

Advent to Epiphany

a daily devotional

November 30, 2014 — January 6, 2015



Holy Spirit Lutheran Church

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Written in gratitude to God for the gift of Jesus!

This devotional is dedicated to the glory of God. We are grateful for all those who have planted, sowed, and harvested the seed of faith in the writers and readers of these daily devotionals.

Jesus was born into this world as an expression of God's great love for all people. Jesus came so that we would have life, and have it abundantly.

If you want to know more about the person of Jesus, or if you desire prayer, please call the church office at 702-645-1777 or email info@holyspiritlasvegas.org. Upcoming events and worship services are listed on the next page.

Throughout this devotional are sprinkled several pages that offer readers a reminder to pause, to meditate on a picture, a thought, or simply remain quiet, listening for God to speak.



Wise Men and Women Still Seek Him

Upcoming Events and Worship Schedule

- November 29 & 30 *Worship 1st Weekend in Advent*
November 30 Advent Celebration Breakfast & Craft 9–11:30am
- December 3 *Wednesday Lenten Service 6:30pm*
Holden Evening Prayer
Bible Study *People of the Nativity* 7:00pm
- December 6 & 7 *Worship 2nd Weekend in Advent*
December 7 Christmas Concert
- December 10 *Wednesday Lenten Service 6:30pm*
Holden Evening Prayer
Bible Study *People of the Nativity* 7:00pm
- December 13 & 14 *Worship 3rd Weekend in Advent*
- December 14 Caroling (meet at Holy Spirit) 5:30pm
- December 17 *Wednesday Lenten Service 6:30pm*
Holden Evening Prayer
Bible Study *People of the Nativity* 7:00pm
- December 20 & 21 *Worship 4th Weekend in Advent*
- December 24 *Christmas Eve Worship* Communion & Candlelight
5pm Children's Service
7pm Contemporary Service
9pm Traditional Service

(Child care is available Christmas Eve for infant to 5 years)

December 25 *Christ is born! Hallelujah!*



Regular Weekend Worship Schedule:

- Saturday 5:30pm Traditional Worship
Sunday 9:00am Contemporary Worship
Sunday 11:30am Traditional Worship
Sunday School Sunday 10:15am (ages 4 thru adult)
NO SS December 22 & 29



This devotional booklet, offered for your *Advent to Epiphany* journey, was written by the faith community of Holy Spirit Lutheran Church in gratitude to God. To God be the glory!

Each devotional is based on the Scripture passage which is noted in the top right corner of each page. Each writer may reflect on only one or two verses. To understand the context of the writer's comments, it may be helpful to read the entire passage, or the entire chapter, during your devotional time. The Bible translation or paraphrase used by each writer is included following the printed verses.

Bible Translation Abbreviations:

CEV	Contemporary English Version
ERV	English Revised Version
ESV	English Standard Version
GNB	Good News Bible
KJV	King James Version
NAB	New American Bible
NCV	New Century Version
NASV	New American Standard Version
NET	New English Translation
NIV	New International Version
NIRV	New International Reader's Version
NLT	New Living Translation
NKJV	New King James Version
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
RSV	Revised Standard Version
TV	The Voice
TNIV	Today's New International Version
TEV	Today's English Version

Bible Paraphrase Abbreviations:

LB	The Living Bible
MSG	The Message (Eugene Peterson)

At that time people will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. (v. 26) NIV.

When I was little, I couldn't wait for Christmas. It seemed to take forever. First, the weather turned cold. While I was in school, my friends and I would talk endlessly about what we would be getting for Christmas. And then it would be Christmas vacation. During this time there would be Christmas shows, mailing Christmas cards, and rehearsal for choirs and plays. And as Christmas got closer, it just seemed as if time increased. Then it became Christmas Day! I would celebrate with family and friends, open presents, and share in a huge meal.

What I find interesting about the day of Christ's birth is that with all the anticipation, I also knew that the day was coming. I was aware that things needed to be prepared and completed in anticipation of that day. However, in today's lesson we are asked to consider a different matter: the anticipation of the return of Christ, without knowing when it will occur. In contrast to Christmas, we are now asked to be prepared, or to anticipate an event we don't know when it will happen. This can be distressing since it is human nature to want to know when events will occur.

I would like to have you see this in a different way. God's decision to not reveal the date and time was meant for me to focus on the journey rather than the final destination. God is telling me to be mindful of the present. Everywhere I turn there are obstacles that can either help and hinder my journey. As a Christian, faith and prayer are tools to be used to either complete or avoid these obstacles so that not only can my journey continue but that I can also become closer to God. How much would I change, ignore, or delay if I knew when the journey would be completed? When the journey ends, there will be great celebration. But when it comes, what will you be able to say about the journey?

Dear God, I know that one day I will be with you forever. Until that day, may my eyes be open to serve you, to do your work, and to glorify you. Amen.

A. Allen Vaughn

Yet, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand. (v. 8) NRSV

Time and again I am reminded that the God of the universe, the Creator of the heavens and the earth, desires a relationship with me. Jesus died to make that relationship possible. Yet, there have been times in my life when that relationship took a back seat. My way, my will was leading the way. I didn't consciously say, "God, I'm going to do it my way!" But, I didn't include God in the decision making.

During those times in my life when prayer, worship, and Bible study were not a priority in my life it seemed like God was distant. I now know it was me that moved and that I only need to turn to God. What I have learned is that in prayer, Bible study, worship and surrounding myself with God and God's people, God molds me and shapes me.

There are times when I (the clay) have needed to be reshaped by the Potter. My thoughts, my behavior, my attitude, all need an adjustment. There are times when the molding is gentle—a little nudge here—a little nudge there. Sometimes it isn't so gentle! But what I have noticed is that most of the molding and shaping comes little by little as I submit myself to God's will in my life and I stay connected with prayer, worship and Bible study.

Merciful God, thank you for the gift of prayer and your Word. I am willing clay in your hands. Please mold me and shape me to be more like Jesus. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Devra Betts

Let your hand rest on the man at your right hand, the son of many you have raised up for yourself. The we will not turn away from you; revive us, and we will call you your name. (vv. 17-18) NIV

Which comes first, the chicken or the egg? Oddly that's what came to my mind when I first read these verses. Does God seek us first or do we look for God?

I thought back to my life about 25 years ago. It was a difficult time for me. In my job, I spent five days a week working with "dysfunctional" families. I knew I was losing a healthy perspective on people in general and families in particular, but I was having a hard time figuring out what I could do about that. Then I thought about church. I had been raised going to church and Sunday School. I was confirmed and even taught Sunday School when I was in high school. However, as often happens with teens and young adults I left the church. I considered myself an atheist.

How surprised I was when I realized, after a few months of attending Sunday services how God had grabbed on to me; or had I grabbed on to God? I'm still not sure how it all happened. "Revive [me] and [I] will call on you name" indeed! One thing I am sure of is that God will never let go of me.

Heavenly Father, thank you for welcoming this prodigal daughter home. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Barbara Butler

This confirms that what I told you about Christ is true. Now you have every spiritual gift you need as you eagerly wait for the return of our Lord Jesus Christ. (vv. 6-7) NLT

The Corinthians were people who were impressed by worldly notions of power and wisdom. Paul wanted them to understand that God's saving work on the cross turns such notions upside down. Paul knew that we don't need worldly knowledge and power to believe in God and to proclaim the gift of salvation we receive through Jesus Christ. The believers in Corinth may have struggled with telling non-believers about their faith; but Paul reminded them that the Holy Spirit would provide strength and guidance to them.

You have probably had friends or family members tell you about concerns in their lives. Have you struggled to find the words to help tell about God's love for them and how God is able to help? When you question your own abilities to share your faith remember God has called you and will provide the words you need to share his love.

Thank you, Lord, for calling us to serve you. May we be willing to answer your call and share your love with others. Amen.

Mary West

See now, I dwell in a house of cedar, but the ark of God dwells in a tent ... and I have been with you wherever you went.

(vv. 2, 9a) NRSV

I live in a pretty nice home. And I bet you do too. Not a mansion or royal place, like King David. But also not a tent, like the ark of God! This is a passage about times when appearances conflict with reality. “King” David, a lofty title by man’s standards, is called a “*servant*” by God.

From the perspective of his palace throne, David perceives God’s dwelling place in the tent as inadequate. Even Nathan, David’s prophet, initially gives the King the “sounds good to me; I’m sure God will be ok with it” response to David’s idea to build God a more permanent earthly home.

To me, there has to be a benefit to the tabernacle idea, and here’s what I’ve noticed—mobility! God reminds David, “*...and I have been with you wherever you went....*” Our God is a go-to God!

And in some of the niftiest bit of irony and foreshadowing available, God hints that he himself will build a “*house*” and a “*throne*” and a “*kingdom*” for David’s offspring (yes, none other than Jesus!) which will be established forever. We are reminded, the “church” is not the building, but the people.

So may you indeed be “built up” by God this season.

Awesome God, thank you for being a go-to God and for being present wherever I am. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Jen Anderson

Extol the Lord, O Jerusalem; praise your God, O Zion, for He strengthens the bars of your gates and blesses your people within you. (vv. 12-13) NIV

The opening and closing phrase of this Psalm is “Praise the Lord”, one that I’ve heard uttered by people, young and old, over the years. I can remember my paternal grandmother using it frequently when speaking with family members, friends, and sometimes, strangers. She thanked God continually for being a part of her life through both good times and bad. My maternal grandfather, when asking the blessing before a meal would always say “we give you thanks for allowing us to surround this table laden with bounty.” My parents, raised accordingly, instilled in their children (me) those same ideals.

Here in Las Vegas, we are surrounded by beautiful, majestic and colorful mountains, astounding weather with glorious blue skies and almost continual sunshine, all provided by our Creator. He provides us everything needed to live: food, air to breathe, shelter, health, employment, etc.

He also provides us with a facility to worship him and minister to those in need in our community, and teach others about his promise of eternal life. Praise the Lord!

Dear God, I praise you, oh Lord! Thank you for the beauty that surrounds me and for all the blessings in my life. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Charlie Kesling

All people are like grass, and all their faithfulness is like the flowers of the field. The grass withers and the flowers fall, because the breath of the LORD blows on them. Surely the people are grass. The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God endures forever. (vv. 6-8)

NIV

When I look at this passage and I look at my life, I am proud to say I am grass and yes, the Lord blows his breath into me every day. I cannot function or survive without him. I have found myself in some life changing moments and each time God was right there beside me, holding me even when I didn't know he was there. In my darkest hours he shined light, in my questioning moments he answered with conviction, and in my most confused moments he set me straight. I am growing with God, and each day that I "let go and let God" he shows me a different direction.

Fear is my weakness right now because I know I have not completely given my life to God and the part of me that wants me to be in control is fighting to hold on. I do know there is no greater love than the love the Lord has for me and for that I am very thankful. I give all praise and thanks to Jesus. I pray that my journey is always filled with knowledge and I continue to grow with God's guidance. So to all my brothers and sisters, I leave you with knowing I know God, I know who I am, and I am very thankful for the blessings God bestows on me each and every day.

Heavenly Father, you have shined your light on me on many occasions, and I ask that you shine your light on my brothers and sisters in Christ as well. Be their strength in the morning, their shelter during the day and their guardian at night. Let them know and feel your presence in their lives for there is no greater love than the one you have for us. Amen!

LaShone Manning

As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, “See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,’” (vv. 2-3) NRSV

I must have been seven or eight years old when several families from my church in southern Indiana traveled to a neighboring city to see a production of the musical, *Godspell*. I had never been to a church other than my own nor had I seen a live musical. The church was in a city down by the Ohio River and the trip down the steep hills was exciting. It was all new to me.

This particular production of *Godspell* began with the song, “Prepare Ye.” We were sitting in a beautiful, traditional sanctuary and a lone voice began singing, “Prepare ye the way of the Lord.” It was the voice of John the Baptist. The song grew louder and faster, drums began playing and a whole rock band joined in. The full cast was singing, “Prepare ye the way of the Lord.”

I’ll never forget that moment. Some two thousand years later, the words of John the Baptist still ring out. In our modern times, there still are messengers telling of the coming of the Lord.

Dear God, thank you for coming to earth in love and for sending your messengers to tell us to be prepared. Help me to stay ready for the moment when you come again. Amen.

Tim Beasley

'The Lord has done great things for us, and we are filled with joy.' (v. 3) NIV

The context of this Psalm is rejoicing among the Israelites at their return to Zion after a period of exile. While reading this Psalm, I try to imagine the jubilation that must have been in the peoples' hearts as they returned to a familiar land where they were free and could tend to their needs. While I'm confident most of us have never been exiled in a foreign land, that doesn't mean that joy and thanksgiving can't apply to us too throughout our lives. This Psalm reminds me of when I returned from a deployment to the Middle East a few years ago, when I lived in a tent and was confined to a military base for four months. While I never really feared for my life on this deployment, the sense of renewed freedom and being back 'home' was absolutely amazing!

I think we can use the imagery in Psalm 126 as an example of how to express happiness and thanksgiving for other gifts God provides for us, even gifts and events that aren't as momentous as the one chronicled in this Psalm. Every day that we share God's creation with other children of God is full of with gifts from him. Just think of how much happiness we can bring into our lives if we go just a little overboard with joy and thanksgiving for each gift from God that we recognize! And think of the joy and thanksgiving that we can project to the rest of the world!

Dear Heavenly Father, thank you for all the generous gifts you give us every day, and during this Advent season. We especially thank you for your Son Jesus and for his sacrifice on our behalf. Please help us to be a joyous and thankful people, and to show your Light to your world. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Jim Clark

But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.(vv. 4-7) NIV

Paul wrote a letter to Titus on the Island of Crete in the Mediterranean Sea. Titus was a Gentile Christian who Paul tasked with leading the church on the island. In this short book, Paul gave simple instructions to the fledgling Christians. After telling Titus about common human character flaws, and proper Christian behavior, Paul included the above verses in his letter.

If you were tasked with bringing the message of Christianity to others (by the way, you are), wouldn't this passage, and the entire book, be a great place to start? Kindness, love, saved by mercy and washing of rebirth by the Holy Spirit. The island of Crete was a moral wasteland, the church was in its infancy, and Paul provided a short, sweet, simple and to the point guideline for Titus to follow. Lead by example, and SHARE!

Lord, as I go through my life, I'm not always comfortable sharing my faith with others. Your message is the greatest ever given, and should be easy to share. As I meet others, lead me to the avenues that will open others eyes to your gift through the Holy Spirit. Paul gave a simple message to Titus, let me share this same message with those that I meet. I ask this in the name of my Savior, Jesus. Amen.

Bryan Petersen

I will listen to what God the Lord will say, he promises peace to his people, his saints—but let them not return to folly. (v. 8) NIV

I remember taking geometry in high school. My teacher, Ms. McGregor, was really tough and I was not sure if I would pass the course. I enjoyed that class because all of my friends were suffering through it with me and we would just roll our eyes at each other when the smart kids showed off their math skills!

Our last exam in the class was 10 formulas that we had to memorize. Memorizing the formulas by heart was the key for getting a 100%. Believe it or not, I got 100% even though that had to be the only test in that class that I got 100% on. I remember how Ms. McGregor beamed because we all did so well. We had followed her advice—we memorized the formulas.

I often thought after taking that class, “How will I ever apply all this stuff to my life?” But if you really think about it, there are a lot of formulas we should go by to improve our lives such as: Eat right and exercise, avoid stress and have good health. How would that formula look? Maybe like this: $GH=ER+EX-S$ (Good health=Eat right + Exercise - Stress).

Or work hard, save money, try not to blow your money and maybe you can retire early. $RE=WH+S\$-B\$$

Or how about this one that most of us learned in kindergarten: Use kind words and kind hands and make friends! $MF=KW+KH$

Verse 8 of this Psalm seems to be a formula too - a formula for peace. I will try to write it: $P = LTG-S$ (We'll have peace if we will just listen to him and get all the sin out of our lives.) Although the formula is a very simple one, for me just sitting down and reading God's Word and having a quiet time to listen to him is tough. Then the part about “*not returning to folly*” is just about impossible.

When Jesus was born in that little animal stall, the angels came down to joyously sing “*Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.*” (Luke 2:14) I am so very glad that Jesus came down and provided a way through his blood sacrifice for his favor to rest on me so that I can have his peace—peace with God—the ultimate peace!

Dear Heavenly Father, thank you so much for your precious Son who died for me so that I can have perfect peace. Amen.

Cindy Bowles

The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance. (v. 9) NRSV

Imagine a family with several children on vacation. When everyone is ready, they will set off on a day of exciting adventures. But Annie didn't get to sleep until very late last night, and she's still asleep. And Ben is just learning to dress himself and tie his shoes, so that takes him a while, and he's distracted besides. Their parents smile and soothe Carl, who rose early, got ready quickly, and is eager to get started. They tell him, "We'll give the others a bit longer. In the meantime you can help us gather together some things we'll need."

Those parents remind me of God. All people are his children; he loves them all, including those who have yet to fully accept Jesus Christ and the salvation he has earned for us. Many people are still unaware of the gospel message. Others hardly know about Jesus and what his life, death, and resurrection mean. And some, already committed in their faith, are dedicated disciples of Jesus. Don't we all know people who fit these descriptions?

Until Christ's return, people have time to change. More people come to hear the Good News and believe. Believers may be ready (and even impatient) for Jesus to return, but it is plain that God's patience in bringing about that day is a blessing for many.

Peter is clear about what to do in the meantime: lead "*lives of holiness and godliness.*" (v. 11) In this waiting time, our lives may seem to go on much the same. But we know the time will come when this world ends. Until then, by sharing the gospel and our faith, we may help others come to faith. And when we hear "Time to go!" it would be wonderful if everyone were ready!

Patient Father, your desire is that all people be able to spend eternity with you. May the things I say and do today help to reveal you to those who need to hear of your grace and love. Amen.

Janice Demaree

Oh sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvelous things...Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth...

(vv. 1a, 4a) ESV

Growing up, my three brothers and I played a lot of rock music in our house. We considered it JOYFUL. Our parents called it NOISE.

The Christian church originally condemned this music. They warned it would lead down the pathway to HELL. To us, it was a little slice of HEAVEN.

Music provides one way of connecting with God. Psalm 98 calls us to "*sing ... a new song*" and "*make a joyful noise*". But which music? What style? And how do we determine which music honors God and which does not?

Some people of faith have a limited view of which music makes the "good" list. Include religious words or symbolism in a song and your little melodic masterpiece is voted into the club. Sing about anything else and prepare to be toasting marshmallows in those eternal flames.

Much of the music I love would not be considered "Christian". The vast majority of it was likely not created by people of faith. Many of these songs however focus on love, peace, hope, compassion, joy and social justice—themes that also are central to the teachings of Jesus.

God gave us the wonderful gift of music. He created us with an amazing spirit of creativity to celebrate life. Somehow I sense that the playlists on God's heavenly iPod contain an astonishing collection of songs. You may not enjoy a certain song or music style, but maybe God does.

Maybe a song was not written with God in mind. But WE can make that *a new song* and a *joyful noise* if God is on OUR mind.

Dear Lord, speak to me through music. Just speak a little louder. My hearing may have been damaged from all that rock music. Amen.

Barry Clayton

...My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior
(vv. 46b-47) NRSV

When I was in my twenties, I loved to target practice with my .357 magnum revolver. I would load my own bullets and would practice for hours. I also had a .45 Colt revolver with a 2.5 scope. It had quite a kick to it, even though I re-loaded the bullets with a small amount of powder.

The scope on my .45 made things look larger than normal. This is how we should praise our God - larger than life. Mary heard the news that she was chosen to give birth to Jesus. Her whole being exalted her Lord - down to her soul. She didn't question the news. Instead she rejoiced and exalted her Lord and Savior.

What if we did that? What if we exalted Jesus greatly in every thing we do - whatever he asks of us. Everyone has things happen to them - that's the reality of life. Do we question God? Do we wonder why things turn out the way they do? Do we praise God? As for me, I pray that my reaction would be praise and thanksgiving, knowing that God has a plan for me. What would your reaction be?

Loving and gracious Lord, give me the heart of Mary so I will praise your name and do your will. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Faye Bastarache

He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. (v. 7) ESV

When I think of John, I think of a man that was a loner and very different from others. He spoke what God wanted him to say and not what was popular. He must have had "the light" shining so much through him that others asked if he was a prophet. I feel that God has called us to be the same kind of witness. That is difficult for me. I want to fit in.

John 12:36 says, *“As long as you have the light, believe in the light so that you might become people whose lives are determined by the light.’ After Jesus said these things, he went away and hid from them.”* (CEB)

The more I read the Bible, the more I want to be this kind of person. Not someone who just fits in. I want to be someone who has the light in her, someone who draws others to the light. I want people I know to no longer be in darkness, not knowing where they go, but, also having the light and knowing their purpose.

Dear Father, thank you for the example of John you have given us. Help me to be more like John. Allow your light in me to draw others to you. Please forgive my sin of not always showing your light. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Rebekah Signoretti

Your love, God, is my song, and I'll sing it! I'm forever telling everyone how faithful you are. (v. 1) MSG

It is my most earnest prayer that as I sing of God's love it tells others of God's faithfulness.

And as the choir prepared for this year's Christmas concert, I was deeply moved by the music and lyrics of the carols and hymns. Oh, how the refrains warmed my soul and taught my heart to sing.

One of the newer refrains, "Jesus be the Center of My Heart," is just one of those songs that keeps repeating throughout my day. This song is the prayer of my soul, Jesus, become my heart's song—my life line—the center of my very being. And the more I pray, my desires and human frailties disappear. So let me stay focused on Jesus.

But let's face it square on—I get easily distracted. But God is there to pick me up and grant me his forgiveness plus another hug. So, then let my song and yours be, "Just a Closer Walk with Thee."

Dear God, let us celebrate the birthday of the King of kings with joy and praise. Keep us centered on Christ, the reason for this celebration. Transform the message of hymns and carols to touch our souls and lives teaching us and others of God's love and salvation. Amen.

Jane Wittes

For the Lord is great and greatly to be praised; He is to be feared above all gods. For all the gods of the peoples are idols, but the Lord made the heavens. Honor and majesty are before Him; Strength and beauty are in His sanctuary. (vv. 4-6) NKJV

Everything not made by humans was made by God. Think about that for a moment. What did God make? What does that include? Well, all things living, for sure. Most things not living, like stars and planets, rivers and rocks, and everything we see when we get beyond the city and into the natural world. This passage helps me understand the order of things, with God on top above everything else in the universe. Because of his attributes he so obviously trumps all false gods. His creative strength is manifested virtually everywhere we look. I love the combination of the words "*strength and beauty are in his sanctuary.*" He is all powerful, he also has a sense of beauty! And that tells me that "*beauty*" and all we equate with it, comes not from you and me, but from God Almighty! As an artist, especially as a *Christian* artist, I want to be sensitive to that fact, and strive to incorporate rejoicing in all I create on canvas.

Many times growing up in church I heard: "For the Christian there is no difference between the sacred and the secular. It's all sacred!" Once we're children of God, his hand and blessing and purpose is over everything we do, and that we need to take a "chill pill" when it comes to worry and doubt and feelings of guilt because we like sports, or movies, or skateboarding, or ART! Or whatever. It's all SACRED! Verses 10-13 of Psalm 96 admonishes all of creation to simply rejoice over the fact that God is someday sending his Son to redeem us to himself and also to judge the earth. The sea, the fields, the trees, and people, should rejoice over this fact!

Lord, remind me to rejoice daily that all things you made are beautiful, that you didn't make ugliness. Help me see that ugliness, wherever it exists, even inside me, does not come from you, but from sin and the devil. I rejoice that you are my God and that you love me, and provide forgiveness, because you made me and all the rest of the universe. Amen.

Austin Bowles

The Sovereign Lord has filled me with his spirit. He has chosen me and sent me to bring good news to the poor, to heal the broken-hearted, to announce release to captives and freedom to those in prison. He has sent me to proclaim that the time has come when the Lord will save his people and defeat their enemies. He has sent me to comfort all who mourn. To give to those who mourn in Zion, Joy and gladness instead of grief, a song of praise instead of sorrow. (vv. 1-3a) TEV

WOW! This is a bit like a summary of the Good News written by the great prophet Isaiah. Jesus quotes Isaiah in Luke 4. The Good News is that there is hope for the hopeless, liberty from bondage, grace for the one in debt and joy in place of sorrow.

For me, the verses about healing the broken-hearted and joy in place of sorrow have special meaning this year. Almost everyday I work with families who are experiencing frustration/pain with a disabled child. Sometimes the families cry.

I enjoy exercising at LVAC. I used to see Betty Mahalik there, with her beautiful smile, about once a week. I still find myself looking for her. Several years ago Joe Signorelli worked in the kitchen on a few Easter Sundays. We worked hard but laughed the entire time. I often see Joe smiling when I use the kitchen sink. There are others who I remember too. I have a big hole in my heart from the sorrow of loss. I suspect each of us has an ache from a loss of someone or something this year.

The Good News is there is hope. I believe God hears the cry of my heart and is comforting me. There will be joy and gladness instead of grief.

Dear God, thank you for your Good News and hope. Thank you for your tender comfort when we grieve. Open our eyes and hearts to your truth. Amen.

Elaine Hansen

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

How often do we confine our prayers to God to thanksgiving only when things are going well, or to prayers of intercession only when someone is hurting physically?

God has given us this wonderful means of communication to express a desire to enter into a conscious and intimate relationship with him. Through prayer we offer God praise and adoration for his greatness and goodness. We acknowledge our sin and guilty disobedience, and offer a plea for God's cleansing spirit. We ask for God's daily sustenance and deliverance, and submit/surrender our will to God's. We seek, through petition, his wisdom and guidance and strength in approaching the world and all its ills. And more importantly, we follow Christ's example, when he sought opportunities to speak to his Father, to beseech his will, and to recognize his omnipresence, omniscience, and omnipotence. What a wonderful gift God has given to us! May we daily acknowledge this gift and take opportunity to speak with God, through Christ, in the presence of the Holy Spirit.

Dear Heavenly Father, thank you for your gift of prayer. Help us to seek daily communication with you. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Sandy Hughes

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.
(v. 5) NRSV

On December 19, 2013, my brother-in-law Jimmy called to tell me that my sister had finally lost her battle with one of the nastiest cancers I had ever heard of. I don't even think there is a name for it. All I know is that any and all treatments aggravated rather than treated this horrible disease. In German, the word used to describe cancer is "boese" which translates in this case to *EVIL*.

So how did the "light" shine in this darkness? For the first time that I can remember—my sister knew, really knew—that Jesus was her light! Through all of the pain, she continued to hope beyond all hope that she would recover. And low and behold, Helga did recover. She got to recover at home with the Father for Christmas.

Though I could not be with her in the end, Jesus shined his light through her husband, son and friends to take my place at her side and kept me informed. Jesus also used his light to prevent the "east coast" family from telling me everything, so that I would not worry.

In the darkness of this "EVIL" disease, Jesus shined his light on my whole family so that we could see HIM and HIS way.

Dear sweet Jesus, thank you for coming into this world to light our way home. Light the darkness in our hearts to that your love may always shine through. Amen.

Linda Middleton

He gave his life to free us from every kind of sin, to cleanse us, and to make us his very own people, totally committed to doing good deeds.
(v. 14) NLT

Crete had a rough cultural environment. The population was known to do anything for a little cash. They were famous as mercenaries and insatiable consumers, plus they saw no shame in greed. Sounds a lot like our present culture doesn't it?

In his letter to Titus, Paul gives instruction on the special assignment he has for him in Crete. He's to bring the virtues of wisdom, righteousness and devotion to God, to make the believers God's very own people and committed to doing good deeds.

But this was Titus's assignment, and a difficult one, to instruct these people with God's grace. The teaching of wisdom, righteousness and devotion to God would counter the Crete's many vices.

Titus was to promote right conduct in God's household, something that is just as relevant today as it was back then. He was to instruct the new elders to teach young and old to honor God and be an example of good works. Paul advised Titus to let everything that Titus did reflect the truth. He was also to encourage the population to have guests in their homes, to love what is good, and be totally committed to doing good deeds.

During this Christmas season we are reminded to emulate the special assignment of Titus. Let's help shape a community with our works and deeds and reign in our own insatiable consumerism. Let us show others how it is done the right way and become players in this performance of grace.

Heavenly Father, thank you for teaching us how to bring virtues to life in order for us to promote right conduct in God's household. Amen.

Janet Saterlie

Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. ...How can this be, since I am a virgin? (vv. 30, 36) NRSV

WOW! Imagine that! How would you react if you'd been Mary? I probably would have had more questions than "*How can this be, since I am a virgin?*" I imagine you would, too. Right?

I had no idea what I would write about for this Advent Devotional. I thought about Mary and her 'predicament' for several days. Then, this morning when I opened up my email, the answer came. Up popped the daily devotional that I receive from Lutheran Church Charities. I began to read, and suddenly things just fell into place. The devotional said in part: *he chose you. Just be yourself, trust God, and everything will go well for you.* I think I started to understand! I checked out one of the references provided. Jeremiah 1:8 says, "*Do not be afraid....*" **Have faith!**

That's it! Have faith! Jesus didn't make a mistake when he picked Mary! God doesn't make mistakes when he chooses you or me, either, for whatever he needs or asks. So ... "be yourself; trust God; **DO NOT BE AFRAID**; all will go well for you."

Heavenly Father, help me to surrender to you, to believe in you, and trust you as Mary did. Amen.

Ruth Ann Isaacs

For the yoke of their burden and the bar across their shoulders; the rod of their oppressors, you have broken as on the day of Midian. (v. 4)
NIV

It took 59 years for me to really know and comprehend this truth. I am free! I am free of fear and worldly temptations because Jesus was born and died for me and everyone. He taught us how to pray (Matthew 6:1-14). It is through prayer that we have a relationship with God.

Jesus taught us to obey God with joy, not anger or resentment. All of this from a little baby who was born to break the yoke, rod, and bar so that we can be free. What a true miracle.

At this time of year especially I am reminded to thank God for the blessings that Jesus has brought to me. I know that I am free of sin and fear. God holds me in his arms as lovingly as I have held my sons—safe, secure, and free.

Our Father who is in heaven, hold me tight and let me feel your love. Keep me safe and secure in your arms. Amen.

Alison Rodriguez

...a messenger announces to Jerusalem, “Good news! You’re saved. There will be peace. Your God is now King.” Everyone on guard duty, sing and celebrate! ...The Lord has given comfort to his people; he comes to your rescue. ...now everyone will see the saving power of our God. (vv. 7-8a, 9b, 10b) CEV

It amazes me that Isaiah had such clarity about God and his future saving work. Can you imagine if we had lived soon after Jesus’ death and resurrection? How might we have reacted once we heard the message, “*Good news! You’re saved.*” If we were apprehensive about our future but then heard this Good News, wouldn’t we want to “*sing and celebrate*”?

And then Isaiah says the Lord comes to “*your rescue!*” You don’t have to be apprehensive about your future. “*Everyone will see the saving power of our God.*”

At times when I wondered about my future, I always knew that God was present and guiding me. Even though I was uncertain, he would help with the decisions I would have to make. God came to my rescue many times. He wants to do this for you too.

What more do we need to hear? The Savior is on his way! Hallelujah!!

Our most gracious and thoughtful Lord, we are thankful for your concern and love for us. You provided your Son to save us and opened your heavenly kingdom to us. We are awe-struck by the way you provide for us and love us. Thank you! Amen.

Terry West

And she brought forth her first born son, wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn. (v. 7) KJV

Oh what a peaceful picture. Wait! What must Mary have been thinking? Here she was in a strange place, not knowing anyone, pregnant, about to give birth and the only place they found to rest was in a stable? Or, was she not thinking like that at all? She was a very humble servant of God. She trusted that he would take care of her.

Each time I read or hear this story I can only imagine what was going thru her mind. But I, too, believe that God will take care of us. He will provide us with what we need. I get very fearful of the things unseen. I allow those fears to overwhelm me and I get lost in them. Then I remember that God is the one that takes care of my needs. He will provide me with those things that make me safe, strong and healthy. Just as he did for Mary. I like to keep that peaceful picture of Mary wrapping Jesus in a swaddling cloth and just holding him, cuddling with him, listening to the noises that he makes. This is the picture that I come back to when I realize that my fears have overtaken me yet again. I may not be as good of a humble servant as Mary, but each day I try to remember that God made me and he loves me.

Thank you God for taking care of me and providing me with the things I need to be safe, strong, and healthy. Thank you for loving me as you do. Help me become like Mary, to be more of a humble servant like she was. I also pray that I can be a gift to others, as they are wonderful gifts to me, and thank you for your son Jesus. He is the best gift of all. Amen.

Dana Hackett

Praise God in heaven! Peace on earth to everyone who pleases God. (v. 14) NIV

As I read this Scripture again and again, I thought about how we sometimes take life for granted. I imagine Mary was aware of the dangers posed by her pregnancy as she traveled with Joseph, and prayed about their situation. They must have been greatly concerned for the baby, too. When Jesus arrived, Joseph and Mary must have been relieved. They even had company (the shepherds) to help celebrate the birth! Mary cherished the details of the events of that night.

My granddaughter came to mind as I read this passage. Some complications during her pregnancy sent her to the hospital and many “angels” prayed for her and for her baby. A C-section would be necessary, and a very close friend volunteered to stay with my granddaughter. My great-granddaughter was born at thirty weeks, just 2 pounds, 7 ounces. The baby could breathe on her own, but I was still frightened at first.

I thank God for the angels who watched over my granddaughter and her baby, and for the prayers of family and the congregation. Although she has some difficulties, it is a true blessing to have watched my great-granddaughter grow to be a wonderful 2-year-old. She is a true blessing of the Lord.

Lord God, please continue to Shepherd my great-granddaughter and my family, and let always be thankful for the gift of life. Amen.

Ann Taylor

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, 2 but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son,^[a] whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. 3 He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains^[b] all things by his powerful word. (vv. 1-3) NRSV

When I was young I had a super hero that I read about all the time. His name was Superman. He could do many great feats. He had x-ray vision; he could fly; he had super strength! But Superman was a fictional character.

In this passage from Hebrews, the author tells Jewish Christians about a “super hero”, a man called Jesus, the Christ, the Son of God. Many people may have heard first hand stories about Jesus, or had personal knowledge of the many miracles Jesus had performed in front of large crowds of people, making him well known throughout the country side. The Jewish people that were following their hero, Jesus, were being greatly persecuted by the Romans and traditional Jewish leaders, causing them to go back to the old teachings of the Jewish faith. The author illustrates to the Jewish Christians (and us), how Jesus, is superior to all things. They (and we) should stay the course—have faith—Jesus is the Savior!

I know Jesus is my Savior; all I have to do is have faith. I don't have to buy comic books or watch movies to know about a real super hero. I know THE “super hero”, Jesus, and his free gift of salvation!

Dear God, I am so grateful that Jesus came and is my super hero. Thank you! In Jesus' name. Amen.

Ray Betts

Upon your walls, O Jerusalem, I have stationed watchmen. Never, by day or by night, shall they be silent. O you who are to remind the Lord, take no rest. And give no rest to him, until he re-establishes Jerusalem and makes of it the pride of the earth.

(vv. 6-7) NAB

The ESV defines Jerusalem in this context as the *New City of God*. In a modern interpretation we might say that Jerusalem can exist wherever Christians choose to live. Taken one step further and expanding on this theme the entire Kingdom of God could be seen as requiring watchmen. We accordingly, are called to be watchful defenders of the kingdom.

That may sound good and be idealistic in a philosophical sense, but in reality, it is often difficult to carry out. Performing a duty requires certain standards. If the Lord calls on us to watch over his kingdom I feel there is necessarily a higher level of living to aim for. In other words, our thoughts, words and deeds will reflect that status. This of course is no easy task. Living in a modern society dominated by many materialistic values and often shallow, secular ethics can leave believers in the minority. Standing up or speaking out in favor of biblical principles, living according to a higher authority, or simply trying to be kind when others are not doesn't necessarily win popularity contests. Nevertheless, we are instructed to not be silent and to take no rest.

In exchange for our loyalty are the countless blessings bestowed upon us throughout our lives. And as Isaiah also suggests, in being called to function as dutiful servants we are also at liberty to remind God to fulfill his promises to us as well. Yet we may take solace while finding strength and wisdom in knowing that we are eternally partnered with Christ our Savior as we strive to be ever vigilant in doing God's work on earth.

Dear Lord, Heavenly Father, grant us the strength, courage and honor to be worthy watchmen of your kingdom. We call on you constantly as we serve in your name. Amen.

Michael James Rickert

And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too." (vv. 33-35) NRSV

Simeon says to Mary: *"a sword will pierce your own soul too."* That sounds pretty ominous. Of course we know why, but did Mary? Did she really not know of Jesus' destiny, and if she did, would that somehow have altered her choices in parenting? Or if she knew, did she have such faith in God that she would let the events come to pass without interference?

For me, knowing what Jesus would go through, even though it was to save us all, I cannot say I would not be scared of his impending suffering and death. I fear I might plan for the worst and want to put my child in a bubble. It is just a natural reaction to want to protect your child from everything.

Though not my children, I was faced with a decision to care for my in-laws after my sister-in-law passed away. My mother-in-law's fate at that time was that she would not make it through the next year. I could not accept that. I felt I needed to give her the best fighting chance to live as long as she could. Through my care for her, we were able to prolong her life for almost 9 more years until her fate was finally sealed by ovarian cancer.

Although Mary fulfilled her purpose regardless, I wonder if at times it was frightening for Mary? I know I am grateful for the gift God gave us in Jesus Christ. But I still cannot help but feel a pain in my heart for Mary, watching her son suffer and die.

Heavenly Father, strengthened my faith through the example of Mary's trust in you. While I know through your grace I am saved, I pray and strive to be as devoted to you as Mary and Joseph. I know I am worthy by Jesus' blood, but wish to live worthy of your gift. In Jesus Christ I pray. Amen.

Amy Trunoske

The Lord reigneth; let the earth rejoice; let the multitude of isles be glad thereof. ...Light is sown for the righteous, and gladness for the upright in heart. Rejoice in the Lord, ye righteous; and give thanks at the remembrance of his holiness. (vv. 1,11-12) KJV

Rejoice is a verb - an action word to *feel or show great joy or delight*. According to the KJV Dictionary the definition of rejoice is to experience joy and gladness in a high degree; to be exhilarated with lively and pleasurable sensations; to exult.

We are God's children. God has power and authority over us and all the world. Because God is a gracious and benevolent ruler - our God sent his only Son to us - the light of the world to show us the way to his truth and to our salvation. So at this time when we celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ our Savior, let us be thankful for God's sacrifice.

Let us also take action, as the angels did upon the birth of our Savior, and live with great joy and gladness in a high degree and be exhilarated. Let us rejoice.

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men." (Luke 2:13-14)

Our mighty powerful, generous and kind God, we thank you for the life of your Son and our Savior Jesus Christ. May our gratitude be given to you and shown through our lives and our accomplishments with joy. Amen.

Paula Perez

See darkness covers the earth and thick darkness over the peoples, But the Lord rises upon you and his glory appears over you
(v. 2) NIV

Everyday in the news and by looking around our city, our country and the world in general I see darkness. There just seems to be no end to it, even in the bright light of a sunshine filled day. So much sorrow, pain and tragedy.

Then comes Sunday morning and as soon as I arrive at Holy Spirit, the darkness is removed from my mind as though a surgeon had just gone into my mind and cut the darkness out. How does that happen? It is the Spirit and glory of the Lord shining through. It is the people of Holy Spirit. It is the closeness to our Lord and Savior. It is the prayers. It is the music. It is in watching young people helping with communion and the joy they show by being a part of the service. It is the LOVE shown by so many.

Therefore, during the week, if darkness starts to come into your life, take a few minutes to sit, close your eyes and remember the feeling of the Light (our Lord Jesus) and the love emanating from the Holy Spirit.

Heavenly Father, sometime in the future you will remove all darkness forever and the Light will be you instead of the sun or the moon. We eagerly await that moment. Until then let us be a light unto others in your name. Amen.

Dean Chapman

Let them praise the name of the LORD, for he commanded and they were created. He set them in place for ever and ever; he gave a decree that will never pass away. He has raised up for his people a horn, the praise of all his saints, of Israel, the people close to his heart. (vv. 5-6, 14) NIV

The word praise is used 13 times in this Psalm. To better understand this Psalm, I needed to know what the word praise actually means. Praise means to express admiration or approval to someone. For me, this Psalm means so much more than just admiration or approval. As I reflected, I found myself not thinking of admiration or approval, but of thankfulness. To me, the purpose of this Psalm is to make us reflect on all that we have been given and how much we have to be thankful for.

Verses 5-6 tell of a decree that will never pass away. To me, a decree is a promise that will never be broken. This Psalm also tells about the heavens and the promise of heaven that will never be taken away. Although we will not know what heaven is like until we pass on, we can see heaven in much of our everyday life.

Las Vegas is full of examples of the promise of heaven found in our everyday lives. When I travel to a national or state park, I see bits of heaven in the beautiful natural landscapes around me. I see heaven in the people that I meet every single day, people who are full of love and compassion for humanity and want to make this city a better place for all. As verse 14 tells us, Jesus was raised for us, *the people close to his heart*, to teach us how to love each other, care for each other, and inspire each other. We bring glimpses of the promise of heaven to each other through our actions and words. This Psalm is challenging us to live our lives with a grateful and loving heart so that we may show others the promise of heaven that we know will never pass away.

Dear God, thank you for all the glimpses of heaven you give us every day to remind us of your promise. Help me have a loving, caring, and grateful heart so that I may live to show others the power of your everlasting promise. Praise be to God! Amen.

Matthew Mordini

But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons. So you are no longer a slave, but a son; and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir. (vv. 4, 7) NIV

I don't proselytize. Yes, my job as a Christian to share the Good News. I do what I can. There are many ways to share the Good News.

I may mention a church hike or other church activity - or worship - to a friend or colleague. The response is usually, "Oh, you go to church? What church do you go to?" I say, "Holy Spirit Lutheran Church," and they say, "Oh, you're Lutheran."

My grandparents were born in Norway and made their way to Minnesota. I joke about the requirement of Norwegians in Minnesota to be Lutheran.

"How is Lutheran different than Catholic? Or Episcopalian?" Well aware that not everyone agrees, I answer: "To me. Not much." (As long as they believe in the tenants of the faith: three-in-one God, born of a virgin, died, rose on the third day.)

I tell them that Jesus is for everyone. He came along at the "perfect time" "born of a woman." So he is just like us.

We, the heirs, were children. I knew a trust fund kid a while back. Even though the estate would eventually be hers, she was under the control of the trustee until the "time fully comes." In my friend's case, 30 years old.

Jesus makes us full heirs. Not slaves. Everyone!

People might say, "I'm a good person. I obey the law." They would rather spend their Sundays doing something else. Sometimes me too. Some of us might not realize that we are slaves to gods of our making.

I invite them to church to hear the Good News. I invite them and myself to become a son and thus full heir of our heavenly Father.

Oh, heavenly Father, thank you for loving me and giving me the opportunity to become a full heir through Jesus Christ. I pray for the strength and knowledge to share my faith with others. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Kevin Cannon

...They will be like a well-watered garden, and they will sorrow no more. Then maidens will dance and be glad, young men and old as well. I will turn their mourning into gladness; I will give them comfort and joy instead of sorrow. (vv. 12-13) NIV

Jeremiah's passage speaks of God's promise to the people of Israel to reverse the sorrow, pain and weeping that has been their life in captivity. God makes the same promise to us in the miracle of Jesus' birth but do we accept that promise as we accept a Christmas gift?

Do we know that because of Christ's birth, there is a reversal in our lives? Or are we so exhausted from the festivities that we move along taking the tree down and packing away the presents? Do we pack away his presence in our lives? Do we fail to know that he "watches over his flock as a shepherd...that we will have comfort and joy..." that he is with us in our struggles. We are not alone.

What would it mean in your life for mourning to be turned into gladness? Do we "shout for joy" and "rejoice in the bounty of the Lord?" Are we reminded each time we receive communion that he is present as he was on that Christmas Day?

Today, dear God, remind me of your presence in the people I meet. Help me to share the comfort and joy of your grace in the way I greet them. Let me trust in your presence as I rest. Amen.

Penny Hauser

The mystery is that people who have never heard of God and those who have heard of him all their lives (what I've been calling outsiders and insiders) stand on the same ground before God. They get the same offer, same help, same promises in Christ Jesus. (vv. 4-6) MSG

“The holidays.” No other time of year, do I think more about the inclusiveness of God. As a child I loved the idea that a “drummer boy” was good enough to come before the baby Jesus and offer him the gift of song (whether it is true or not). Then God revealed his glory to shepherds which seems to be an unlikely group to hear that the Savior of the world was coming to earth. Even God’s selection of Mary being the mother might seem odd if we were not as knowledgeable of the rest of the story.

So what does this mean to us now? Who are the insiders and who are the outsiders today?

For me, it is easy to think of the stories of the Bible as historical but that defeats the true purpose. We are a part of the same promises. We are a part of the story.

Loving God who welcomes us all, open our eye, ears, and hearts so that we can love both insiders and outsiders the way you do. Let us be your hands and feet. Amen.

Karen Harris

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ... And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. (vv. 1,14) NIV

Have you ever wondered what you would be like if it were not for Jesus having become flesh and living among us? What would you think about life if Jesus hadn't come to demonstrate and tell us about God and about ourselves? The Bible indicates that just by observing nature/creation we would likely conclude that there is a "higher power" who gave design and an initial burst of life to this universe, but what could we know of this god's character or purposes? Would we not, like so many around us today, have few convictions and little hope?

Many of us Christians today have fallen into the trap of isolating ourselves from those outside the Church. We love the safety and comfort of our Christian circles. While we do need to give and receive love from one another, what of those outside the Church? How are they to come to understand God's gracious and true character? How are they to find meaning within God's healing purposes?

It is up to us to follow the Word's example, to live among our neighbors and co-workers, so that we can show and tell them this Good News that brings peace and hope to our lives. It is up to us to introduce them to God-become-flesh so that they can know the joy and meaning we know. Is the Holy Spirit prompting you to break out of your "holy huddle" and be a bridge to those who don't know "the Word" who is God?

Dear Heavenly Father, thank you so much for caring about me enough to come and be with me in Jesus. Embolden me to step out of my Christian bubble so that I may show and tell Jesus to my friends in need; in the name of Jesus, the Word become flesh. Amen.

Pastor Paul Hansen

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, (v. 3) NIV

It's an awesome feeling knowing that God through Christ has blessed us all. In this letter that Paul wrote to the Ephesians, he details the spiritual blessings bestowed upon all those willing to receive Christ into their lives.

Imagine receiving a gift card that could be used anywhere, anytime and was limitless. Well, that is what Paul was speaking about. God has given a limitless abundance of blessings to each and everyone of us. He has taken our sins of yesterday, today, and those of tomorrow and marked them all forgiven. This gift card is like no other. You can't add to it with money or good deeds. Our gift card never expires and has been paid in full by the suffering and death of God's own son, Jesus Christ.

God gave us the ultimate gift that just keeps on giving! Paul was moved by the Holy Spirit to spread the Good News. And just like Paul, it is our responsibility as people of God, to share the Good News with those with whom we come in contact. Praise be to God!

Gracious and loving God, thank you for your steadfast love and the abundance of blessings that you bestow upon each and every one of us through your Son Jesus Christ. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Terri Veach-Geiger

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." (vv. 1-2) NIV

Today is the Epiphany of our Lord. There are all kinds of wonderful and astonishing things about this festival which arrives 12 days after Christmas. It commemorates the visit of the wisemen which signifies that this Christ is God's Good News for all people-for all nations. It is the message that Christ is the very light of the world to guide us and to lead us on a daily basis.

Do you have a GPS in your car? These things are really handy gadgets. We need it for directions if we are going to a new location. The wisemen had a GPS. It was a bright star that led them to the Christ. At our baptism-for many of us as infants-we began our journey of faith. What stars have guided us along the way? For me it was our pastor as I was growing up. It was also my parents who not only taught me about the grace of God but demonstrated it. It was the church with its great gifts of Eucharist by which I could taste the grace of God. It was the worship services with brothers and sisters of the faith. What gifts has God given you to sustain you on your faith journey?

As I reflect on it, the thing that sustained and guided me most were the promises of Christ: the promise of forgiveness, the promise of his strength, his love, his grace, his presence. These promises are like the stars in the heavens. There is one promise I especially love; it's from the Apostle Paul: *"If we live, we live to the Lord or whether we die, we die to the Lord. So whether we live or die we belong to the Lord."* (Romans 14:8) NIV.

Dear Lord, keep my eyes focused on your promises. Amen.

Joe Hauser