

Advent 2018

Trinity Baptist Church

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These devotions were written by the people of Trinity Baptist Church. They come from the heart. As you read each of these devotions this Advent season, it is our hope that God will speak to your heart and that you will share the joy of Christmas with others.

~ Worship Committee, 2018

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Short Cut

A couple of years ago my son, Brett, needed to return to his internship in Seattle. Brett decided he wanted his car with him so he and I departed on a cross-country adventure – in December! We decided to follow the GPS directions that had us turn off the Interstate. It was a divided highway but then we turned onto a two-lane road. That turned to a dirt road and then it was nearly a one-lane road and very steep! I started leaning in onto the steering wheel and asked Brett, “Do you still have us on the GPS?” It turned out that he did and Brett is a great navigator. The road up the Rocky Mountains was very steep and scary. But we made it!

In the passage for today, Isaiah is trying to comfort God’s people because they had been enslaved in Babylonia. They are no longer enslaved, but they felt like their relationship with God had been broken. Isaiah relays the message from God to them to “be comforted” (40:1). God said to “Speak tenderly to Jerusalem” (vs.2.) and tell them that the Lord is coming. Prepare the way: valleys need raised, mountains need lowed, rough ground smoothed out, etc. etc! But he isn’t talking about the ground. Isaiah is referring to the heart. He wanted the Israelites to prepare their hearts for His coming. We prepare our own hearts for God’s coming by reading these devotionals, reading the Bible, praying, doing spiritual disciplines, and ministering to others.

When we were going through the mountains, I was scared and wished the mountains were made low. A few things helped: a map, someone to go through it with me, and also encouragement that we were on the right road, that we were ok. That gave me a lot of comfort. The mountains were not lower, the valleys did not rise up, but we were able to get through them. May you find comfort this season though Christ!

Dear God, we seek comfort. Thank you for revealing to us how to find peace and comfort in our lives. May we can be agents of sharing this comfort with others this season. And may we remember, that those that mourn will be comforted. In the name of Jesus, Amen.

Shine, Jesus Shine

When I was a young man, I remember going to Mammoth Cave in Kentucky. As we ventured down into the cave, we got to a point where the park guide gathered us all together and turned out the lights. I had not experienced anything like that before in my life, no cell phones back then to light my way, only darkness. In the mist of the darkness the park guide turned on his flashlight, and it was then that I realized how much light could impact the darkness.

In reading today's passage, I am reminded of the light that God brought into the world. As I was preparing to write this devotion, I went back looking at God's creation in Genesis. I had not thought much about it, but the Bible does not speak about the creation of darkness. It appears to have always existed. But light, well that is from God and exists in both physical and spiritual forms. We need both as we navigate this world, and yet so many people avoid the spiritual by trying to create their own light. They seek to empower themselves believing they are enough while living in a world that tells them the same. Yet, they continue to search for something... There is only one true light that opens the eyes of the blind and helps each of us navigate the hills and valleys of life. This is the Christ. Sent by God to be a light in the world for all and to work through us as we are called to be the same. So today go and take the light of Christ in you and let it shine; for the world needs it.

Father, I thank you for the light that you have sent into the world; may I be a reflection of that light in the darkness.

- Mike Boersma

God Sustains Me

Imagine King David having a discussion with Bathsheba, perhaps on their first anniversary. “Honey, remember how your first husband was a war hero? Well, I had him killed. I did it for you, dear, so you could be queen.”

“What did the prophet Nathan want, dear?”, she might have asked, after that important visit. “He was just saying how good the crops would be this year.” I don't think so. He carried the weight of that secret for the rest of his life.

Sin separates us from God. When enemies surround us, we also might feel separated from God. This psalm relates to the time when David was being pursued by Absalom. When Absalom was anointed king, David fled Jerusalem to avoid being killed.

When we sin, or when our enemies are against us, we might feel that God cannot save us. Perhaps even that God cannot hear us. In verse 5, the Hebrew word *camak* (sa-mash) means “sustains”. God not only hears and cares for us, He sustains us, provides our food, rest. His name is *Jehovah Jireh* (Genesis 22:4), the one who sees, the one who provides. We are worthy, not for anything that we have done or decided, but because God is making us into a holy nation, a royal priesthood, in spite of our sin and our enemies.

Lord God, Jehovah Jireh, cleanse us from our sin, restore to us your joy. We praise you for your sustaining power. Help us to forgive ourselves and to put aside any mountain which might hinder us from worshiping you. Guide us to be a priest to someone this holiday season.

~ Joel Craig

Grey Poupon Anyone?

The mustard seed is one of the smallest seeds in the plant kingdom yet what a powerhouse! Did you know that the health benefits of mustard are numerous? Different parts of the plant have been used to treat skin disorders, cancers, diabetes, as a decongestant to name a few. Have you ever seen a football player hobble off the field with a leg cramp? That magic potion that the trainer gives him to eat-yep it's a package of mustard. The bible tells us that even the vegetation is useful for the birds to nest in. How is it possible to pack so much into one tiny, tiny seed? Jesus told his disciples that if they would only have the tiniest amount of faith it would impact the kingdom of God in a mighty way. Isn't it amazing that God requires so little of us yet the benefits are exponentially beyond what we can imagine. When we are faithful and put even the smallest flicker of trust in Him, it has eternal impacts. After planting the seed, the farmer doesn't see the germination process happening but trusts that in time a plant will grow. Many times, we think our small acts of faith are unimportant. Maybe we never see the end result of our faithfulness. but rest assured the bird looking for a place to nest is grateful for the planting of the seed.

Father, we pray to place unwavering trust and faith in you. We know you are a God that keeps promises so help us to believe that you can do mighty things with the little that we give.

- Lisette Colson

A View from the Mountains

Sunrise in Yosemite Valley. The sun glows behind the majestic Half Dome as the valley slowly comes into the light. Half Dome has withstood the test of time through storms, snow, ice, fire, and earthquakes. Nothing has moved it. Half Dome dominates the landscape in that part of the valley, a silent sentinel to the power of God.

In this passage, Paul is reminding Christians to stand firm, like Half Dome. Trouble and storms will always come our way. We don't feel as if we can withstand the pressure and torment. Know that God loves us unconditionally. If we give ourselves completely to Him, He alone will guide us through the darkness to see the glory of the sunrise.

Lord, let us see Your majesty in your creation, power and strength in the mighty mountains, and glory in the sunrise. Let us stand firm in You when we are uncertain and weak. You are the almighty God. Show us Your love every day. Amen

~ Susan Spencer

Do Not Be...

This past year has been tough on many members within our church family. People near and dear have lost family and good friends. Many are fighting through formidable health issues, and some are dealing with life changes as a result. If I could say a special prayer or snap my fingers, all would be back to normal—all would be fine. Yet, I do not have that kind of power.

God hears prayers. God will act on them in His way, beyond our understanding, always to the good but not always understood through our tiny grasp of knowledge.

Joshua's words: "Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged. Be strong and courageous. This is what the Lord will do...". The Lord will conquer the enemy, whatever form the enemy takes, to our understanding or not. God is the creator of our reality: everything we know and everything we do not yet understand. God has you in his hands and in his plans. His light will pierce every darkness no matter how deep. His love for you is shown through His son, whose light was not contained through the cruelty of the cross.

God is beyond concept. If you have a computer, please search When the Hubble Stared at Nothing for 100 hours. The Hubble telescope was pointed at a patch of blackness 1/30th the size of a full moon for 100 hours. Shining in the darkness was the light of 3000 galaxies. In a universe of 10 million galaxies, the estimate rose to 50 million. We have no concept of the Creator and His creation, but His son has shown that our light will not be contained.

God thank you for the peace of the "do not be..." for the light of your love is with us through every trial and beyond.

~ Tut Smith

Hope is the Light

"Why am I discouraged? Why is my heart so sad? I will put my hope in God! I will praise Him again - My Savior and my God!"

Christmas season is a time for being joyful but sometimes because of life events your heart may just feel heavy and sad like David's did in this passage. His soul was discouraged, and he felt alone and in the dark. David had personally seen God work in his life in mighty ways, conquering Goliath and much more. He knew that God was the Living God so that is where he chose to put his Hope. It is not a meager hope or wish but a Hope that is firm and secure. Advent reminds us of that Hope. Christ came down to Earth to show us God in the flesh, to save us and to give us the way to unite with Him through the Holy Spirit.

Remember all the times God has been with you. Write them down, ponder them, and then thank God for them. Put your Hope in the Living God who is with you now too. This Hope is your Light. His Light will flood your outlook and you will naturally praise Him again, "My Savior and my God".

Lord help us remember how You have been with us in the past when times seem dark. Our Hope is in You from sending Christ to the earth to save us through the cross and resurrection. The darkness did not overcome the Light then and it won't now either. Thank You God that You are our Hope and Light today and in this Christmas Season. Amen.

~ Jody Bowhay

Children

Our adult children, Hannah and Brett, have both acquired cats in the past few years. Sometimes both cats are at our house at the same time, but they are not on friendly terms. Most of the time we actually close the door that separates the bedrooms from the rest of the house, each cat getting their own set of rooms without having to deal with the other one.

When our cats can't get along with each other, the idea of wolves and lambs or calves and lions living peacefully together seems ludicrous. Throw a baby in the mix and you've entered the world of the absurd.

What kind of peace would that be if animals could be trusted with each other and even with babies? Maybe that's the kind of peace only God can give – the kind that “surpasses all understanding.” It's obviously that kind of peace that God hopes for us and offers us, but it can be pretty hard to come by.

I have never really noticed the last part of verse 9 until now, where it says that the knowledge of God will fill the earth like water fills the oceans. If the peace of God covered us like water, surrounding us on all sides, then maybe it would be possible to find that kind of peace for ourselves and truly pray for that peace in the rest of the world. May it be so.

O God, We are so hungry for peace but can also be so captive to fear and worry. May your peace surround us like water and may we float in the hope it brings. Amen.

~ Teresa Bowers

The Peace of Christ

Our world today seems so fractured with people suspicious and hostile to others. Much of this feeling is fostered by the endless media barrage of negativity.

However, if you choose wisely, not everything on TV is divisive.

We've been enjoying watching the Great British Baking Show on Netflix. Twelve contestants are chosen to represent a diverse group of people. Young and old, women and men, city and country, immigrants and others from all over Great Britain. All are different, but all enjoy baking. When they march into the tent on the first show, they are all strangers to each other and to us. But, as the weeks go by, we watch them in times of stress and joy, we see how they help and encourage each other, putting politeness ahead of competition, rooting for each other even as they face their own failure. By the show's end, you find that you like them all and would be happy to have any of them as friends and neighbors.

I think this simple baking show is the best diversity training anyone could receive. It teaches us to look past the differences and enjoy getting to know all the contestants. It also teaches us how to bake a good cake.

With the love of Christ in our hearts, we can accept others, knowing that we are all children of God. We can be thankful that we are all part of God's wonderful creation, all different, all special, all loved.

If we look for the bad and the negative, we will find it. But, if we look for the good, we will find that in abundance. It is our choice.

Dear Lord, help us to choose to look at others with peace and love in our hearts.

~ Linda Lyons

Pursuing Peace

My children will tell you that when they were young, the Bible verse they probably heard quoted the most was Romans 12:18, “If it is possible, as far as it depends on YOU [emphasis mine], live at peace with everyone.” (NIV). As parents of children and teenagers know, peace is not the standard condition between siblings. Reminding them that they are supposed to get along is pretty much an everyday occurrence.

God reminds us that we are to get along with everyone in our family – all His children – in today’s passage. It is our job daily to “pursue peace” (CSB) with everyone. To pursue something, one must take action. One definition of pursue is “to find or employ measures to obtain or accomplish”. How can we pursue peace? Perhaps you have heard the song, “Make Me an Instrument of Your Peace.” The beautiful lyrics come from a prayer called The Prayer of St. Francis and remind us how we can pursue peace each day.

“Where there is hatred, let me sow love;
Where there is injury, pardon;
Where there is doubt, faith;
Where there is despair, hope;
Where there is darkness, light;
Where there is sadness, joy;

Grant that I may not so much seek
To be consoled as to console;
To be understood as to understand;
To be loved as to love...”

Peace with each other is not a “couch potato” job. It is not our nature to be peaceful, but it is God’s nature. He has given us this peace as a fruit of the Spirit and as His followers calls us to live peaceably as He makes us into His image.

Heavenly Father, fill us with your peace so that it will spill out of our lives into the lives of others. Help us work each day at sowing peace. Thank you for the gift of Jesus who is the Prince of Peace. Amen

~ Beth Francis

What Shoes Should I Wear

During this season of holiday parties, concerts, special church services, and family gatherings, I admit I become more concerned about what to wear. Is the outfit formal enough? Is it too sparkly? What shoes look the best?

Recently, I was reminded the Bible had the answer to my question, "Which shoes?" (I guess Paul, while in prison, had time on his hands and thought he would answer this age-old question of women,) Paul tells Christians in Ephesians 6:15 to slip our feet into the "gospel of peace".

Ask my daughters, the most important part of the outfit is the shoes! Even us old folks know our shoes ground us and prepare us for the job at hand. I have never climbed a ladder in a pair of pumps or worn my muddy gardening shoes to an office meeting.

Are you walking daily in shoes of peace? Definitely, wearing shoes of peace is easier said than done! I will admit, at times I limp around in the sneakers of jealousy, the sandals of frustration, and the boots of worry. But we must not forget, Jesus entered this world of discord, hostility, and uncertainty. But, he let "the words of His mouth and the meditations of His heart be acceptable in God's site".

Are you walking in the wrong shoes? Has the world worn blisters on your feet? During this season when we turn our attention to celebrating the Lord's birth, let's make sure the darkness of the world does not overcome the peace he gives us, the peace that passes all understanding.

Excerpts from St. Francis of Assisi:

"Lord, make us instruments of your peace.

Where there is hatred, let us sow love; where there is injury, pardon;

Where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope;

Where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy.

For it is in giving that we receive."

Amen.

~ Mary Griffith

Is Peace Possible

With the world at unrest, especially our nation, is peace possible? After the War Between the States, devout General Lee told his Southern soldiers to turn their weapons into plows and build the South into a peaceful home. Yet, as a nation, we continue to send our children off to war. Isaiah 2:4 says “he shall judge among the nations” and “nation shall not lift up sword against nation.”

Trust in the Lord to bring peace among his people and put down your sword of words, love thy neighbors. Let your neighborhood grow from your block, to your city, your county, your country, and the world. Encourage peace around you wherever you are throughout your day. During this time of blessing, do your part for peace on earth, good will toward all. Let peace reign over the earth starting within ourselves and spreading out.

Thank you, Lord, for this season of peace and love. Help us all to find contentment with each other and our world throughout our time.

~ Marjorie Ann Reeves

Peace

In John 16:33, Jesus reminds his disciples, and us, that there is trouble in the world but that He is bigger than this world, “I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.”

We all have our own personal struggles, family issues, work stress, etc. And the news and the internet are full of stories about violence, politics, and disasters. Even the Advent season brings its own unique “troubles”; travel, gift buying, decorating, meals, and memories of those who have passed. John 16:16-33 describes how the disciples’ grief will turn to joy. Let’s turn to our Lord, in prayer and other ways, to find peace and joy. The Serenity Prayer is a great start.

*God grant me the serenity
to accept the things I cannot change;
courage to change the things I can;
and wisdom to know the difference.
Living one day at a time;
Enjoying one moment at a time;
Accepting hardships as the pathway to peace;
Taking, as He did, this sinful world
as it is, not as I would have it;
Trusting that He will make all things right
if I surrender to His Will;
That I may be reasonably happy in this life
and supremely happy with Him
Forever in the next.
Amen.*

Episode IV: A New Hope

A New Hope brings some of us back to Star Wars the battle between the dark and light sides of the force. I am not talking about Star Wars but a New Hope found in Isaiah Ch 9 which is all about seeing the light through the darkness up to Ver 6 and the joy of a child being born. This child will go on to lead us on a better path to our salvation and will be given to us for our victory over sin. Ver 6 gives us many of his glorious titles but we all know this person as Jesus, our lord and savior. We all know the power in his name and how he was able to still the storms with grace and it is that same grace that moves in each one of us when we feel his presence as that storm rages inside of us.

Sometimes it feels like Jesus might exist in that same galaxy. Find comfort in knowing that Jesus is always with you and waiting for you to open up and let him take away the darkness in your life. For where there is light, there is life and it is this light that will never be extinguished. As Ver 7 continues by saying... “of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David’s throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time and forever.”

Father God, thank you for sending us your son to lead us out of the darkness of life and to bring us into the light. We are grateful for your love and providing us with the ability to have a relationship with your son Jesus. Through Jesus we will one day be able to see you and live together in paradise. In Christ Jesus name we pray. AMEN.

~ Jarred Green

The Blossoming of Joy

In this passage, Isaiah paints a beautiful picture of what it means for a person to be joyful. He describes it as a desert blossoming in beautiful foliage after a rain, which if you've ever seen means bright colors and vibrant life in a place where before there was seemingly nothing. This is joy that so many of us have experienced, a period of being overwhelmed by the glory and majesty of God. In this midst of this experience we truly glimpse the fullness of the kingdom of God, what it will be like to fellowship with God for eternity. As beautiful as this is, it's not the part of the passage I find the most moving, though. What I find moving isn't the joy, but the desert. So often we're told that we must be joyful all the time to be a good Christian, but that's not what we see in Isaiah. Yes, the picture painted here is beautiful and joyful, but the fact that it starts in a desert means that it isn't the landscape of joy all the time. What Isaiah describes is a periodic high point of joy, but the rest of the time the desert is a desert. Each and every one of us spends time in the desert, spends time in what feels like the wilderness. These times don't make us a bad Christian; in fact, it's these times that truly build our faith. We know that the joy of the Lord will come, and that God is always with us, even in the desert. It's the honesty of Isaiah that I find moving in this passage, and it is this hope of coming joy that I find so moving in this season of Advent.

Dear Lord,

We thank you for the times in which we feel your joy so strongly. We also thank you for your faithfulness in the times we walk through the desert, knowing that we can hope in you, hope in your coming joy.

*In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit,
Amen.*

~ Taylor Johnson

A Divine Visit

I sat in my thinking spot one night last April realizing God felt very far away. I didn't want to admit I had put Him there. I pulled a stack of Bible lessons my daddy had written many years ago for his Sunday School class. It was as if God was saying "If you won't listen to Me, maybe you will listen to your daddy."

The first lesson I touched was exactly these verses I am writing about, Luke 2: 8-14. I discovered daddy's notes four months before I was asked to write this Advent entry. I feel it is meant for me to share his words with my own.

The key word, daddy wrote, is abiding. The shepherds were doing what they were supposed to be doing. They were not sleeping, loafing or indulging in the world. God didn't have to alert them. They were abiding and watching, and the angels brought them "good news of great joy."

Daddy imagined it to be quiet and peaceful in that countryside at night. His notes ask: what do we need to lay aside to get where God can speak to us? That question is especially prudent during this season, I think.

An asterisk he penciled highlights what, to me, is the most powerful thought in daddy's lesson. It is the sentence that began bridging the gap I felt between God and me.

**We are not out of the way of Divine visits when we are sensibly employed in an honest calling while abiding with God.*

Those words are now written on my heart.

God is not reserved for royalty. Jesus is not exclusive to the elite. The good news of great joy that the angels announced to those abiding and watchful shepherds is for all people.

Joy to the World!

Help us, O Lord, to abide with You this season. Amen.

~ Julie Reyburn

Christ Gives Us True, Eternal Joy

Romans 15:13 (NIV)

” May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in Him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.”

Joy, a recurring thread woven throughout the New Testament, is God’s promise to overcome our fears and sustain us for eternity. Fear is also spoken of and dealt with throughout Scripture. Fear is of the world; joy is of God. Although earthly fears are temporary, as the Psalmist spoke inspiration: “ Weeping may stay for the night, but **joy comes in the morning**”, God understands our human frailties including our tendency to succumb to a plethora of fears we face; daily fears, fears that linger and discourage us, fears exceeding anything man can offer answer to, or effectively counter through his own strivings. We are told directly to not fear, that fear is temporary; God’s joy is eternal. We are promised that whatever we face here in our daily lives Christ has already overcome.

Abiding, living joy cannot be conjured up by man’s efforts; true, abiding, genuine, eternal joy is God’s gift to us who place our faith in Jesus. Joy is God’s gift through His Holy Spirit.

Here is true joy promised from the Risen Christ:

John 14: 27 (new living translation): "I am leaving you with a gift -- peace of mind and heart. And the peace I give is a gift the world cannot give. So, don't be troubled or afraid."

Matthew 5:12 (NKJV)

“Rejoice and be exceedingly glad ...”

Christ is our only source of true, abiding Joy.

Lord, we ask as others have asked before us: increase our faith. Spirit of God abide with us. Give us, we pray, your true joy and the peace of God that the world cannot understand.

This we ask You in the Name of Jesus. Amen.

~ Allen Bennett

Shout and Sing for Joy!

December 19 is a special day in our family. Twenty-nine years ago we were “shouting for joy” over the birth of our only son! Due to my health concerns we were unsure if I could have children. After much prayer, medical counsel and trusting God, we were blessed with a healthy baby boy. That Christmas “unto us a child is born” echoed in our hearts. We were overcome with inexpressible joy as this precious life entrusted to us brought excitement and hope for the future.

During Isaiah's time, the people of Judah heard numerous prophecies about God's judgment. For some, great insecurity about the future caused them to question God's goodness and give up hope. But in chapter twelve, Isaiah describes the enjoyment of God's grace. He foresees a day when God's people will praise him for the abundant joy of his salvation. A day that will bring new life and hope to the inhabitants of Zion.

Most likely you have experienced great uncertainty about your future. At some point all believers have come under conviction regarding God's judgment of their sin. The thief (God's enemy and ours) comes to steal, kill and destroy in whatever way will rob us of joy and hope.

But take heart! Unto us a child has been born! The Word became flesh, the only begotten Son of the Father, full of grace and truth! “*Shout and sing for joy... for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel!*” (Isaiah 12:6)

Heavenly Father: You are a just and merciful God. Whenever we face conviction, uncertainty, doubt or fear, help us to remember that we can still enjoy the fullness of Your grace. Christ, the Holy One came into the midst of our sinful world to pay the penalty for our sin and provide us with strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow. That is something about which we can “shout and sing for joy!”

- Candy Craig

A Faith Pep Talk

Throughout the New Testament are epistles that could be considered 'pep talks' from the author to a given church. Hebrews (including this particular section) is one of these 'pep talks' for Christians having to endure persecution, congregation division, and temptations. Indeed the world New Testament Christians lived in was not easy - but the key to their perseverance was their faith. Faith that persecution would end. Faith that congregations would unite. Faith that their temptations would be overcome. Their faith was well founded - Jesus had shown humanity what it means to only have faith, but what it means to use it in our lives to serve God.

The 'pep talks' from Hebrews still apply today. The message is clear: Jesus gave his life to redeem us and to enable us to leverage our faith against temptations. Stay strong in your faith to stay strong in your connection with God.

As we approach the celebration of Jesus' birth, remember that his death blessed with us spiritual lives filled with faith.

Dear God,

Please help us understand how our faith, enabled for each of us by your son's sacrifice, can make us better people and to follow your plan for all of us.

In your name we pray,

Amen

~ Jeremy Kenny

Faith in Hard Places

Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior. Habakkuk 3:17-18

Verse 17 is tough. Habakkuk is in a hard place in life. He has nothing to eat, for all crops will not thrive and produce. Imagine that on top of this, he has no livestock for the livelihood of shepherding. Basically, Habakkuk has absolutely nothing he needed to survive.

How would we respond in this situation? Personally, it would probably be difficult to remain positive and even more so to focusing on anything but how I could survive and care for my family. I would be worrying and wanting a plan of action!

Then verse 18 is a surprise! Habakkuk is not only positive, but is proclaiming he would be “joyful and rejoice in the Lord,” even should he experience tough circumstances. Habakkuk is saying, “While I may suffer and lose absolutely everything, I will still trust in God’s love and discernment for me.” (my paraphrase) What a magnificent act of faith and affirmation of his devotion to our Lord!

Where do we fall on this spectrum of living out our faith? Do we cling to God in the hard times and strive to depend on Him? Or do we try to handle it all on our own? I believe God gave us the gift of free will, along with His Word, that we would BOTH strive to do our best in living out His call AND have the faith to follow Him into the tough spots of life, knowing He will draw near to us.

Heavenly Father, I pray that as we each encounter hard places in our lives, we would depend upon you, having faith in Your divine providence for our lives. I pray that you would guide us AND be wise in our use of the knowledge You have given us. I pray that we would each be your hands and feet in this world, easing others “hard places.” I pray for Your will. I ask all these things in Your Son’s Precious and Holy name. Amen.

Going Home with Joy!

Background Scripture: Isaiah 35:1-10

Isaiah 35:10 “and those the LORD has rescued will return. They will enter Zion with singing; everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away.”

Isaiah is prophesying of a time when God’s people will be exiled in a foreign land. All they want is to go home. They need hope. Isaiah shows them what will happen when God rescues, brings life, joy, healing, and hope!

Can’t you just hear their beautiful voices singing and smiling as they enter Zion? They are now crowned with everlasting joy. What is this joy? *Pastor Jimmy Tidman shared the following truths in a sermon: “It is God alone who gives true joy. Seek God. Delight yourself in him. And in that you will find true joy. Satisfy yourself in God and he will fill you with joy. Remember that circumstances can never take away the joy God has given.”*

As a child growing up in Kenya I loved to be out front in a race and win. It was great to win the Silver Sports Cup. Being overtaken was not much fun. Today being *overtaken with God’s gladness and joy is winning!*

Our church family is walking that “Highway of Holiness”. We lovingly pray for and walk with each other through difficulty, illness, and loss of precious family and friends. God is right there giving meaning to “the joy of the Lord is my strength”. His incredible promise is that when He comes again “all sorrow and sighing will flee away”!

Father, help me seek you completely, be taught by your Spirit, and fully understand your joy and share it with others. During this Advent season prepare me to celebrate Jesus birth and be prepared to “Come Home with Joy” to you! Amen.

- Kathleen Cox

Covenant of Peace

Life displays a profound paradox: the wicked seem to prosper and the godly seem to suffer. However, this psalmist has discovered a truth that the wicked can never know unless they turn from their wicked ways. There is something better than anything here on earth: better than riches, better than material things, better than success, better than fame, better than earthly relationships. This better thing is the great comfort to the pilgrim of the Lord, a comfort found in the courts of the Lord. Why? Because the Lord is there, and He is better than any other pursuit in life. He is the source of every good thing for us. In Him is mercy, grace, and help in time of need. In fact, He is “the God of all comfort”

“For the mountains may be removed and the hills may shake, but My loving kindness will not be removed from you, and My covenant of peace will not be shaken,” says the LORD who has compassion on you.

Lord, You hold my life in Your hands. You know my heart and You call me by name. You undertake to always be faithful and compassionate towards me. You are everything good in my life. Amen.

- Jessecca Green

Drop Everything!

The angels appeared to the shepherds to give them the wonderful news of Jesus' birth. They told them where and how they would find the child, wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger. What did the shepherds do? Verse 15 tells us: *When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about."* Verse 16 says that they hurried off. I'm not sure, but this would indicate that they dropped everything and left to find the baby Jesus. They didn't worry about their flock, maybe they took them with them, again, I do not know. But clearly, they had a sense of urgency to go see what the Lord had told them about.

They found the baby, just as described. Then, they spread the word and everyone was amazed at what they had seen. They glorified and praised God. And what of Mary? She did what a mother would do, she treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart.

How often does the Lord tell us something? Do we respond with the same sense of urgency as the shepherds? Do we worry and fret about how on earth we will do it? Or do we, like the shepherds, drop everything and just do what the Lord has asked of us? It certainly is not easy to do. In today's world, we have kids we have to shuffle from one sports activity to another, we have appointments, school functions, and yes, we have many church activities we are involved in. Hopefully we can depend upon the Lord to help us to do what he has asked of us. If we do, all the things on our schedule will work themselves out and we can be a blessing by doing God's work.

Lord, help us do what you have asked of us with a thankful heart. Amen

~ Joanne Brann

God in the Times That Try Our Souls

In December of 1776, when the Americans had met with defeat after defeat in their effort to be free from England, Thomas Paine wrote, “These are the times that try men’s souls.” Those words were followed with encouragement for the patriots. Sure enough, by Christmas the Americans claimed their first major victory when Washington famously crossed the Delaware River.

In whatever time humans have lived, there have been souls that feel the trying, the pain of the times. Our own nation seems to be so torn by division and constant bickering. And it tries us. Many face trying times related to relationships, illnesses, and career. Life is good, to borrow a phrase from a t-shirt company, but it can often be trying to our souls.

The earliest Christians lived in trying times. They were harassed, persecuted, and misunderstood. Their culture was barbaric, life was a struggle and keeping faith was not easy. Luke says Jesus was born when Caesar Augustus led the Roman empire. He was a personal benefactor to Herod the Great, the harsh ruler of Israel. Remember the innocent babies slaughtered in Bethlehem (Matthew 2)? That was Herod. Yet, these early believers found hope in the words of Luke’s Christmas story.

Luke places Jesus’ birth in the time of Caesar Augustus, when Quirinus governed Syria. Joseph took Mary from Nazareth to Bethlehem. There Jesus was born, wrapped in swaddling cloths and laid in a manger. It’s all so specific and grounded in time and place.

Whatever time it is in your life—a time of joy, sadness or of trying, remember God does not stay aloof, uninvolved. God comes in the times that try our souls. God will be Immanuel, With Us, in all the times of our lives.

Lord, whatever time it is in my life right now, thank you for loving me enough to come and be with me. Amen.

- Mike Oliver