



2021

Advent
READINGS

HARRISONBURG BAPTIST CHURCH

Introduction

Thank you to each of you who contributed to this Advent booklet. Your willingness to share from your heart is most appreciated. The majority of these readings have been submitted by church members, but a few are prayers, poems, etc. by professional writers. The hope was to put together a booklet that will encourage you along the way as we journey toward the birth of Jesus together—alongside the shepherds, wisemen and Mary and Joseph.

We will be posting these readings daily on the HBC Facebook page along with a link to a special Christmas song. We encourage you to share these on your own Facebook page to encourage others in this special Advent season and remind them that God always keeps his promises.

God bless your Advent journey!

At that time, people will say,

“The Lord has saved us!

Let’s celebrate.

We waited and hoped—

now our God is here.”

Isaiah 25:9 CEV

Sunday, November 28

THE PROMISES OF GOD

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: "The Lord is our righteousness."

Jeremiah 33:14-16

Let us claim the hope that calls us...

Come. Worship God.
Bring hopes and longings, joy and sadness,
everything you are.

Come. Worship God together.
Step into God's new world
and taste the poetry of promise:

The desert shall blossom abundantly,
Burning sand shall become a pool,
and the thirsty ground springs up water.

The eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;
The lame shall leap like deer,
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.

Waters shall break forth in the wilderness,
and streams in the desert;

A highway shall be there.
It shall be called the Holy Way
and the redeemed shall walk there.

Everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.
Come! Enter God's future.
Step into hope
and worship God.

*Brian Wren (echoing Isaiah 35:1-10)
From *Advent Christmas and Epiphany**

Monday, November 29

WHAT WILL YOU BRING TO BETHLEHEM?

As far as we know, there was no one playing the drums at the manger. However, the song written by Katherine Kennicott Davis in 1941 tells the story of a young boy who, just like the wise men, desperately desired to bring a gift to the baby Jesus. No doubt the lyrics are familiar to us, but let's take a moment to consider them once again...

Come they told me
A newborn king to see
Our finest gifts we bring
To lay before the king
So to honor him
When we come

Little baby
I am a poor boy too
I have no gift to bring
That's fit to give our king

Shall I play for you
Mary nodded
The ox and lamb kept time

I played my drum for him
I played my best for him
Then he smiled at me
Me and my drum

The sincerity of the little drummer boy is exceptional. It is uncomplicated and it is not meant to be some grand theological statement, but it is real. He simply wants to honor the newborn king by offering what he can. It makes me wonder what it is that I can bring to our king this Christmas.

I was reminded of this song a few years ago when my youngest nephew Braeden, offered up his own gift to the baby Jesus. At the time, Braeden very much enjoyed playing with Rescue Heroes toys. Appropriately named, they were action figures based on firefighters, paramedics, police officers, and others who take care of people. Not long after my sister had started putting out the Christmas decorations that year, she came into the living room to find more than just Mary and Joseph gathered around the baby Jesus in the

nativity set. Braeden had taken all of his Rescue Heroes figures—his prized possessions—and placed them carefully around the baby Jesus lying in the manger—and left them there. (It seems they, too, wanted to honor Jesus that Christmas!) In this simple act, Braeden was offering what he had to Jesus. He gave this very special gift that was only his to give just like the little boy who played that drum. The openness and innocence of a child is something we adults need to practice more often.

“Our finest gifts we bring, pa rum pum pum pum...” What can I give? Every year we know Christmas is coming and somehow every year it seems to sneak up on us. I am already overwhelmed with all the things (good and fun things) that are heading our way. In some ways, I am already tired. It is my prayer, though, that throughout this Advent season, I will daily take time to pause—to simply stop and quit focusing on the to-do lists and be reminded that we are all called to give something of ourselves at Christmas—and not just gifts wrapped in bright paper and bows.

James 4:7-8 (in the New Century Version) reminds us of the most important gift any of us can give to Jesus—*“So give yourselves completely to God... Come near to God, and God will come near to you.”* The passage is a challenge for us to walk away from the sin and brokenness in our life and walk toward the fullness of God. This year let’s work on that. As



we journey toward the manger this Advent, let’s help one another along the way. Let’s encourage one another to bring our whole selves completely to God this Christmas. That is the real gift Jesus desires of any of us. Pa rum pum pum pum.

This year our children will be invited to bring their own special gifts to the manger during our Children’s Messages in December. Take time to talk with your children about what they’d like to offer Jesus this Christmas.

Eli Withers

Tuesday, November 30

THE FULFILLMENT OF GOD'S PLAN

Jesus, the fulfillment of God's plan for all of us didn't start with Mary and Joseph. In the first chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, Matthew records Jesus' genealogy beginning with Abraham. Among the many generations named, Matthew includes women, which is rare. As we learn more about these women, we see how God worked to fulfill his promise of a Messiah to his people. In this season of Advent, we celebrate the coming of Jesus, God's Messiah.

We expect to find Jesus' mother, Mary in Matthew's genealogy. We read in Matthew 1:16, "...Joseph, the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus, who is called Christ." You can find Mary's story in Luke 1. We don't know a lot about Mary, but we know she was Jewish. She must have been a strong, courageous young woman. The angel came to her in Luke 1 and told her she would be having the son of God by the Holy Spirit, the Son who was promised by God to reign forever. Mary was no doubt confused, as she was a virgin. Nevertheless, Mary responded, "I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said" (Luke 1:38).

Even though Mary was Jewish, the other women who Matthew lists in Jesus' genealogy are not Jewish. They are Gentiles and foreigners. You can find the stories of these other four women—Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Bathsheba—in the Old Testament.

Tamar's story is found in Genesis 38. Her life was full of trickery and seduction with her father-in-law. Despite her deception, Tamar had a son with Judah named Perez, who is in the direct line of Jesus. We find his name in Matthew 1:3.

Matthew named Rahab in Matthew 1:5, and you can find her story in Joshua 2. Rahab was a prostitute who risked her life to save some Israelite spies. Rahab became the mother of Salmon who was the father of Boaz and is mentioned in Matthew 1:5.

The third woman named in Matthew's genealogy in 1:5-6 is Ruth. Ruth, a foreigner from Moab, was the loving and steadfast daughter-in-law of Naomi. She left her family and all she knew to go with Naomi to her home in Bethlehem and to follow Naomi's God, the God of Abraham. Her story is in the book of Ruth. Ruth married Boaz, and their son Obed became the father of Jesse and the grandfather of King David.

The fourth woman in Matthew's genealogy of Jesus is referred to as Uriah's wife. In Matthew 1:6, we read, "David was the father of Solomon, whose mother had been Uriah's wife." We know this was Bathsheba from the account in II Samuel 11 and 12. Bathsheba is

best known as the woman who was seen bathing by King David on the roof and summoned to come to him. He slept with her, and she became pregnant. David arranged for her husband, Uriah, to be killed in battle. That child died, but Bathsheba later had a son by David, named Solomon.

God's plans are sometimes not clear to us. They may not always make sense to us. Other than Mary, these women who Matthew included in Jesus' genealogy were foreigners. They came from pagan and Gentile backgrounds and were not Jewish. None of them was perfect. Some were deceitful. But each of them had a special place in God's plan. Each woman was especially chosen by God and was valued. Each of them played a vital role in God's fulfillment of bringing Jesus, the Savior of the World, to be born.

We can learn something from this. None of us is perfect, yet God has a special place for each of us in his plan. We're all valued by God and are loved. Another thing is that our past doesn't necessarily foretell our future. Tamar, a deceiver, Rahab, a prostitute, and Bathsheba, an adulteress, moved beyond their pasts to be a vital part of God's wonderful plan. Their sins weren't beyond God's ability to forgive and use them.

As we celebrate Advent, the coming of our Savior and Lord Jesus, let us remember that God can use anyone and everyone who will follow him. Our pasts don't have to define our futures.

Karen Burke

Wednesday, December 1

THE HIDDEN WORKS OF GOD

Exciting news usually stirs the hearts and piques imaginations. I remember sharing with our family the news of both our pregnancies. The buzz was palpable in both instances. New life has a way of stirring the hearts and minds as we dream of how life might go. Prior to Jesus being born, Mary's cousin Elizabeth, who was advanced in age, was also pregnant with a child who came to be known as John the Baptist. From pregnancy to delivery, the story of John's birth was filled with unlikely scenarios. Zechariah, a priest and close follower and testifier of the Lord, was struck mute because he questioned the legitimacy of the angel's proclamation that his wife Elizabeth would give birth. Zechariah trusted more in what he had seen and known than in what God might do.

Yet, God ensured Elizabeth's pregnancy occurred. Then, at John's birth, Elizabeth's well-meaning friends and neighbors suggested name after name for the child. John, it seems, was insufficient for these advisers, but Zechariah's muted voice came to life when he

insisted the child would be named John. At this, the neighbors became amazed and fearful, and word spread of this child and his father's odd speech patterns. Imagination began to take root in the Judean foothills as families considered what was taking place. Luke 1:66 reports that the citizens began to wonder, "What will this child become?" It seems the hand of the Lord began to work, stirring hearts and minds. Might the Lord be up to something after all this time?

We know from other sources that the Israelites were feeling dismayed around the time of Jesus's birth. God seemingly had forgotten about them, and the Romans were growing more and more powerful. The Israelites were starving for a fresh word, a new hope, and the enactment of God's promises. It turns out that God was up to something. God had not forgotten. God was working in unseen and unexpected ways in order to bring about his kingdom's plan. None of these characters predicted how God would work, but God did.

Might God still be up to something in our lives that we haven't predicted? Might God still be working to bring about his kingdom in ways we don't expect? Might God be able to do exciting things beyond our capacity to know? If these answers are yes, then let us not give up on God but continue to praise His creative work around us. Maybe that reminder will stir our imaginations to see God in new ways this season.

Matt Winters

Thursday, December 2

THE WAIT

We wait in our lives for that moment of clear vision and connection, resolution, and reward. We, the sinners, the outcasts, and the poor.

A life of waiting - for what is to be, or hoped to be. The now is a disappointment and we look to the future for the answers and gifts we want and fear. We look for forgiveness of sin, inclusion and belonging, wealth of resources - of all kinds. We wait in the moment in that state of expectation. We anticipate, we dread. We fear. We hope.

We wait for pay checks, reunions, diagnoses, recognition, love connections, healing, vacations, escape, understanding, acceptance, peace, wealth, security.

The anxiety of the wait - and the anticipation and hope for better things. Those things that tantalize and gratify when received - for the moment - and then fade into the next sequence of waiting, at a time when life's challenges are hard to endure. The hope - a light of hope in

a dark world of illness, conflict, uncertainty, rejection, confusion, isolation and dubious plans. Complexity, technology and a struggle for "real" is our experience.

A light of hope - through a star and a babe - upturns society and kings and powers to provide a salvation, a hope and a lightened pathway through the challenges of life and the shades of our existence. You unite us into that Holy Circle of your love and into the wholeness of the self you created us to be. We reach beyond ourselves and somehow connect with a loving Being who waits for us to accept this gift.

That Being is Immanuel - God with us. A human, a baby and a Savior who loves and transforms our lives and our very being into the reality of NOW. God's Kingdom Is Come, and we are here in the experience of redemption, love, and connection with the God who so loved the world and us. Thank you for this gift - and Glory to God in the highest who is with US!

Shirley Cobb

friday, December 3

GOD'S PROMISES

For all of God's promises have been fulfilled in Christ with a resounding "Yes!" And through Christ, our "Amen" (which means "Yes") ascends to God for his glory.

2 Corinthians 1:20

The Jews of Jesus' day were hoping for and expecting the promised Messiah. They knew God's promise to David in 2 Samuel 7:16 - "Your house and your kingdom shall endure before Me forever; your throne shall be established forever." They were familiar with the prophecy found in Isaiah 9:7 - "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 on and forever." They knew these promises, and they believed God would keep his word.

So why then did so many reject Jesus? Apparently because he wasn't what they were expecting. They were sure the promised Messiah would be an earthly king who would free them from the oppression of the Romans and rebuild Israel into a strong nation. They were so focused on their desire for physical freedom that they failed to recognize their greater need: freedom from sin. Jesus came to free them from their greatest enemy, but they rejected him because his plan didn't include freeing them from Roman rule.

WEEK ONE: HOPE

I want to scoff a bit at the first century Jews. Who rejects a truly spectacular gift just because it's not the good gift they wanted? But if I'm honest, I know that I have done much the same. Life gets hard, pain overwhelms, prayers seem to go unanswered, and I wonder where God is. In my desire for answers right now, I forget that God's ways are not my ways. I forget that he knows my greatest need isn't physical relief but redemption.

Through the gift of Christ, God provided for my redemption. He has reconciled me to himself and given me the hope of eternal life. That's all I really need.

Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift. 2 Corinthians 9:15

Kim Brubaker

Saturday, December 4

A PRAYER FOR ADVENT

O come, Emmanuel.
We enter into this time of Advent
With holy anticipation.
We enter this sacred season
With bated breath.

O come, Emmanuel.
We're prone to get tangled
In sparkling lights and glittering tinsel,
Lost in to-do lists,
Swallowed in the seas
Of ribbons and restless hearts and weary souls.

O come, Emmanuel.
Our nights have not been silent,
Calm or bright.
We have been up late
Squinting at the stars,
Trying to make sense
Of the hurting world our children will inherit,
And our weary hearts in it all.

O come, Emmanuel.
We see the wonder etched in our children's eyes,
And we ask for our grown-up anxieties

To be set free
As we await the day
To celebrate
The God who made a way.

O come, Emmanuel.
Ignite in us the awe of a child,
Looking into a manger scene
As we wait on the promise
Of the coming infant King
In a humble stable.

O come, Emmanuel.
The whole world waits for You.
We are at war with each other
And ourselves.
We have clung to our idols
Of power and pocketbooks,
And we cry out for the ways
We have reflected King Herod,
Even as we ache for You,
Prince of Peace.

O come, Emmanuel.
Help us light the candles
And illuminate the darkness
Within us.
O Light of the world,
Be with us as we recite these stories
With our children—
Of shepherds and angels and
Peace for all people.
Ring the bells
Of righteousness, of justice, of hope.

O come, Emmanuel.
Help us prepare the way

WEEK ONE: HOPE

In our hearts and in our home,
In our family and in our children.
As we hang stockings and ornaments,

As we frost cookies and tie bows,
We know Your peace
Can't be bought or packaged.

O come, Emmanuel.
We anticipate great news
That we so desperately need.
Break into this world
Again and again and again,
Like you did so many years ago.
Bring joy to the people,
Hope to the hopeless,
Light to the darkness.
And may we and our children
Prepare You room
So that we may be instruments
Of Your peace.

O come, Emmanuel.
We thank You for this time of anticipation
And for the glimmers of Your light
Spilling in even now
Among the ornaments and the candy canes.
We thank You for this time of together.
Help us to get quiet, to get small
So we can make space in our souls
For the Newborn
Who will illuminate the darkness
And change everything.

O come,
O come, Emmanuel.

Kayla Craig
From *To Light Their Way*

John 1:3-5

Sunday, December 5

PEACE

But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah,
who are one of the little clans of Judah,
from you shall come forth for me
one who is to rule in Israel,
whose origin is from of old,
from ancient days.
Therefore he shall give them up until the time
when she who is in labor has brought forth;
then the rest of his kindred shall return
to the people of Israel.
And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord,
in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God.
And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great
to the ends of the earth;
and he shall be the one of peace.

Micah 5.2-5

People of God, dare to hope. Dare to believe.
Hear what God, the Living God, will speak,
For God will speak peace to the people.
Salvation is at hand for those who say, "Hallowed be your Name.
May your glory dwell in all lands."
Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet.
Justice and peace will kiss each other.
Fidelity will sprout from the earth,
and righteousness will lean down from heaven.

Brian Wren

From Advent Christmas and Epiphany

Monday, December 6

A MOMENT IN TIME

My son-in-law Gil immigrated from Uruguay in the mid-1990s and had become a US citizen. He worked for a local engineering firm in Harrisonburg while attending classes at Virginia Tech.

On April 16, 2007, the first call from our daughter came in at 10:28 a.m. There was a shooting in Gil's classroom. He was okay but had been taken to triage. Twenty minutes later, a second call: the police had transported Gil to the hospital.

CNN reported an off-campus shooting. Why would Gil be involved in something off-campus? But as time passed, it became apparent that something really terrible had happened.

After waiting for some time, we called and spoke to our daughter. Gil was in surgery to repair a bullet wound on his shoulder and remove a bullet from the back of his head. She was told it didn't appear to be serious. What? A head wound wasn't serious?

We packed our bags, and as we drove from our home in West Virginia to Blacksburg, I called my dear church friend to ask for her prayers. I remember the peace of mind that comforted me knowing she was praying for us.

Around 9 p.m., we received a call from our daughter Nell-Marie that the bullet didn't fragment and the surgeon easily removed it. We heard Gil's voice in the background – he sounded okay. Nell-Marie said he was sitting up, eating his first meal since the shooting, and talking to people in the room.

I didn't know it, but at that same time my church had gathered in the sanctuary for a special candle-light prayer service. Everyone was praying for us!

Gil returned home late the next day with bandages on his head and shoulder. Reporters lined the street hoping for an interview. The phone rang so often that we took it off the hook.

It took time for life to return to some normalcy. After each shooting, the emotions all come rushing back again. We can never escape this tragic point in history and it will always be a part of us. Thankfully, though, I can also find comfort remembering the peace that blanketed me that day through the faithful people interceding for us.

Mary Laughland

Tuesday, December 7

ANGELIC ENCOUNTERS

Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them... Luke 2:9

I'm not sure why church Christmas pageants cast sweet preschoolers as angels. Perhaps it's their innocence or their cuteness that appeals to us. Rare is the pageant with a rogue angel with an edgy attitude. All four angelic appearances throughout the Christmas story (to Zechariah, Mary, Joseph and the shepherds) contain a peaceful similarity. To each the angel proclaims, "Do not be afraid." Talent scouts stocking Christmas pageants full of innocent preschoolers as angels help satiate our fears of angelic encounters, so it's easy for us to not be afraid of the angels or their messages.

The challenge to not be afraid is a great reminder to us and something to consider—especially considering the angels messages that turned the world upside down. But what's also worth considering is the way God used the angels to deliver his message. To a large extent, the shepherds, Zechariah, Mary and Joseph were all living according to their customs and norms. They were living as was expected. Life was wholly positive and predictable. So, as life as they knew it would be upended in a matter of moments, the angel's words of peace and calm would be highly necessary.

Consider life from an alternative angle. What if life isn't going according to norms and customs? What if life has already turned on its head? What if life is a severe struggle and there are feelings of deep anguish, remorse, pain, bitterness and hurt? What if we tussle with the sheets and don't have the energy to get out of bed? What if we wonder why we don't feel like the rest of the world? Where are the peaceful angels on those days?

Let's consider Elijah. Elijah had a good life up until 1 Kings 19:2. Life was great and he was a champion for God! Then he was overwhelmed with fear and with a life he couldn't control. Gone were the blessed thoughts and the joys of life. Instead, he was terrified and overcome. In 1 Kings 19:4 he goes into the wilderness and asks God to take away his life. We read, "Elijah went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die: 'it is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life.'" He had suffered enough. He didn't see a way out. He was ready for his life to be over.

Over the next day, two angelic encounters occur. There was no glory shining around the angel and no chorus. The angel just offered a simple statement: "Get up and eat." The angel had provided space for Elijah to begin his healing and food to nourish his body. There wasn't a life-altering message or a world-changing mission in store for Elijah. It was a

WEEK TWO: PEACE

moment when the angel, and God, recognized that simply feeding the body and giving space for rest was enough.

No matter where you are in your walk today, ready to embrace the challenge of a new mission or needing space for rest, find the peace of God as the angelic encounters nurture our souls.

Matt Winters

Wednesday, December 8

GABRIEL'S ANNUNCIATION

For a moment
I hesitated
on the threshold.
For the space
of a breath
I paused,
unwilling to disturb
her last ordinary moment,
knowing that the next step
would cleave her life:
that this day
would slice her story
in two,
dividing all the days before
from all the ones
to come.

The artists would later
depict the scene:
Mary dazzled
by the archangel,
her head bowed
in humble assent,
awed by the messenger
who condescended
to leave paradise

to bestow such an honor
upon a woman, and mortal.

Yet I tell you
it was I who was dazzled,
I who found myself agape
when I came upon her—
reading, at the loom, in the kitchen,
I cannot now recall;
only that the woman before me—
blessed and full of grace
long before I called her so—
shimmered with how completely
she inhabited herself,
inhabited the space around her,
inhabited the moment
that hung between us.

I wanted to save her
from what I had been sent
to say.

Yet when the time came,
when I had stammered
the invitation
(history would not record
the sweat on my brow,
the pounding of my heart;
would not note
that I said
Do not be afraid
to myself as much as
to her)
it was she
who saved me—
her first deliverance—
her *Let it be*
not just declaration
to the Divine
but a word of solace,

WEEK TWO: PEACE

of soothing,
of benediction

for the angel
in the doorway
who would hesitate
one last time—
just for the space
of a breath
torn from his chest—
before wrenching himself away
from her radiant consent,
her beautiful and
awful *yes*.

Jan Richardson

From www.painterprayerbook.com

Thursday, December 9

ADVENT

The sacred call “Prepare!”
does not ask for lists or logistics.
We do not “Keep awake!” only to ensure
we are not forgotten at the rapture.
Nor is the stillness sedentary.

So do not simply go looking
for a candle scent to capture
what it means to Ponder,
or a gift to prove your Love,
or a tall tree to announce,
“Joy to the World!”

Advent lays bare visions of time bending
into already and not yet,
by the God who tears apart
the hustle, the heavens, the temple curtain!

with no intention of mending
back together our favored boundaries.

This is the thin space where
stillness is powerful and
God is changing our hearts,
so sacred Ponder, Love, and Joy
can birth and shelter.

The miracle grows with slow strength
in the one place we have all called home,
where we do not yet know another way,
while our fullness is being prepared,
carried, and nourished by
the One who says, “Yes.”

Meta Herrick Carlson
From *Speak it Plain*

friday, December 10

PROMISE

According to the Online Etymology Dictionary, the word “promise” comes from the combination of two Latin terms, *pro*, meaning “before” and *mittere*, one of the meanings of which is, “let go.” Before it happened, God told the prophets, and later Mary and Joseph, that He would be letting go, in His timing, allowing salvation to enter the world in the form of His Son, Jesus Christ. As new empty-nesters, Kathy and I are familiar with the feeling of letting go. What did God feel as He let go, sending His Son to earth? An earthly father might be tempted to get things off to a more promising start for their son than a stable and a narrow escape to a foreign country. Nothing about Jesus’ life was particularly promising in a conventional sense. But God knew the end from the beginning. As Natalie Sleeth puts it in her poem “In the Bulb there Is a Flower” . . .

In the cold and snow of winter
There's a spring that waits to be
Unrevealed until its season
Something God alone can see

There is an aspect of letting go that relates to us as well. In order for God's promise of salvation to be fulfilled in our lives, it must be believed and received. We are called to accept the healing power God has released into the world in Jesus, to let go of reliance on self, and to embrace the mystery of the incarnation and grace. In utter dependence - like the Babe in the manger - we respond in love to God's love, and the promise is fulfilled anew, in us and through us.

Gary Ritcher

Saturday, December 11

I HEARD THE BELLS ON CHRISTMAS DAY

Even though he was reading classical literature and writing stories by the age of six and eventually writing his own textbooks and dearly beloved poetry we still read today, Henry Woodworth Longfellow faced several tragedies in his personal life. He had lost two wives at tragically young ages and faced taking care of his five children on his own. Things began turning around in his world but before he could (truly) regain his stride, his faith was again challenged by the American Civil War.

Longfellow hated the Civil War. It tore at the very fiber of his being to see the United States of America—a nation his family had fought to create and help build—divided by the greed and sinful nature of man. An ardent believer in the power of God to move on earth, the poet all but pleaded with his Lord to end the madness of war. When his oldest son, nineteen-year-old Charles, was wounded in battle and sent home to recover, the poet's prayers turned to rage.

As Henry tended his son's injuries, saw other wounded soldiers on the streets... and visited with families who had lost sons in battle, he asked his friends and his God, "Where is the peace?" Then, picking up his pen and paper, he tried to answer that haunting question.

It was the ringing of Christmas bells that probably inspired the cadence found in his writing on December 25, 1863. That day Longfellow hung his whole message on the tolling of the church bells. Yet while most Christmas verse is light and uplifting, America's greatest poet set his lyrical ode in tones that were largely dark and solemn.

In the original seven stanzas of *I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day*, Longfellow focused on Christmas during the Civil War. In his lines one can easily sense the writer's views of slavery and secession; his words divide the war into an effort of God's love and understanding against the devil's hate and anger. It would have been a poem completely

void of hope, a testament to the power of Satan, if Henry hadn't finished his work with two verses that embraced the thought, 'God is not dead, nor doth He sleep. The wrong shall fail, the right prevail, with peace on earth, goodwill to men.' This was a poem that would inspire not only the union, but soon the whole world.

Almost ten years later, in 1872, an Englishman named John Baptiste Calkin decided to marry music to Longfellow's Christmas poem. The organist and music teacher wrote a soaring melody that contained the power to not only convey the bleak imagery of Longfellow's sadness in the poem's tormented first few verses, but the poet's deep and abiding faith in the ode's exhilarating conclusion. When published, this combination of British music and American lyrics quickly made *I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day* one of the most popular carols in both Europe and the United States. Except for the deletion of the two verses that dwelled on the poet's view of the Civil War, the song remains the same today as it was when first published.

While it has been arranged in anthem form for numerous choirs and recorded countless times by a wide variety of artists, *I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day* is still a very personal song. With its plea for sanity in a world often gone insane, with its hope that somehow the joy, comfort, and peace that Christ was born to offer would be realized, the song has been a musical anchor for millions during the dark days of World War I, World War II, Korea, and Vietnam. Even today, when conflicts and turmoil rule so many lives, millions still ask where peace and good will reside. The answer is one that Longfellow not only knew, but also shared, in his most beloved work.

*I heard the bells on Christmas Day- their old, familiar carols play,
and wild and sweet - the words repeat of peace on earth, good-will to men!*

*And thought how, as the day had come, the belfries of all Christendom had rolled along
The unbroken song of peace on earth, good-will to men!*

*And in despair I bowed my head; "There is no peace on earth," I said;
"For hate is strong, and mocks the song of peace on earth, good-will to men!"*

*Then pealed the bells more loud and deep: "God is not dead, nor doth He sleep;
The Wrong shall fail, the Right prevail, With peace on earth, good-will to men."*

*Till ringing, singing on its way, the world revolved from night today,
A voice, a chime, a chant sublime, of peace on earth, good-will to men!*

Ace Collins

From Stories Behind the Best-Loved Songs of Christmas

Sunday, December 12

GOOD NEWS OF GREAT JOY...

Even the wilderness and desert will be glad in those days.

The wasteland will rejoice and blossom with spring crocuses.
Yes, there will be an abundance of flowers
and singing and joy!

The deserts will become as green as the mountains of Lebanon,
as lovely as Mount Carmel or the plain of Sharon.

There the Lord will display his glory,
the splendor of our God.

With this news, strengthen those who have tired hands,
and encourage those who have weak knees.

Say to those with fearful hearts,

“Be strong, and do not fear,
for your God is coming to destroy your enemies.
He is coming to save you.”

And when he comes, he will open the eyes of the blind
and unplug the ears of the deaf.

The lame will leap like a deer,
and those who cannot speak will sing for joy!

Springs will gush forth in the wilderness,
and streams will water the wasteland.

The parched ground will become a pool,
and springs of water will satisfy the thirsty land.

Marsh grass and reeds and rushes will flourish
where desert jackals once lived.

And a great road will go through that once deserted land.

It will be named the Highway of Holiness.

Evil-minded people will never travel on it.

It will be only for those who walk in God’s ways;
fools will never walk there.

Lions will not lurk along its course,
nor any other ferocious beasts.

There will be no other dangers.

Only the redeemed will walk on it.

Those who have been ransomed by the Lord will return.

They will enter Jerusalem singing,
crowned with everlasting joy.
Sorrow and mourning will disappear,
and they will be filled with joy and gladness.

Isaiah 35:1-10 NLT

Monday, December 13

ANGELS TO WATCH OVER US

I didn't plan to collect angels. It just happened. My best friend in elementary school gave me my first angel. It's a white, porcelain childlike angel that plays the Brahms Lullabye. My mother, as well as my students and friends, gave me several angels over the years. I also have angel Christmas tree toppers that I like so much - they are displayed all year long.

The Bible tells us that God has sent his angels to watch over us. Although my wooden, porcelain and cloth angels are poor substitutes for the angels described in the Bible, from childhood I have felt that angels are important and a good thing to have around.

The Bible gives us many examples of God sending angels to help and watch over His people. Angels played an important part in the story of the birth of Jesus. They may get a little overshadowed by the shepherds and the wisemen, but make no mistake, God used angels in a special way to herald the good news of Jesus' birth.

The angel Gabriel came to Mary in her home and proclaimed, "You are favored by the Lord! The Lord is with you." Can you imagine what Mary must have thought? She tried to figure out what this greeting meant. Gabriel continued, "Don't be afraid, Mary. You have found favor with God. You will become pregnant, give birth to a son, and name him Jesus. He will be a great man and will be called the Son of the Most High" (Luke 1:28-32). I think Mary realized how special this messenger from God was, and that the things he told her would change her life forever.

Joseph, Mary's betrothed, had a similar visit and experience. In a dream, an angel of the Lord appeared to him saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take to you Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. And she will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins" (Matthew 1:20-21). I am sure that Joseph was also humbled by this messenger's words. Imagine what the conversation was like between Mary and Joseph as they compared the

messages they had received. They would have a son – not just any son, but the Son of the Most High. They would call him Jesus, and He would save God’s people. Certainly, they were awestruck and probably confused by what they saw and heard from these divine messengers.

Then in the fields near Bethlehem, an angel, surrounded by bright light, appeared to the shepherds, who had been watching their flocks during the night. The angel tried to alleviate their fear by saying, “Don’t be afraid! I have good news for you, a message that will fill everyone with joy. Today your Savior, Christ the Lord, was born in David’s city. This is how you will recognize him: You will find an infant wrapped in strips of cloth and lying in a manger” (Luke 2:8-12). Not quite what they were expecting on a quiet, starlit night. How strange this all must have seemed to these shepherds and even stranger yet, when more angels appeared, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men!” (Luke 2:14)

*“For he will command his angels concerning you
to guard you in all your ways; they will lift you up in their hands,
so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.” Psalm 91:11-12*

Mary Smith

Tuesday, December 14

CHRISTMAS 1952

At six years old, Christmas filled me with wonderment. Mom made a traditional gingerbread house from scratch. A delicious temptation sitting on the living room coffee table a day or so before Christmas. We first ate the gum drops and candies attached to the walls. Next we consumed the white frosting chimney. The gingerbread walls slowly disappeared. Mom stored the surviving pieces in a red tin canister to be finished over the next few months.

With great effort, Dad and my older brothers maneuvered and placed the Christmas tree in the living room. I don’t remember who decorated the tree or strung the lights. I just recall the wonder of silver tinsel and holiday objects hanging from the tree, lights glowing in the living room during Christmas week.

And looking out the living room window, watching soft white pedals of snow falling while Christmas lights reflected off the window. Christmas songs filled the air as Gene Audrey sang “Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer.”

On Christmas Eve, we’d open presents to each other and from relatives. Utilitarian items of clothes, tools, cooking utensils, and books. My parents gave each other ashtrays for their two-packs-a-day Camel habit. After opening the gifts, I had to go to bed.

The real excitement began the next morning. Santa had left gifts under the tree. Flash Gordon space men, plastic cars, Monopoly game, candy, and assortment of toy trinkets. My older brothers got more Lionel train cars and tracks. My sister got more doll clothes.

On this particular Christmas, I received the most special gift: a complete Hopalong Cassidy hat, shirt, trousers, and a two-gun holster set. A loose tie brought together with a silver steer-head tin tie clasp. But most importantly, two six-guns holstered.

So on Christmas day, I changed into my Hopalong clothes and rode throughout the house on my invisible horse, fighting bad guys room to room.

Mom instructed me to tuck my ears under the hat. She feared that the hat might push my ears out, making me look like Dumbo the flying elephant. We didn’t want that to happen.

Our traditional mid-day Christmas meal consisted of turkey, dressing, cranberry sauce, mashed potatoes and pie and ice cream for dessert.

Afraid that a bad guy might try to steal my dessert, I placed my guns on the table. But Mom quietly leaned over to me and said, “Guns do not belong on the dining room table,” so slowly, I returned the guns to my holster. I needed to be good so I could get a second helping of ice cream.

I wore that Hopalong outfit every day when possible. I cried when Mom took it away to wash it. But at some point, the Hopalong clothes began disappearing. First the trousers, followed by the shirt. The hat stayed but soon it became too small to wear.

But like all things, life changes, and Superman became my new TV hero. I now wore my Superman cape whenever possible. But, occasionally, I wore my Hopalong guns and holster too, because, well, even Superman might need a gun.

Joe Laughland

Wednesday, December 15

NATIVITIES HELP US REMEMBER

On World Communion Sunday, I showed our children how children around the world see Jesus as just like them. This Christmas we can see how people around the world see Jesus. They each have unique styles of Nativity scenes reflecting their own culture. Although they are distinctive, they all help us to remember the event of Christ's birth - "God's fulfillment of His greatest Promise."

St. Francis of Assisi was the first to have a live Nativity scene in 1223 AD. He had been on a visit to the Holy Land where he had seen the birthplace of Jesus, and it had deepened his devotion to the Christ Child. Back home in Greccio, Italy, he wanted to share that experience and do something to overcome the rampant greed and materialism prevalent in his time (sound like today?). So he prepared a manger (a food trough for animals) in a cave, brought hay and an ox and donkey. He held a church service (mass) inside the cave inviting his fellow friars and townspeople. St. Francis stood before the manger, full of devotion and piety, bathed in tears and radiant with joy. He called Jesus "Babe of Bethlehem" because he was too touched to utter His name.

Over the next several centuries the concept of the Nativity scene developed and changed to make it more accessible to everyone. It is recreated in town squares and churches worldwide. St. Francis meant for it to be a way for people to meditate on the humility, simplicity, and poverty of Christ. Many of the scenes of today's Nativities are quite elaborate and expensive. There are still some live Nativities, but they are often replaced by statues and figurines depicting the birth scene.

I think St. Francis would be sad to see his emphasis missing. He wanted us to remember that Christmas is not just a time for gift giving or materialistic objects, but it is first meant to be a time to celebrate the birth of our Savior.

Sandy Cude

Thursday, December 16

THE COVENANT- THE CHURCH

All those wicker baskets
The collections of coins and bills
Some torn, some twenty-dollar bills...
They gather in wicker baskets...
Passed around the members of the church
All the wicker baskets
The meal prepared for Sunday consists of fried chicken, steamed rice, and peas,
Prepared for Sunday
Consists of fried chicken, steamed rice, and peas
Prepared by the hand blessed by God
A bag of chips and a cup of joe
Go along with the feast, besides
The Bible, and something to eat,
The warmth of the members of
The church, illuminates the room
The smell of fried chicken, steamed rice, and peas
And reading of Psalm 23
The Lord is my shepherd. I
Shall not want. Here we find
Family, God and, Grace.

Amen.

Katrese Watts

Friday, December 17

TURKEY, TINSEL, TEARS

Grief is always difficult, but this time of year as stores start stocking their shelves with holiday decorations, Christmas carols begin to echo through shopping malls, and holiday commercials hit the airwaves, our grief feels deeper. Memories of past holidays flood our minds. We begin to feel isolated, lonely and that everyone else is having the “Hallmark holiday.”

These once benign reminders become deeply painful, and we suddenly wish we could go to sleep in November and wake up sometime after the new year.

As devastating as the death of a loved one can be, any life altering experience can trigger a sense or feeling of loss that will bring about grief. These are called life losses and may include families devastated by divorce, couples facing the holidays alone for the first time as empty nesters, a new diagnosis or the isolation we feel due to covid.

Grief doesn't take a holiday. It demands full attention now or will silently wait until later. We have to complete the grieving process in order to heal and this includes grieving during the holidays.

It's helpful to reframe our way of thinking during this difficult time. One way is to attach positive symbolism to holiday reminders.

- Christmas lights can remind us that there is hope. Darkness cannot overcome light, but light will always prevail in the darkness.
- Gift wrapping reminds us that there are still wonderful things in our future that we haven't seen yet.
- Christmas trees are conical, symbolizing the eternity of no beginning or end. They form a symbolic arrow to heaven. They are ever green, reminding us that life and hope continue and that love is forever.

You may have recently lost a loved one or simply be revisiting the pain from a time gone by.

You may be struggling with divorce, physical, emotional, or psychological challenges or facing the reality that you are in a different season of life.

Whatever your loss, please know that you are not alone. Never let go of that reality regardless of how you feel. Surround yourself with positive people, draw close to the father

knowing there is no wound that he cannot heal, no pain so great that he cannot comfort you. No sorrow too deep that he cannot understand.

I ask our heavenly father to gently pick up his heartsick, hurting child. To place you lovingly in his lap while wrapping his arms around you. Providing you comfort and respite as he whispers softly in your ear....

I am here and you are loved.

Nancy Shomo

Saturday, December 18

THE DECREE

And in these days a decree goes out to all the world
for these are taxing times.
We are all called again to go to Bethlehem,
no matter the state of our health or our world.
We come, obedient and faithful,
for we have heard the message,
we have dreamed the dream
that God will come to dwell among us.
We come, expectant with joy,
pregnant with anticipation,
for God has done great things for us.
We come searching for a sign;
bearing gifts, we come.
We come, called from the silent hillsides of our hearts,
startled and frightened by the magnitude of light,
we huddle together toward Bethlehem.
We come, one by one,
and yet, as one,
dancing into the Promise.

Ann Weems

From *Kneeling in Bethlehem*

Sunday, December 19

MARY'S SONG OF PRAISE

Mary said:

With all my heart
I praise the Lord,
and I am glad
because of God my Savior.

He cares for me,
his humble servant.

From now on,
all people will say
God has blessed me.
God All-Powerful has done
great things for me,
and his name is holy.

He always shows mercy
to everyone
who worships him.

The Lord has used
his powerful arm
to scatter those
who are proud.

He drags strong rulers
from their thrones
and puts humble people
in places of power.

God gives the hungry
good things to eat,
and sends the rich away
with nothing.

He helps his servant Israel
and is always merciful
to his people.

The Lord made this promise
to our ancestors,
to Abraham and his family
forever!

Luke 1:46-55 CEV

Monday, December 20

THE BEST GIFT EVER

I have many fond memories of Christmas morning from when I was growing up. One of the most memorable was when I was in 5th grade. Perhaps it was so special because it was the last Christmas before I discovered the secret about Santa. Regardless, it was 1998 and the age of Beanie Babies was at its peak. I had been hoping, wishing, and praying that the highly coveted Princess Diana Beanie Baby bear would magically materialize under my tree on Christmas morning. I remember it was especially difficult to fall asleep that Christmas eve night – I was just so excited! I had visualized exactly what I thought it would be like to finally open that bear. Eventually sleep claimed me for a few hours and Christmas morning had finally arrived.

My brother and I waited anxiously at the top of the stairs while our parents tried to shake the grogginess of sleep. I remember how we kept peeking at our newly stuffed stockings hanging below, while also trying to spy all of the recently placed presents under the big, bright Christmas tree. After what felt like at least 100 years, we were finally granted permission to go downstairs and open our stockings and gifts. Every year, we observed a tradition where each family member took turns opening a gift, one at a time. I will never forget the ear-piercing scream I let out as I opened my last and most treasured gift that morning. The royal purple bear with the white rose on its chest was my most sacred Christmas wish realized. I could not believe I had a Princess Diana bear of my very own now.

I may or may not still have that bear today, but I still cherish the warm memories of past Christmas dreams. The celebration of Christmas gifts each year laid a foundation of deep joy for me. As years have gone by, and as I have now accepted Jesus as Lord over my life, I am in awe of the original and most sacred Christmas gift ever given. That God would gift this broken and corrupt world such a treasure as His one and only Son is unfathomable to me. We do not deserve, nor could we ever earn, such a gift. But because of his unconditional love for us, we can accept his freely given gift of grace, should we so choose.

My prayer today is that we never overlook the most special Christmas gift freely given but that we will cling to it and cherish the birth of Jesus even more tightly than a fifth-grade girl holding her new bear.

Katelyn Belcher

Tuesday, December 21

GREAT ANTICIPATION

Jesus spoke these words, “Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. In my Father’s house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also” (John 14:1-3). With these words Jesus assures and comforts us on many levels. We can overcome our troubles by believing in God. We can rest assured that in death we will be with Jesus as He has prepared a place for us. Jesus also promised here he will come again, and in Revelation 22:12, “Behold, I am coming soon...” Christians look forward to the fulfillment of this promise.

In the Advent season we celebrate the birth of Christ when He first came to earth as a baby. He has promised that when he comes a second time he will come in the clouds with great power and glory (Matthew 13.26). Ever since the disciples watched him ascend into heaven after the resurrection, believers have waited expectantly for His return. Some of our Christmas carols reflect this hope. The third verse of *Angels, From the Realms of Glory* says,

Saints before the altar bending,
Watching long in hope and fear,
Suddenly the Lord, descending,
In his temple shall appear.

As we celebrate this season, let us remember the child who came, but let us also eagerly look to the second coming of Christ when we believers who are still on earth will join Christ to be with him forever.

Betty Ecklund

Wednesday, December 22

IT IS NOT OVER

It is not over,
 this birthing.
There are always newer skies
 into which
 God can throw stars.
When we begin to think
 that we can predict the Advent of God,
 that we can box the Christ
 in a stable in Bethlehem,
 that's just the time
 that God will be born
 in a place we can't imagine and won't believe.
Those who wait for God
 watch with their hearts and not their eyes,
 listening
 always listening
 for angel words.

Ann Weems
From *Kneeling in Bethlehem*

Thursday, December 23

FIRST COMING

He did not wait till the world was ready,
till men and nations were at peace.
He came when the Heavens were unsteady,
and prisoners cried out for release.

He did not wait for the perfect time.
He came when the need was deep and great.
He dined with sinners in all their grime,
turned water into wine.

WEEK FOUR: LOVE

He did not wait till hearts were pure.
In joy he came to a tarnished world of sin and doubt.
To a world like ours, of anguished shame
he came, and his Light would not go out.

He came to a world which did not mesh,
to heal its tangles, shield its scorn.
In the mystery of the Word made Flesh
the Maker of the stars was born.

We cannot wait till the world is sane
to raise our songs with joyful voice,
for to share our grief, to touch our pain,
He came with Love: Rejoice! Rejoice!

Madeleine L'Engle

friday, December 24

HE'S HERE!

Everything was ready. The moment God had been waiting for was here at last! God was coming to help his people, just as he promised in the beginning.

But how would he come? What would he be like? What would he do?

Mountains would have bowed down. Seas would have roared. Trees would have clapped their hands. But the earth held its breath. As silent as snow falling, he came in. And when no one was looking, in the darkness, he came.

There was a young girl who was engaged to a man named Joseph. (Joseph was the great-great- great- great- great grandson of King David.)

One morning, this girl was minding her own business when, suddenly, a great warrior of light appeared—right there, in her bedroom. He was Gabriel and he was an angel, a special messenger from heaven.

When she saw the tall shining man standing there, Mary was frightened.

“You don’t need to be afraid,” Gabriel said. “God is very happy with you!”

Mary looked around to see if perhaps he was talking to someone else.

“Mary,” Gabriel said, and he laughed with such gladness that Mary’s eyes filled with sudden tears.

“Mary, you’re going to have a baby. A little boy. You will call him Jesus. He is God’s own Son. He’s the One! He’s the Rescuer!”

The God who flung the planets into space and kept them whirling around and around, the God who made the universe with just a word, the one who could do anything at all—was making himself small. And coming down... as a baby.

Wait. God was sending a baby to rescue the world?

“But it’s too wonderful!” Mary said and felt her heart beating hard. “How can it be true?”

“Is anything too wonderful for God?” Gabriel asked.

So Mary trusted God more than what her eyes could see. And she believed. “I am God’s servant,” she said. “Whatever God says, I will do.”

Sure enough, it was just as the angel had said. Nine months later, Mary was almost ready to have her baby.

Now, Mary and Joseph had to take a trip to Bethlehem, the town King David was from. But when they reached the little town, they found every room was full. Every bed was taken.

“Go away!” the innkeepers told them. “There isn’t any place for you.”

Where would they stay? Soon Mary’s baby would come.

They couldn’t find anywhere except an old, tumbledown stable. So they stayed where the cows and the donkeys and the horses stayed.

And there, in the stable, amongst the chickens and the donkeys and the cows, in the quiet of the night, God gave the world his wonderful gift. The baby that would change the world was born. His baby Son.

Mary and Joseph wrapped him up to keep him warm. They made a soft bed of straw and used the animals’ feeding trough as his cradle. And they gazed in wonder at God’s Great Gift, wrapped in swaddling clothes, and lying in a manger.

Mary and Joseph named him Jesus, “Emmanuel”—which means “God has come to live with us.”

Because, of course, he had.

The Nativity, from Luke 1-2 in The Jesus Storybook Bible

Saturday, December 25

THE LIGHT OF THE WHOLE WORLD

That same night, in amongst the other stars, suddenly a bright new star appeared. Of all the stars in the dark vaulted heavens, this one shone clearer. It blazed in the night and made the other stars look pale beside it.

God put it there when his baby Son was born—to be like a spotlight. Shining on him. Lighting up the darkness. Showing people the way to him.

You see, God was like a new daddy—he couldn’t keep the good news to himself. He’d been waiting all these long years for this moment, and now he wanted to tell everyone.

So he pulled out all the stops. He’s sent an angel to tell Mary the good news. He’d put a special star in the sky to show where his boy was. And now he was going to send a big choir of angels to sing his happy song to the world: He’s here! He’s come! Go and see him. My little Boy.

Now where would you send your splendid choir? To a big concert hall maybe? Or a palace perhaps? God sent his to a little hillside, outside a little town, in the middle of the night. He sent all those angels to sing for a raggedy old bunch of shepherds watching their sheep outside Bethlehem.

In those days, remember, people used to laugh at shepherds and say they were smelly and call them other rude names (which I can’t possibly mention here). You see, people thought shepherds were nobodies, just scruffy old riff-raff.

But God must have thought shepherds were very important indeed, because they’re the ones he chose to tell the good news to first.

That night some shepherds were out in the open fields, warming themselves by a campfire, when suddenly the sheep darted. They were frightened by something. The olive trees rustled. What was that... A wing beat?

They turned around. Standing in front of them was a huge warrior of light, blazing in the darkness. “Don’t be afraid of me!” the bright shining man said. “I haven’t come to hurt you. I’ve come to bring you happy news for everyone everywhere. Today, in David’s town, in Bethlehem, God Son has been born! You can go and see him. He is sleeping in a manger.

Behind the angel they saw a strange glowing cloud—except it wasn’t a cloud, it was angels... troops and troops of angels, armed with light! And they were singing a beautiful song: “Glory to God! To God be Fame and Honor and all our Hoorays!”

Then as quickly as they appeared, the angels left.

The shepherds stamped out their fire, left their sheep, raced down the grassy hill, through the gates of Bethlehem, down the narrow cobble streets, through a courtyard, down some step, step, steps, past an inn, round a corner, through a hedge, until, at last, they reached... a tumbledown stable.

They caught their breath. Then quietly, they tiptoed inside.

They knelt on the dirt floor. They had heard about this Promised Child and now he was here. Heaven’s Son. The Maker of the Stars. A baby sleeping in his mother’s arms.

This baby would be like that bright star shining in the sky that night. A Light to light up the whole world. Chasing away darkness. Helping people to see.

And the darker the night got, the brighter the star would shine.

From *The Jesus Storybook Bible*

December 26–January 6

THE KING OF ALL KINGS

Far away, in the East, three clever men saw the very bright star. The star that God had put in the sky when Jesus was born. They knew it was a sign. A baby king had been born.

They had been waiting for this star. They knew it would come.

“He’s here!” they shouted. “He’s here!” (And I’m sure if you’d been there, you would have heard them laughing and dancing and singing until the sun came up!)

At dawn, they packed up their camels and wrapped gifts for the baby. They brought their most precious treasures of all: frankincense, gold, and myrrh. Special sparkly, lovely-smelling, gleaming things—just right for a king.

The three Wise Men (actually, if you’d met them, you’d have thought they were kings because they were so rich and clever and important looking) set off.

They rode their camels...

Across endless deserts...

Up steep, steep mountains...

Down into deep, deep valleys...

Through raging rivers...

Over grassy plains...

night and day, and day and night, for hours that turned into days, that turned into weeks, that turned into months and months, until, at last, they reached... Jerusalem.

Jerusalem was by far the most important city for miles and, as anyone can tell you, that’s where a palace would be and kings were born in palaces. So that’s where they went. But they were in for a surprise.

They went to see King Herod. Surely he’d know where this baby was.

But he didn’t. In fact, he didn’t like the sound of a new king—it made him cross. He didn’t want anyone to be king, except him.

But Herod’s advisors told the three Wise Men what was written in their books—what God had said about the baby king: “Go to Bethlehem. That’s where you’ll find him.”

Suddenly the star they had seen in the East started moving again, showing them the way. So the three Wise Men followed the star out of the big city, along the road, into the little town of Bethlehem. They followed the star through the streets of Bethlehem, out of the nice part of town, through the not-so-nice part of town, into the really-not-so-nice-at-all part of town, down a little dirt track, until it stopped right over... a little house.

But wait. It wasn't a palace. And there weren't any guards. Or servants. Or flags. Or red carpets. Or trumpets. Or anything. Did they get it wrong? Or was this what God had meant?

Sure enough, in that little house—there, sitting on his mother's knee—they found him. The baby King.

The three men knelt before the little King. They took off their rich royal turbans and gleaming golden crowns. They bowed their noble heads to the ground and gave him their sparkling treasures.

The journey that had begun so many centuries before had led three Wise Men here. To a little town. To a little house. To a little child.

To the King God had promised David all those years before.

But this child was a new kind of king. Though he was the Prince of Heaven, he had become poor. Though he was the Mighty God, he had become a helpless baby. This King hadn't come to be the boss. He had come to be a servant.

From *The Jesus Storybook Bible*

And in that very moment, God's promise was fulfilled.

HARRISONBURG BAPTIST CHURCH

501 South Main Street, Harrisonburg, Virginia 22801

540.433.2456 | www.hbcalive.org