

The Season of Christmas

Daily Devotions from December 25 - January 6
From the Cruxifusion network in the United Church of Canada

The Purpose of "The Season of Christmas" devotional produced by Cruxifusion is to encourage brothers & sisters in Christ throughout the United Church (and beyond!) to celebrate this season by joining in shared scripture and prayerful communion with God. You can find this devotional online at www.cruxifusion.ca or on facebook at "Cruxifusion Canada".

In the joy of Emmanuel!
The Cruxifusion Board
December 2017

December 25

Luke 2:8-20

What Next after Christmas?

We hear the same story every year. Angels sing. Shepherds watch their flocks. Mary and Joseph and the babe in the manger wrapped in swaddling clothes. A tableau fixed in our minds. But what about the next day...next month...next year...next years?

The postscript to the Christmas story, as told in Luke 2, provides us with important reminders of what we are called to do with the good news of the birth of Jesus. In verses 19-20, we read *“But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.”*

Verse 19 tells us that Mary treasured the words of the shepherds and pondered them. Much of the magic of the Christmas story is that we know where it is going. It is the beginning of a much bigger vision of what God intends to do. We know the story leads to miracles; teaching about love and mercy; Gethsemane; the cross; the empty tomb and the right hand of the Father himself. And we hold that story of God’s intervention to redeem his people in our hearts and we treasure it.

But that is not all. The shepherds did not hold the story and ponder it. What they saw, what they heard, what they had been told. It became an opportunity to lift their voices in praise. The story is in our hearts. But is it in our lives? Is it in our words? Is it in our praise? We do not know what became of the shepherd’s proclamation. We may never know what becomes of our proclamation. The good news we have received about Jesus Christ is meant to be spoken of in praise.

So Go...Tell It...Everywhere.

Lord God, let what we treasure in our hearts be an object of praise dedicated to you so that our hearts, minds and lives show we belong to you. Amen.

Rev. Michael Goodfellow

December 26

Acts 7:59-60

59 While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." 60 Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he died.

December 26 is the traditional feast day of St. Stephen, and I have to admit that at first I wondered what the story of Stephen has to do with the season of Christmas. Why would the Feast Day of St. Stephen fall during the season of Christmas, rather than Easter, when we consider how Stephen's words at the time of his death witness to the words of Jesus as he hung on the cross?

The only connection to Christmas I could think of is that this is the day, legend tells us, that "Good King" Wenceslas - actually a 10th century martyr and saint - went out into the cold Bohemian winter to deliver bread and wine to a poor, lonely man he saw off in the distance gathering wood. Wenceslas' actions honour the namesake of the feast day in that they reflect the self-sacrificial service of Stephen, who was one of the first commissioned to a position of service in the Church.

I've always thought of this Christmas Carol as kind of a jolly song, likely because the lyrics of this rather serious story are set to the whimsical tune of a traditional spring carol (Tempus Adest Floridum - "Now comes the time of flowers"), also originally sung at Easter time.

So everything about the Feast Day of St. Stephen seems to point us to the cross. And maybe it's not entirely amiss, if we want to go deeper into our reflections around Christmas; for while we rejoice at the birth of a baby, He came into the world knowing that He was stepping down from glory into our human brokenness. He came to deliver himself, the bread and wine to all the poor and lonely people of the world.

*"Therefore, Christian men, be sure, wealth or rank possessing,
Ye who now will bless the poor, shall yourselves find blessing." (v. 5)*

Lord Jesus, you who were not afraid to humble yourself and dwell among us, renew us in our commitment to serve others as the saints Stephen and Wenceslas did, that others might see your self-giving love through us. Amen.

Rev. Lori Hill

December 27

Psalm 148

Joy to the world, the Lord is come...

Hymnary.org reports it was the #1 Christmas carol included in hymnbooks prior to 1979 - a total of 1387 times... 400 more than second place!

... and heaven and nature sing!

And what shall be the song of heaven and earth? Psalm 148 invokes: Praise! Praise! Praise! Nine times in the first five verses the creatures of heaven are called on to praise the Lord.

*Praise the Lord from the heavens; praise him in the heights!
Praise him, all his angels; praise him, all his host!*

There is satisfaction knowing that while my praise may face constant interruption and distraction, there are creatures able to offer constancy in praise. There is pleasure knowing that while my praise may be feeble and so often marred, that the hosts of heaven offer pure and splendid praise to God.

The second half of Psalm 148 calls for this praise begun in heaven to take on flesh among the peoples of the earth.

*Young men and women alike, old and young together!
Let them praise the name of the Lord...*

No matter the imperfection, no matter the rank or station in life, all are invited to this "pleasant work" (Matthew Henry). I've written gratitude lists as part of my prayer life for some time; they took on new meaning though when I was encouraged to turn each thanksgiving into praise. For example:

Thank you for my family.

You are the giver of life and the source of love.

Thank you for food.

You are the provider, the one sees and meets my every need.

Thank you for Jesus.

You are my Savior and Lord. You are my teacher and friend.

Psalm 148 ends acknowledging the blessing Israel has of being "close" to God. It is a blessing that at Bethlehem extends to all. Emmanuel! God with us! *Praise the Lord!*

Prayer suggestion: Write a gratitude list and turn each phrase into praise.

Rev. Heather Carlson

December 28

Matthew 18:1-14

I have been wracking my United Church sentiments to find a (witty and progressive) way to address the “Slaughter of the Innocents”. I yearn towards the heart rending words of Isaiah “The Lord has forsaken me...” “...I will not forget you” and I bristle with Jesus as he admonishes his followers not to place a “stumbling block” (Greek: skandalon)) before the “little ones”. As I read, I found myself wishing to thunder at, as the Coventry Carol intones:

*Herod the King In his raging
Charged he hath this day
His men of might In his own sight
All young children to slay*

Think of the parallels in Exodus of the dual mass-murders of the Hebrew Children and the Egyptian firstborn. How many times, throughout history, have the Innocents paid the price for fallen human depravity. I need not compile a list as I neither have the time, the space nor the stomach to do so.

Yet, I would like to tangentially move on. In a recent paper (<http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/2167702617723376>) the spike in reports of teen depression, suicide and similar mental illnesses has been linked to “screen time”. An analysis has posited that what is behind this is the loss of REAL human contact: friends and family, and sleep. Are we laying down stumbling blocks to the children and youth in our lives? Instead of inscribing the names of God’s beloved daughters and sons on the palms of our hands are they tightly clamped around names like Apple, Samsung, Google? Have we, in the sin of needing to be liked, given up our rightful authority as parent and adult to say to children: “NO! put away the smart-phone and go outside and play with your friends”?

One of the greatest Christmas presents I ever received was a wooden toboggan from Santa. Apparently he needed to outsource his toboggan making to “The Bay”. I still have that toboggan - and I still use it, as I used it when I was a kid - and used it with my kids. The pocket electronic football game - gone. The Commodore 64 - trashed. The Palm Pilot - obsolete. If getting away from screen-time might mitigate self-harm in teens and youth, then let us do it. And we’ll probably be the better for it, given that we are generally overweight and under-active. Let’s do what we can to keep God’s Holy Innocents Wholly Innocent. Merry Christmas.

Prayer for the Holy Innocents (BCP 1979):

We remember today, O God, the slaughter of the holy innocents of Bethlehem by King Herod. Receive, we pray, into the arms of your mercy all innocent victims; and by your great might frustrate the designs of evil tyrants and establish your rule of justice, love, and peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Blair Paterson

December 29

Jeremiah 31:15-22

Ramah was a few hours' trudge outside Jerusalem, that shattered city from which the smoke was still rising. The village was conscripted as a collection point for the forced march to exile. There Rachel rocked, disconsolate for her stolen children. Were they dead? Taken? Lost in the confusion? Did she know? Countless mothers and fathers were stricken that day. Jeremiah paused over her.

Was it her name? She shared it with Israel's (aka Jacob's) second wife. That Rachel had been the mother/grandmother of three of Israel's tribes: Benjamin, Manasseh and Ephraim. That day, then, Rachel was all God's People, shaking and sobbing. All its children, lost.

Jeremiah consoles her. He gives her God's promise that her children will come back. I'm perplexed, however. Notice who he names. Ephraim! Here's the thing. A much earlier calamity, centuries before, had stolen away ten of Israel's tribes, including Ephraim. Ephraim was long-gone. Why remember Ephraim now?

Of course Rachel remembers him. Parents grieve for their lost children, no matter how long-gone. Grief is a sack we carry with us. Whenever we open it to add a fresh loss, we see all the other losses in there. They rush back, often with surprising intensity.

Ephraim vanished long-before that day at Ramah. Rachel did not forget.

God does not forget. Ephraim is God's son too (v. 20). "I still remember him." God utterly, absolutely, unshakingly and unfailingly remembers Ephraim.

Anyone whom God remembers is not lost.

All of Rachel's children, God remembers and brings back. They are always held in the redeeming, re-creating and resurrecting grace of God.

Let us pray . . . for parents who are grieving their lost children, and for children whose parents are lost to them.

Greg Smith-Young

December 30

2 Corinthians 4:16-18

I wonder if you've ever felt inadequate at Christmas. You wanted to be the sort of the person who bakes cookies with care and joy, but couldn't make the time. You wanted to find the perfect gift for a loved one, but found yourself without ideas. You wanted to preach an amazing sermon and 'wow' the Christmas and Easter crowd, but none of them came back the next Sunday.

In 2 Corinthians, Paul is accused of being inadequate. He is a substandard apostle. He has not worked particularly impressive miracles. He changed his schedule in a scatterbrained way. He is not a very good speaker.

Paul's response is this: My abilities and gifts are ultimately not what are important. What matters is the Good News of Jesus.

In this season of so many pressures, let's take a moment to listen to Paul's words: "for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal." The cookies, the gifts, the power of eloquent speech: these are well and good. What is central and vital, however, is what is unseen. We celebrate Good News of Jesus who is born in a dark barn and who will one day rise from a dark tomb. We celebrate an unseen and spiritual Kingdom, which is becoming flesh and bones in our world.

God gives you rest. Take a moment of prayer. In your everyday life and community, where might God show you a glimpse of the eternal and unseen?

Natalie Istead

December 31

Luke 2:22-40

*Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too."
Luke 2:34-35*

Simeon's blessing represents a call to clarity. One that might be particularly welcome at this juncture in this holy season. Would that it could have come earlier. Simeon speaks to us without the benefit of years and years of the commercial creep that Christmas has been subjected to and his remarks, though cryptic, reflect the reality of the Messianic Kingdom which draws ever nearer.

What is at stake in this transition Simeon has longed for is more than Black Friday chaos or Boxing Week blowouts. It is more than the weaponized sentimentality and ritualized cheer that are the cultural expectation of this time of year. It is the move from humanity's temporary stewardship to God's eternal care. A move which will not be easy or without conflict.

Gone will be the days of stone tablets and legal tomes which regulate our interactions and that void will be filled by the commands and precepts God has etched into the living flesh of our hearts. The light of life, which illuminates our very beings, will be the same light which fills our new reality. The children of God will be raised up to reflect the glory of God and show the image of God strongly in every corner of the new heaven and the new earth. Maranatha Lord! Come quickly!

God of grace and glory, Creator of sea, soil and sky, hold our hearts in your gentle hands. Cradle our heart against your firm and steady palms creased by the innumerable names of all your children you have engraved upon them. Safe in your hands we cannot fall and every loss we endure shall be redeemed by your Son. Sustaining Spirit of Holiness be the spark which moves our heart and fill us with your life-giving wisdom in the days and weeks and years to come. Amen.

Rev. John Maich

January 1

Psalm 8

There is no more profound a question a “person of faith” can ask of God, than the question posed by the psalmist: what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?

Please note that it is, indeed, the “person of faith” who asks this question, a truth underlined by the psalm’s subsequent affirmation of human beings as a little lower than God, crowned with glory and honor. Such an appraisal of humankind, far from being accessible through empirical measures, is the domain of those who have come to view the problematic human creature in light of its exalted Creator.

Also worth noting is the close connection between the psalmist’s question and the implicit question asked by none other than the Adversary in the opening chapters of Job. The perplexity with which Satan views humanity—the bewilderment with which he regards God’s care for the human race—clearly drives Satan’s attempt at undermining God’s affection by undermining the integrity of a representative human figure, namely Job.

While it is often claimed that God, in the course of that lengthy book, succeeds in answering neither the psalmist’s question nor Satan’s challenge, what ought to be affirmed is that God—at Christmas—effectively “double-downs” on Satan’s challenge. At Christmas it can, indeed, be said that God chooses not so much to explain having chosen the human being, but instead places an exclamation mark next to that choice, insisting upon its indelible nature. How?

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth. John 1:14

May the good news of Christmas—the scandalous news of God’s incarnation—comfort, challenge and inspire us throughout this joyous season, and forever more. Amen.

Foster Freed

January 2

Hebrews 11:1-12; Genesis 12:1-7

Reigniting the Flame of Faith

In Hebrews 11:8 we're told that "by faith Abraham obeyed ...set out for a place to receive as an inheritance...not knowing where he was going". Abraham didn't know the outcome, he didn't have all the answers, but he had all that he felt he needed to make a move, faith in the One that sent him. Having faith and not using it is like having a treadmill for a fitness regime, and not use it. The truth is that the measure of our faith is often found not just in having it, but also in what we do in response to the call of God to go and do.

What Abraham did in faith, was no small act. To make such life altering decisions requires a faith that is fueled by two things, a promise and prayer. In Genesis 12 we see an outline of a promise made to Abraham, it is that promise that gives him the drive to make the first step, at 75 years old, taking his family and moving to a foreign land (v4-6). How disappointing it must have been for him to arrive and find his land occupied. To cushion this disappointment, the Lord reassures him with another promise. What can we learn from Abraham's response to this disappointment; he builds an altar and prays. We can learn that our faith flame fueled by a promise can be doused with disappointment, but prayer can be used to reignite it.

This Christmas Season put your faith into action and if you are disappointed, pray. Not a prayer of defeat, but one celebrating the fulfillment of the promise you received (see Psalm 20) to keep your flame of faith burning. Let us pray...

Rev. Sadekie Lyttle-Forbes

January 3

Genesis 28:10-22

Jacob was facing a difficult assignment. He was to choose a bride from a distant city. There were many unknowns in this quest, but he had to go. We may be able to relate to Jacob's uncertainty at the beginning of this new year. Where will our strength and wisdom come from in the quandaries on our horizon? Will we have the resources we need? Jacob didn't even have moss on the stone he chose for a pillow.

Jacob thought he was alone, yet he discovered God was there, too. As a child I sang, "We are climbing Jacob's ladder" but Jacob hadn't climbed any ladder; God came to him. We have just celebrated the birth of Emmanuel- God with us. As our creed says, 'We are not alone'.

God made a promise to Jacob, a promise that included far more than Jacob had ever dreamed of asking for. Our God is still far more wise and generous than we can imagine or deserve. Which promises do you claim, especially in tough times? My favourite is Romans 8:28 "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose." That verse has steadied me as God has fulfilled this promise in my life many times.

I find Jacob's response amusing- and sad. He begins with "If" to almighty God, and proceeds to drive a hard bargain. What is comforting is that God does not reject Jacob in his self protecting response. We can't know if Jacob kept his end of the bargain but we know that God kept hers. And still does. That is why we keep celebrating Jesus' birth and remember that he accompanies us into this new year.

PRAYER PROMPT

I give thanks for....

I claim your promise...

Helen Reid

January 4

Today we invite you to choose and meditate on one of the following scriptures:

- Exodus 3:1-5
- Hebrews 11:23-31

Prayer: Psalm 72

January 5

Hebrews 11:32-12:2

I long for candle flames and twinkle lights long into the new year. Such numinous beauty is derived from a bit of electrical wire and coloured glass. Still, lest I become that person whose Christmas tree of shame is standing in the corner after epiphany, I am winding up and putting away the tree lights. I leave them plugged in till the last minute, so that I may enjoy the colour flashing through my fingers.

These strings of lights remind me of the saints and witnesses who have brought the light of Christ to me. Each one has been a little glow, connected to the one before who shared faith with them and so on down the years, until it came to me, making it possible that I would hear of Jesus.

In Hebrews we read of great heroes of the faith who endured all to become the “great cloud of witnesses” (Heb 12:1) and whose stories inspire and provide us with hope, leading both backwards and forwards in time to Christ.

Every once in a while, when I think about that string of light stretching back over the millenia, I tear up in gratitude and awe of those whose greatness we admire like King David, Deborah, Mary Magdalene, and Peter...and my auntie Ruth...and my grade three Sunday school teacher.

But Hebrews also tells us that, “they won strength out of weakness” (Heb. 11:34) and that encourages me to hope that my little faith will be a pinprick of light that will lead another to the One they need who can give them the joy that is set before us. (Heb. 12:2)

Prayer: Lord God, into this quiet moment of gratitude, I offer the names of those who helped bring me to faith:

Melodee Lovering

January 6

Matthew 2:1-12

How do you feel about the future these days? Do you anticipate it with anxiety? Do you view it with hope?

Matthew begins today's gospel story with the words, "In the time of Herod". It was a way of saying that Jesus was born at a time when anxiety dominated the future. Herod was a ruler driven by paranoia. Herod had closed the future down violently, trying to make sure that nothing happened other than what he wanted to happen.

After Jesus was born, magi came from Iran asking, "Where is the one who is born king of the Jews? We have seen his star at its rising and have come to worship him." With nothing more to go on than a hint that something new was on the horizon, they had set out with hope toward God's new future.

Christian hope is risky and costly. Say, "I will follow Jesus" and God will set you on a journey. that will change you. It will set you down a different path than you had planned to go.

The only reason for taking that risk is that Jesus meets you on the Way. He comes as Saviour and Friend and Guide. Christian hope is rooted in God's promise that, whatever happens, God will make a way of salvation through it. Held fast by that God, bowing our hearts to the Child of Bethlehem, we face the future with courage.

Prayer prompt:

Begin your prayer remembering one or more promises of God, e.g. "The Lord is my Shepherd; I have everything I need", or "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you". Hand over to God whatever is weighing on your heart. Rest in God's love for you, with thanksgiving for God's faithfulness.

Christine Jerrett

Contributor Biographies

Rev. Heather Carlson has been serving the Drumheller Pastoral Charge in the beautiful badlands of southern Alberta for 3 years.

Foster Freed currently serves the Trinity Pastoral Charge in Nanaimo, B.C.. He and his wife Sherry recently became grand-parents, and are immensely enjoying this new phase (and newest blessing) in their life-together.

Rev. Michael Goodfellow currently serves the Hartland-Jacksonville Pastoral Charge in rural New Brunswick. Just a simple country preacher, he loves his Lord, his wife Sarah and his cat Jenny, in that order. He has great interest in the writings of the Puritans. His main prayer is for a Holy Spirit revival in the church. Soli Deo Gloria

Rev. Lori Hill lives in Toronto, ON and will be marrying her fiancé, Chris, in August 2018. She is the Minister of Congregational Life and Membership Development at Timothy Eaton Memorial Church.

Natalie Istead is the student minister with Église Unie de la Grâce United Church in West Quebec. She is a candidate for ordained ministry from Ottawa Presbytery.

Christine Jerrett works part-time with EDGE with a focus on animating new ministry in rural and small town churches. She is also in ministry with Shiloh Inwood pastoral charge.

Melodee Lovering is a Designated Lay Minister who works with youth and children at Parkdale United Church, Ottawa. She is married to Rev. Jack Lovering and together they have two children and two grandchildren.

Rev. Sadekie Lyttle-Forbes is an ordained minister serving at Emmanuel United Church, Windsor. Preaching, teaching, prayer and pastoral care are her passions.

Rev. John Maich was ordained by The United Church of Canada in 1998. Currently, he is serving the Brigus-Cupids-Georgetown Pastoral Charge in Newfoundland and Labrador. John proud husband of Kimberly for 26 years, proud father to Robert, Grace, and Hannah, and even prouder grand-father to Quincey (10 mos).

Blair Paterson is a minister, husband, dad and general pest. When he is not blowing his bagpipes, he's deleting posts that he really wants to say, but is afraid that he might be banned from facebook, and well, the United Church. He is also hoping that, as his beard grows greyer, he might actually become a wizard, or Santa. Whichever comes first.

Helen (Irwin) Reid graduated from Emmanuel College and was ordained in 1967. She served pastoral charges in BQ, MNWO, SK and ANW. She married Don Reid, (Queen's '68). They have 2 daughters and 5 grandchildren. Helen is retired in Medicine Hat and presently is secretary of South Alberta presbytery.

Greg Smith-Young is an ordained minister serving with Elora and Bethany United Churches near Guelph, Ontario. He is dedicated to supporting and equipping fellow-disciples as we follow Jesus into the various neighbourhoods we are part of. He is vice-chair of the Cruxifusion board.