He assured them that God was aware of their hurting. He would help them and stop the pain. The people knew that God would keep this promise to take them back home -- and to send the Savior to heal them. They could now wait with a new hope.

Prayer -- Father, thank you that even when you punish me for my sin, you still care and want to bring me back home to you. Thank you that I live with hope because of your love. Please help me to honor you as I listen to you and wait this month.

December 4

Waiting for the Music

Isaiah 51: 1-5

The Lord says, "Listen to me, you that want to be saved, you that come to me for help. Think of the rock from which you came, the quarry from which you were cut. Think of your ancestor, Abraham, and of Sarah, from whom you are descended. When I called Abraham, he was childless, but I blessed him and gave him children; I made his descendants numerous. I will show compassion to Jerusalem, to all who live in her ruins. Though her land is a desert, I will make it a garden, like the garden I planted in Eden. Joy and gladness will be there, and songs of praise and thanks to me.

Listen to me, my people, listen to what I say: I give my teaching to the nations; my laws will bring them light. I will come quickly and save them; the time of my victory is near. I myself will rule over the nations. Distant lands wait for me to come; they wait with hope for me to save them.

The Jewish people loved to sing. They sang songs about God's love for them. They sang about how he had rescued them in the days of Moses and his other mighty acts throughout their history. But when the Babylonians conquered their nation and carried them away as slaves, the music stopped. The prophet Isaiah brought a message from God that one day their songs would start again. God himself would come as king and save them - and the whole world. In that day, the whole world would celebrate and sing their thanks to God. But until then, they would have to wait.

Prayer -- Lord, thank you for finally coming and giving us so many reasons to sing to you. Thank you for the wonderful things you have done even today. Help me to see your gifts and say thank you to you each day this month as I listen - and wait for Christmas day.

December 5

Waiting for the Shepherd

Isaiah 53:1-12

The people reply, "Who would have believed what we now report? Who could have seen the Lord's hand in this? It was the will of the Lord that his servant grow like a plant taking root in dry ground. He had no dignity or beauty to make us take notice of him. There was nothing attractive about him, nothing that would draw us to him. We despised him and rejected him; he endured suffering and pain. No one would even look at him -- we ignored him as if he were nothing.

But he endured the suffering that should have been ours, the pain that we should have borne. All the while we thought that his suffering was punishment sent by God. But it was because of our sins he was wounded, beaten because of the evil we did.

We are healed by the punishment he suffered, made whole by the blows he received. All of us were like sheep that were lost, each of us going his own way. But the Lord made the punishment fall on him, the punishment all of us deserved.

He was treated harshly, but endured it humbly; he never said a word. Like a lamb about to be slaughtered, like a sheep about to be sheared, he never said a word. He was arrested and sentenced and led off to die, and no one cared about his fate. He was put to death for the sins of our people. He was placed in a grave with those who are evil, he was buried with the rich, even though he had never committed a crime or ever told a lie.

The Lord says, "It was my will that he should suffer; his death was a sacrifice to bring forgiveness. And so he will see his descendants; he will live a long life, and through him my purpose will succeed. After a life of suffering, he will again have joy; he will know that he did not suffer in vain. My devoted servant, with whom I am pleased, will bear the **punishment** of many and for his sake I will forgive them. And so I will give him a place of honor, a place among the great and powerful. He willingly gave his life and shared the fate of evil men. He took the place of many sinners and prayed that they might be forgiven.

The people of Israel felt afraid and threatened while they were in Babylon. Isaiah said they were like sheep. He also described God's promised King as a shepherd who gives his life in order to save the sheep. The Savior would suffer and die so that his people could be saved. The people were waiting for more than just a teacher or political leader. They were waiting for forgiveness and a new

relationship with *God* that Jesus would bring.

Prayer -- Lord, thank you for sending Jesus to be our shepherd and even die for us. Thank you that you are still our shepherd who takes care of us day by day. Thank you for caring for me this month as I wait and listen.

December 6

Waiting to be Saved

Isaiah 52:7-10

How wonderful it is to see a messenger coming across the mountains, bringing good news, the news of peace! He announces victory and says to Zion, "Your God is king!" Those who guard the city are shouting, shouting together for joy. They can see with their own eyes the return of the Lord to Zion. Break into shouts of joy, you ruins of Jerusalem! The Lord will rescue his city and comfort his people. The Lord will use his holy power; he will save his people, and all the world will see it.

This time the prophet Isaiah described the coming of the Savior as when a messenger came with news that the war was over and that their king had won! They would soon see him returning home to the city to rescue them from the last enemies who were still fighting against the city. They must wait - but the final rescue was certain!

Prayer -- Father in heaven, thank you that nothing and no one can defeat you and so we can always count on you to deliver us. Thank you that you know how I need your help as I wait and listen this month.

I hoped you enjoyed the first six readings on the theme of Waiting.

The next six are on the theme of **Preparing** for the Lord. During all those years of waiting - God had been doing careful preparation before sending his son into the world - at just the right time.

During this week ask God to be preparing you to celebrate the birth of his son.

Also, if you have any questions from your readings, please ask me. I'd be happy to explain things.

Len

December 7

Preparing a Mother

Luke 1: 26-38

...God sent the angel Gabriel to a town in Galilee named Nazareth. He had a message for a young woman promised in marriage to a man named Joseph, who was a descendant of King David. Her name was Mary. The angel came to her and said "Peace be with you! The Lord is with you and has greatly blessed you!"

Mary was deeply troubled by the angel's message, and she wondered what his words meant. The angel said to her, "don't be afraid, Mary; God has been gracious to you. You will become pregnant and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High God. The Lord God will make him a king, as his ancestor David was, and he will be the king of the descendants of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end!"

Mary said to the angel, "I am a virgin. How, then can this be?"

The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and God's power will rest upon you. For this reason the holy child will be called the Son of God. Remember your relative Elizabeth. It is said that she cannot have children, but she herself is now six months pregnant, even though she is very old. For there is nothing that God cannot do." "I am the Lord's servant," said Mary; "may it happen to me as you have said." And the angel left her.

Even though Jesus was God's son, he was also human. He needed the same mothering that all children need. Mary was just as important to Jesus as your mother was to you. God prepared her to provide a home filled with love for His son

until he was ready to begin the work God had given him. We know nothing of Mary's earlier life, but it is clear that God had prepared her for this special task. God prepared Mary by molding her into a person willing to trust and obey Him even when God's command was very unexpected and very frightening. By sending his angel, God also assured her that He would be with her as she obeyed Him. She is an example to us of how to answer God, when He speaks to us.

Prayer -- Lord, help me to be like Mary - trusting and obeying you - as I wait and listen this month. And thank you that you are always with me as I obey you.

December 8

Preparing a Father

Matthew 1: 18-25

This is how the birth of Jesus Christ took place. His mother Mary was engaged to Joseph, but before they were married, she found out that she was going to have a baby by the Holy Spirit. Joseph was a man who always did what was right, but he did not want to disgrace Mary publicly; so he made plans to break the engagement privately. While he was thinking about this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, descendant of David, do not be afraid to take Mary to be your wife. For it is by the Holy Spirit that she has conceived. She will have a son, and you will name him Jesus -- because he will save his people from their sins."

Now all this happened in order to make come true what the Lord had said through the prophet, "A virgin will become pregnant and have a son, and he will be called Immanuel" (which means, "God is with us")

So when Joseph woke up, he married Mary, as the angel of the Lord had told him to. But he had no sexual relations with her before she gave birth to her son. And Joseph named him Jesus.

As with Mary, over the years, God had also molded Joseph into a special person to prepare him to be the man who would care for Jesus. We are told that he was a good man who followed God's laws. But we also see in the way he treats Mary, that he was a kind person who cared about others. Finally, God helped Joseph in a special way by sending an angel to speak to him. Through the angel's visit, God helped him in the very difficult time of thinking Mary had betrayed and embarrassed him. This was a time of confusion and sadness and probably anger. But even this was an experience of preparation for Joseph. Here he learned that Jesus was a very special child - and that his task as the father would be a very special task. Like Mary, Joseph would need God's powerful help in the task ahead of him.

Prayer -- Lord, thank you for giving us all the preparation we need to do your will. Help me to look to you and hear your voice, even in my times of confusion, as I listen and wait for you this month.

December 9

Preparing a Messenger

Luke 1: 5-17

During the time when Herod was king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife's name was Elizabeth; she also belonged to a priestly family. They both lived good lives in God's sight and obeyed fully all the Lord's laws and commands. They had no children because Elizabeth could not have any, and she and Zechariah were both very old.

One day Zechariah was doing his work as a priest in the Temple, taking his turn in the daily service. According to the custom followed by the priests, he was chosen by lot to burn incense on the altar. So he went into the Temple of the Lord, while the crowd of people outside prayed during the hour when the incense was burned. An angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar where the incense was burned. When Zechariah saw him, he was alarmed and felt afraid. But the angel said to him, "Don't be afraid, Zechariah! God has heard your prayer, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son. You are to name him John. How glad and happy you will be and how happy many others will be when he is born! John will be great in the Lord's sight. He must not drink any wine or strong drink. From his very birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, and he will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. He will go ahead of the Lord, strong and mighty like the prophet Elijah. He will bring fathers and children together again; he will turn disobedient people back to the way that pleases God; he will get the Lord's people ready for him."

This is the story of another baby born about the same time as Jesus. God was also guiding the birth of this baby very carefully because John would grow up to be the prophet who would introduce Jesus to the world. His task would require, above all else, that he be a person who listened to God, and that he have the courage to speak God's words to the Jewish people. He would be the one to tell them that God's long promised plan to send a Savior was about to be completed. He would urge them to turn away from sin and to believe the Good News that Jesus, the Savior was about to appear -- and that the waiting was over!

Prayer -- Lord, help me to listen when you send your messengers to speak to me this month.

December10

Preparing the Great

Matthew 2: 1-12

Jesus was born in the town of Bethlehem in Judea, during the time when Herod was king. Soon afterward, some men who studied the stars came from the East to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the baby born to be the king of the Jews? We saw his star when it came up in the east, and we have come to worship him." When King Herod heard about this, he was very upset, and so was everyone else in Jerusalem. He called together all the chief priests and the teachers of the Law and asked them, "Where will the Messiah be born?" "In the town of Bethlehem in Judea," they answered. "For this is what the prophet wrote: 'Bethlehem in the land of Judah, you are by no means the least of the leading cities of Judah' for from you will come a leader who will guide my people Israel.'" So Herod called the visitors from the East to a secret meeting and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem with these instructions: "Go and make a careful search for the child; and when you find him, let me know, so that I too may go and worship him." And so they left, and on their way they saw the same star they had seen in the East. When they saw it, how happy they were, what joy was theirs! It went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. They went into the house, and when they saw the child with his mother Mary, they knelt down and worshipped him. They brought out their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, and presented them to him. Then they returned to their country by another road, since God had warned them in a dream not to go back to Herod.

Sadly, great and powerful people often find it hard to submit to God and His commands. They fall in love with their own power and begin to think they are little gods. King Herod was this type of person. Amazingly, he seems to have thought that if he could find the baby Jesus and kill him, he could stop God from raising up a new King that would challenge his own power. In this passage, the wise men from the East are what the Bible defines as truly great people. They were people of great wealth and power, yet they were trying to listen to God - to follow where He was leading them - and bowed in worship to the Savior.

Prayer -- Father, help me see any areas in which I am fighting against You and Your plans for me. And help me to be like the wise men from the East and follow your Son as I wait to celebrate His coming to us this month.

December 11

Preparing the People

Luke 3: 1-17

It was the fifteenth year of the rule of Emperor Tiberius; Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip was ruler of the territory of Iturea and Trachonitis; Lysanias was ruler of Abilene, and Annas and Caiaphas were High Priests.

At that time the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the desert. So John went throughout the territory of the Jordan River, preaching, "Turn away from your sins and be baptized, and God will forgive your sins." As it is written in the book of the prophet Isaiah: "Someone is shouting in the desert: 'Get the road ready for the Lord; make a straight path for him to travel! Every valley must be filled up, every hill and mountain leveled off. The winding roads must be made straight, and the rough paths made smooth. The whole human race will see God's salvation!'"

Crowds of people came out to John to be baptized by him. "You snakes!" he said to them. "Who told you that you could escape from the punishment God is about to send? Do those things that will show that you have turned from your sins. And don't start saying among yourselves that Abraham is your ancestor. I tell you that God can take these rocks and make descendants for Abraham! The ax is ready to cut down the trees at the roots; every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown in the fire."

The people asked him, "What are we to do, then?" He answered, "Whoever has two shirts must give one to the man who has none, and whoever has food must share it." Some tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what are we to do?" "Don't collect more than is legal," he told them. Some soldiers also asked him "What about us? What are we to do?" He said to them, "Don't take money from anyone by force or accuse anyone falsely. Be content with your pay."

People's hopes began to rise, and they began to wonder whether John perhaps might be the Messiah. So John said to all of them, "I baptize you with water, but someone is coming who is much greater than I am. I am not good enough even to untie his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. He has his winnowing shovel with him, to thresh out all the grain and gather the wheat into his barn; but he will burn the chaff in a fire that never goes out."

The baby we read about two days ago, has now grown up and become the first prophet to Israel in 400 years. His preaching was getting lots of attention. Many people were coming to hear him - and many of them were changing their lives. John's job was to get the people ready for Jesus. He did this by telling them one basic message -- turn from your sins! John told some of them what this meant for them, but what he wanted to change most was their hearts. He told the people that the Savior was coming soon - and that as they waited, they must admit their sin to God, ask his forgiveness, and begin to obey Him. If they did this, they would be able to hear what Jesus would tell them.

Prayer -- Lord, help me to prepare my heart today, and each day -- admitting my disobedience to you and asking your forgiveness -- so that I can hear you speaking to me as I listen and wait this month.

December 12

Preparing the Humble

Luke 2: 8-20

There were some shepherds in that part of the country who were spending the night in the fields, taking care of their flocks. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone over them. They were terribly afraid, but the angel said to them, "Don't be afraid! I am here with good news for you, which will bring great joy to all the people. This very day in David's town your Savior was born -- Christ the Lord! And this is what will prove it to you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." Suddenly a great army of heaven's angels appeared with the angel, singing praises to God: "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and peace on earth to those with whom he is pleased!"

When the angels went away from them back into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us." So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph and saw the baby lying in the manger. When the shepherds saw him, they told them what the angel had said about the child. All who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said. Mary remembered all these things and thought deeply about them. The shepherds went back, singing praises to God for all they had heard and seen; it had been just as the angel had told them.

If we had lived in the days before Jesus was born, and someone had asked, 'To whom do you think God will announce the arrival of the Savior?' - no one would have said 'the shepherds'. They were nobody in the society. They were poor, ignored, looked down on. Yet on the night when Jesus was born, God sent his angels to the shepherds with the great announcement! And then they hurried into town to see the baby for themselves -- and so they were also the first people to actually see the Savior! The world usually ignores the poor and humble, but God made it clear from the beginning that the forgiveness and blessing brought by Jesus was for all people -- including those often ignored by society.

Prayer -- Father, thank you that you care for all of us. As I wait and listen this month, help me to also treat all people with care and honor - especially those I would think of as below me in this world.

Well, today we start our third series of readings for Advent. Our theme this time is [Remembering Jesus](#). As we approach the celebration of his birthday, it is a good time to meditate a little on the wonder of who and what Jesus is. I hope you see a bit more of His glory this week.

Len

December 13

[Remembering God](#)

Isaiah 40: 9-11

Jerusalem, go up on a high mountain and proclaim the good news! Call out with a loud voice; announce the good news! Tell the towns of Judah that their God is coming! The Sovereign Lord is coming to rule with power, bringing with him the people he has rescued. He will take care of his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs together and carry them in his arms; he will gently lead their mothers.

Isaiah first spoke these words in 700BC. Then the prophet John used this passage to introduce Jesus 700 years later. They both are saying that God Himself will come and rescue His people. Not that God will send someone, but that He will come Himself! Jesus came and did the things only God could do, accepted the worship only God should have, and even claimed to be God. Here is the primary mystery of Jesus' birth -- that He was God in the form of a man. He is called Emmanuel - which means 'God with us'.

When we want to see what God is like, we look at Jesus. When we want to know what God thinks, or feels or how he treats people or what he wants of us, we look at Jesus. When we want to know God, we go to Jesus and follow Him.

On Christmas, we celebrate this mystery and great love - that God loved us enough to come to us.

[Prayer](#) -- Lord God, Jesus, this is such a mystery, but so wonderful. Thank you for coming to us so that we could understand you and know you in a way never before possible. And thank you that you loved us enough to come close and be near us. You are such a wonderful God. I want to know you more completely and honor You as You deserve to be honored in this special season.

December 14

[Remembering the Savior King of the World](#)

Colossians 1: 15-20

Christ is the visible likeness of the invisible God. He is the first-born Son, superior to all created things. For through him God created everything in heaven and on earth, the seen and the unseen things, including spiritual powers, lords, rulers, and authorities. God created the whole universe through him and for him. Christ existed before all things, and in union with him all things have their proper place. He is the head of his body, the church; he is the source of the body's life. He is the first-born Son, who was raised from death, in order that he alone might have the first place in all things. For it was by God's own decision that the Son has in himself the full nature of God. Through the Son, then, God decided to bring the whole universe back to himself. God made peace through his Son's blood on the cross and so brought back to himself all things, both on earth and in heaven.

Here, Paul the apostle gives us a brief look at the mystery and glory of Jesus. God the Father and God the Son are separate, and yet exactly the same. (perhaps the greatest of all mysteries) God the Son existed before all things and was the one who created the universe and rules over it. But Paul focuses finally and especially on the fact that it is through Jesus's death that people - all people - even the whole universe - is brought back to God. Jesus is not only creator of all - He is Savior of ALL. Christmas is the marvelous story that God not only came to be with us, but he also came to save us - all of his world and universe - so that we could once again know Him.

Prayer -- Lord Jesus, you deserve all of my honor and all of my thanks and all of my life because you are my creator - but also my loving Savior. Thank you that your love reaches out to all of us, everywhere. Lord, please let more people all around this world see your glory and your love and give their hearts to you in this season.

December 15

Remembering the Comforter

Matthew 11: 2-6

When John the Baptist heard in prison about the things that Christ was doing, he sent some of his disciples to him. "Tell us, " they asked Jesus, "are you the one John said was going to come, or should we expect someone else?"

Jesus answered, "Go back and tell John what you are hearing and seeing: the blind can see, the lame can walk, those who suffer from dreaded skin diseases are made clean, the deaf hear, the dead are brought back to life, and the Good News is preached to the poor. How happy are those who have no doubts about me!"

The world is so filled with hurt! And we are each in so much need of healing - physically, emotionally, in our families, and in our relationship with God. When John's followers came to see if Jesus was really the Savior, Jesus told them to look around at what He was doing. Healing of all sort was happening. People who were helpless were suddenly able to live a new life! People who were rejected because their sickness was considered dirty and shameful were given dignity again! And the poor were not being ignored by Jesus either. People's lives were being changed completely!

Jesus not only brought us a way to be forgiven for our sin, He also brought us the power of God to heal our broken lives! He did it then, and He continues to do it today for all of us who follow Him.

Prayer -- Lord, I am glad that you know where I need healing and comfort. And thank you for counting me valuable enough to stop and care for - just as you did with so many when you walked the streets of Israel.

December 16

Remembering our Life

John 15: 1-5

I am the real vine, and my Father is the gardener. He breaks off every branch in me that does not bear fruit, and he prunes every branch that does bear fruit, so that it will be clean and bear more fruit. You have been made clean already by the teaching I have given you. Remain united to me, and I will remain united to you. A branch cannot bear fruit by itself; it can do so only if it remains in the vine. In the same way you cannot bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine, and you are the branches. Those who remain in me, and I in them, will bear much fruit; for you can do nothing without me.

A car needs gas to run. Plants need sunshine and water to grow. Computers need electricity to function. And here Jesus tells us that we need a close relationship with Him if our character is to change and we are to be used by God in His work. Jesus' example, guidance, protection, and help of every sort is the key to our life in following Him. We are like a branch on a tree, but Jesus is the vine - the source of all the nutrition and life that allows us to thrive. Jesus' part in our life cannot be overstated! Without the close, daily relationship with Him - He says we can do nothing. Cut us off from an active interaction with Him and we are sure to dry up and die spiritually.

Prayer -- Lord, it is so easy to live independently of you and act as though you were a teacher who once helped me get started, but is no longer needed. Help me to stay close to you each day this month and hold tightly to You as the key to my life.

December 17

John had been punished for his faith in Jesus by being sent to a small island in the Mediterranean Sea. One day during that imprisonment, he had been visited by Jesus and wrote this account of the vision.

Remembering the Living Lord

Revelation 1: 9-18

I am John, your brother, and as a follower of Jesus I am your partner in patiently enduring the suffering that comes to those who belong to his Kingdom. I was put on the island of Patmos because I had proclaimed God's work and the truth that Jesus revealed. On the Lord's day the Spirit took control of me, and I heard a loud voice, that sounded like a trumpet, speaking behind me. It said, "Write down what you see, and send the book to the churches in these seven cities: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea."

I turned around to see who was talking to me, and I saw seven golden lampstands, and among them there was what looked like a human being, wearing a robe that reached to his feet, and a gold band around his chest. His hair was white as wool, or as snow, and his eyes blazed like fire; his feet looked like brass that has been refined and polished, and his voice sounded like a roaring waterfall. He held seven stars in his right hand, and a sharp two-edged sword came out of his mouth. His face was as bright as the midday sun. When I saw him, I fell down at his feet like a dead man. He placed his right hand on me and said, "Don't be afraid! I am the first and the last. I am the living one! I was dead, but now I am alive forever and ever. I have authority over death and the world of the dead..."

There are two great facts to notice in this vision of Jesus. First, has to do with what He looks like in this description. We are usually most familiar with the stories of Jesus in the gospels and tend to think of Him as He is in those stories. However, even though He is still the same Jesus; with the same heart and personality and character, He is now the risen Christ! While He was on earth, his power and glory were only partly seen. Now, however, His power and glory are clear and John immediately falls on his face in fear at the sight of Jesus. This is an aspect of Jesus we often forget. We fail to honor Him because we don't really see who He is - the God of the universe.

The second thing to be seen here is the simple and wonderful fact that Jesus is

alive! He died, but he rose from the dead and is now alive forever. He is not simply a story from the past. He is our risen Lord today. The risen Lord who is powerful and frightening - yet who loves us and is alive to help us each and every moment of our life.

Prayer -- Lord Jesus, I am so thankful that you are alive and powerful beyond anything I can even imagine - yet you place your hand on me and say "Don't be afraid". Let your glory be revealed in this special season - to me and to all of those who are seeking you.

December 18

Remembering Jesus' Return

John 14:1-3

"Do not be worried and upset," Jesus told them. "Believe in God and believe also in me. There are many rooms in my Father's house, and I am going to prepare a place for you. I would not tell you this if it were not so. And after I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to myself, so that you will be where I am.

1 Thessalonians 4:16-18

There will be the shout of command, the archangel's voice, the sound of God's trumpet, and the Lord himself will come down from heaven. Those who have died believing in Christ will rise to life first; then we who are living at that time will be gathered up along with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will always be with the Lord. So then, encourage one another with these words.

2 Thessalonians 1: 7-10

...when the Lord Jesus appears from heaven with his mighty angels, with a flaming fire, to punish those who reject God and who do not obey the Good News about our Lord Jesus. ... when He comes on that Day to receive glory from all his people and honor from all who believe.

Not only is Jesus alive, but He has promised that He will return to the earth at the end of this age. For those who believe in Him and follow Him, this is wonderful news. He will come to take us home - to once and for all rescue us from this broken and sinful world. This is our wonderful future! But for those who do not follow Him, it will be a day of terror and punishment.

When we remember Jesus, we remember that He is not to be taken lightly or casually. Though He offers forgiveness and love, He also will be the Judge who punishes and destroys all who remain in their sin and do not receive His offer and follow Him in this life.

Prayer -- Lord Jesus, thank you for making your offer of love known to me and for promising me the hope of being with you forever. Thank you for dying for my sin and adopting me as your child. Help me to live for you now, until the day when you return.

Well, here we are in the last six days before Christmas. The month has really gone by fast. For our last six days, the theme will be **Responding**. We have thought much about who Jesus is and now we will prepare ourselves by thinking about how we are responding to Him.

Please feel free to send me any questions you have about things in our readings.

I'll be praying for you as you take these last few exams.

Len

Dec 19

Responding in Repentance

Luke 18: 9-14

Jesus also told this parable... "Once there were two men who went up to the Temple to pray: one was a Pharisee, the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood apart by himself and prayed. 'I thank you, God, that I am not greedy, dishonest, or an adulterer, like everybody else. I thank you that I am not like that tax collector over there. I fast two days a week, and I give you one tenth of all my income.'

But the tax collector stood at a distance and would not even raise his face to heaven, but beat on his breast and said, 'God, have pity on me, a sinner!' I tell you," said Jesus, "the tax collector, and not the Pharisee, was in the right with God when he went home."

Honestly admitting that we have disobeyed God is the first step in accepting God's forgiveness -- but it is also the attitude we should maintain every day. When we look at Jesus, we will always see our own sin. His perfection will always remind us of our failure. However, each time we come in this way, we will also find His love and forgiveness.

Prayer -- Lord, thank you that you have opened my eyes to see my sin. Please do help me to always be honest with You and with myself about my disobedience. I do long for a heart that is pure and obeys You more completely. Thank You for this season that reminds me of your mercy and forgiveness.

December 20

Responding with Faith

Mark 5:24-34

So many people were going along with Jesus that they were crowding him from every side. There was a woman who had suffered terribly from severe bleeding for twelve years, even though she had been treated by many doctors. She had spent all her money, but instead of getting better she got worse all the time. She had heard about Jesus, so she came in the crowd behind him, saying to herself, "If I just touch his clothes, I will get well." She touched his cloak, and her bleeding stopped at once; and she had the feeling inside herself that she was healed of her trouble.

At once Jesus knew that power had gone out of him, so he turned around in the crowd and asked, "Who touched my clothes?" His disciples answered, "You see how the people are crowding you; why do you ask who touched you?" But Jesus kept looking around to see who had done it. The woman realized what had happened to her, so she came, trembling with fear, knelt at his feet, and told him the whole truth. Jesus said to her, "My daughter, your faith has made you well. Go in peace, and be healed of your trouble."

This is one of my favorite stories about Jesus life. Here is a woman who is in terrible trouble. She has been sick for twelve years, is now poor, seems to be alone... She has heard about Jesus and thinks that maybe here is finally someone who can really help her. She makes her way to where He is and simply reaches out her hand - simply, quietly, in hope --- and suddenly everything changes! She is an example of a simple faith - looking to Jesus. This is the response Jesus was always looking for and which He always enjoyed. He loved meeting people who would trust Him and this is still the response He looks for in us. In the end of this story, Jesus calls the woman 'daughter'. He wants us to come to Him so that He may care for us as His children also.

Prayer -- Jesus, like the woman in your story, I know that I need help in my life. I am very thankful that you are always there when I come and always able to help me - no matter how difficult the problem seems to be. I hope my trust in you, will bring you joy as we approach the celebration of your birthday.

December 21

Responding with Thanksgiving

Luke 17:11-19

As Jesus made his way to Jerusalem, he went along the border between Samaria and Galilee. He was going into a village when he was met by ten men suffering from a terrible skin disease. They stood at a distance and shouted, "Jesus! Master! Have pity on us!" Jesus saw them and said to them, "Go and let the priests examine you." As they were on their way to see the priests, the disease vanished. When one of them saw that he was healed, he came back, praising God in a loud voice. He threw himself to the ground at Jesus' feet and thanked him. The man was a Samaritan. Jesus spoke up, "There were ten who were healed; where are the other nine? Why is this foreigner the only one who came back to give thanks to God?" And Jesus said to him, "Get up and go; your faith has made you well."

The fact that someone would rush back to Jesus and say thank you after he had been healed does not seem surprising at all. Isn't this only natural? Yet nine men did not return. Sometimes in life we become so busy enjoying the blessings God has given that we fail to just stop and say thank you. We begin to worship the blessings instead of the one who gave them. As Christmas comes, take much time each day to thank the Lord for the many expressions of His kindness that you so often take for granted. This will be a birthday present He will enjoy!

Prayer -- Lord Jesus, thank you for

December 22

Responding with Complete Trust

Mark 8: 34-38

Then Jesus called the crowd and his disciples to him. "If any of you want to come with me," he told them, "you must forget yourself, carry your cross, and follow me. For if you want to save your own life, you will lose it; but if you lose your life for me and for the gospel, you will save it. Do you gain anything if you win the whole world but lose your life? Of course not! There is nothing you can give to regain your life. If you are ashamed of me and of my teaching in this godless and wicked day, then the Son of Man will be ashamed of you when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."

Jesus' message of love and forgiveness was so attractive that some people followed him simply for the benefits - like kids might follow a man with candy. But Jesus was not simply handing out candy. He made it very plain that He was inviting us back into a relationship with GOD. That means that when we follow Him, we must be willing to trust Him completely - with every area of our life. He spoke of taking up our cross and forgetting ourselves and losing our life. He means that we must give up control - we can no longer be our own God - we must treat Him as God and let Him direct our life. However, the promise is that when we do this, we will find real life! He is our good and loving God and He can lead us into life far better than anything we could hope to find by ourselves.

If we are to celebrate Jesus' birthday, we must ask if we are allowing Him to lead us in each area of our life. This will be a birthday present He will enjoy.

Prayer -- Lord Jesus, thank you that you want to guide me. I owe you my obedience as God and I know that You are wiser than me. I do want to follow you in each area of my life. Help me honor You this week by bowing before You and following You as my King.

December 23

Responding by Serving

John 13:2,4-5,12-15

Jesus and his disciples were at supper....he rose from the table, took off his outer garment, and tied a towel around his waist. Then he poured some water into a washbasin and began to wash the disciples' feet and dry them with the towel around his waist. ...After Jesus had washed their feet, he put his outer garment back on and returned to his place at the table. "Do you understand what I have just done to you?" he asked. "You call me Teacher and Lord, and it is right that you do so, because that is what I am. I, your Lord and Teacher, have just washed your feet. You, then, should wash one another's feet. I have set an example for you, so that you will do just what I have done for you. I am telling you the truth: no slaves are greater than their master, and no messengers are greater than the one who sent them. Now that you know this truth, how happy you will be if you put it into practice!"

Only servants washed people's feet. It was a job for unimportant people. But Jesus, the leader, the Savior, suddenly got up from supper and began to wash the feet of His followers. The disciples were surprised - uncomfortable - but Jesus had their attention. Then he sat down and said the thing he wanted them to understand from this experience. His followers must be people who served others - just as he lived his life serving others! No job is too small or too dirty or too low. We are to be known as people of love. If you are to celebrate Jesus' birthday, you must ask if you are just religious, or if you are known as a person who serves others. This will be a birthday present He will enjoy.

Prayer -- Lord, I often live only for myself. Please show me the people around me whom you want me to serve -- and give me a heart that truly cares for others.

December 24

Responding by Sharing the News

Matthew 28:18-20

Jesus drew near to the disciples and said, "I have been given all authority in heaven and on earth. Go, then, to all peoples everywhere and make them my disciples: baptize them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and teach them to obey everything I have commanded you. And I will be with you always, to the end of the age."

This was the last thing Jesus said before being taken up into heaven. He is telling us to continue his work of sharing the good news about God's loving offer of forgiveness and a new relationship with Him. We are now the Christmas messengers. As we remember Jesus and seek to live in a way that honors Him, one of the best things we can do is to share the story and good news with others who do not yet know or understand. This indeed will be a Christmas present that will please the Lord.

Prayer -- Lord Jesus, thank you for the privilege of sharing Your story and message with others. Please use me to help others meet you. Give me wisdom and courage and love in this task. And help me to be your representative by my life and with my words this new year.

December 25 Christmas Day!

Luke 2: 4-7, 8-10

Joseph and Mary went from their town of Nazareth, in Galilee, to the little village of Bethlehem to register as the government had ordered Mary was pregnant and while they were there the time came for Mary to have her baby. This was her first child and it was a boy. She wrapped him in strips of cloth and put him on some straw in the box used to feed the animals, because they were sleeping in a barn that night.

There were some shepherds in that part of the country who were spending the night in the fields, taking care of their sheep. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of God filled the sky with light. They were terribly afraid, but the angel said to them, "Don't be afraid! I am here with good news for you, which will bring great joy to all the people. This very day in Bethlehem your Savior was born -- Christ the Lord!

We end our readings today with the Bible's few words that tell the story of Jesus' birth. It is a simple story of a young mother and father having their baby in a very difficult situation -- away from home, sleeping in a barn, with no one to help and not even a blanket or bed for their new baby. And it is a surprising story of God coming to earth -- as a baby! The story seems impossible --- or absolutely amazing, if it is true. We celebrate today because after watching Jesus grow up and seeing His life, we know that He is indeed the Savior - our wonderful God who came to be with us.

Today we celebrate His birthday to say thank you to Him and to let all of our joy out as we think about all He has done -- and is doing -- and always will do for us.

Make today a wonderful day of thanking God and of just enjoying His kindness and love. It makes Him smile to see us singing and laughing and dancing at His party.

Praise be to God for His wonderful gift!

I hope you have enjoyed these daily readings for this special month. I've enjoyed writing them and sharing them with you.

If the readings have left you with any questions about the details of the story , or about why Christians believe that this is true, please ask me or any other Christian friend.

Len Andyshak

PS -- Also I have written a short booklet retelling the story of Christmas in easy English and also in a way that explains the cultural and religious issues around the story. If you would like to read it, I am attaching it to this note as a PDF file.

Have a wonderful day.