

# *Blessed Trinity Lutheran Church at Rosemont*

MEDITATIONS — DECEMBER, 2024

December 1, 2024

**And it came to pass in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered.**

Luke 2:1

When Mary and Joseph made their journey to Bethlehem, they weren't planning to settle there. They were travelling because they had to obey the Roman government's order to be 'registered', as in a census. Mary and Joseph couldn't know what would happen during their journey— their baby's birth, a dazzling star in the sky, shepherds coming to kneel at the manger, wise men from the East bringing gifts to the newborn child. They didn't know that Joseph would be warned in a dream to "go into Egypt" to avoid danger to their son. They did not know that Herod, after hearing of Jesus's birth, would order the slaughter of all male children under the age of two in Bethlehem. After Herod's death, Joseph was told, in another dream, that it was safe to go home to Nazareth. None of this was known or planned when they started out. They simply knew they had to make these necessary journeys. The story of Mary and Joseph is ancient, and it is also as current as today's news. Today, people around the world are, like Mary and Joseph, making necessary journeys. They're fleeing war-ravaged homelands where bombs, gunfire, and explosions bring death every day. They're running from gang violence that brings assault, rape, and murder to their doorsteps. They're escaping from places where police have no control, where corruption rules, where normal life is impossible. If any one of us lived in such an area, we'd flee, too. Fathers, especially, would be anxious, like Joseph, to protect their families.

Much has changed in the world since Mary and Joseph journeyed to Bethlehem, but some things have not changed. Danger, threats, and violence still dominate in many places. The need to flee – for life, for safety – still exists, and it opens refugees to other dangers: rejection, abuse, denigration ('they're not even human, they're vermin'), and killing. From the time of Abraham ... to the time of Jesus ... to our time, sadistic rulers and regimes have ordered slaughters of the innocents. From Herod ... to Hitler ... to today's Houthis, Hamas, Hezbollah, Boko Haram, and so many more, people seek to kill those who are not like them. They do this in the name of religious or racial purity, in the quest for power or territory, or in the perverted name of nationalism. Two thousand years passed between the time of Abraham's journey and the journey Mary and Joseph made to Bethlehem. Two thousand more years have passed from the time of Mary and Joseph to our time, the 21<sup>st</sup> century AD. So ... why should we care about those who are fleeing or in danger today? Why can't we just look at Mary, Joseph, and Jesus as if they, and their story, are charmingly preserved, as if in a snow globe that we gaze at once a year? We can't do that, because the story of Mary and Joseph can't be separated from the life lessons it is meant to teach us. The Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament are not simply interesting stories and concepts. They are also lessons from which we are expected to learn; learn how to live in relationship to our Creator, to live more peacefully and productively with our fellow human beings, as God intends for us, as God asks of us. And the child born in a stable in Bethlehem, during that long-ago journey, gave us what he said was part of the most important lesson of all: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." (Romans 13:9)

December 2, 2024

**"And who is my neighbor?"**

Luke 10:29

One day, as Jesus was speaking, a man affirmed Jesus's teaching that we should love our neighbors as ourselves. But then the man asked Jesus, "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus replied with the parable of the Good Samaritan. In that parable, a priest – someone who should certainly know about love and mercy – sees a man who was beaten, robbed, and left for dead at the roadside. The priest does nothing to help the man and crosses over to the other side. A Levite, someone charged with responsibilities for temple and worship practices, also sees the man and does nothing to help him. But a Samaritan, someone ostracized and ridiculed by most Jews of the time, takes pity on the injured man. He bandages the man's wounds, tends to him, and takes him to an inn.

He even pays the innkeeper to provide ongoing care for the man. Jesus's point in telling this parable is clear: the least exalted of the three people who saw the injured man is the one who cared enough to help him ... to act with the mercy and compassion which Jesus teaches. The Samaritan saw the injured man as a fellow human being, as his neighbor. Perhaps we're not surprised by that. Perhaps we've seen famous and powerful people behave reprehensibly, and we've seen ordinary people display extraordinary kindness, love, strength, and courage. Once again, the ancient lessons have modern-day applications. For decades, we've watched a humanitarian crisis unfold around the world. We've seen thousands of refugees lost at sea as they try to go to a safe land. They drown in rivers, die in deserts, and freeze to death in sub-zero crossings at the Canadian border. In recent months, the words 'immigrant' and 'migrant' have been in the national news, and in coming months and years, we may learn even more about Jesus's concept of 'immigrant', 'refugee', and 'neighbor'. We may learn that people who were not born in this country, who do not look like us or speak as we do, are not only our neighbors, by Jesus's definition, they are also essential to our well-being and way of life. They're almost 20% of our national workforce. They're the majority (73%) of America's 2.4 million farm workers. They're 55% of Wisconsin's dairy workers, producing 79% of America's milk. They're 30% of all construction workers; 40% or more in Texas, California, and other states. Almost 19% of all healthcare workers, 2.8 million people, including doctors and nurses, are immigrants. According to Census/IRS figures, immigrants pay \$579 billion in federal, state, and local taxes. Undocumented (illegal) immigrant workers pay \$97 billion in taxes. Undocumented immigrants pay an estimated \$34 billion into Social Security, Medicare, and Unemployment Insurance annually, although they may not, by law, receive any benefits from those programs. If such statistics make our heads spin, we can understand why Jesus used the word 'neighbor' in its widest and most embracing sense. Jesus knew – and he still yearns for us to know, especially in our increasingly hostile world – that we are more connected, and more dependent upon each other than we realize. If Jesus thought that “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” is the most important commandment and teaching, it is surely one we should contemplate in this season of his birth.

#### **December 3, 2024**

**Jesus says, “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.”**

John 8:31-32

In Christ's time, the basic truths of which he spoke were largely hidden from the Jewish people; hidden by the maze of rules, rituals, and requirements that governed their lives. Christ's truths were centered on God's love, not his law; God's grace, not his judgment; God's nearness, not his distance; God's acceptance, not his rejection. No wonder these were new truths to those who heard Jesus's teachings. From the time of Abraham, God had often been described as a stern taskmaster, a harsh judge, and a deity who must be appeased by obedience and sacrifice. Jesus turned that narrative inside out, bringing the light of love to the darkness of fear. Today, we still have some of the same truths to learn. There are still those who would tell us that God keeps an unforgiving score card of our lives; that he requires obedience to what are actually man-made rules, created to control us, not to connect us to God. Christ still shines the light of truth onto these misrepresentations. But there are other truths to be discovered in our age, truths as important to us as their new truths were to the Israelites of Jesus's time. One truth surely centers on the importance of truth itself; on its sanctity, and on God's expectation that we will pursue and honor truth in all areas of our lives. The deliberate lies and falsehoods that swirl around us in our time vastly outnumber the misconceptions with which Christ's listeners had to deal. It is not easy to pursue truth, especially in our time. But truth is fundamental, not ornamental, to our life with God. Truth will make us free. Along with God's love, it is the only thing that will ever bring freedom.

#### **December 4, 2024**

**God has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy.**

Acts 14:17

Decades ago, when a large portion of the population was directly involved with agriculture, people had an innate sense of the seasons, of seed time and harvest, fallow times and fruitful times. They also had a sense of God's presence in these changing cycles and seasons. Today, when we can buy strawberries in December, and when many kids think chickens are born wrapped in yellow plastic, that sense of God's presence and provision can be a bit hazy. When we think of food, we don't even think of farms any longer, we think of Wegman's or Weis's,

Whole Foods or Costco, or other local grocery stores. It's not surprising that thinking of God as our provider is even farther back on the list. But even if we've never seen a fruit tree, a vegetable garden, or a live salmon in shimmering splendor, we can remind ourselves that the source of all this food isn't the grocery store, it is God. It would be an enjoyable – and authentic – activity, the next time we go to the grocery store, to simply whisper 'Thank you,' as we stroll the aisles. Whether it is cocoa, oatmeal, avocados, or ahi, it all comes from God. *"Thank you, Creator God, thank you—for all you give, all you provide, all that we have. Thank you."*

### December 5, 2024

**Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding.** Proverbs 3:5

Exactly one month ago, Americans voted in a presidential election. A Moravian church in our town posted this sign outside: "The sanctuary will be open tomorrow for prayer and contemplation." Among the materials provided for reflection was this excerpt from the church's Book of Worship: *"We pray for those who are engaged in making important decisions in this time, for those who report on these events, and for those who shape public opinion. Give them the courage to speak out and the restraint to listen, that together we may discern the truth and hold aloft its light. Take away the temptation to trust in human power and military solutions, and give us the courage to be your servants in the community of nations. Direct all governments in the way of peace and justice, that your will may be known and done among the nations. Deliver us from the sins which lead to war and conflict, and strengthen within us the will to establish righteousness and justice on the earth. We pray for those who are suffering and can make no sense of tragedy. Help them to turn to the One who embraces us in our lives— even Jesus Christ, who lived and suffered among us. There is no one who is righteous, not even one, for we have all turned away from you. Make us aware of our common need of a Savior, and remove from our hearts the pride, ambition, and greed that would lead us to enslave and demean other people. Have mercy on your whole creation. Hasten the day when the kingdom of the world shall become your Kingdom, and by grace make us worthy to stand before you. Amen."* Wise and helpful words, for that day, for any day, for all days.

### December 6, 2024

**Jesus said, "The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost."** Luke 19:10

In the busyness and joy of the holiday season, it can be easy to lose sight of those who feel excluded, who feel lost. The holidays can be even worse if we are the ones who are feeling lost. It can be so many things. Perhaps painful memories, a new grief, fear, depression, worry, or simply feeling unconnected to others at a time when everyone else seems to be linked. If we are feeling lost, if this season seems painful rather than joyful, we can, first, turn to God; take our fears and sorrows and lostness to God, and ask God to hold us in his arms, to comfort us, and to fill us with his love. We can also reach out to others, or at least be receptive to those who reach out to us. If our lives are fine and full, then we should – especially in this season – pause to notice those who are standing at the sidelines of the celebration; those without families or links to others, or those who have sorrows that cloud their days and burden their lives. Simple things like sending people a holiday greeting – whether they celebrate Christmas, Hanukah, Kwanzaa, New Year's – can mean a lot. So can a small gift or an invitation to lunch or coffee. Jesus always has his eye on those who feel lost. So should we.

### December 7, 2024

**This one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining toward what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.** Philippians 3:13-14

This is one of those days people always remember. They remember where they were and what they were doing when they got the news of the attack on Pearl Harbor. More than twenty years later, people would have the same precise memory of where they were when they heard news of the assassination of President Kennedy. And almost 40 years after that, people would know exactly where they were on that September day when planes struck the Twin Towers, attacked the Pentagon, and when brave passengers took control of the hijacked plane that plunged into the ground in Shanksville, Pennsylvania. There aren't many such days, when our memories

are frozen in time. Perhaps one such day in a generation. As the people who remember December 7, 1941 ... those who were alive on that day ... pass on, a strange responsibility descends upon the rest of us, just as it will upon our children and grandchildren. We must remember. We must never forget, so that we can be vigilant in the protection of life and freedom for all people. At the same time, as Paul tells us, we are to look forward, to what lies ahead, striving to make a world in which the gifts and goals of God – peace, love, harmony, oneness – are not only prizes for us individually, but for all of us, as God’s collective, created humanity. *“Guide us, dear God. Lead us and teach us, so that lessons we’ve learned from a painful past can guide us toward a peaceful future, lived in alignment with your love and will.”*

### **December 8, 2024**

**Beloved, I pray that you may prosper in all things and be in health, just as your soul prospers.** 3 John 1:2

This is, understandably, a season in which our hearts are inclined to wish all people well, to look past old grudges and animosities, and to wish health, peace, and happiness to all. This good will is further enhanced when we actually *tell* people that we wish them well. We may do that in a greeting card, in a warm hello at church or at a gathering. But it is important – for us as well as for those in our kind thoughts – to hear our good wishes. Let’s not permit the busyness of these days and weeks to prevent our good wishes ... our spoken or written words ... from reaching those who may need to hear those words more than we know. *“Lord, remind me, nudge me, to speak the words of kindness and caring that so many long to hear. May your love and grace be in my words and greetings this season ... and long after.”*

### **December 9, 2024**

**Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.**

2 Peter 3:18

If we have never seriously thought about who Jesus is – the historical, human Jesus, the Christ who links us to our Creator God – this would be a good month to give some thought to who Jesus was ... and is. Who is this extraordinary man whose birth we will celebrate? Why does that birth, that life, matter, twenty-plus centuries later? Far too many people will dutifully go to church this month, sing the familiar carols, hear the well-known nativity story, and still not know who Jesus really is, or who he can be in their lives. Many fine books, with varying levels of complexity, have been written about Jesus. Some Bibles have Jesus’s words, in the Gospels, printed in red so that we can more easily know what he said. Discussion groups exist or can be formed to talk about the human and divine dimensions of Jesus. There are many ways to become better acquainted with Jesus. It is simply important that we do so. And Jesus is waiting to become better acquainted with us, in this season and always.

### **December 10, 2024**

**My child, give attention to my words; incline your ear to my sayings.**

Proverbs 4:20

In keeping with yesterday’s Meditation .... We would never, in our wildest thoughts, think that we could sit down at a piano, have one lesson, and then play a Chopin piece. We know we can’t show up at a university, register as a student, take a couple of classes, and immediately get a degree. We know that becoming a doctor requires years of study and training, and excelling at a sport means thousands of hours of practice and playing. We know these things. But we often think that our relationship with God can be nurtured by simply hearing some scripture in church, and saying – “saying” not praying – the Lord’s Prayer occasionally. But it doesn’t work that way. To be all that it can be, all that God destined us to be, our relationship with God needs the same kind of time and attention that any other important relationship or endeavor requires. It means talking to God – really talking to him – and listening, listening for the messages and answers God places in our hearts. It means reading the Bible or spiritual books that can help us to understand God. It means turning off the phone and TV and just being with God, being present for him, as God is for us. Our life in God can begin in an instant, and God welcomes and works with whatever commitment we give to him. But, like life itself, our relationship with God requires time and attention. Are we willing to make that commitment? If life, here and into eternity, is the most important reality for us, then, yes, it is a commitment we should make. But only we can decide to do that.

## December 11, 2024

**And this is the victory that conquers the world, our faith.**

1 John 5:4

As we look ahead – to January, to the New Year, to all the years to come – we can't know what lies ahead. Even plans that are very much in place can change, or we can decide to change them. God may know what lies ahead, but we don't. To all of the unknowns we bring one enormous, immutable, unconquerable certainty: our faith. If we have that – if we know that God is with us and in us, to work his will for good – we need not be afraid. We can enter the New Year and every year that follows with both peace and joy, knowing that we have what we need most: our God and his love. It is enough.

## December 12, 2024

**Now begin the work, and the Lord be with you!**

1 Chronicles 22:16

Today's scripture verse, and yesterday's reminder to trust in God, are very necessary for us. We humans have a penchant for worrying; especially worrying about things we can't control, things that might not even happen. We not only waste time and energy with worrying, but such distress can actually make us physically and emotionally ill. Decades ago, when I began my scuba training with a former Navy SEAL and his team, I made the mistake of looking in the back of the textbook, at the last chapter, as soon as I got it. The thick book covered dive training and the science of diving— ambient pressure, equipment details, and US Navy dive tables to calculate nitrogen levels and deep dive/decompression times. The last chapter of the book illustrated advanced underwater requirements such as 'ditch and recovery'. I looked at the diagrams and the dive tables and felt sick. There was no way I'd ever be able to do any of that. At the first class, I told one of the instructors that I was dropping out. He wisely told me that I didn't have to do the things at the back of the book now. I only had to get through the first class. I stayed for that first class: one hour of classroom study in dive science and physics, two hours of pool work. I came back for the second class, then the third. One class at a time, one chapter at a time, I could do it ... and love it! By the time the three-month course concluded, doing 'ditch and recovery' was easy, and using Navy dive tables was second nature. God moves us through life one day at a time, one task at a time, one chapter at a time. We are to 'take no thought for the morrow', to trust God for each day as it comes. The dawn of a new year is a good time to leave our worry habit behind, and to not stress ourselves about things that might not happen or things that will happen many 'chapters' down the road. Particularly, not to worry about that last chapter in life, whatever it will be. Come to think of it, 'ditch and recovery' is a pretty good description of the last transition that we'll make. And by then, it, too, will be natural and instinctive. 'Take no thought for the morrow.' Trust God. One day at a time. "Now begin the work, and the Lord be with you!"

## December 13, 2024

**I said, "Here I am, here I am," to a nation that did not call on my name.**

Isaiah 65:1

There is great comfort in today's verse. God is saying, so clearly, that he is not coy or evasive or difficult to find. God isn't hiding or being passive-aggressive with his often-contentious people, then or now. God is not only present, God is practically shouting, like a relative at the airport, "Here I am! Here I am!" God is there for us, even when we're too foolish or distracted or self-involved to be looking for him. God seeks us out, always. God waits for us, always. God is here for us, always. In this season of Christ's birth, when the Son of God arrives with an obvious "Here I am", how welcome it is to hear those same words from the God of the Israelites, the Creator God, our God: "Here I am." *"Oh, God, I'm here, too; to be with you, now and forever. Here I am."*

## December 14, 2024

**I have taught you in the way of wisdom; I have led you in right paths.**

Proverbs 4:10

When Hurricane Helene hit Southern states this fall, TV channels showed the lashing rainfall, the surge of the ocean, and palm trees bending almost in half. Two things struck me as I watched these scenes. First, the bending and swaying of the palms reflected the need to change, to adapt, to bend to the storms; and – clearly – the

palm trees remained in place because they were strongly rooted in the earth. In any storm, a weather-related disaster or a storm that rises up in our lives, the ability to adapt to changing reality, to do what we have to do, is critical. Just as critical is our need to be rooted into the most solid and unchanging foundations we can find for our lives: the love, presence, and reality of God, and the truths and wisdom given to us in Christ's teachings. The second thing that struck me was something a newscaster said: "Hide from the wind, run from the water." He said that warning was issued throughout the stricken region. In our lives, we know that some things – anger, jealousy, greed – will lead us astray and cause us to be less than the people God created us to be. But other things – hatred, vengeance, unforgiveness – can overwhelm us, just as an ocean surge can submerge an entire town. "Hide from the wind, run from the water." *"Lord, give me the wisdom to choose rightly in all things, and when temptations or my own failings divert me, help me to 'hide from the wind and run from the water'."*

### **December 15, 2024**

**Sing to the Lord, bless his name; tell of his salvation from day to day.**

Psalm 96:2

The local diner is a popular spot; affordable prices, great salad bar, mile-high pies, a menu with scores of items, and breakfast available all day. Our opportunities for connecting with God – for aligning ourselves with that indescribable source of love and power – are a lot like the diner's lengthy menu. Perhaps this is a good week to choose from that spiritual menu. Today, we might simply spend some quiet time thinking of our current blessings; blessings we often take for granted. Tomorrow, we might think about the times God has rescued us, has led us from a bad situation to a better one. Next, we might think about our past blessings, the God-touches that made life good, from our earliest years on. Then, we could muse about the hopes and dreams that are still in our hearts, whatever our ages. If God placed them there, they're there for a reason. Let us be open to their fulfillment, in God's time and way. Next, we can think about specific people who are or who have been a blessing in our lives. A prayer of thanks for them, and a smile aimed toward heaven for those who are gone, will bless our hearts as well as theirs. Making time to look at and give thanks for the beauty around us – even for places we may have only seen in photos, like the Grand Canyon or the rainforests or blue glaciers – will fill our hearts with peace as well as wonder. Finally, some time spent thanking God himself – for himself – will please God's Creator/Parent's heart and remind us of where our hearts should be focused. The menu for praise and thanks is, like the diner's, long and appealing, and there are many ways in which we can align ourselves with the Creator each day. And just as breakfast can be served all day, so can love, trust, praise, thanks, and joy. All day.

### **December 16, 2024**

**... they went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing. Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach.**

John 21:3-4

It is often said that 'timing is everything' — our timing and God's. Often, timing just takes ... time. Perhaps, if the fishermen in today's verse had had one great haul of fish after another, they wouldn't have paid attention when Jesus told them to go out and cast their nets again. Timing. We often have to cast our nets repeatedly. We don't always find the right friends, the right church, the right job, the right calling. Some even have two, three, or more marriages before they find the right connection. We cast our nets many times in our lives. If we're fortunate, we're wise enough to follow God's paths from the start. But even if we don't, when our nets are empty, we will sense Jesus with us on the beaches of our lives, and we'll hear his voice: "Try again."

### **December 17, 2024**

**In the day of my trouble I sought the Lord; my hand was stretched out in the night without ceasing; my soul refused to be comforted.**

Psalm 77:2

I was about to leave on a trip to a place I'd never been, and I was worried – scared – about making the long drive on my own. I didn't like that feeling. Years ago, I often flew to new cities, got in a rental car, and found my way around with a paper map. But it has been a long time since I did that routinely, and my nervousness was mounting. "You must learn to use a GPS," I'm told for the umpteenth time. "You have to learn to use the maps on your phone. It's easy!" Yes, I know I have to learn these things. I agree, and promise that I will. Then I bite my tongue. What I don't say is, "It's easy when you have someone sitting next to you, learning with you."

It's easy when you have someone teaching you. It's easy when someone's always there to answer your questions, and to come get you if you become lost." I know something that my well-meaning friends do not: that being alone can be hard; that a huge chunk of our confidence and courage in life comes from having someone sitting next to us, living with us, sharing life with us. It can be a parent, sibling, spouse, child; someone so close that they are part of our life. I recall the boundless encouragement I got from my parents. They believed I could do anything, so I believed it, too. Those who have someone sitting next to them in life are often not even aware of that blessing. But it is why some people say they can't sleep when their spouse isn't there. Same house, same bed, same pillow, but that reassuring presence is missing. As my friends continued to talk to me about phone maps ... and before I could slip fully into the trap of self-pity ... I heard God – that voice I know – in my heart: *"You're right. Courage and confidence come more easily when someone is with you, when someone is right next to you. And that's where I am. With you. Right next to you. I always will be."*

### **December 18, 2024**

**Bear fruits worthy of repentance.**

Luke 3:8

Today's verse isn't a stern order, it's a liberating blessing. When we have done wrong – deliberately or through misguided foolishness or by sheer accident – we can repent and ask for forgiveness, from God and from whom-ever we've wronged. But God does not want us to remain in that state of regret. The people we've harmed may want us to continue to suffer, but that isn't God's way. God wants us to rise from remorse, to climb out of that pit of sorrow. Once we have admitted our wrongs, sought forgiveness, and repented, God expects us to move on, in new strength and freedom, cleansed from our sins, as cleansed and pure as if the sin had never existed. In that new freedom, God invites us to move forward, with confidence and purpose – God's purposes, his calling within us – willing and able to do good and great things that will be a blessing in the world and a service to God. God invites us to bear fruits that honor the power and significance of our forgiveness, our newness of life in him. "Fruits worthy of repentance." Fruits – deeds, actions, attitudes, effects – that will bring joy to us as well as to God.

### **December 19, 2024**

**Jesus said, "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful."**

Luke 6:36

Speaking of forgiveness.... It is a blessing that goes both ways. As we are forgiven by God – completely, generously, permanently – we are expected to forgive those who have wronged us. We're expected to be merciful, as God is merciful. It might be difficult. It might take time. We may need, at first, to simply say, "Lord, I'll let you forgive through me, until I can do so myself." We may have to pray, "Lord, please deal mercifully with \_\_\_\_\_ until I am able to." That's okay. God knows that our pain might hold us for a while. What matters is our openness and willingness to deal as lovingly with others as God has dealt with us. It doesn't matter that we can never equal the breadth or depth of God's love. Our human love will do just fine. 'Hate the sin but love the sinner' is an old expression, but it has validity. We are not expected to deny or whitewash the very real wrongs in this world, whether done to us or to others. But we are expected to forgive and show mercy, as best we can, when we can, to those who have done wrong. *"Thank you for your forgiveness and mercy, Lord. Help me to offer the same, especially when that is so, so hard to do."*

### **December 20, 2024**

**The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.**

Psalm 51:17

When I was a child, when our family had troubles I couldn't talk about to anyone else, I had the illusion that we were the only family with problems. In my child's mind, all other families were like the Nelsons on 'Ozzie and Harriet', or the Cleavers on 'Leave it to Beaver.' I thought only we had deep troubles and secret sorrows. In college, in the shared confidences of new friends in late-night talks, I began to realize that other families, even ones that seem picture-perfect, could be troubled. But my illusions can still surface. I sometimes think that only those who are single know the pangs of loneliness or the burdens of having to manage every single detail of life alone. I make the mistake of assuming that widows and widowers have their precious memories; that they have

kind of stored-up, long-term happiness that carries them along. And I assume that families have the blessing of simply being families. But then, once in a while, a married person or a parent says something that challenges my illusions. They speak of adult children who never visit, grandchildren who never call; spouses who never give a gift or even a greeting card; siblings who are as distant as strangers. And I learn, once again, to not assume. I re-learn the lesson that all lives can have troubles and heartaches. Married or single, young or old, parent or childless, all human beings are vulnerable, and any relationship can be torn or painful. *“Lord, reach out to embrace all those who are hurting; hurting with pain that goes so deep that they can’t talk about it, perhaps not even with you. In your mercy, touch hearts that hurt, lives that are lonely, memories that are painful. With the pure grace of your love, heal and help all of us ... even those who seem to be picture-perfect.”*

#### **December 21, 2024**

**When you have eaten your fill and have built fine houses and lived in them, then do not exalt yourself, forgetting the Lord your God.** Deuteronomy 8:12-14

Perhaps this verse, too, has special meaning at holiday time. This is a season when many of us welcome people to our homes. We decorate, we fuss a bit more, and we take understandable pride in having our homes, large or small, looking nice. We’re also glad to be generous, if we can be, in our gift giving and, for some folks, there’s just a wee bit of extra pride in being able to give special gifts to loved ones and charities. That’s human, too. But all of this, from the pride we take in our homes to the satisfaction we feel in being able to give some lavish gifts, should prompt us to remember the source of all that we have, and to thank God for his abundant blessings and gifts to us. *“Father, there is nothing that I have – nothing – that did not originate, however indirectly or distantly, in your divine and loving abundance. All of what I am and have began with you, and in my best moments I know that. You provide, I receive. You bless, I thank you. Let me never forget.”*

#### **December 22, 2019**

**And they came in haste, and found Mary and Joseph, and the Babe lying in a manger.** Luke 2:16

*God of Miracles, be with us on this fourth Advent Sunday, as we walk closer to Bethlehem, to the manger, to the newborn baby. Help us to be still and to be silent, to set aside our busyness, and to be profoundly humble in the presence of Joseph, Mary, and Jesus. In that manger is the One who brings eternal light, love, and life to us. May that truth transform our lives, and may our hearts and minds overflow with wonder, awe, and gratitude, now and forever.*

#### **December 23, 2024**

**My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and behold the face of God?** Psalm 42:3

We often hear of people, usually the very elderly or those who have serious physical ills, who actually want to come to the end of their earthly lives. They tell family and physicians that they’re ready; they’ve had enough, and they want God to take them. Sometimes, their wait for that passing is brief, and sometimes it takes a long, long while. Some people are serene in this waiting, some are anxious or in distress. Age and infirmity tend to focus attention on this desire to depart and be with God, but, in a very real way, we are all on this journey, at every stage of our lives. We are all, as the saying goes, ‘in God’s waiting room’, often longing to see God’s face and know God’s reality. But while we are waiting – whether we are in our ninth or tenth decades, or are teenagers or twenty-somethings, just beginning our lives – we can, in fact, see God’s face all around us. Those who are old and infirm can see it in the faces of family, friends, caregivers, and health care professionals; the ones who are devotedly with them as they conclude their journeys. Others of us, at all ages, can see God’s face in every loving and compassionate person who enters our lives; in teachers, co-workers, friends, neighbors, and church colleagues. We can see God in those who make us laugh and let us cry, those who inspire and encourage us, those who help and heal us, those who love and forgive us. God’s face is everywhere, if only we’ll see it. In this season, it shines in candlelight and stars, in the faces of carolers and children in Christmas pageants, in those who give from the heart and speak from the soul. God’s face is everywhere. We don’t have to wait to see it.



## December 24, 2024

### **My heart exults in the Lord.**

1 Samuel 2:1

Today, let us take time to be quiet; to think about the miracle-in-the-making that we remember and celebrate this night: the intersection of heaven and earth, the divine and the human, a single moment in history touched by the timelessness of eternity. All of these converged, like a laser point of light and love, on the night that a baby was born in a stable, to a poor carpenter and his young wife. Angels sang in the skies. Shepherds came, fearfully and reverently, drawn by a star and by something they could not name. As cattle watched and sheep baa-ed, the newborn squirmed his wet way into new life, earthly life; his tiny fingers moving in the air, his waiting mouth opening to his mother's breast; neither the infant nor his parents able to know that, on that night, the world was changed forever. Yes, let us sit quietly for a while, and think about this night, this birth. Let our hearts exult in the Lord.

## December 25, 2024

### **Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!**

John 1:29

Today, we celebrate the life of Jesus, its certainty and its meaning. "Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" Jesus's life and ministry affected people in his time and ever since, in countless ways, directly and indirectly. It would take us a very long time to list all of the things that we know Jesus has brought to our lives: love, peace, forgiveness, hope, healing, help, encouragement, comfort, insight, understanding, and so much more. But today's verse centers on an important truth. If sin, at the center of its essence and in its ultimate form, is separation from God, then Jesus's most important gift to us, his greatest blessing, may well be that he "takes away the sin of the world." He removes the barriers, he breaks down the walls, he reaches up and out – across time and life itself – to connect earth to heaven, humanity to God. In conquering sin, he achieves reconciliation— for himself, for us, for all time. Because of Jesus, we need not be defined or defeated by sinfulness. Because of Jesus, we are reconciled to God. Because of Jesus, we need not fear death. Last night, we celebrated the birth of Jesus. Today, we celebrate our own new birth, into new life, into his new life, a life we celebrate now and forever. "Behold! The Lamb of God!"

## December 26, 2024

### **As my life was ebbing away, I remembered the Lord; and my prayer came to you. Jonah 2:7**

In a book written by a brilliant physician and researcher, the author refers to the terrible anxiety attacks he'd suffered for many years. His honesty is refreshing. Anxiety, fear, and depression are things we often hide, even from those closest to us, even from God. We may be familiar with the sensations – the stabs of fear that seem to come from nowhere; the suffocating pressure of anxiety; sleepless nights and fretful days, when worry consumes us and drains all the joy, peace, and sanity of life from us – but we often don't do anything about those sensations, because we don't know what to do ... and we're afraid. During a crisis which triggered anxiety in me, a dear friend who is also a gifted therapist helped me to find my way through the fears. But before I could even speak to my friend, I had to get past the misconception that many people have: that anxiety is cause for shame, that fear is a failure of faith. It isn't. That's worth repeating. ***Fear is not a failure of faith.*** Fear and anxiety come because we have minds and hearts, and because we know that bad things can happen to us in life. A loved one dies unexpectedly and we're thrown off balance. We fear the unknowns of illness or incapacity. A retirement fund is depleted. A home is lost. A child dies. A marriage ends. For most of us, life presents a long list of reasons to be afraid. It would be strange if we did *not* feel anxious at times. But these fears should not feel like failure. We haven't flunked God's course in Christian living because we're scared. All human beings are vulnerable to fear and anxiety. But in the same way that we go to a medical doctor if we break our arm, or to a dentist if our tooth throbs, we can go to someone – therapist, counselor, pastor, wise friend – when it is our hearts, minds, or spirits that are hurting. And we can always turn to God, the Great Physician, the healer who is also the Creator who made us. In these days especially, some people will feel guilt if they think that their faith isn't measuring up to the joyful standards of this holy season. But God isn't measuring our faith in that way, and if we listen, perhaps we'll hear God say, "I understand your fears. It doesn't mean your faith has failed. Come to me. After all, I came to you. Fear not. Fear not."

## December 27, 2024

**“I will do more good to you than ever before. Then you shall know that I am the Lord.”** Ezekiel 36:11

Sometimes, it is as difficult to learn how to receive as it is to learn how to give. My parents stopped at my apartment to visit me one evening, and they found me coughing, sneezing, stuffed up, and with a fever. I told them that I'd stayed home from work for two days and was drinking tea and taking aspirin. “What did the doctor say?” Dad asked, concerned. “I din't go to da doctor,” I mumbled in my stuffed-up voice. “I don't hab any munny for da doctor or for med-cine, and pay day isn't 'til next week.” My father exploded. He was so, so angry that I hadn't told them I was sick and hadn't asked for money to go to the doctor. I heard a stern lecture on how you never, ever fail to take care of your health, no matter what. Dad announced that he was taking me to the doctor in the morning if he had to drag me there. Even in my feverish state, I heard something else besides his lecture. I heard deep sadness and disappointment in his voice; almost a feeling of betrayal that I hadn't reached out to him and Mom; that I hadn't asked for help when I needed it, and when I knew – or should have known – that nothing would upset them more than to know that I was hurting. I realized then that I had always been good at offering and giving, not so good at asking or receiving. Help and compassion are two-way streets. Sometimes we give, sometimes we receive. Both are equally important, especially when we're hurting.

## December 28, 2024

**Therefore we must pay greater attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away from it.**

Hebrews 2:1

A friend told me about someone's reluctance to have a legal will drawn up. The person was dragging her feet, fearful that having a will might hasten her death. “Who has the power to persuade her?” I asked. My friend mentioned a few people, but by then my mind was elsewhere. “Who has the power?” It's an important question, not just for fearful will-avoiders, but for all of us. Who – or what – has the power in our lives? Who has the power to persuade us, lead us, direct us? To whom do we listen? Whom do we believe? Who – what – has the power in our lives? Some people would have to admit that fear holds the most power over them. For others, it's a need for money; not in the sense of greed, perhaps, just a vast uneasiness about not having enough. Others are held captive by addictions. Some people let emotional need – for approval, for success, for the good opinion of others – have power over them. We know who and what should have such power— the God who created us, and the loving, God-inspired, life-enhancing principles by which we should live. We might never have thought about who or what actually has power in our lives. To whom/what have we given that power? Let that be the question for today. Think about it. Try to answer it. “*Who – or what – has the real power in my life?*” Who, or what, is the power leading you, directing you, persuading you in all of the choices and decisions of your life? Who has the power? Is it God? Is God even on the list?

## December 29, 2024

**God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of his mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. It is he whom we proclaim.**

Colossians 1:27-28

Sometimes, a sentence we read, or an idea we hear spoken, can zoom into our minds and hearts and change or illuminate the way we think. That happened for me when I read this sentence in a book by a pastor and theologian: “... each one of us is a manifestation of the divine; the Spirit is incarnate not only in us but *as* us.” I've always been comfortable with the concept of God with us and in us, but God “as us” was a whole new reality that resonated at a soul level. “God *as* us.” God as me, Carol. God as you— Joe, Gina, Dagny, Ed, Pat, Kenda, Glenn, Sandy, Lou, Lori, Art, Sue, George, Donna, Mary, Kevin, Cliff, Bonnie, each of us. “God *as* us.” What a compelling, transforming thought! God, the essence of divinity, showing up in this life as ... us! Jesus said, “Is it not written in your law, ‘I have said you are gods?’” Perhaps, more than simply being in us, God does, indeed, go further than that, and – by his Spirit – is in the world *as* us. I am still finding my way around this idea, sniffing at it, poking it, probing it, trying to see if it fits in the space of my comprehension. Perhaps you, too, can hold this idea close for a while. Try it on intellectually and spiritually. Imagine what it would be like for God to have so entered into you that God is, here and now, living *as* you. I'm still testing the idea. It is too big, too riveting, to be absorbed all at once. But its first effect on me is to have me feeling far more

respectful, more humble, more careful in what I say and do. It is as if I was asked to portray God, as in a play ... or to be his representative or ambassador. Would that change how I think and act? It certainly would. If God chose me – and you and you and you – to be individual incarnations of the divine, suddenly my life – our lives – are vastly different than if we were simply walking through life in the presence of God or having an acquaintance with God. Let’s think about this captivating concept for a while, with a comfy chair, a cup of tea or coffee, silence, and time to think and listen. Curling up with a fascinating idea is always deeply satisfying, especially when God is with us ... or, perhaps, more than just with us. Especially in this season of miracles.

### **December 30, 2024**

**For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind** 1 Timothy 1:7

I had been asked to speak to a large group of women scientists and researchers at the regional headquarters of a major, national company. The meeting was held in an unmarked room, behind locked doors. That was my first clue. I learned that these highly intelligent women – all with earned PhDs in the sciences – were responsible for developing new products, systems, and processes. But as soon as they developed an idea and brought it to a point of fulfillment, as soon as it was viable, it was taken from them and given to higher-ranked male employees who would then take credit for the project. The women were frustrated and angry, but felt they had nowhere to turn. The system was rigged. I understood. “How did you come into the building today?” I asked them. Puzzled, they said there was an employee entrance from the parking lot. “And how do you leave at the end of the day?” Still puzzled, they answered, “Through the same door.” “Oh,” I replied. “So that door isn’t locked, and it opens both ways. You can leave if you want. You’re not being held against your will.” They began to understand. I reminded them that they weren’t indentured servants, that staying was their choice, and they had the power to make that choice each day. “If you’re staying because you love your work, that’s fine. Own that choice and know that you can change it at any time. It is *your* choice. If you’re staying because you have a family to support and need the income, that’s just as valid. Own that decision and know it is yours, made by you in your power to decide what *you* want to do.” I told them that they had power they didn’t recognize; the power of choice, the power to stay or leave, to submit to the status quo or fight it. “Your worst enemy,” I said, “isn’t the oppressive, ignorant, and doomed management here, it is your impression that you are powerless, that you are victims. You aren’t. Begin to transform your situation by transforming your thinking.” Even in the most horrific situations – as psychiatrist Viktor Frankl learned in Nazi concentration camps – human beings retain one power that can never be taken from them: the power to choose how they will respond to their situations. Once these women ceased to see themselves as victims, and when they understood that they had the power to govern their own lives and choices, things began to change. It didn’t happen overnight. It took time. But it happened when the women learned that they had power as well as purpose; that the ultimate choices were theirs. Once they began to assert their power, the company’s national headquarters paid attention and change began. A side note: the friend who asked me to speak to these women, her colleagues, went on to be the CEO of three major high-tech companies. Along with all of the other negatives that we should leave behind as this year ends – grudges, regrets, fears – let us leave behind the idea that we’re victims, that we’re powerless. Instead, let’s claim the sanctity of self and the power of our own personhood, which God has gifted to us, and let us take that power and perspective into the New Year.

### **December 31, 2024**

**Surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm,  
to give you a future with hope.** Jeremiah 29:11

This verse might be the best thought we could take with us into the New Year. We’re wise enough to know that any year, any stage of life, will have its challenges as well as its blessings. The world itself seems to be creating change, confusion, and even chaos on an overtime basis. In the midst of this mayhem, we can find ‘the peace that passes all understanding’ as well as a kind of unmerited, inexplicable joy— in nature, in past blessings, in future hopes, in life itself, and in the promise that God has plans for us “... to give you a future with hope.” Praise be to God, and may the coming year bring blessings to all of God’s creation and all of God’s children.

