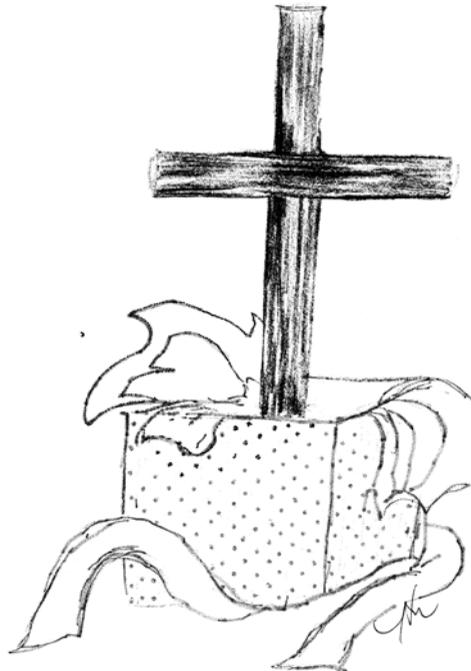


Advent Leads to the Cross 2011



Shepherd of the Hills Lutheran Church
6914 Wurzbach Road
San Antonio, TX 78240-3832

Brothers and Sisters,

It's that time of year again – the time to make gift and party lists, to start baking holiday treats, and to start counting down the days to Christmas. It may also be the time for bittersweet reminiscence of days gone by and of family and friends either gone from this life or far away, or stress over holiday budgets and too little time in the schedule. The holidays can bring wonderful excitement, anticipation and joy....and can also bring anxiety, loneliness, and depression.

As with the season of Christmas, Jesus Himself also brings many thoughts to mind. In the pages of this devotion booklet, you will find many of those thoughts captured on paper. Jesus as our refuge...new life in Christ...The Creator....Jesus, the perfect Gift...the Body of Christ....Jesus, the Servant.

When we think of our Savior, He is many things to each of us. But, unlike the human season of Christmas, Jesus does not bring sadness, anxiety, or depression. There is no loneliness, no increase in debt, no frustration in Him. In Jesus, we have forgiveness for our sins, and hope for eternal life with God. He is the source of all goodness and light.

Throughout the holiday season, let us focus on Christ. When we need comfort, let us focus on Jesus. When we need strength and patience, let us come to Him. When we lack peace or joy, let us look to our Savior to meet all of our needs.

Our sincere hope is that you will find Jesus Christ in the pages of this devotion booklet, and that, in finding Him, you will rejoice in the celebration of His birth and life this Christmas season.

In Christ,

The Devotion Writers of Shepherd of the Hills Lutheran Church

2011

Sunday, November 27, 2011

Advent Theme: He Will Come

HE'S COMING HERE!!!

Revelation 3:15-16 [Jesus said,] “I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm – neither hot nor cold – I am about to spit you out of my mouth.” (NIV)

Oh, OH, OOOOOOOH; he's coming here to give a concert. I have to go – please, please let there be tickets still. I just have to go see him.

Sound familiar? Like your teen? Actually I, a well-aged lady, got that excited over a musician coming to San Antonio to perform with the Symphony. I surprised myself, as I do not usually get that excited over such things. The last time I remember being this excited was in the late 1970s, and I had a ticket to a live Tom Jones concert (for you younger crowd, he was a singer who attracted loads of ladies to his performances). When was the last time you were that excited? Last birthday you had? Last Christmas morning? We really should be that excited over Christmas – it's when Jesus comes to us as a Baby full of promise. Sometimes I think we've grown dulled to the joy of the Christmas season. Retailers start their Christmas too early, making it hard to keep enthusiasm from Halloween to December 25th. We may shop for a special present, make an effort to help others, do traditional baking and cooking, or spend time with family – these things help keep Christmas special.

But, we don't go to the stable to see the Baby Jesus with the same awe and wonder the shepherds had. Where did we lose this? How can we get it back? By focusing on the special, wonderful, extravagant gift the Father gave to us that first Christmas... Jesus Christ. Attend the Advent services to prepare for His joyful arrival, and spread the word: “He is almost here – He is coming to save us – He is the Wonderful Counselor, Mighty Lord whom we worship – He is coming HERE !!!!!!!”

Dear Father, Son, and Spirit, You bless me daily. You gifted me with salvation and will take all believers home with You one day. I am grateful and thankful. This year I will try harder to center my celebrations on You and the joy of knowing You. Amen.

Monday, November 28, 2011

Advent Theme: He Will Come

THE HOLY SPIRIT WILL TEACH YOU

Luke 12:11-12 [Jesus said,] "When you are brought before synagogues, rulers and authorities, do not worry about how you will defend yourselves or what you will say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that time what you should say." (NIV)

A friend insists that I can write a devotion on any subject, because she has seen many devotions written about her faux pas. She does not realize that I keep a file of devotion ideas that have not gelled. Currently there are about 75 ideas in that file. Some of those ideas are 3 or 4 years old and may never become devotions. Periodically I go through and eliminate the ideas that I no longer can make sense of. Weekly I go over the list; and when I am nudged, I hope by the Holy Spirit, I add a few more words or another paragraph to a devotion idea. When I think it is finished, I circulate it to others for their input. Usually they can improve the devotion, and then I send the devotion to my friend, and she is impressed that I am such a resourceful writer.

On a more serious note, we are often called on to give witness to our faith. We think that we are never well enough prepared, and that is probably true, but as Jesus said when He sent out His disciples to witness, **"the Holy Spirit will teach you at that time what you should say."** We do not have an acceptable excuse. We should go out and witness, no matter how nervous we are. The Lord will be with us. That promise was fulfilled when He died on the cross to pay the debt of our sin, sin that kept us apart from God. Remember the story of Jesus' birth. That is easy to tell. Then there are the promises that the Father would send Him. Most of us memorized verses about these promises when we were part of a Christmas Pageant as children. Can you say, "Jesus Loves Me"? Suddenly you realize that the Holy Spirit is there, giving you words to say.

Lord, You have promised to teach me what to say when I am witnessing in Your Name. Motivate me to go out and witness. Amen.

Tuesday, November 29, 2011

Advent Theme: He Will Come

LOVE IS A CHOICE

1 Corinthians 13:4-7 Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. (NIV)

My granddaughter and I talked about many things. The conversation moved to “love.” Rather than give her my normal dissertation concerning the three most common Greek words for love (Eros, Phileo, and Agape), and how English has only one word, I took a different tack. I told her that what is often referred to as Puppy Love is driven by hormones and can be very intense and a lot of fun. It can end. Adult Love is a conscious decision to place someone’s needs and desires ahead of your own. If you have seriously made this decision, then when trials come, and trials always come in life, your love will endure. She responded, “That is what my daddy says.”

God the Father made a decision to send His Son to earth to be born of Mary, and to be sacrificed on the cross to pay for our sins. God made a decision. For us, it was a wonderful decision, because it was the only way we could spend eternity with Him in Heaven.

God’s decision was based on His timeless, enduring, and unfathomable love for us. We are not just a passing fancy or a silly infatuation to God. God demonstrated His great love for us in sending Jesus to die for our sins – and we can count on His love. We can count on God’s love for us here on earth, as He takes care of our daily needs. We can count on God’s love for us in Heaven for eternity, as He gives us our eternal home and blesses us with His presence. God’s love is the model for us, as we try to love each other the way that God loves us – with patience, kindness, and hope. God is also the source of forgiveness when we fail to love as He loves.

Lord, thank You for teaching me about love by sending Jesus to die for my sins. Help me to place the needs and desires of others above my selfish desires. Amen.

Wednesday, November 30, 2011

Advent Theme: He Will Come
CONVICTED BEFORE THE TRIAL

Isaiah 1:18 "Come now, let us reason together," says the LORD. "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool." (NIV)

Recently I received a jury summons from Bexar County. They were nice enough to seat me in the first panel of 65, from which a panel of 12 jurors would be selected. Within 30 minutes, I realized that I would have to disqualify myself. I had learned two things: (1) this was not the defendant's first offense of this type, and (2) 6 or 7 police officers would be testifying against him. After learning these two facts, in my mind I had enough evidence to convict the young man. Looking back, I regret my narrow-mindedness, and yet, I'm not sure that I could have suspended making a judgment until I had heard all of the evidence.

I'm sure glad that God does not judge me like I judged that young man. If He did, I would have been convicted and sentenced long ago. But God does not judge in that manner. He is a righteous God and demands payment for sin, but He knew that I could not pay the price, so He promised to send His Son to redeem me. That promise was repeated many times, over thousands of years, proving God did not forget His promise. He sent His Son to be born of Mary and to suffer and die on the cross to pay the debt of my sin. When He looks at my sin through the blood of Jesus, He sees me as being holy.

Lord, thank You for sending Jesus to pay the price of my sins, so I can join You in Heaven. Amen.

Thursday, December 1, 2011

Advent Theme: He Will Come

A NEW CREATION

2 Corinthians 5:17 Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! (NIV)

The McNay Art Museum in San Antonio is a pleasant, spacious museum with a range of art on display: Picasso, Manet, Monet, religious relics from European churches, and an outdoor sculpture garden. The day that I went to the McNay, they had a temporary exhibit entitled “New Images.” It was modern art, and included some bizarre and some thought-provoking displays. One in particular had been highlighted on the radio and the internet: a life-sized, 3-dimensional creation made of furniture and animatronic people, arranged as if at a cocktail party. What made this display noteworthy was that every surface – people, furniture, glasses – was covered with bright orange Cheez Doodles. I wasn’t fond of this particular exhibit, but agreed with the small paragraph next to it: it forced the viewer to consider ordinary things (like Cheez Doodles) with a new perspective. Who would have considered Cheez Doodles to be art?

Artwork made of Cheez Doodles may not be for everyone, but it is fun to see things with a fresh perspective. Through Jesus Christ, God looks at us with a fresh perspective. Repeatedly in the New Testament, those who believe in Christ are referred to as “being made new” or “a new creation.” We have been redeemed by His sacrificial blood, and brought into a right relationship with Him for now and for all of eternity. We are called righteous, holy, and heirs of eternal life. Through the perspective of the Gospel, we should never look at ourselves the same way again. We are no longer separated from God, no longer sullied by sin. We are a new creation! Becoming a new creation started when God promised Adam and Eve that He would send a Savior. He repeated that promise numerous times over the next 4,000 years or so. God’s people knew that He was coming – they just did not know when.

Heavenly Father, thank You for sending Christ Jesus to pay for my sins and make me a new creation through His blood. When I feel dull and hopeless, remind me that I am made new in You. Amen.

Friday, December 2, 2011

Advent Theme: He Will Come

A REFUGE IN A STORM

Proverbs 14:26-27 In the fear of the LORD one has strong confidence, and his children will have a refuge. The fear of the LORD is a fountain of life, that one may avoid the snares of death. (RSV)

We headed down the Rio Bravo del Norte, against a strong headwind, to Parida Cave. After a hard paddle, we arrived. We studied the Indian art on the walls of the cave, and then headed towards Panther Cave to see more Indian art. After a mile and a quarter, we were exhausted and started looking for a place to camp. We found a cave. It was about 20 feet above the water level and took quite a scramble to get up to it. We hoisted our gear up to the cave and secured our kayaks onto the cliff face. After setting up camp, we enjoyed supper, while the winds howled out on the river. We had a place of refuge in a stormy world.

Although the words “a place of refuge in a stormy world” were not used, God made many promises in Scripture to send a Savior. Without that Savior, we would not have a place of refuge in a stormy world. Without Christ, we have no hope for the future and no comfort when the trials and struggles of life threaten to overwhelm us.

The motto of Shepherd of the Hills Lutheran Church is “a place of refuge in a stormy world.” Enjoying that evening in the cave helped me appreciate the motto and the knowledge that Christ is that refuge. We can't handle everything alone, but our Lord and Savior provides us a place of refuge in this life and then provides us a home in Heaven when this life is over. Before we head to that eternal home, it would be nice if each of us could help others who need a place of refuge to find that refuge. We can tell them about Christ. We can listen to their troubles and needs. We can rake leaves; or if we are up north, we can shovel snow from a sidewalk. There are thousands of things we can do. The ultimate refuge is Christ Jesus, our Savior.

*Lord, thank You for giving me a place of refuge and help me to help others find places of refuge.
Amen.*

Saturday, December 3, 2011

Advent Theme: He Will Come

OPENING DAY - HYMN 733, Verse 5

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. (NKJV)

On opening day for deer season, we sang Hymn No. 733. When we sang Verse 5, I wondered where our pastor's mind had been when he selected the hymns.

“Time, like an ever-rolling stream, Soon bears us all away;

We fly forgotten as a dream Dies at the op'ning day.”

Dreams die – Even a dream of bringing a trophy home. Wherever we are, whatever we are doing, we should be worshiping the Lord. How do you worship the Lord when you're mopping the floor? How do you worship the Lord when you are in a deer blind and not thinking about Him?

St. Paul tells us that we should pray without ceasing. If we have turned our lives over to Christ, and He is the most important thing in our lives, then no matter what we are doing, we can be in communication with our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Jesus' death for our sins makes us worthy to have our prayers heard. God had promised a Savior almost as soon as sin entered the world, and He repeated that promise on a number of occasions. It seemed like each generation of His children forgot that promise and let the cares of this world blot out the good news that God was sending a Savior. Whether we are worshiping our Lord and Savior from deer blinds or from our favorite pews, we should remember that God kept His promise. Not only did He send His Son to save us, but Jesus is there for us to make every day a new day, the opening day to receive His love in a season that never ends.

Lord, thank You for sending a Savior to provide a way to Heaven for me. Prior to my going to Heaven, You have provided many things for me to do. Help me to enjoy all of those things, whether it is something like deer hunting or something like scrubbing the floor – but help me remember to always put You first. Amen.

Sunday, December 4, 2011

Advent Theme: He Came

IN THE FULLNESS OF TIME

Galatians 4:4-5 But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons. (NKJV)

Galatians describes the timing of Jesus' birth as "the fullness of the time." It was the perfect time, the time ordained and arranged for by God. By modern standards, Jesus was born into a chaotic and dangerous time – He was a Jew living in one of many nations conquered by the Roman Empire in a time known as the "Pax Romana," the Peace of Rome. The Roman Empire brought order and discipline. They attempted to unify the language, currency, and social order of the known world. They built tremendous roadways that increased the ability of people to travel, and for societies to grow and trade. Then Jesus was born into this world, and the Roman Empire facilitated the spread of Christianity. While the exclusivity of Christianity ultimately made it incompatible with Roman thinking, Roman tolerance for all religions may have allowed the early Christian church to blossom unimpeded.

God chose the perfect time for Jesus to be born, because His plan is perfect. Everything about God's timing is perfect. God continues to plan for our lives with the same commitment. He wants to save us from sin, death, and hell through the death and resurrection of His Son Jesus. He also nurtures us throughout our lives as He continues to fulfill His perfect plan for us, leading to a perfect place for eternity.

Heavenly Father, thank You for sending Jesus to be the perfect sacrifice for my sins, sent at the perfect time in history. Thank You for Your unconditional love for me. Please help me to trust in You, knowing that You hold my life in Your hands and You control all things. Amen.

NATIVITY SCENES

Jeremiah 10:21 The shepherds are senseless and do not inquire of the LORD; so they do not prosper and all their flock is scattered. (NIV)

I have a craft set of rubber stamps with beautiful Christmas images: an angel, the 3 kings, the holy family, and no shepherds. The shepherds also seem to be under-represented in many nativity scenes – usually a young, handsome shepherd boy, not the ragged, poor, and amazed group of men who appeared at the bedside of the newborn King. The shepherds were the first outsiders to know of the birth of Jesus and His amazing significance. They were informed of His birth by a choir of heavenly angels, and must have been dazed and confused as they headed into the town of Bethlehem to see the new Baby themselves. The Magi arrived later, possibly a year or more after Jesus' birth. The shepherds, however, knew that first night. There is a contrast between the shepherds and the Magi, and it is likely the contrast is deliberate. The shepherds were poor – they were probably dirty and smelled like their sheep. They were also Jewish men from the local community. They were "the people" to whom Jesus was originally sent – the Jewish people. The Magi, on the other hand, were well-educated foreigners, and compared with the shepherds, were wealthy.

Jesus came first to the Jews, but the message of hope and salvation that He brings is for the whole world – Jews and Gentiles alike. His message does not distinguish between rich or poor, well-educated or ignorant. God's love is for all people. By excluding the shepherds from our images of the nativity, are we ignoring a group of people to whom Jesus came? I hope not. He came for ALL people, and the message of Christmas should be a message for the whole world. The message of God's love, of the forgiveness and salvation through Jesus Christ, is a message for all people.

Dear Lord, help me be an agent in spreading Your Word to ALL of the world – to people of all races, colors, nations, and tongues. Forgive me when I let prejudice blind me to Your love for the whole world. Help me to love all people the way You love me. Amen.

Tuesday, December 6, 2011

Advent Theme: He Came

I WANT TO HUG A HOBO

Matthew 25:37-40 [Jesus said,] "Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?' The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.'" (NIV)

"I want to hug a hobo." These were the shocking words my granddaughter used to see if there was anything which could get me to show some emotion. I disappointed her by simply inquiring, "Why?" "Because I never have, and I think it would be cool." Over the next 15 to 20 miles as we drove through the Lower Sonoran Biotic Province, we discussed this ambition. On a number of occasions, she has volunteered in a soup kitchen with her parents and has met many homeless people, but it was always a "hands-off" kind of relationship. She indicated that her parents were not any more enthralled with the concept than I was.

A theme that was on the fringes of the conversation but was not expressed in words was "I love my fellow man – it's people I cannot stand." Or to express it another way, can we really show a person agape-type love from a distance? Jesus showed His love by coming down from Heaven to be born of Mary. He left His position of authority and His throne of glory to become a human man. He showed He loved His disciples by washing their feet. He set aside His power as God and endured hunger, pain, and humiliation. He showed His love for all of us by dying on the cross at Calvary. By His very personal sacrifice, He provided us an eternal home with Him in Heaven. My granddaughter reminded me that we should show God's love to all of His children – to show the personal, hands-on, compassionate love that God in Christ showed to all of us. God helps us to love others with that kind of love.

Lord, help me to reach out to others and show my love for You in how I treat them. Amen.

Wednesday, December 7, 2011

Advent Theme: He Came

FOR GOD SO LOVED

John 3:16 [Jesus said,] “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” (NIV)

My next patient was a little girl. She was dressed in a cotton knit purple dress, and she had socks with purple, pink, and blue stripes. She walked into the office alone, while her dad straggled behind with the stroller and the reluctant 2-year-old brother. I asked her how old she was.

“I am four,” she said proudly, so I asked what her favorite color was. “Purple,” she replied, so I asked her to show me the purple in her socks. “They are not socks. They are leggings.” As she answered, she lifted up her dress to show me her leggings going up all the way to her waist. Then she pointed at a purple stripe in her leggings.

After the customary medical history interview with her dad, she climbed up to the exam table. I was concentrating on her heart sounds when my eyes focused on the movement of her arm, which extended up to her body. Her chest moved in and out as she breathed. Suddenly, I was reminded of what marvelous, living, moving creatures we humans are. Cells joined to make tissues, which organized themselves into organs, that work in organ systems that make up our body, which breathes in and out. The cells by themselves are nothing, but when they are together in a living human, the result is amazing. I was in awe of the power of my God, the Creator. I was aware of the wonder of the breath of life in us. **“...the LORD God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.” (Genesis 2:7 NIV)**

Mary and Joseph probably had similar feelings of awe as Jesus was born and they cared for Him.

Lord, thank You for sending Jesus, born of Mary, to be a sacrifice to give me the hope of eternal life. I thank You for love and life. May I honor You as I live my life. Amen.

THE PERFECT GIFT

Luke 2:6-7 While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.
(NIV)

Giving and receiving gifts can be complicated. It is a terrible feeling to receive a gift that isn't right – the wrong size, the wrong color, just something you don't like or can't use. It seems as though the giver just wasn't paying attention, just didn't know much about you, or maybe didn't even care to put much effort or thought into it.

On the other hand, receiving “the perfect” gift is a wonderful feeling: clothing in just the right color and style; the perfect addition to a cherished collection; the ideal tool for a favorite hobby. Gifts like this reveal the time and thought spent by the giver, and make the gift feel even more precious. Receiving a perfect gift can make you feel understood, appreciated, and listened to.

On Christmas, God gave to the world “the perfect” Gift: Jesus. God knew just what the sinful world needed, a Savior. God “listened” to us, and He sent His gift in the perfect time and in the right size and style – Jesus meets all of our needs. Jesus saves us from the hopelessness of sin; He strengthens us for the challenges of this life; and He comforts us with the promise of eternal life. The gift of Jesus is a timeless gift, always in fashion and always needed.

Heavenly Father, thank You for sending me the perfect gift of Jesus Christ. Thank You for understanding all of my needs and helping me to always appreciate the Gift of Christ, and to gladly share that gift with others. Amen.

Friday, December 9, 2011

Advent Theme: He Came

A CRYSTAL SHARD

Luke 2:8-9 And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. (NIV)

I bought a small piece of crystal in a museum store in South Dakota. There was a yellowed note attached to it that said the piece came from a telescope lens made in Cleveland, Ohio. The telescope is in California and is still in use. It was dated 1972. I sent it to my brother, an astronomy buff, so that he can research its history.

We continue to make new and more powerful instruments to explore the heavens. Scientists are trying to discover the origins of our universe. What they see are God's creations, but the origin is in God Himself, something we can never see in our lifetimes.

It is only through faith in our Lord Jesus Christ that we will some day see God. Our sins would bring us death if we looked upon God's face. But through the death and resurrection of His Son, we can be absolved of our sin and be with God in Heaven. His face will be open to us. We will understand everything about God's creation. We will live in His light and grace forever.

We marvel at the bright stars in the sky, all the while missing the bright light of Heaven – the glory of the Lord which the angels saw on that first Christmas.

Gracious Father, I seek answers to our world through Your creations and get more questions instead. Help me to find the answers I really need in Your Word – the answers to my salvation. In the name of Jesus I pray. Amen.

Saturday, December 10, 2011

Advent Theme: He Came

BROWN NAIL POLISH

1 Corinthians 6:9-11 Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God. (NIV)

I took my granddaughter and a few others on a four-day kayaking-camping trip. On the way home, we talked about many things. As we passed a nail shop in a strip mall, she said we could stop and have our nails done. I've never had nails done and was not very keen on the idea. In a moment, she said that I could have mine done using brown nail polish. I looked down at my dirty fingernails and decided I should clean them at the first opportunity. She never said I should do a better job of keeping my nails clean, but the message stuck.

Brown nail polish would hide my dirty fingernails. That reminded me that Christ came into the world on a day we celebrate as Christmas. His purpose in coming was to wash each of us with His blood, so we can spend eternity with Him. I have been washed with the blood of Christ. It does not just hide my sin, like brown nail polish would hide the dirt under my fingernails; it washes all my sins away, so they no longer exist. Meanwhile, the dirt will remain under my fingernails, even if my granddaughter can convince me to have brown nail polish applied to my fingernails.

Lord, I thank You that You did not just cover over or hide my sins, but that You forgave them for Jesus' sake. Help me to serve You by reaching out and helping others. Amen.

Sunday, December 11, 2011

Advent Theme: He Still Comes

BUILDING UP ONE ANOTHER

Romans 14:1, 7-9 Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters... For none of us lives to himself alone and none of us dies to himself alone. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord. For this very reason, Christ died and returned to life so that he might be the Lord of both the dead and the living. (NIV)

One weekend our friends put together composite wood bookshelves they had bought. It appeared flimsy as they were assembling it, but when finally finished, they found that, thanks to modern engineering, the bookshelves were as sturdy as though made of hardwood. They were not only sturdy – they had a pleasing design.

The church is like those bookshelves. Each of us is like one of the individual components – essentially useless. Imagine a bookshelf without screws, supports, very strong glue, or perhaps missing pieces! But as a church working together, God can use us to do great things.

God's plan for our salvation includes members of His body coming together to play their important roles in mutual support. We have a common goal – keeping alive our faith in Jesus' death and resurrection as payment for our sins. When members of the faith come together in worship, our faith is strengthened, just as the bookcase became strong when every piece was there.

The theme for this Advent week is that Jesus still comes. One of the ways He continues to come is through each of us building up one another. God's church is not as strong or as useful if members are missing. Ask yourself, "Am I a missing part?" Have I unwittingly rejected a "fellow-part" of God's plan? Each of us can be a tiny support piece or a strong leader – each part working for the building up of one another. **Romans 14:19: "Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification."** (NIV)

Dear Father, thank You for the body of Your Church and for bringing us together to be an important part in the building up of one another. Thank You for the gifts You give each of us. Guide us to avoid dissension, fear, and laziness, so that we may work together for Your glory. Amen.

Monday, December 12, 2011

Advent Theme: He Still Comes

EVERY GOOD GIFT

James 1:17 Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. (NIV)

She's four *and a half* (emphasis hers) years old. (Her daddy says it's more like four going on forty.) In recent weeks she has announced she is in charge of her own bedtime prayers – she still wants Mom and Dad there, but she doesn't want them telling her what to say. It's usually the typical "Now I lay me down to sleep..." followed by all the "God blesses." But Christmas Eve, after gifts were opened, the prayers took an interesting turn. After the final "God bless..." came, "Thank you, Jesus, for letting Grandma give me a new dress. Thank you, Jesus, for letting Mommy give me a new dolly bed," and so on, until she had listed each and every gift she had received right down to the candy cane in her stocking. After the "Amen," her mother explained she didn't have to thank Jesus for all those gifts, she could just thank the people who gave them to her. "But Mommy," she declared, "Jesus had to give the presents to them first!"

I don't know about you, but I often forget that ALL I have comes from a gracious and loving God. It's fairly easy to remember to be thankful for the "big stuff," like grace and salvation and daily bread, but when it comes to the ordinary things, like a big bowl of freshly-popped corn, or a long cool drink of water on a hot day, or a comforting hug from a friend, I tend to take them for granted. The other side of the coin is that I forget that God gives me gifts of time, talents, and treasures to pass on to others through generosity, service, and fellowship. Obviously, the praying child understood this relationship. She knew exactly where the gifts came from and Whom she should thank for them.

Lord God, Heavenly Father, I pray You would give me the simple, sincere heart of a child. A heart that understands that all good and gracious gifts come from You. A heart that is truly thankful for the great and the small. A heart that longs to share those gifts with others so that they, too, may praise Your Name. Amen.

Tuesday, December 13, 2011

Advent Theme: He Still Comes

HAVE YOU HUGGED YOUR KAYAK INSTRUCTOR TODAY?

Psalm 37:28-29 For the LORD loves the just and will not forsake his faithful ones. They will be protected forever, but the offspring of the wicked will be cut off; the righteous will inherit the land and dwell in it forever. (NIV)

My father once told me that a man should never initiate a hug with a lady, because the lady might feel she was being mauled. He said that one did not get as many hugs that way, but the average hug was much better. I tried to follow this principle; but the non-verbal message I delivered must have been very clear, or my breath must really have been bad, because regularly, after hugging others, the ladies would shake hands with me. Then I started having problems with some perfumes. A hug from the wrong lady would bring on a headache.

When I started teaching deep-water re-entry in kayaks, the water washed the perfume away, and with it the headache. I likened it to my sins being washed away with the blood of Jesus. So the question comes up, if your kayak instructor dunked you in the water today and washed away your perfume and the set in your hair, so much so that you felt like a drowned rat, would you or could you respond with a hug?

Seriously, the hug I desire more than any other is from my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Each time I study His Word, I receive such a hug. Actually, I'm enfolded in His arms at all times – it is just that sometimes I am not paying attention. In **Matthew 28:20b**, Jesus said, **“And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”** (NIV) This is great comfort. Not only did Jesus pay the price for my sins, He is with me at all times.

Lord, thank You for protecting me and comforting me, even when I forget to acknowledge that You are there caring for me. Amen.

Wednesday, December 14, 2011

Advent Theme: He Still Comes

MIRACLE GRO

Ah, Miracle Gro. What would we do without it? Our plants would be smaller, weak, and sickly; they would produce less fruit and fewer flowers, and their leaves would be paltry and pale. At least, that is what the advertisements tell me, and it's what I believe – because I buy the stuff, and use it generously in my garden of tomatoes and herbs.

The apostle Paul talks about “growing” Christians, and “growing” the church. He says to the church in Corinth, **“I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow.” (1 Corinthians 3:6-7 NIV)**

God is at work in every heart and in every Christian church. Christ, the Savior, is the “Miracle Gro” God sent to us to forgive our sins and make us fertile ground. The Holy Spirit gives us the will and power to serve Him in every way and bring a harvest of people to God the Father.

Specifically, God's Word and His Spirit work to grow the Church. In Isaiah, God says this: **“...so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.” (Isaiah 55:11 NIV)**

God's purpose is to continually grow His kingdom on earth. We are all laborers in that kingdom, empowered by His Spirit to witness to others. God is the source of all of the good gifts that we have, with which to serve Him and further His kingdom (see **1 Corinthians 12**). We can trust in His goodness and in His power to work all things to His glory.

Heavenly Father, thank You for planting the seed of faith in my heart, for working through the people around me who love and care for me, and for causing my faith to grow and mature daily. Please continue to bless Your kingdom on earth. Bless each person and each church to grow and flourish, in faith and service to You. Amen.

WASHING FEET

John 13:12-17 When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. "Do you understand what I have done for you?" he asked them. "You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. I tell you the truth, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them."
(NIV)

We were camping in a cave, and it came time to bed down. I noticed my granddaughter's feet were filthy. Her friend's feet were not any cleaner. They would be sleeping on new air mattresses and in new sleeping bags. To protect my investment, I proceeded to wash their feet. My granddaughter said that it reminded her of Jesus washing his disciples' feet. The comment made me feel warm inside. I was doing a very humble act, and she made what I was doing seem like a wonderful act of service. I was being praised for it by a special young lady. Her friend said that all men are evil, and therefore they could not remind her of Jesus. I'm sure she was using the words "all men" to refer to all humans rather than just to me and other males of the species. She had a point. We are all sinful, but she allowed me to wash her feet. I resisted by temptation to tickle her feet. After their feet were washed, they went to bed. Within a few minutes I was in bed and sound asleep.

It reminded me that Christ came to earth to serve and save us. We serve our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ by serving others. Many of these acts of service are very humble acts. A friend washed dishes at pot-luck meals, saying that she was washing dishes for the Lord.

Lord, help me to find humble acts of service to bring glory to Your Name. Amen.

Friday, December 16, 2011

Advent Theme: He Still Comes

A FINAL DRINK

Matthew 26:27-28 Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." (NIV)

My friend posted on his Facebook account shortly after his father passed away: "Dear Fort Sill Cemetery, those two Coors Tall Boys on the grave are there on purpose. Also the Java Monster can, because 16-year-olds can't drink a beer with their Opa."

He and his son had gone to his father's grave, and they had "had a drink" with dad/grandpa. It brought tears to my eyes. It is so hard to lose a loved one, to know that we will never be able to share a conversation, a movie, a meal, or a beer with them again.

As Jesus was preparing to die, He shared one final meal with His disciples. He shared the lamb, bitter herbs, the bread, and the wine of a Passover with them in the Upper Room a few hours before He was betrayed on Thursday night. On Friday He was crucified. On Saturday it's likely His disciples remembered His words and that last meal as they grieved His death. Their grief turned to joy on Easter Sunday, as Christ returned from the dead and greeted His disciples and friends in victory.

Through our celebration of Holy Communion, we are privileged to share His body and blood. We share in His sacrifice. We receive grace and forgiveness. We look forward with hope to His return and to the resurrection of all the dead. In the meantime, we share in His presence and remember His life and His sacrifice. It is good to "share a drink" with our Lord and Savior.

Lord Jesus, thank You for coming to earth, for becoming flesh and blood like me. Thank You for Your sacrifice on the cross, and for sharing Your presence with me through Your body and blood in Holy Communion. Forgive my sins; comfort me in my grief; assure me of the hope of eternal life; and strengthen my faith, until I am in Your presence for eternity in Heaven. Amen.

Saturday, December 17, 2011

Advent Theme: He Still Comes

RE-READING THE GOSPEL

Matthew 26:26-28 While they were eating, Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, “Take and eat; this is my body.” Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them saying, “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.” (NKJV)

I forget things – not birthdays or doctors’ appointments or dinner dates, but ideas and concepts, and lessons I was taught in past years. God sometimes reminds me of things I’ve forgotten, actually He sticks them in front of my eyes in His Gospel, and I must pay attention. Recently I was reading in **Matthew 26:26-28**, and I found that these verses held new meaning for me.

I wondered what Jesus’ words meant to His disciples. What were their thoughts at this moment? And what does it mean to me today? Have I gone unthinking to the Lord’s Table? Has it become routine to me? I do not want this act to become “just a routine.” Jesus gave His body in pain and His blood in death to give eternity to me and all people, to make us clean and forgiven in the eyes of His Father.

How can I forget this sacrifice or trivialize it as routine? It should be and will be from now on the greatest gift I ever receive. Jesus comes to me each time I attend the Lord’s Supper.

Dear Jesus, You sacrificed so much to make me Your forgiven child and an heir of Heaven. Once again You have taught me through Your Word that Communion is not an act that occurs every two weeks in my life – it is You reaching out to me in the bread and wine, assuring me of my forgiveness bought by You and the promise of eternity with You. May I never forget this. Amen.

Sunday, December 18, 2011

Advent Theme: He Will Come Again
MY FOREVER HOME

Several friends use the term "forever home" to refer to the house where they plan to spend their lives after retirement, or after the kids have moved away, or after they are able to afford what they really want. It is a favorite hope and dream of many people.

As Christians, we already HAVE a "forever home"; Jesus promised that He was preparing it for us while we wait here on earth. **"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am."** (John 14:1-3 NIV)

We don't know specifics about this heavenly home, but we do know the Builder. We know that our Savior demonstrated unending compassion and kindness to all people at all times during His life on earth. He willingly laid down His life on the cross to pay for our sins, to heal the broken relationship between sinful mankind and God, and He promised to send us the Holy Spirit to guide us in holiness and godliness, and to bless our efforts and our lives. Knowing this, we have reason to believe that our heavenly "forever home" will be beautiful and wonderful beyond all human imagination. We will bask forever in the Light of God the Father, enjoying the treasure stored up for us in Heaven with Him.

Heavenly Father, thank You for the gift of Jesus Christ, Your Son, who saves me from my sins. Thank You for the promise of eternal life with You in Heaven. Help me to find comfort and hope in all of Your promises, and to always keep in mind the eternal reward waiting for me in Your presence. Amen.

Monday, December 19, 2011

Advent Theme: He Will Come Again

PARKING IN THE SHADE

When I first arrived at my new job, I chose to park in the shade of the trees that dot the parking lot; it was high summer, and I thought that extra shade was a good idea. Sadly, while my car may have been a tiny bit cooler at the end of the day, it was also heavily besmirched with bird droppings. Yuck. It was immediately obvious why many of those shady parking spots were open; no one wanted a messy car in exchange for a little shade.

This made me wonder about other times when I “parked myself” in a bad spot:

- When I sat and listened to gossip;
- When I idly daydreamed covetous or discontented thoughts;
- When I entertained myself with movies, books, or television that are opposed to the Christian values I know I should uphold;
- When I chose to be with people who act and think contrary to my values. I shouldn’t be surprised at the consequences, since ungodly choices in friends, thoughts, or entertainment can easily lead to spiritual bird-poop!

Psalm 1, verses 1-3, says it this way: “Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers. But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers.” (NIV)

We know that Jesus is coming again. He promised this before He sacrificed His life, so that we could become children of God. When He comes, do we want Him to find us abiding in His presence and looking to do His will, or “parking in the shade and covered with spiritual bird-poop”?

Heavenly Father, thank You for the blessing of Your Word and Your Spirit. Help me to abide in You, through study of Your Word and time spent with other believers. Protect me from the ungodly influences of the world; forgive me when I stray from You. In Jesus’ Name. Amen.

Tuesday, December 20, 2011

Advent Theme: He Will Come Again
RANKING SIN

Luke 6:41-42 [Jesus said,] "Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, 'Brother, let me take the speck out of your eye,' when you yourself fail to see the plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye." (NIV)

Fill in the blank:

I am _____ (tall; short; blue-eyed; dark-skinned; long-haired.....).
That was easy. These are things we can't help – it's just who we are.

I am _____ (clumsy, forgetful, naïve, cynical.....). That was more difficult. These are also individual characteristics but are more personal, and we may feel vulnerable when we talk about them. It's hard to admit we aren't perfect.

I am _____ (greedy; someone who drinks too much; angry; promiscuous; a gossip; a busybody; covetous and discontented; lustful; lazy; gluttonous; selfish; ambitious; vain; neglectful; abusive; hate-filled; bigoted; prone to outbursts; lacking in self-control; addicted to pornography; addicted to shopping; addicted to compliments; vindictive; demeaning; back-stabbing; deceitful.....). This is a very difficult blank to fill. We could simply fill it with the word SINFUL. We are all sinful. Sin is as much a part of being human as hair color or height. The Bible says that every one of us was conceived and born in sin, thus we are separated from God. So to make ourselves feel better, we are tempted to "rank" sin. We may think "I may be a little selfish, and I may covet my neighbors' stuff and have a pretty nasty temper....but that's not nearly as bad as so-and-so who beats his kids....or who got pregnant out of wedlock....or who got arrested for doing drugs....".

Original sin and every sin we commit separate us from God. That innate sinful nature – and all the sins we commit because of that sinful nature – separate us from God. Thankfully, God sent His Son Jesus as payment for our sins. Through His death, our sins are paid for. By faith in Him, we are made right with God – our sins are forgiven, and

our debts are paid. The earthly consequences of sin may remain – and the magnitude of those consequences may be different from one sin to the next – but the eternal consequences of sin have been removed. We are no longer doomed to eternal separation from God in hell; instead, we are promised a place with God for eternity in Heaven.

Heavenly Father, thank You for forgiving all of my sins for Jesus' sake. Please help me to look with mercy and compassion on other people; help me to not reject or hate them for their sins, but to love them and help them in their weaknesses, as You love and help me. Amen.

Wednesday, December 21, 2011

Advent Theme: He Will Come Again
THE LONESOME ROAD?

Matthew 28:20b [Jesus said,] “And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” (NIV)

There was a song written some years ago by a composer whose name I don't remember. It was a metaphor for life and a call to individualism or non-conformism. Some of it went like this:

“Goin' down that long lonesome highway;
Gonna live life my way.”

It's a catchy song but I see two glaring errors in that stanza:

The highway doesn't have to be lonesome.

Doing things our own way leads us to sin and death.

I'm certain the composer was not trying to introduce some deep guiding principles to us.

It's a song expressing feelings about its author's life and times.

So many of us see life as something we must cope with alone. “It's my life, and I'm in charge, and I will do as I please.” We try going alone in a world never intended for that. A truly rational person can't exist alone without any human contact. We just aren't wired that way.

God knew this and created Eve to be Adam's companion. Through them, families and societies were created. Through them, sin was also introduced to the world. They went their own way in the Garden of Eden, breaking God's commandment. So now we write songs about loneliness and rejection.

With God we are never alone. We are His children, and He wants us to be with Him. He allowed His Son Jesus to die for us and cleanse us of the sin that separates us from Him. By doing things His way instead of our own, the highway isn't lonesome – it's a walk to glory.

Father, with You and in You I am never alone. Thank You for being there. Amen.

Thursday, December 22, 2011

Advent Theme: He Will Come Again

THOSE MAGNIFICENT BIRDS

I took a group of young ladies kayak bird watching. One of them was extremely skilled at using stealth techniques to approach large wading birds, such as the Greater Egret, without disturbing them. You might say she got up close and personal with them. When she spotted some magnificent black birds sitting on a large rock, she decided to see how close she could approach. Over the next 20 minutes she used the wind and a few slow paddle strokes to drift closer and closer to the birds and the rock they were sitting on. She then paddled back to us at a fairly rapid rate. The large black birds were Black Vultures. The large rock was a bloated dead cow that the vultures were feeding on.

Although I did not say it, I thought about what Jesus said when He was describing the end times: **“Wherever there is a carcass, there the vultures will gather.”**

(Matthew 24:28 NIV). The statement in modern-day vernacular would be, “It is a sure thing.” Jesus went on and described many signs that would signify that the end times were near. Those signs have already come to pass, so we know that the end of the world could come at any time. Even though Jesus was using a common expression to indicate a sure thing, I feel that those magnificent black birds sitting on the large rock are a metaphor for sin. At a distance, sin looks very enticing, and like something that by participating in it would appear to make a person happy, but after you have made the commitment to become involved with the sin and you cannot undo the sin, you realize that it is like that bloated, smelly carcass where vultures go to feed.

The Second Coming will happen. Our sins have made us like that bloated carcass, but the blood of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, shed on Calvary, has washed our sins away, and Jesus can welcome us into Heaven.

Lord, I sin daily. Help me to turn away from those sins and turn towards You. Amen.

Friday, December 23, 2011

Advent Theme: He Will Come Again
PROVIDING WARMTH

2 Corinthians 1:3-5 Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows. (NIV)

During the night a Texas norther blew in, and the winds howled out of the Northwest, forming whitecaps on the river. We loaded our kayaks and headed up the Rio Bravo del Norte into that strong headwind, with waves breaking over the bows of our kayaks. As long as we were paddling, everyone stayed reasonably warm, but we had to take a periodic break. One young lady got cold during a break and started to shiver. I offered to get a jacket out of my emergency bag, but she said that she was OK. I suggested that she come over and sit beside me and that another adult sit on the other side of her to give her shelter, and in that way she could warm up a little until we challenged the wind again. She came over because I told her she should. We sat very close, and I put my arm around her. She relaxed, and soon she quit shivering.

The world is a cold and dreary place sometimes. We can end up beaten down and chilled to the bone by our struggles. How wonderful it is that we can find warmth and comfort beside other believers. The Body of Christ – the Church – is established for just that purpose: to comfort and warm us, and to strengthen our faith.

How many times have we wanted to stay in bed on a Sunday morning? How many times have we wanted to do something besides go to church on Sunday morning? How many times have we realized when we got to church that we were right where we wanted to be? Yes, we can worship our Lord and Savior while on the lake fishing or in a deer blind, but it is so much more satisfying to worship Him surrounded by fellow believers.

Lord, thank You for providing for all of my needs. Help me to reach out to others and help them with their needs. Amen.

Christmas Eve, Saturday, December 24, 2011
THE LADY IN THE BLUE HOODIE

Luke 2:19 But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. (NIV)

A friend of mine told of how her daughter once asked – upon viewing a nativity scene on display – whether Jesus’ Mom was “the lady in the blue hoodie.” If Jesus were born in our time, in the United States, maybe Mary would have been a teenager in an oversized blue hooded sweatshirt. Mary, Jesus’ mother, was a teenager – now famously depicted in a saintly blue gown – but in reality she was very young, poor, and scared. Based on what we know about ancient Israel, it’s likely that Mary was maybe 14 or 15 years old. Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit, but no one but Mary and Joseph (and apparently Cousin Elizabeth) knew this to be true. Everyone else thought Mary had engaged in a horrible sin, and that Joseph was foolish enough to stick with her anyway. Jesus was born in a stable, surrounded by the smell and warmth of barn animals; Mary, Joseph and a few shepherds knew that He was the promised Messiah, but to everyone else He was just one more baby.

God used that special Baby to redeem humanity. Jesus Christ was born to a human mother. The son of a carpenter, Jesus had an unremarkable childhood and entered adulthood as just a man from Nazareth. Yet through His perfect obedience and His innocent death on the cross, He earned salvation for all who believe in Him. Through simple things that are common, even ugly and coarse, God is able to work His will. The lady in the blue hoodie. The poor teenager. The peasant town of Bethlehem. The dirty stable. The rough shepherds. The instrument of Roman torture – the cross. God worked out His plan of salvation for us in those simple things. Through the simple things – His Word connected to the simple water of baptism, and the simple bread and wine of the Lord’s Supper – He strengthens our faith throughout life.

Heavenly Father, thank You for the faith of Mary, who humbly accepted her part in Your plan. Thank You for the birth, the death, and the resurrection of Jesus Christ – who earned for me forgiveness and eternal life. Thank You for Your Word and Your sacraments, simple means to strengthen my own faith. Bless me with a faith strong enough to last a lifetime. Amen.

Christmas Day, Sunday, December 25, 2011
FIVE! FOUR! THREE! ... TWO! .. ONE! .

Ponder the Lambkin God laid in a manger:
Humanity's whole, yet humanity's stranger,
Destined our proxy, a true re-arranger,
Miraculous infant, a heaven-sent changer,
Child among children, living our danger!

We, hopeless and helpless, plod on to our graveyard,
Mired in rebellion, in step with the vanguard
Of self, sin, and Satan, our spirits pressed downward,
Living the lie that God's plan is all backward!

Tiny this seed that embodies earth's Maker,
Full equal to God, yet of man's flesh partaker,
Sparked by the Spirit, life's mover and shaker!

Saints and all angels raise high the bold chorus:
All worthy is He who from death will restore us!

In quiet contemplation would you thank God for Jesus
by completing our greeting to you for this season
A Blessed Nativity
John and Phoebe Lawrenz
Hong Kong 2010

Monday, December 26, 2011
LATE, LIKE EVERYONE ELSE

Colossians 3:23-24 **Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving. (NIV)**

I try to be on time, and since I take into account potential traffic or other problems, I am usually early. Due to life getting in the way, I found that I was going to be late submitting a paper. I contacted the lady I was to send it to, and she assured me that I had a few extra days. When I finally got it submitted, she e-mailed, "I'm glad to see that you are occasionally late like the rest of us."

It is easy to feel pride in being on time, especially when we see that others are not as timely. Being on time is an indication of being considerate of others and sending the message that I think their time is as important as my time. It is a good work. But apart from Christ, all of our good works are like filthy rags when God the Father sees them. So really, I am no better (or worse) than some people I know who are constantly late. I pray that I am not like the Pharisee in **Luke 18:11b**, who proclaimed, **"God, I thank you that I am not like other men...."** (NIV)

The redeeming power of Jesus' blood, shed for us when He sacrificed Himself on the cross to pay for our sins, makes us clean and holy in God's eyes. God's plan and His timing were perfect. Our sins are forgiven as though they never happened.

Father, as I try to be timely in order to be considerate of others, I fall into the sin of pride. I recognize that in Your eyes, all sins justify sending me to hell. I thank You for the blood of Jesus that covers my sins and opens the doors of Heaven to me. Amen.

Tuesday, December 27, 2011
LOCKED OUT

Hebrews 9:13-14 The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean. How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God! (NIV)

We were at a motel, and I went down to the breakfast area to get my spouse some breakfast. It took about 10 minutes, and when I got back, my room key would not work. I tried it again. A light flashed red, indicating that either I was using the wrong card or that the door had been locked from the inside. I tried it again. It did not work. I checked the room number, and it was correct. I had been locked out. My spouse had apparently turned the security bolt on the door, laid down to await my return, and immediately gone into a sound sleep. Or maybe I was using a credit card by mistake. After knocking on the door and probably waking up the neighbors, I was relieved when she came to the door and opened it.

When my sin sat before God, I was locked out of Heaven. There was nothing I could do to get in. Beating on the door of Heaven would not let me in. Doing good works would not get me a place in Heaven. Lock picks, crow bars, and sledge hammers would not work. The only way the door to Heaven could be opened was from the inside. It was opened to me when Jesus died for my sins. His blood washed them away. Looking through the blood of Jesus, God the Father says, "Welcome to Heaven."

Lord, thank You for providing the Sacrifice that opened the door to Heaven for me and all other believers. Amen.

Wednesday, December 28, 2011

THE WAR

Hebrews 11:32-34 And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets, who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions, quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies. (NIV)

Ulysses S. Grant was an American Civil War hero. He came from relative obscurity to national fame as a general of a great army during the war, and later as President of the U.S. During the Mississippi River campaign, he earned a reputation for never offering concessions to the Confederate armies he captured and became known as “Unconditional Surrender” Grant.

Our struggle against sin is like a never-ending war. We fight against all sorts of temptations in this world. We win some battles, we lose some, and the war rages on. The obstacle in this war is that sin cannot be conquered by anything we do. When Jesus Christ died on the cross and rose again in glory for our forgiveness, He conquered sin for us. The war has been won, but the battles continue. Our enemy, sin, is still among us, making us prisoners to its relentless power. In our lifetimes, we can only try to resist through the power of the Holy Spirit. We can win in the end – praise God.

It's God's will that we have faith in Christ, whose sacrifice freed us from our earthly shackles. Through Christ we receive God's unconditional salvation. We are welcomed to an eternity of His love and peace in a heavenly home.

Some people see surrender as a weakness, but in God, it becomes the power and strength to break Satan's deathly grip. **2 Corinthians 12:9:** “**But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me.**” (NIV)

Almighty God, You have defeated sin for me, so that through Your grace and love I may one day join You in glory. Help me to have the will to battle sin through faith in Your promise. Amen.

Thursday, December 29, 2011
WILL WE SEE GOD THE FATHER?

Job 19:26-27 And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; I myself will see him with my own eyes – I, and not another. How my heart yearns within me! (NIV)

We know that God the Father is watching over us; and when we get to Heaven, we will be with Him, as well as with Jesus and the Holy Spirit, the angels, and all the saints who preceded us. The other day I was asked if when we are in Heaven, will we be able to see God the Father? My response was, “Of course we will.” Then I was asked, “Where in the Bible does it say that?”

That was a harder question, and it took me a while working with my concordance to find the reference in Job. While I was hunting, I kept remembering the saying I grew up with, “The problem ain’t what you don’t know, it’s what you know that ain’t so.” I also learned, “Ain’t ain’t a word,” but that is how I learned it. (See Editor’s Note below.) In this case, I was right, and I had found a wonderful verse that said we would not only be able to see God, we will have real bodies. We “know” so many things about the Bible, Heaven, and the path to Heaven. Are all of those things we “know” correct? If we are lax in studying the Bible, we may never know during this life. To me the important message is not that I will be able to see God with my own eyes – the important message I find in the Bible is that Jesus died so I could go to Heaven. Knowing that is enough, but knowing that I will be able to see God with my own eyes is icing on the cake.

Lord, thank You for providing a way for me to enter Heaven. Keep me motivated to study Your Word so I can, with the help of the Holy Spirit, align my life with Your will, and help others in their walk of faith with You, too. Amen.

Editor’s note: The Oxford Dictionary declared “ain’t” a word in 2010, I believe. They couldn’t find a better way to contract “am not” for the masses.

Friday, December 30, 2011
FASHIONABLE SHOES

Proverbs 22:6 Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it. (NIV)

As the Easter service was over, a young lady headed across the lobby with her parents. She was in her Easter finest, wobbling on her high heels as if she were playing dress-up in her mother's clothes. About two-thirds of the way across, she stopped, sat down, and removed her shoes. From the expression on her face, I suspect her feet were hurting, and she was afraid that she would fall. What lessons were her parents teaching her that day? They could have been:

Go to church on Sundays,
Follow the latest fashion, no matter how much it hurts, or
Dress like Mommy.

There are thousands of lessons we need to teach our children. Some are easy to teach; some require many lessons. Many seem never to be learned. Some parents take comfort in the last part of the quoted Scripture, "when he is old he will not turn from it," and insist that the verse does not mention teenage years. The primary lesson we need to teach is that Christ was crucified for our sins. He did everything to bring about our salvation, for He loved us when we did not yet know Him. If we do not teach that, nothing else matters.

Lord, thank You for teaching me to love You. Help me to consistently, constantly witness to others about You – especially to the children in my life. Bless and keep all of those young in the faith. Amen.

New Year's Eve, Saturday, December 31, 2011
ONE DAY AFTER ANOTHER

Philippians 4:4-7 Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (NIV)

“Have you recuperated from your accident?” my friend asked. Physically - Yes, but my leg still hurts. Financially – I’m getting there. Emotionally – I’m a mess. Every time I get behind the wheel of a car, I panic. My knees shake, my heart pounds, my stomach gets in a knot, and my head aches. I panic when I see cars approaching me – I panic if someone brakes suddenly – I panic if the car behind me gets too close. I have to drive, so I pray out loud, sing hymns, and make a conscious effort to breathe deeply. Every morning, before driving off, I tell God about my fear, and ask Him to take care of my fear and to help me, and the others on the road, arrive safely.

Recuperating from a traumatic experience is difficult. God uses tough times in order to prepare us for the future. I’m not sure what His plan is, but I still have a purpose because I am still here. Every day is a challenge. I have financial matters to tend to, I have to find another car, I have to continue driving, and life goes on. Every day I feel a little better. I remember my mom telling me, “The best thing God made was one day after the other.” “Don’t worry about tomorrow.” “What doesn’t kill you will make you stronger.” “Time will heal...” I will continue to remember how fragile life is and continue to live it, to the best of my ability, according to God’s plan. I know that He is taking care of me. Life is good! By His grace, I am alive! And He takes care of me even when I don’t see it. The Lord is GOOD!

Heavenly Father, by Your grace You keep me from harm. Help me to always surrender my life to You and remember that You are in control. Amen.

New Year's Day, Sunday, January 1, 2012
ENOUGH FOR THIS DAY

Proverbs 30:8-9 [The sayings of Agur], “Keep falsehood and lies far from me; give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread. Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you and say, ‘Who is the LORD?’ Or I may become poor and steal, and so dishonor the name of my God.” (NIV)

Research into human behavior has revealed an interesting – but maybe not surprising – phenomenon: the more we have, the more we use. We will eat more from a large bag of M&M's than a small one. We will use more shampoo from a “value-sized” bottle. Stockpiling and wastefulness seem to be two characteristics human beings are prone to.

The children of Israel received manna in the wilderness, one day at a time, to teach them that God will provide for their needs. Jesus specifically taught us to pray “Give us this day our daily bread.”

If we have too much, we may waste it; or we may rely on our own resources rather than trusting in God's providence and His care for us. It is hard for us to trust in God's care for us. It is part of our sinful human nature to worry about the future, worry about having “enough.”

Jesus reminds us to not be anxious for anything. **“So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them.” (Matthew 6:31-32 NIV).** Through God's love and provision, we will have enough – the food, the clothing, the shelter that we need. In **2 Peter 1:3**, we are reminded that **“His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness.” (NIV).** Through Jesus Christ, we have grace, forgiveness, and salvation – more than enough.

This life is challenging, and there may be times of great struggle and deprivation – from lack of food and water, to lack of hope. It is very difficult to believe that even in those

times of “lack,” there is still “enough.” God has promised that we will always have enough. Even in times of suffering, we should rely on His promises. His goodness and His grace will lead us to His eternal love and life with Him. God is our source of comfort and hope – in times of suffering and lack, He calls us to come to Him to receive all that we need.

Heavenly Father, thank You for blessing me with every spiritual and physical blessing that I need for my life. Help me to trust that if I do not have something, it is because I do not need it, or I do not need it now. Help me to rely wholly on you. When others around me are suffering, help me to be a source of blessing, generosity, and comfort to those in need. Let Your blessings flow to others through me. Amen.

Monday, January 2, 2012
GRAFTED INTO CHRIST

John 15:5-6 [Jesus said,] "I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned." (NIV)

The host of the radio program on gardening was discussing the Meyer Lemon tree of a concerned caller. The winter had been hard, and the tree had many brown leaves and seemed to be doing poorly. The radio host raised an interesting concern: because the Meyer Lemon tree was grafted onto the root system of a hardier variety, it was possible that the top portion of the tree – the lemon-producing trunk and limbs – would die, leaving rootstock to take over. This could result in a tree – but not a lemon tree.

In John, chapter 15, Jesus discusses the importance of “remaining in” Him (Jesus). He describes His followers as those who have been grafted in – the new Christian Church grafted into the historical root of Judaism, and ultimately into THE Root, Jesus Christ. Those Christians who remain in Christ will be fortified and strengthened through Him. Those who remain in Him will bear much fruit, will pray with great confidence, and will give glory to God. Those who fail to remain in Christ and who fail to bear fruit in Him, will be cast off, like the dead portion of that lemon tree. If we fail to remain in Christ, we are no longer grafted into the true Root of Christ Jesus. We will die spiritually. We will not bear fruit. We remain in Christ by studying His Word (v. 7), by striving to be obedient and to love each other (v. 10), and by sharing the love of God with others (v. 16-17). Through God’s grace, we will be with Him forever.

Heavenly Father, thank You for grafting me into Christ Jesus and for blessing me with every spiritual blessing, for giving me Your Word and the gift of salvation in Christ. Thank You for promising to be with me, and to produce in me much good fruit to give You glory always. Help me to study Your Word and to follow Your commands. Amen.

Tuesday, January 3, 2012

JUNK E-MAIL

I hate forwarded “junk” e-mails. Most of the time they are full of sentimentality and inaccuracies. My brother-in-law (a lawyer) is infamous for shooting back “reply all” e-mails with a link to www.snopes.com. “Snopes” is a website that seeks out the truth behind urban legends and chain e-mails. A quick check on Snopes revealed that No – Billy Graham did not compose that long prayer forwarded to me; and Snopes told me that No – there is no fear of someone “stealing” the electronic signal of my car remote to later open my car doors. After my latest check on Snopes, I thought of what was said about the Church in Berea: **“Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.” (Acts 17:11 NIV)** The people in Berea were praised for their discernment and close study of the new Gospel and the Old Testament scripture. Later, in the letter to the Thessalonians, Paul says this: **“Do not put out the Spirit’s fire; do not treat prophecies with contempt. Test everything. Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil.” (1 Thessalonians 5:19-22 NIV)** He encouraged them to “test them all” – test all of the wisdom, prophecies, and teachings of their leaders; look for what is true and Godly; be alert to what is false. They are not to hold a cynical, close-minded view (“Do not put out the Spirit’s fire; do not treat prophecies with contempt.”), but to make wise distinctions between what is good and what is evil.

As Christians, we are told by Jesus to be **“shrewd as snakes and innocent as doves” (Matthew 10:16b NIV)**. We should use the wisdom and intelligence given by God to further His cause and His kingdom. By sifting carefully both Scripture and the teachings of this world, we protect ourselves from falsehoods that waste our energy, and from lies that may lead us astray. Wisdom helps us protect the truth and purity of the Gospel, God’s promise for our salvation, as we share it clearly with others.

Heavenly Father, please give me supernatural wisdom; strengthen my human wisdom with Your Spirit, to guide me in all truth and to further Your kingdom. Amen.

Wednesday, January 4, 2012
ARE YOU THAT BRAVE?

Psalm 37:3-4 Trust in the LORD and do good; dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture. Delight yourself in the LORD and he will give you the desires of your heart. (NIV)

She was 14, going on 15, and had never flown. She was flying from Oregon to Texas and changing planes in Salt Lake City. The last time we had seen each other was 6 years ago when I had pushed her on a swing. We were not related, but her father and I had worked together on several projects. We traded photos so we would recognize each other at the airport. She was joining me on a four-day wilderness kayak-camping trip, with people whom she had never met. She was going to have to paddle her own kayak and carry her share of the gear. She was going to have to be an adult. Would you have been willing to face that challenge? Most 14-year-olds would not. In fact, there are many adults who would not want to face the challenges she was facing. Her parents trusted that I would look out for her, so she trusted me. It was a difficult, but delightful, trip.

Shortly before she caught her flight home, she sent her father a photograph of the two of us with a caption, "Me and my grandfather." I said a prayer thanking God for giving me another granddaughter.

The Lord has said that He will care for us and that we should put our trust in Him. Sometimes we think that we know more than the Lord. Sometimes we think the Lord only speaks King James English and does not understand our modern conditions. Seldom will we put our faith in someone whom we have seen to take care of us, so it is very difficult to put our faith in the Lord, whom we have not seen. Thank God that He gave us Jesus, sent to this world to save us. Thank God that He surrounds us with godly people who show us love and compassion, living out God's love in our lives.

Lord, thank You for putting me in the lives of people and helping them in their lives. Help me to show others that it is safe to put our trust in You and that You will take care of us. Amen.

Thursday, January 5, 2012
COVETING RABBITS

The neighbors behind us took the whole fence down to replace it, leaving our yards completely open. My husband and I were working in the back yard, and our dog came to keep us company. She spotted the 2 small kennels which the neighbors keep in their backyard – and the 2 small bunny rabbits housed in each one. Her ears perked up, and her whole posture became alert and interested. "Trixie," I told her, "you are too well fed to be coveting your neighbor's rabbits." She gave me an embarrassed look, but went back to avid rabbit-watching.

Having enough of his own didn't stop King David from coveting Bathsheba. Having enough of our own doesn't stop most of us from coveting what our neighbors have – a nicer home, a faster car, a better job, more-well-behaved children, younger skin, a trimmer physique. We spend much of our time in covetous contemplation, rather than focusing on all of the many blessings God gives each of us. The Scripture tells us that God knows what we need and ensures that we have it (**“For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them.”** **Matthew 6:32 NIV**). As Christians, we have everything we really need in Christ Jesus. Through Jesus, we have forgiveness from sins, reconciliation with God, and eternal life after we die. God blesses us beyond these spiritual gifts and gives us "our daily bread" in generous supply. We have food and clothing; we have shelter and transportation. In many cases, we have more than that – we have stylish clothes, delicious food, beautiful homes, and state-of-the-art transportation. We are encouraged to cultivate contentment; Paul reminds young Pastor Timothy that **"godliness with contentment is great gain" (1 Timothy 6:6 NIV)**. Being discontented and coveting what others have can distract us from a spirit of thanksgiving and gratefulness. We should have a spirit of gratefulness, focusing on the love of God and His generous gift of Jesus Christ.

Heavenly Father, thank You for giving me all that I need in this life and in eternity and for the blessings of food, clothing, and shelter which I have in rich supply. I thank You for the salvation I have in Christ Jesus. Help me to reject covetousness and discontent, and to be grateful for Your good gifts. Amen.

Friday, January 6, 2012
EPIPHANY PIE

Matthew 2:1-2 After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him." (NIV)

At a potluck luncheon, one of our devotion writers had an empty pie pan in front of him. I asked if he had eaten the whole pie. He answered, "Yes," and said I should write an Epiphany devotion about this. My first thought was "that's impossible!" Pie and the Three Wise Men have nothing in common. When I got home I googled, and I learned a lot of trivia about Epiphany.

On Epiphany, which is 12 days after Christmas, we celebrate the visit of the Magi, who were the first Gentiles to recognize Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God. They are also called the Three Kings or the Three Wise Men. It is believed that the song "The 12 Days of Christmas" about the partridge in a pear tree, the geese, the golden rings, the Lords a-dancing, etc., are about the 12 days between Christmas Day and Epiphany. The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church celebrates Epiphany as the day of Christ's baptism. The Eastern Orthodox Church celebrates it as the Feast of Theophany, meaning "God shining forth." Many European countries celebrate Three Kings' Day, and their celebrations include traditional cakes or other special foods. All of this pointed me toward celebrating Jesus' inclusion of Gentiles into God's chosen family.

The potluck luncheon was for new members of our Shepherd family. We celebrated their journey to us, as Epiphany is the celebration of the visitation of the Magi. The empty pie pan relates to Epiphany. The pie pan signifies food. Food is normally part of a celebration. Celebrations are given in honor of special events. Epiphany is a really special event. See, there is a common thread here between pie and Epiphany; they do have something in common – Celebrations.

Dear Loving Father, thank You for new believers, old believers, and all who come to You finding their way to faith. Help us to celebrate these events every day, not just on special Sundays, and to celebrate these in our daily prayers and in our thanks to You. Amen.

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