Advent 2019

Wait with an Expectation
Wait with Anticipation
Wait in Preparation
Worship While You Wait
In 2007, in her living room, Apostle Cosby along with five other people, founded In the Spirit Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). The church has since grown to a viable community of worshippers and is located in Tulsa, Oklahoma. It is a diverse community that seeks to live out its vision to “impact and transform individuals and families by teaching practical biblical principles that can be applied to everyday life.” The church offers a variety of ministries for all age groups and is an active presence in the community.

To further the church’s vision, Oklahoma Family Empowerment Center (OFEC), a counseling and social justice center, was founded in 2012 as an outreach of the church. Under her direction, OFEC offers many services including services for the homeless, food pantry, at-risk youth programming, seniors and parenting classes. It now stands as a separate but related 501(c)(3) organization.

Apostle Cosby has over 14 years of hospice experience, serving as a chaplain, bereavement counselor and ultimately the Director of Pastoral Care and “We Honor Veterans.” There, she led the bereavement counselors and chaplains, to ensure exceptional pastoral care for hospice patients and their families. As coordinator of the “We Honor Veterans” program, she oversaw the provision of enhanced end-of-life care for veterans. She has a significant record of working with vulnerable populations and holds the designation of Board-Certified Clinical Chaplain with the National Association of Veterans Affairs Chaplains.

Apostle Cosby was born in El Paso, Texas and moved to Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, where she graduated from Northeast High School. After attending The University of Oklahoma, Norman, Oklahoma, she moved to Tulsa. She holds a Master of Divinity Degree from Phillips Theological Seminary, Tulsa, Oklahoma and is currently pursuing her Doctor of Ministry, with a concentration in Transformational Leadership in Improvisational Ministry.

As an advocate for those whose voices have been silenced, she has served on various boards and commissions including; the Mayor’s Commission on the Status of Women, Oklahoma Department of Corrections Community Advisory Board, Tulsa Interfaith Alliance, Abba’s Family Housing Faith Alliance, and the Mayor’s Police and Community Coalition.

As a woman of vision and passion, Apostle Cosby is recognized and has received numerous awards for her leadership, integrity, and compassion for all, especially the marginalized in the areas of hunger and food scarcity, homelessness, gangs, criminal justice, immigration, and prison reform.

While Apostle Cosby is known for her gifts of preaching, teaching, directing, community advocacy and writing and is a well sought-after speaker and lecturer, she says, “I am most grateful for being blessed to be a mother and grandmother, but my greatest accomplishment is being God’s servant.”
## Daily Advent Readings 2019
### Year A Season after Pentecost

#### First Sunday of Advent (December 1)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sunday</th>
<th>Monday</th>
<th>Tuesday</th>
<th>Wednesday</th>
<th>Thursday</th>
<th>Friday</th>
<th>Saturday</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dec 1</td>
<td>Dec 2</td>
<td>Dec 3</td>
<td>Dec 4</td>
<td>Dec 5</td>
<td>Dec 6</td>
<td>Dec 7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Matthew 24:36-44

#### Second Sunday of Advent (December 8)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sunday</th>
<th>Monday</th>
<th>Tuesday</th>
<th>Wednesday</th>
<th>Thursday</th>
<th>Friday</th>
<th>Saturday</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dec 8</td>
<td>Dec 9</td>
<td>Dec 10</td>
<td>Dec 11</td>
<td>Dec 12</td>
<td>Dec 13</td>
<td>Dec 14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19</td>
<td>Psalm 21</td>
<td>Psalm 21</td>
<td>Psalm 146:5-10</td>
<td>Psalm 146:5-10</td>
<td>Psalm 146:5-10</td>
<td>Psalm 146:5-10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Matthew 3:1-12

#### Third Sunday of Advent (December 15)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sunday</th>
<th>Monday</th>
<th>Tuesday</th>
<th>Wednesday</th>
<th>Thursday</th>
<th>Friday</th>
<th>Saturday</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dec 15</td>
<td>Dec 16</td>
<td>Dec 17</td>
<td>Dec 18</td>
<td>Dec 19</td>
<td>Dec 20</td>
<td>Dec 21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Matthew 11:2-11

#### Fourth Sunday of Advent (December 22)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sunday</th>
<th>Monday</th>
<th>Nativity of the Lord Proper I Dec 24 &amp; 25 Christmas Eve, Morn or Mid-day</th>
<th>Nativity of the Lord Proper II Dec 24 &amp; 25 Christmas Eve, Morn or Mid-day</th>
<th>Nativity of the Lord Proper III Dec 24 &amp; 25 Christmas Eve, Morn or Mid-day</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Isaiah 7:10-16</td>
<td>2 Samuel 7:18-, 23-29</td>
<td>Isaiah 9:2-7</td>
<td>Isaiah 62:6-12</td>
<td>Isaiah 52:7-10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romans 1:1-7</td>
<td>Galatians 3:6-14</td>
<td>Titus 2:11-14</td>
<td>Titus 3:4-7</td>
<td>Hebrews 1:1 – 4, (5 – 12)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ADVENT A SEASON OF WAITING

Advent is a season of waiting for many Christians all around the world. Individually and collectively we wait for the day to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ. However, in this time of waiting the ultimate experience might be different from household to household and from one faith tradition to another. For some this will be an experience of joy, of peace, of love while others continue to desperately wait for the same. Some will experience a time of family gatherings, festive meals, renewing friendships and the reunion of relationships, while others experience empty baskets, separation, brokenness, and loneliness. Subsequently, Advent’s meaning, and significance can differ, depending on who you ask. Yet, for many Christians, Advent is considered a season of waiting and worshipping while they wait.

For me, Advent’s meaning and significance have changed over the years. As a young girl, I grew up in the Methodist church. I had always heard of Advent. I saw the wreath, and experienced the lighting of candles, but never fully understood its significance. We simply were not taught in the church that I attended.

As a young adult, I worshipped with several different faith traditions ranging from Baptist, Pentecostal, and Non-Denominational. It wasn’t until I was over forty years of age and in seminary that I learned of the richness of the tradition. It was there that I learned Christians have prepared for Christmas by observing the season of Advent for centuries. Now, it is with worship, awe, wonder and excitement that I enter the season.

While various Christian faith traditions may observe Advent differently, the season begins for all on the fourth Sunday before Christmas. Some may have a separate worship service and others will choose to include it in their regular worship experience. Inclusive of candle lighting and traditional prayers, others will use the Advent wreath and have selected Bible readings. But no matter how we celebrate, Advent is characterized by a sense of expectation, anticipation, and preparation.

As I prepared for the writing of this devotional, and during my private devotion time and listening to worship music, a song began to play from gospel recording artist William McDowell’s new album, “Rise.” The song is entitled “Wait” and the soloist begins by singing: “Wait with expectation, Wait with Anticipation, Wait, I will worship you while I wait.” It is in that spirit that I have written this devotional. I pray that you are blessed in reading the selected scriptures, meditations and prayers and that you will join me in worship while we wait for the celebration of Jesus Christ’s coming into the world.
During the first week of Advent, the purple candle is lit. It is the candle that symbolizes hope and is sometimes referred to as the “Prophecy Candle.” To put us in remembrance of the prophets, like Isaiah, who foreshadowed about the virgin birth of Jesus the Christ.

**Hope defined**
a feeling of expectation and a desire for a certain thing to happen.

*Webster Dictionary*

an optimistic attitude of mind that is based on an expectation of positive outcomes.

*Wikipedia*

**Scriptural References**

The Prophet Jeremiah speaks to God and says, “Therefore, our hope is in you.”
Jeremiah 14:22 (NIV)

“Lord, You are the hope of Israel.”
Jeremiah 17:13 (NIV)

“The days are coming, ‘declares the Lord, ‘when I will fulfill the good promise I made to the people of Israel and Judah. ‘In those days and at that time I will make a righteous Branch sprout from David’s line; he will do what is just and right in the land. In those days Judah will be saved, and Jerusalem will live in safety. This is the name by which it will be called: The LORD Our Righteous Savior.’
Jeremiah 33:14-16 (NIV)

**Hope In God**

How wonderful it is to have an unshakable hope; when going through trials and tribulations it is our lifesaving rope.

Without hope in God where would our lives be; they would be like a wandering ship lost out at sea.

When our heart is aching amidst the darkest night; hope comes shining forth like a bright and glorious light.

Without hope we would be lost in an ocean of despair; But God gives us His Word and assures us He is always there.

When trouble is all around and our dreams seem to shatter; It is then we find that love, faith, and hope are the things that really matter.

God will never fail us no matter what we face; He will always meet our need with His sustaining grace.

Our hope comes from God’s word, that’s where it is found; We can mediate upon it and put our feet on solid ground.

Hope is the only thing to cling to when we don’t understand; Jesus is always there to take us by the hand.

Without hope we would have no place to go; But resting on God’s promises, we rejoice in the blessings that flow.

How wonderful to rest in the promises in His wonderful book; If you ever get discouraged, just open it up and take a look.

By Cindy Wyatt
A song of ascents. Of David

I was glad when they said to me, “Let us go to the house of the LORD.”

Psalm 122:1 (NASB)

Hope for the Next

In 2007, as part of the Vision 2020 in our denomination, I was among a group of many new church planters who gathered in San Antonio, Texas, for a time of learning, visioning, planning, praying and worshipping.

I was new to the Disciples and have typically been part of a majority black worshipping community. But in this gathering of various ethnicities which included White, Black, Haitian, Korean, and Latino from various parts of the United States and Canada; there seemed to be a sense of wonder and excitement.

While we appeared to have hope for a new church and a spirit of expectation about the possibilities, I can only imagine that each of us were also wondering, with some level of holy anxiety, about what was next. I know that I did. There was no amount of training or tools provided about starting and sustaining a new church that was going to erase it. Then came our time to worship.

Each worship experience was full of music, singing of songs in our own languages (with the gift of translation). The Word was proclaimed by some excellent preachers, and throughout there was a spirit of unity among us. We were in this together. Yet the final day of worship was different.

It was different because there seemed to be a new sense of excitement, unlike before, in the room. We were empowered, equipped and ready to conquer new church ministry. There was still music, singing and preaching, but this time the service included communion.

There I stood up front with a Haitian man on one side and a Korean man on the other. Each offered communion prayers in their own language. When they prayed, I didn’t understand their language, but I heard and felt them ‘In the Spirit.’

As the Korean man prayed, tears began to flow down my face. My spirit leaped. Sensing that I knew exactly what he was saying. I fought back the tears of joy. At that moment, I received a glimpse of what Pentecost was like.

It is with that same spirit of gladness that the Psalmist speaks to us during this season of Advent. We are reminded that if the worshipping community of old could be so exciting, how much more joyous should the New Testament church be, now that the full revelation of Jesus the Christ has been revealed. Let us press forward together in hope for the next level of worship this Advent.

Let us pray:
Dear God, As we enter this time of waiting help us, empower us, and equip us to do Your will with a joyous spirit of worship. Worship that can and will calm fears, ease anxieties, answer questions, and propel us to the next. Let us enter worship with the expected hope for that next level of revelation, next level of unity and next level of justice for all. Give us that heart of worship that is salve for healing of the soul of each one of us. Amen
Hope in God

The dictionary defines the word “expectation” as “a strong belief that something will happen.” However, the one thing that I have learned during my lifetime is that disappointment happens. Having traveled this journey and in observation of others, it seems that every time one puts their hope and expectation in a person, frustration is sure to come at some point.

What is your expectation? Is it in your career? In your education? In your financial resources? In your abilities? In your marriage?

With most of the couples I have had the opportunity to visit regarding their marital issues, it seemed that the reoccurring problem was unmet expectations. These unfulfilled expectations can not only cause friction in a relationship and hard feelings but can often lead to a split of the relationship.

When we put our expectations and hope in our family, our company, our abilities, church members, or even the pastor, we can get disappointed. These expectations can put much pressure on the people closest to us.

Expecting our children to excel where we didn’t or our spouse to fulfill our every desire is putting an unnecessary burden on them. Your spouse is not your provider. God is.

God may use your spouse to provide care for your family, use the company to provide a job for you, use the school to provide education, and may use the pastor to offer a word of encouragement and to pray for your family in time of need. Ultimately, it is God who cares and provides for you. Let’s prevent frustration by making a conscientious decision not to put so much pressure on those around us to take care of your needs. Put your expectation and hope in the Lord, and you will not be disappointed.

Let us pray:

Dear God, We confess that we have been wrong in not trusting you fully with everything concerning our life. We repent for looking to other people, our family, our job, and anything other than you as our source. We declare that you alone are our provider. Moving forward, we will look to none other but you.

God, We thank you for being faithful, even when we have not been. Thank you for being forgiving when we do not so easily forgive others. We ask that you to help us to be more like you in our words and deeds. So, please help us to trust you for everything and in every area of our life. Amen

Photo by Christiana River
Power of Hope!

A song of ascents. Of David.

1 If it had not been the LORD who was on our side, let Israel now say
2 if it had not been for the LORD who was on our side when our enemies attacked us,
3 they would have swallowed us alive when their anger was kindled against us;
4 then the flood would have swept us away, the torrent would have gone over us;
5 then over us would have the raging waters.
6 Blessed be to the LORD, who has not given us prey to their teeth.
7 We have escaped like a bird from the snare of the fowler’s; the snare is broken, and we have escaped.
8 Our help is in the name of the LORD, who made heaven and earth.

Psalm 124 (NRSV)

Hardly a day can go by without hearing some news reports about there being a crisis at the U.S. and Mexico border. Politicians have debated about it; families and colleagues are talking about it, and some even deny it. But without question, there is a sizeable undetermined number choosing to make the journey. So, one may wonder why are so many willing to leave everything behind and take the risk of death in the desert, capture by border patrol, persecution, possible detainment and deportation to crossover?

There is no cookie-cutter answer and I imagine responses would vary, depending on whom you ask. Some would offer reasons like to escape persecution, poverty, work, opportunity, and more. However, during a conversation with a fellow Rotarian regarding the subject, she said, “They take the risk in search of hope!” Wow, hope!

Hope is a powerful cognitive response to cope with despair. In search of hope realized can cause one to take risks that do not make sense.

In search of hope can drive one to risk the loss of life in pursuit of it, travel deserts, endure hot and humid temperatures, risk capture, and more. Perhaps for the migrant traveler, the risk is worth it, for life absent hope is not worth living.

So, just as the Psalmist records, they trust that God will be their defense. With faith, countless numbers take the risk and sojourn to the border in search of hope realized.

The question for us today is there anything that we desperately hope for that we would be willing to trust God enough to risk everything in search of it? If so, you are invited to tap into the power of that hope!

Let us pray: Dear Creator, protector, and sustainer, there is a crisis at the border. People are dying. God, Your Word tells us that You are concerned about all things and care for all people. So, we come before Your presence to seek Your divine care and protection. Protect the weak and the strong. Cover the vulnerable and those who are not. Lord, expand our love, extend care, and compassion for each other. Please help us not to be guilty of seeing situations from only the side of privileged but let us also be mindful of the hopes and dreams of those who lack opportunity. It is in the name of the immigrant, Jesus Christ we pray. Amen
“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”
Hebrews 11:1 (NASB)

**Lord, Teach Me How to Wait!**

I once heard a preacher say, “God gives us kids so that we can have plenty of preaching material.” While that is not the reason why God gives them to us, I can attest that children usually don’t leave us short of preaching topics. As in the case of my daughter’s recent house buying experience.

You see, over the years, she would periodically share how much she loved the house where she grew up. She planned to finish college and get a good-paying job. Then her first house purchase would be similar to her childhood home. She had a plan and followed it.

When the time came to buy her first house, she was on the hunt. However, several months went by, and she was starting to get frustrated. Looking at house after house, none seemed to meet her expectations. Unmet expectations often will lead to disappointment, and she was getting tired of waiting.

Now I love my daughter and believe that she has many great qualities, like being a planner. However, patience is not on top of that list.

In frustration, she would call me. That meant I was allowed to listen to her very vocal complaints. She complained, lamented, and verbalized feelings of disappointment. There wasn’t much I could do but listen and offer words of encouragement. But she was stressing. Her stressing was starting to stress me. At one point, I remember saying a quick prayer for the both of us. “Lord Jesus, please… help my daughter find a house!”

The truth is that most of us don’t want to wait for anything. Now, some people have plenty of experience in waiting. They have done it enough that they have learned to have a quiet resolve in the waiting. But for the majority of people, the last thing any of us want to hear is, “Not now, wait. This “dis-ease” of waiting can sometimes prompt anger, frustration, and feelings of hopelessness.

Waiting is not a new phenomenon. It starts as little children and follows most of us into our adult life. While as adults, we may not respond with the same emotional outbursts as a five-year-old, but lament does happen, sometimes silently and other times loudly.

After all, we live in an age where everything happens quickly. We drive through and get our food fast. We gather information through high-speed internet. Society encourages the desire for the quickest and the fastest. We not only desire it but demand it.

Silicon Valley Psychiatrist, Dr. Stephanie Brown noted in a New York Post article, “‘I want it now!’ or ‘Do it now!’ are valued mantras for today’s with-it person, young or old… People are addicted to speed.”

Such is our dilemma as Christians. While society seems to place a demand in the life of people to be more comfortable and faster, God works on a very different timetable. Though I don’t claim to know the mind of God fully, it appears to me that God desires that we to learn how to wait. The Psalmist lets us know that there is nothing wrong with waiting, “Wait for the LORD; Be strong and let your heart take courage; Yes, wait for the LORD” Psalms 27:14. I believe that waiting can be a positive good. Waiting can shape and teach us how to be more like the perfect Son of God, Jesus Christ.

***

**Let us pray:**

God, Help us to slow down and wait on Your perfect timing! Amen
For I know the plans that I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope. Jeremiah 29:11

What God Has for You Is for You!

As one can imagine, there is more to my daughter’s house buying experience. So, here is the rest of the story.

After months of looking, she found a house that she liked. It was very much like the one growing up. Having pre-qualified for a loan, she excitedly called her realtor and was ready to make an offer. She was not only informed that others were also looking at the property but was told, “If you want it, you will need to be aggressive.” She was then encouraged to offer more than the asking price. That suggestion caused my daughter to promptly call me for advice.

While admitting to her that it had been some time since I purchased a home, offering more than the seller’s asking price didn’t feel right to me. Being aggressive didn’t sound like God-like advice.

Additionally, my daughter noted that although her loan approval was for a higher amount, she wasn’t comfortable with being obligated for a higher payment. My advice to her was, “Offer what you are comfortable with. What God has for you is for you!”

Well, she did exactly that and didn’t get the house. She was more than disappointed. As you can imagine, we had a long conversation after that!

After a lengthy pep talk and the passing of a few days, she began the hunt again with a renewed sense of purpose. But this time with a new realtor.

In less than two weeks, she found the house. This one wasn’t like her childhood home. It was better with more square footage and updates. In addition to four bedrooms, it had a bonus room, an office, and a larger yard for less money. Thank you, God, for coming through one more time!

There are times that we can be looking and waiting for something. We have our minds made up on it. When it doesn’t happen, we get disappointed and feel that somehow God has forgotten or doesn’t care. Romans 5:5 reminds us that “hope in God does not lead to disappointment. For God loves us.”

As believers, it is essential to know what God would want regarding decisions, both big and small. When it comes down to it, once you know God’s will and understand it, it is always far better than our desires. Nothing else really matters.

However, figuring out God’s will is not always straightforward. While God sends the message of God’s will, obstacles like fear and anxiety can interfere and block the transmission. But we have the responsibility to earnestly seek to know God’s will and wait for clear reception.

Once it is known, we must then pursue it and not think that God is going to switch God’s will for ours. We can then stand on the promise found in 1 John 5:15, “This is the confidence we have in approaching God, that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us.” We have to learn to wait on God’s perfect timing. Why? Because what God has for you is for you!

“Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” Philippians 4:6-7

Let us pray:
Heavenly Father,
Thank You for the plans that You have concerning my life. Help me not to be anxious in this journey. We want to earnestly seek Your will for my life. Once we know Your will, let us wait with a spirit of expectation for that which You have promised. Amen
Hope deferred makes the heart sick...

Proverbs 13:12a (NRSV)

Delayed But Not Denied!

What happens when hope is deferred? That is, you are looking, waiting, trusting, and praying, but it still has not come to pass. Hope has somehow been delayed.

In the examination of the Hebrew word in this place means “to drag.” And so, the Proverb is saying that when your hope takes a long time to come to fruition, when it drags, the time of waiting can be sorrowful and disappointing.

Can you imagine how it feels to wait for something, something that you believe to be very important, even the realization of your dreams? You start to wonder if God is ever going to give it to you. Do you begin to wonder why the answer is taking so long? Does God care?

Some people have traditionally been part of a congregation where slogans have been adopted as a way of coping with long waits. Slogans that are like, “Waiting on God is not wasted time” and “Delayed, but not denied.” Borrowing from 1 Samuel 30:6 (KJV), “David was greatly distressed… David encouraged himself in the Lord” has been made into a personal testimony, “I have learned to encourage myself.” However, if most of us are honest with ourselves, the truth is that even the most believing Christian can become discouraged. Mainly, that is true if the wait seems to take a long time.

After all black folks have a long history of waiting: Waiting for freedom after 400 plus years of American slavery, waiting for equitable treatment throughout Jim Crow, Black Codes, and Separate but Equal; waiting for justice through the countless named and unnamed unarmed men shot in the streets. They are waiting for equal access to opportunity. The list could continue. Just as the Poor People’s Campaign reminds us, the wait continues.

Your wait may not be the same as the poor, the disenfranchised, or the immigrant. However, everyone, regardless of ethnicity, social status, or stage in life, is waiting for something. Perhaps you are waiting for a break in your career, a life partner, a child to call your own, to purchase your first car or the day you can finally retire and start traveling.

Whatever you find yourself waiting for, be encouraged to keep on praying. Keep on trusting and keep on believing. While that which you are praying for is not yet realized, keep the faith. Hope has not failed. It might be delayed but not denied. I declare by faith that it is coming!

“Faith is the substance of things hoped for…” Hebrews 11:1 (NASB).

Let us pray:
Dear God, We trust You. Help us to trust and be more dedicated to You. We know that You are faithful. Help us not waver this journey. We know that You are all-powerful. Empower us to wait on You in confidence and patience. Because we walk by faith and not by sight, we are waiting in the confidence of Your answer. So finally, we ask that You equip us to move, to do, to say, and to act when Your spirit prompts us. Amen

To learn more about Dr. William Barber and the Poor People’s Campaign go to www.poorpeoplescampaign.org.

To learn more about what Disciples are doing regarding justice issues, such as: immigration and refuge, women, children, hunger, race and equity and more go to: www.discipleshomemissions.org
“...but a desire fulfilled is a tree of life.”
Proverbs 3:12b (NRSV)

**I Don’t Mind Waiting**

Life has a way of allowing situations to occur that we need reminding of hope in God. As a matter of fact, in keeping with the old marketing adage that people need to hear something at least seven times before they get it, it seems befitting to continue the discussion about hope and waiting.

When life happens, most often we can look on either side and seem not to find any answers or anyone to help. Then, you are forced, through no choice of your own, to learn how to wait.

Having dealt with trial after trial, challenge after challenge, disappointment after disappointment, there comes a time when one realizes that if God brought you out of the test before that, the challenge before that, and the frustration before that one, surely God is going to see you through this one too!

You see, being on the Christian journey for a while, one should have learned some things like patience, trust in God, and things like that. But, those faithful in the journey of life can get hit hard and waver, even if it is just for a little bit.

I remember being in the midst of one huge trial a few years ago having to pause and with a joking sincerity saying, "God, I do not need you to trust me that much!" Those are the times when I have to start singing to myself. Singing is a way of "encouraging myself in the Lord." One of the songs I sing is one released by American gospel preacher, author and singer, Juanita Bynum, entitled, "I Don't Mind Waiting." The lyrics start like this:

_I don't mind waiting I don't mind waiting I don't mind waiting On The Lord"

I don't mind waiting (Because I know He's coming in awhile) I don't mind waiting (I don't mind) I don't mind waiting (I'll wait on) On The Lord

I don't mind waiting (I don't mind) I don't mind waiting (I'm gonna wait on Him) I don't mind waiting (I'm gonna wait right here) On The Lord...

The repetition of the song helps the mind and spirit come into agreement with waiting because when the answer comes and desire is fulfilled, it is in that moment that you realize that the wait was well worth it. That is in encouragement in Proverbs 3:12b.

Let us pray:
Dear God, I look to You for all of my needs. I trust You through every trial and challenge. I will not lament nor complain. Instead, I choose to walk in faith regarding Your promises and declare them real in my life. I don't mind waiting on You God for I know that You are faithful to hear and will always answer according to Your will. Amen

---

**A Few Scriptures about Waiting on God**

Isaiah 30:18, 40:31, 64:4; Psalms 25:4-5, 27:13-14, 33:2-22, 37:7, 9, 34, 40:1-17, 62:5; 130:5-6; Proverbs 3:5-6; Lamentations 3:25; Micah 7:7; Habakkuk 2:1-3; Matthew 6:34; Romans 5:3-4; Galatians 6:9; Philippians 1:6; Hebrews 11:1 James 5:7-8, 5:11; and 2 Peter 2:9
The second candle, also purple, represents faith. It is called the “Bethlehem Candle” as a reminder of Mary and Joseph’s journey to Bethlehem.

**Faith Defined**
Belief, trust, and loyalty to a person or thing. For Christians faith resides in the security and hope in God as revealed in Jesus Christ.

Baker Theological Dictionary of the Bible

Fidelity to one's promises, sincerity of intentions, belief in the traditional doctrine of a religion or a firm belief in something for which there is no evidence. Merriam-Webster

**Scriptural References**
“For we walk by faith, not by sight.”

2 Corinthians 5:7 NASB

“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen...And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him.”

Hebrews 11:1-6

**Through Faith**
Through faith we understand the things we cannot know the hidden pattern God has planned and why each thread is so. We trace life’s vast design and lose His golden strand; but when our wills with His entwine;

Through faith we understand. what to our sight is dim, and still Love’s strong, all-knowing hand leads those who trust in him. Ours not to know the way but bow to his command; and when our childlike hearts obey, through faith we understand;

By E. Margaret Clarkson
“So faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ.
Romans 10:17 NASB

What Faith Needs

A couple of years ago, ministry colleagues and friends, Rev. Daniel and Dee Henley, pastors, Journey Christian Church, Memphis, Tennessee, joined us for our church's tenth-anniversary celebration. As one of the keynote speakers for the occasion, Pastor Dan brought with him a copy of his recently released book, "The 7 Things that Faith Needs," and preached a powerful sermon on the topic.

Now, I have faith. At least I think that I do. I have preached and taught about faith. However, his message was not only on target for the church, but it was also uplifting and appeared to expand the minds of each hearer. As with the book, he began his message with a testimony.

Journey Christian Church began as a church plant and quickly grew as a multiracial, intergenerational teaching. However, after some time in ministry, the church was in trouble. Members left, it appeared that they were going to lose their church building and the congregation was right in the middle of a church split. He needed a word, and early one morning, he received it. He heard God say in the spirit, "Things are getting better all around you they just don't appear to be." That's what he needed and he quickly learned that one of the seven things that faith needs is a Word. "A few words make all the difference."

A word from God is what we all need. When faced with difficult circumstances that we didn't ask for, we have no control over, but yet God allowed it to happen. A word from God will empower you to hold on and wait. Hold on in spite of how the situation may look. Things can and will turn around. So, wait with expectation; change is coming!

Available on Amazon.com

Let us pray:
Dear God, life seems to have many twists and turns. Too often, things appear to happen when we least expect it. It is during some of those times that it seems to take everything we have within us to keep holding on. That is when we need to hear from You. Thank You for understanding our pleas, cries, and sometimes our lament. In the midst of it all, Your Word comes forth to remind us that You are with us during those difficult times. Your Word comes when we need it the most. God, we thank You for Your Word. Amen
We Have Come This Far
By Faith

Many of us have had the esteemed privilege of entering a church on a Sunday morning hearing the sounds of instruments playing, voices singing, and each joining together to engage expectant attendees in worship. These melodies came forth purposing to prepare the hearts and minds of congregants for the preached Word. A well-known song, for such an occasion, in the black church is "We Have Come This Far by Faith."

The song was birthed in the height of the Civil Rights Movement. It was sung with a fervent spirit of thanksgiving because worshippers were conscious of how faith in God had brought them through many difficult times. It also was a reminder that faith would continue to carry them through the next challenge. So, is this the faith that the unknown writer of Hebrew text proclaims?

By proclaiming "now," the author offers encouragement to hold on during any trial by reviewing the triumphant experiences of the Hebrew heroes. It proclaims that faith is real. It is called a substance. The Greek word means "that which stands under" something else or "provides the basis for" something else. In other words, faith is the "underlying reality" of things hoped for.

Faith is the title deed of those things that are hoped for. Throughout the chapter, the writer emphasizes that assurance rests on the promises of God. Guarantees that we, as people of faith, must hold on to, especially during difficult times. Promises that cannot fail.

This faith is also "the evidence of things not seen." It deals with things we cannot see. We need faith because "By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God so that what is seen was not made out of things which are visible." Hebrews 11:3

While we can use our natural senses to connect with the visible world, "what is seen." It is that faith in God, through the gift of the Holy Spirit, that allows us to connect with the invisible "what is not seen." This faith relates us to two eternal, unseen realities: God and the Word of God; the secular world denotes faith in other contexts. Outside of

God, we seek confidence in the economy, but the stock market has crashed more than once. We look to medicine for healing, but pharmaceuticals don't always work. We trust in political leaders, but far too many have failed. However, according to Joshua 21:45, God's Word never has nor will ever fail. Isaiah 55:11 says, "So will My word be which goes forth from My mouth; It will not return to Me empty, Without accomplishing what I desire, And without succeeding in the matter for which I sent it."

That is why we can sing, "We have come this far by faith leaning on the Lord and trusting in His every Word, he has never failed me yet!

Let us pray:
Father in heaven, even though we cannot see You with our natural eyes, we feel Your presence. We sense You working on our behalf, even when we have not yet realized it in our earthly life. We praise You because You are the eternal God. Your Word is real, sure, and will accomplish what it has been set forth to do. This day we decide to trust in the eternal reality of Your Word because our faith is substance, and our hope is real. Amen
To the Chief Musician. A Psalm of David.

“O LORD, in Your strength the king will be glad, And in Your salvation how greatly he will rejoice! You have given him his heart’s desire, And You have not withheld the request of his lips. Selah.

For You meet him with the blessings of good things; You set a crown of fine gold on his head. He asked life of You, You gave it to him, Length of days forever and ever. His glory is great through Your salvation, Splendor and majesty You place upon him. For You make him most blessed forever; You make him joyful with gladness in Your presence. For the king trusts in the LORD, And through the lovingkindness of the Most High he will not be shaken.

Your hand will find out all your enemies; Your right hand will find out those who hate you. You will make them as a fiery oven in the time of your anger The LORD will swallow them up in His wrath, And fire will devour them. Their offspring You will destroy from the earth, And their descendants from among the sons of men. Though they intended evil against You And devised a plot, They will not succeed. For You will make them turn their back; You will aim with Your bowstrings at their faces. Be exalted, O LORD, in Your strength; We will sing and praise Your power.”

Psalm 21 (NASB)

---

Praise God For What God Has Done

I love the Psalms.

I love reading the Psalms. They have a way of comforting when my heart is heavy. They bring me joy when my spirit is a little down. When I am in trouble, the Psalms seem to help me. When I need to know what God is doing in my life, I turn to the Psalms for clarity and direction. In short, Psalms is where I go for almost any occasion because they are real and speak to me.

The English title "Psalms" originated from the Septuagint's Greek title Psalmoi, meaning "songs of praise" which is a translation of the Hebrew word, Tehillim, "praise songs.” Subsequently, it stands as a collection of lyrical poems and is an expression of worship. Consequently, if anyone is looking for words to express their worship, I suggest turning to the Psalms.

Throughout its many pages; the text encourages its readers to praise God for who God is and what God has done. The Psalms bring light to the greatness of our God, affirm God's faithfulness in times of trouble, and remind us of the absolute centrality of God's Word. As the Psalms present a clear picture of God as a loving guide, our responses should be none other but one of praise and worship to the God who never fails.

The text appears to be a response to the previous pleas of the people for their king found in Psalm 20. David's victory over the enemy. The people prayed, God responds, and King David was victorious. The writer then pens thankful praise for the success won in battle.

As a believer, this not only speaks to the special place prayer should have in our life but also to pray for our leaders. 1 Timothy 2:2 says,
"First of all, then, I urge that entreaties and prayers, petitions and thanksgivings, be made on behalf of all men, for kings and all who are in authority, so that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity." We should pray that they will repent of any sin or iniquity. Pray that they will live a Godly life. Those leaders and those in authority receive wisdom, knowledge, and understanding. That they will seek God and allow God to lead, guide, and direct every action.

Finally, we should know the blessing of frequently answered prayer. Pray with an expectation and anticipation of results.

"And concerning you, my brethren, I myself also am convinced that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able also to admonish one another."

Romans 15:14 NASB

Encouraged to be an Encourager

This is an excellent passage about Christians encouraging one another. Paul shares with the Romans his understanding of his call to minister to the Gentiles. Without meeting them, he shares his knowledge of them in the spirit that they are 'full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, and able to admonish one other.' Paul's encouragement to the believer also stands for us today. Reminding us that we are called to advise, instruct, and help one another toward spiritual maturity.

There are many times that I jokingly say, "Every time I think that I have got it figured out, God has a way of moving the mark to remind me just how much I don't know." What Paul says in these verses leads to pure excitement. I am excited with the understanding that God gives each one of us what we need at the moment. We don't have to have it all figured out. We have all we need to live a life that brings honor to God. There is simply something genuinely liberating about knowing this. Yes, we all have much more to learn. However, each of us also already has a lot to share with others.

Yes, Paul surely was a great encourager. It makes me think of the times that people have encouraged me. In my former church, the bishop's mother was one of those people. She mentored and spoke truth to me, even when I didn't want to hear it. I knew that her advice was spiritual, and she always had my best interest in mind. I have friends that I trust and who have no problem giving me a reality check when most needed.

I think that is what Paul is doing. He was encouraging his friends to lean in and fight the good fight!

Let us pray:
Dear God, According to Hebrews 4:16 we come boldly before Your throne of grace. We ask that You raise and set Godly leaders to be in authority over us. That every leader will seek Your wisdom, direction, and guidance concerning every area that You have given them responsibility for. May they acknowledge You, seek Your guidance and direction as they carry out their duties. Let each one be victorious as they lay aside their will, and they faithfully do Your will. Let this effectual fervent prayer of Your righteous ones avail much. Amen

Wednesday, December 11, 2019
I can't help but think about organizations like Her Faith Ministries in Memphis, Tennessee. It is the kind of place where people who are in the margins can find friends that will speak the truth. They foster spiritual growth while helping struggling families, especially single women with children. They help them understand the will of God for their lives while offering aide in meeting their basic needs.

So, be encouraged for God has already equipped you with the goodness and knowledge to be an encourager.

“Now it came about in the days when the judges governed, that there was a famine in the land. And a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the land of Moab with his wife and his two sons. The name of the man was Elimelech, and the name of his wife, Naomi; and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion, Ephrathites of Bethlehem in Judah. Now they entered the land of Moab and remained there. Then Elimelech, Naomi’s husband, died; and she was left with her two sons. They took for themselves Moabite women as wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. And they lived there about ten years. Then both Mahlon and Chilion also died, and the woman was bereft of her two children and her husband... But Ruth said, “Do not urge me to leave you or turn back from following you; for where you go, I will go, and where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God, my God.””

Ruth 1:1-5, 16

Let us pray:
Lord God, First and foremost, we say thank You! We thank You for all that You have already done in our lives. We pray that as we move forward in our journey that You will empower us with Your support and be our pillar of strength. Lord, we thank You for sending encouragement to us in our times of need. We ask that You use us to offer encouragement to others in their time of need. We know that we're absolutely nothing without You, but we're everything because of You. We thank You for answering the prayer of your people. Amen

Where You Go I Will Go!
The story of Ruth and Naomi is a familiar biblical story that is used in sermons, Sunday School lessons, and women’s ministry meetings to share the value of faithfulness, kindness, and integrity. It is a story that takes place sometime during the period of the rule of the judges. A time that was dark for Israel, “for the people did whatever seemed right in their own eyes.” (Judges 17:6). There was almost nothing worse than being a widow during that time. Widows were often taken advantage of or ignored. They were practically always poverty-stricken. Widowed and no sons left to care for her, this appears to be the fate of Naomi.

Unfortunately, the conditions in the United States for a widow is not much different today.
Looking on the Promise

A few resources for the aging

Let us pray:

Dear God, You care for the young and old, the widow and the widower. You are the provider of comfort and companionship in times of loneliness. You provide peace in a world that seems to offer little. You provide food, shelter, and clothing when food is scarce, safe housing, and clothing for those who need accommodation. We know that You are the supplier of all needs. So, we thank You now for Your provision. Hear this our prayer. Amen

A Few Resources for the Aging

American Association of Retired Persons
www.AARP.org

ElderCare Directory
www.eldercaredirectory.org

National Council On Aging
www.ncoa.org

U. S. Department of Health and Human Services
https://www.hhs.gov/aging/health-aging

Looking on the Promise

While in seminary, I heard much talk about living in a Post-Christian era, subject that I had not thought much about prior. I imagine that was because the majority of those I associated with felt as I did, that is Christian. It wasn't that I didn't know non-Christians. I did. We didn't hang out outside of our job or had much interaction other than community work. They respected my view, and I respected theirs.

However, it has become more evident that Christianity is no longer the dominant civil religion. Now having more opportunities to speak, teach, and pray in the public sphere, I am called to be more mindful of those present whose faith is different from my own.

At first, I struggled with that mindfulness. I felt that somehow if I didn't close my prayer with "In the name of Jesus" or acknowledged that a faith different from my own had some value, at least to the one who practices it, I was compromising. I was wrong. The truth is that I am stronger and more grounded in my faith in God and the saving work of Jesus Christ than ever before.

However, indulge me for just a moment. Suppose that Jesus is not coming back. Suppose that Jesus never was born of the Virgin Mary, never actually rose from the dead and, the promise of His return is not real. Think of the implications. The injustices in this world would remain and not be replaced by fairness and equity. Suffering would have no reward. The curse of death would be the final answer.

Moreover, the hope of humanity would be a mere dream. While an undergrad, the "Death and Dying" college professor told me that this idea of a redeeming savior was something that was made up. It was a fictional character to give people "hope," and people have been looking for the promise ever since. I was seventeen then.

Now over the years, I have been privileged to observe redeeming and saving work consistently. I have seen people be healed of illnesses and disease when the doctors have given up hope. I have seen people delivered from the bondage of drugs and alcohol when they have tried treatment after treatment and lost hope. I've seen miracles happen when it seemed that there was no hope. At age twenty-six, I was diagnosed with Rheumatoid Arthritis and told by my doctor, "to get my matters in order because I would be crippled by age thirty." Well, thirty-three years later, I am moving around better than some half my age. I didn't give up hope. This is the hope that Peter challenges his readers to live.
Hope in keeping with their Christian faith in looking for the promise of Christ. Hope that allows their expectation in the redeemer and the anticipation of the saving Christ's return to impact their daily lives. Hope can be experienced. Hope can be lived. Hope is coming!

"As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, “The voice of one crying in the wilderness, ‘Make ready the way of the Lord, Make His paths straight. ‘Every ravine will be filled, And every mountain and hill will be brought low; The crooked will become straight, And the rough roads smooth; And all flesh will see the salvation of God.’”

Luke 3:4-6

Time to Make Ready

This time of the year was always particular around my house, especially as I was growing up. Thanksgiving was the designated day to start "making ready" for Christmas. Mother was so committed to this tradition that she would begin pulling out the decorations a few days before Thanksgiving Day and kept the decorations up until just after the New Year. She loved to decorate with plenty of lights lining the outside of the house. Flashing and colorful lights filled the shrubs, and the front door was adorned with a beautiful wreath. However, what I remember most was the lingering aroma of pine. The smell of the Christmas pine tree filled the house. The tree decorated with bulbs and ornaments illuminated the space as the night approached. Oh, let me not forget the various strategically placed Santa Claus figures throughout the living room. We had dancing Santa, Jazz Santa playing the saxophone, ladder climbing Santa, and sleeping Santa, to name a few. Our home was full of expectations and was a time of "making ready" for the season.

While that was almost fifty years ago, today many decorations are more elaborate than ever. People start planning long before the Thanksgiving holiday. For some, it will take months, weeks, and many hours of human resources. Others spend large amounts of money to pay professional contractors to adorn their homes or places of business. There are light shows, neighborhood tours, and even churches have joined in making their campuses so beautiful that it can genuinely change their community into a spectacular sight during this special time of year.

With all the time and money spent in decorating to celebrate Christ's first coming, I wonder what kind of "making ready" is being put forth to prepare for His NEXT arrival? In the time of John the Baptist, "make ready," herald likened to Isaiah's prophecy to repair the roads for the coming king. However, there is a duality in the saying, "make ready the way..."

Let us Pray:
Dear God, Please forgive us for sometimes letting the things of the world distract us from You and Your purposes in our lives. We know that You have a plan and purpose for our lives. We seek to follow that purpose. We know that You are a God promise. We believe in your promises. Moreover, we look forward with a spirit of anticipation to the fulfillment of Your purpose and promise. For we know that it is coming! Amen

Lights at Rhema Bible Church
Tulsa, Ok

“As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, “The voice of one crying in the
Surely John did his part in "making ready" by confronting people with an inescapable decision of baptism and repentance. In doing so, he created a favorable environment that was suitable for Jesus' arrival. However, John was also encouraging the people to make ready their hearts for the coming King of kings! As the scripture records, "all the region around the Jordan went out to him and were baptized by him confessing their sins" (Matthew 3:5-6). The people made ready their hearts.

As it is this Advent, a voice continues to cry out in the wilderness, "make ready and prepare the way." In the midst of our decorating, we are called to make ourselves ready and to prepare our hearts. To remove hindrances that get in the way of Christ in our life and his grace. Let us also "make ready" for Christ's return by living in a manner that is worthy of receiving the Christ child that was born over two thousand years ago in a lowly manger.

Let us pray:
Eternal God, in all our preparing for the holiday season; let us take the time to examine ourselves. Let us be particularly mindful of the condition of our hearts and make ready for Christ's return. Amen

The Advent Prayer Labyrinth Journey's aim is to give us a quiet space to reflect on Christmas, its meaning for them and allow time to take something of this into our daily lives during the season. The idea of this finger Advent Prayer Labyrinth is that as one journeys inward toward Christ, take time to stop and contemplate at each word, listen for God to speak before reaching the center, and then journeying outward back to the world.
The third candle which is pink or rose, is called the “Shepherds Candle.” It represents Gaudette Sunday and the joy that the birth of Christ brought to the world. Traditionally, on Gaudette Sunday one takes a break from Advent fasting to experience the joy of the day.

Joy Defined

The emotion evoked by well-being, success, or good fortune or by the prospect of possessing what one desires.

Merriam-Webster

Happiness over an unanticipated or present good.

Baker Theological Dictionary

Scriptural References

“The LORD is my strength and shield. I trust him with all my heart. He helps me, and my heart is filled with joy. I burst out in songs of thanksgiving.”

Psalm 28:7, NLT

“Cry aloud and shout for joy, O inhabitant of Zion, For great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.”

Isaiah 12:6, NASB

Snowflakes fall elegantly,
Ice glints glow for all to see.
Lights of red, yellow, blue and green,
are all a part of the Christmas scene.

Clap your hands sing out loud,
Rejoice in the name of Jesus.
Tis his birth we celebrate,
knowing he’ll never leave us.

Gather round one and all,
It’s time to create a memory.
Stand proud, stand tall,
allow everyone to see.

The happiness and joy you possess,
will fall upon those, without rest.
A beautiful gift to share,
at this brilliant time of year.

By Melvina Germain
“Now when John, while imprisoned, heard of the works of Christ, he sent word by his disciples and said to Him, “Are You the Expected One, or shall we look for someone else?” Jesus answered and said to them, “Go and report to John what you hear and see: 5 the BLIND RECEIVE SIGHT and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the POOR HAVE THE GOSPEL PREACHED TO THEM.”

Matthew 11:2-5, NASB

Are You the Expected One?

Today's text reads much like a sequel to an epic drama. Jesus has been teaching and healing the blind, deaf, lame, and sick. Plus, preaching the good news to the poor. All this while John the Baptist is in prison due to conspiring corrupt religious leaders and the king reacting to his ministry of preparing the way.

While waiting for trial and inevitable execution, John receives a message about all that Jesus has done. Now John knows and has preached about the Messiah. He baptized the Messiah. But John looked for the Messiah to fulfill his mission with a different approach. John was looking for eschatological judgment, and Jesus did not do what he expected.

John was expecting and looking for more and is now wondering if his faithfulness was in vain. Was he wrong about the Messiah? Has he dedicated his life to herald for the wrong one? Was there someone else? John was in a crisis of faith and needed reassurance. So, he sends two of his disciples to ask Jesus, "Are you the expected one, or shall we look for another?"

While John the Baptist was an extraordinary man, his question was not unusual. Doubt can and often does come when what a person is expecting does not go as they hoped. Anyone who has diligently worked, prayed, given of their resources and put everything on the line will sometimes need the reassurance that it all was not in vain.

This type of question is so common that gospel recording artists the Clark Sisters, pioneers of contemporary gospel, wrote a song about it entitled, "Is My Living in Vain." The song was an instant hit because it spoke to the doubt many Christians face, but often do not verbalize the questioning. The lyrics go like this…

Is my living in vain?
Is my giving in vain?
Is my praying in vain?
Is my fasting in vain?
Am I wasting my time?
Can the clock be rewind?
Have I let my light shine?
Have I made ninety-nine?

Just as Jesus commends John as a man of courage amid adversity, we are also called to stand and be courageous. Without question the Christian journey has its many rewards, but it also has challenges, and times of doubt will surely come. Yet as we continue forward, we are encouraged to conclude, and rest in the knowing, just as John did, that it is all NOT in vain. Jesus is the expected one!

No, of course not
It's not all in vain
No, no Lord, no
Cause up the road is eternal gain

Let us pray:
Dear God, help us to invite Jesus’ assurance in times of doubt. Let us rest in the peace of God that surpasses all understanding and serve God in the belief in the Christ that transcends all peace. Hear this our prayer. Amen

Icon located in the Church of the St. John in Jerusalem depicting his head on a platter. To the right is a jeweled case said to hold a relic of John’s skull.

Photo courtesy of WordPress.com
“As the deer pants for the water brooks, So pants my soul for You, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and appear before God? My tears have been my food day and night, While they continually say to me, “Where is your God?” When I remember these things, I pour out my soul within me. For I used to go with the multitude; I went with them to the house of God, With the voice of joy and praise, With a multitude that kept a pilgrim feast. Why are you cast down, O my soul? And why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God, for I shall yet praise Him For the help of His countenance.”

Psalm 42:1-5, NKJV

I Shall Yet Praise Him
Over the last several years, I’ve had the awesome privilege to serve some of Tulsa, Oklahoma’s vulnerable and marginalized citizens through the Oklahoma Family Empowerment Center (OFEC). Many of the clients who grace us with their presence for breakfast, lunch, and other outreach services lack stable housing. Most don’t particularly like the label “homeless,” yet they lack a permanent address to call home, sleeping on the streets, abandoned buildings, or in neighboring hotels. Our joy has been to watch their countenance change over time, in spite of their circumstances.

Initially, clients seem unsure of what to expect and perhaps a little afraid of the unknown. Additionally, their countenance appears depressed, desperate, and down. After getting to know them and hear their stories, we learn that many are working through various issues related to mental illness, addictions, and others are involved in the business of sex. But each comes with anticipation to glean a little joy.

Upon arrival as they sign in, they are greeted with a warm welcome by a volunteer or worker. As they make their way to the dining area, gospel jazz music is playing in the background, with smiling faces at the serving counter, as they prepare to share in a hot and tasty meal. One of the workers is a member of the church’s praise team and is subject to start singing along with the music, at any given time. I recently noticed that clients have started singing along with him.

Clients are transforming. With joy in the atmosphere, cast down heads are being lifted, and hope is replacing desperation. Clients who used to have to restrain themselves from cussing (they wanted to be able to stay and eat) are now having no difficulty with appropriate language. The work that OFEC is doing is transferring to the church. Clients are transforming and desiring to be part of the worshipping community. Recently a client stopped me in the parking lot to sing a verse of a song and said with a big smile, “I am getting it together so I can join the praise team.”

They have found hope in God. For that, they want to praise God for the help of their countenance! We shall all yet praise God for all that is being done during this advent of Christ and the proclamation of His glorious gospel.

Let us pray: Dear Lord, the words of the Psalmists are so encouraging and hope fueling. We crave the moment when seeing You will no longer require faith, imagination, or waiting. For everything we already know about You fills our hearts with awe, worship, and joy. But there’s so much more to see and know about and to experience of You. Lord, we wait in the spirit of joy and anticipation of Your arrival. But until that day, we remain hungry and thirsty for You and rest in the love of the Creator of all things. Amen
“He said to me, “Son of man, have you seen this?” Then he brought me back to the bank of the river. Now when I had returned, behold, on the bank of the river there were very many trees on the one side and on the other. Then he said to me, “These waters go out toward the eastern region and go down into the Arabah; then they go toward the sea, being made to flow into the sea, and the waters of the sea become fresh.”

Ezekiel 47:6-8, NASB

Healing Waters

Please allow me the opportunity to be transparent for a moment. While writing this devotional, I reached a point where I could not move forward in my writing. I found myself stuck in this text for over a week. Several times I tried to write but couldn’t find the words. I tried to change the subject and the scripture kept coming back. A week later, I am revisiting Ezekiel 47. I believe that there is a message that needs to be shared. A prophetic word of the time and season that we are in and what God desires.

You see, over the last ten years, the United States has experienced everything from massive wildfires, extreme droughts, deadly hurricanes, tornadoes, and record flooding.

This past January was the beginning of the historical wettest six-month period in the United States, with significant flooding in the mid-west mainly along the Missouri River and its tributaries. Around the same time, I spent ten days in New Orleans, as part of my Doctor of Ministry studies in an immersion course post Katrina.

One afternoon, while there, I had the opportunity to gaze at the beauty of the Pontchartrain Lake. It was calm and peaceful. During a tour of the city, our group later stood at the bay of the Mississippi River, which serves as a significant source of commerce for the entire world. It is a life-giving source, and yet when it overreaches its boundaries it is deadly.

Now, I don’t know much about climate change, but I feel that the realities of what is happening in the natural are a reflection of what God desires in the spiritual for the body of Christ.

Perhaps this idea of that which was once dry (deadly), also being a source of saturation (life), is reminiscent of Ezekiel’s vision. The church has been on a decline for years. It appears too dry and has not served its productive capacity. Yet, I am reminded that God desires for the church to live. God desires for it to open itself up to receive the rain, which will bring the spiritual renewal and rebirth of the living gospel to the world.

This river metaphor serves as a symbol of life from God and the blessings that flow from God’s throne. It is a gentle, safe, deep river, expanding as it flows. Flowing first to ankle, then to the knees, to the waist and finally, the depth too deep to cross. God desires to transform the desolate wilderness by producing water that will flow from underneath the temple and saturate the land with unimaginable healing abundant water.

What about your life? Have you been in a dry place and not producing? Do you need to allow the Holy Spirit fullness in your life today? “Let us allow the outpouring and blessing of the Holy Spirit, given by Jesus to His church, to touch us and flow out of us. May the healing waters flow, as the church lives, so we will live!

Pontchartrain Lake

Let us pray: Dear Steadfast God, as the earth groans, we hear and seek to answer Your call. Saturate our hearts with the flowing and life-giving water of Your Holy Spirit. We are looking for and in anticipation of spiritual renewal and revival in this season. Amen
“When He came to the other side into the country of the Gadarenes, two men who were demon-possessed met Him as they were coming out of the tombs. They were so extremely violent that no one could pass by that way. And they cried out, saying, What business do we have with each other, Son of God? Have You come here to torment us before the time?” Now there was a herd of many swine feeding at a distance from them. The demons began to entreat Him, saying, “If You are going to cast us out, send us into the herd of swine.” And He said to them, “Go!” And they came out and went into the swine, and the whole herd rushed down the steep bank into the sea and perished in the waters.”

Matthew 8:28-32, NASB

Sometimes It Just Takes a Word

While in undergraduate school, I worked full time at the nearby mental health hospital. Not only did I learn a lot, but I had a particular interest in the disease. With one out of every five persons in the United States experiencing mental illness, almost everyone's family has someone who is touched by the condition, including my own. I wanted to learn more. I was motivated then and even now as I continue my work with the marginalized or those who would be considered "unclean."

However, I did learn that many cultures deemed mental illness as a form of religious punishment or even demonic possession, and negative attitudes persisted well into the late eighteenth century. Just as they did during the time of Jesus' ministry, now in the twenty-first-century views have made some significant changes, and most don't look at mental illness as demonic possession, there is still much to be learned and understood.

While I don't discount demonic possession, I think about the countless number of people who have been feared, misunderstood and often found living in the least favorable conditions. The two men in Matthew's gospel were considered "unclean" in three ways: There were Gentiles, they were demon-possessed, and they lived in a cemetery. Jesus helped them in spite of the condition.

This account of Jesus' compassion serves as an example for us. We should not turn our backs on people who are 'unclean' or appear to have a mental or physical challenge or who violate our moral standards and religious beliefs. Instead, as the people of God and followers of Christ, we are called to recognize that every human individual is a unique creation of God, needing to be touched by the love of God. Sometimes all it takes is just a word wrapped in love and full of compassion!

Let us pray: Loving God, We pray for all those who are working through the disease of mental illness. May they find hope, experience compassion, and know Your love for them. We pray for their families and all those who love and desire to offer care, equip them. Finally, we pray for the church; it's leaders and congregates, may we offer our houses of worship as a place of sanctuary. Let us be the balm of our communities they may come to for comfort, peace, and understanding. Amen
"But before faith came, we were kept in custody under the law, being shut up to the faith which was later to be revealed. Therefore, the Law has become our tutor to lead us to Christ, so that we may be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor. For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's descendants, heirs according to promise."

Galatians 3:23-29, NASB

It seems hard to imagine and even believe that after over one hundred fifty years post-slavery, passing of civil rights laws, and significant advancements in space and technology that race continues to be a problem in the United States. According to a new Pew Research Center Survey regarding race relations, "About six-in-ten Americans (58%) say race relations in the U.S. are bad, and of those, few see them improving. Some 56% think the president has made race relations worse; just 15% say he has improved race relations, and another 13% say he has tried but failed to make progress on this issue." Whatever one's opinion regarding the subject the fact is that most people of color, namely, those of African and Hispanic descent, are not feeling optimistic about racial progress. So, what should be the church's position regarding the matter? I think the Apostle Paul makes it clear that the law is not enough. However, once we come into the faith, the position for those in Christ is one of love and unity. "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all "one in Christ Jesus."

(Galatians 3:28) It is our faith in Christ that transcends all differences and makes us all one in Christ. It is not only the position of those in Christ, but it is also the church's responsibility to proclaim the message. A message declared inside the walls of the church, and in the public sphere.

Too often, we hear the words "separation of church and state" concerning the church's involvement in the public. However, I believe that this logic is misunderstood or at least practiced in error. The truth is that what happens in the world affects the church. That is the people who make up the church. The church is to be concerned about what affects all people. Christ changed the world, and as followers of Christ, we are called to be world changers! We are all one!

Let us pray:
Great God, You who made us all and loves us, You delight in the creation of Your human rainbow, which spans the earth with colors from blackest ebony to palest white and, in between, skins of weathered red and saffron. We are all children of the universe. We are meant to share the air of this planet in peace and plenty. But greed and fear have distorted Your human creation. We have made the planet a place of war, hunger, homelessness, pain. And within the prison walls the children of Your creation are suffering. Forgive the foolishness and ingratitude of the human race. Guide us to heal the hardness of our hearts and to work for justice and peace. O great God of all the nations, hear our prayer today. Amen

Adapted from Standing in the Need of Prayer: Devotions for Christians in Prison.
“Now I say, as long as the heir is a child, he does not differ at all from a slave although he is owner of everything, but he is under guardians and managers until the date set by the father. So also we, while we were children, were held in bondage under the elemental things of the world. But when the fulness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, so that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons. Because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!” Therefore you are no longer a slave, but a son; and if a son, then an heir through God.”

Galatians 4:1-7, NASB

Abba Father!
There is a lot to like about this time of year, including observing traditions, spending time with family, great food, and remembering the birth of Jesus Christ. There is also a lot not to enjoy. Crowded shopping centers and the busyness of putting it all together can cause added stress. For some, the lack of family to share the holiday can bring new feelings of loneliness. One of the things that tug on my heart during this time is the local newscast about the numerous orphaned children in foster care on a segment called "A Waiting Child."

The segment tells the story of children praying and long anticipating possible adoption by the holiday.

Thoughts usually flood my mind of calling in and bringing one, two, three... home. But I quickly come back to reality with the realization that my kids are adults. My time for raising children is over. Thank you, Jesus!

God is about timing. When the time was right, God sent His son Jesus to earth. For centuries the Jews had been wondering when their Messiah would come, but God's timing was perfect. While we were once slaves to sin and under the law, God sent Jesus.

Now is the time that we think not just his life, but also how his subsequent death bought freedom for us. Now we are adopted into God's family. We can legally be called children of God, and we can say, Abba Father in confidence because of Christ.

Just as the Jews of old were wondering when God was going to send the Messiah, we too may sometimes wonder if God will ever respond to our prayers. But we must never doubt or give up on God. At the right time, God will answer. Are you waiting for God's timing? Trust in God's judgment of time and trust that God always has your best interest in mind.

Let us pray:
We come before Your presence and seek Your parental care for the countless children in foster care, in shelters and on the streets. Heal them of any past trauma or drama that has caused them adverse childhood experiences. Please give them the space and place of a loving and secure family. Help them to know the joy and freedom of Your love. Finally, we ask that You generously give adoptive parents the wisdom to provide and care for their children in every situation. Amen.
While We Wait

In all of the over twenty years of ministry, I do not believe that I have ever preached a sermon on this text. There is no particular reason why that I can think of; the scripture subject just did not come up.

I am guessing that there is a good reason. There appears to be much debate about the text. Biblical scholars’ question whether these are the words of Jesus or the Apostle John. However, it sounds a lot less like John than most of the rest of the narrative, and so some even wonder whether it is a later addition to the earliest manuscripts we have of John's Gospel. It's hard to tell, and it appears somewhat difficult to follow. However, while we wait for scholars to agree on the authorship, there remains a central message.

First, it is the message that Jesus' testimony was trustworthy because he had come from heaven and was speaking of what he had seen there. His words were the very words of God. Subsequently, our spiritual life depends on the answer to one question: Who is Jesus Christ? To accept Jesus as only a prophet or teacher means to reject his teaching, for he claimed to be the Son of God, even God in the flesh.

Secondly, if the message of Jesus' testimony is real, then part of the life of faith is to trust in the word. Trust in the word of God, and believe in the promises of God, while we wait.

Finally, Jesus comes to share God's word of love and grace to all freely.

So whatever else may be going on with this passage, it seems clear to me that the promises of God are real, Jesus comes bearing the gifts of grace and is coming again. And perhaps that is all we need, while we wait.

Let us pray: Dear God, As we wait for the arrival of your Son, let us read, study, meditate and interpret the truth of scripture and our lives in light of Your unconditional love for us and the grace that is freely given to all the world. Amen
The last purple candle is the “Angel's Candle” and represents the peace and justice that the angels and Christ bring to the world.

**Peace Defined**
In English, peace conjures up a passive picture, an absence of civil disturbance or hostility, or a personality free from internal and external strife. The biblical concept rests heavily on the Hebrew root *šlm*, which means, “to be complete” or “to live well.” The noun “Salom” can be grouped into four categories: 1. Wholeness of life or body (health) 2. Right relationship or harmony between two parties; 3. Prosperity, success, or fulfillment 4. Victory over one’s enemies.

Baker Theological Dictionary

**Scriptural References**
*But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; The chastisement for our peace was upon Him, And by His stripes we are healed.*  
Isaiah 53:5, NKJV

*Let the peace of Christ [s]rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body; and be thankful.*  
Colossians 3:15, NASB

*And the peace of God, which surpasses all [s]comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*  
Philippians 4:7, NASB

**Prayer for Peace**

Lord, make me an instrument of Thy peace; where there is hatred, let me sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; and where there is sadness, joy.

O Divine Master,
grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood, as to understand; to be loved, as to love; for it is in giving that we receive, it is in pardoning that we are pardoned, and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

Amen.

St. Francis of Assisi
"God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth." John 4:24, NASB

In the late 1990s songwriter, Matt Redman, an English Christian worship leader, singer-songwriter, penned the song "The Heart of Worship." The story behind the song is quite unusual because it was written soon after his home church journeyed through a time of returning to the authentic worship of Christ. His pastor felt that the church had grown to a place of empathy about the worship experience. With that in mind, he decided to eliminate the sound system and instruments from the service for a period.

What this pastor did was a pretty bold move. The only instruments of praise the people had were their voices. While initially, there was an awkward silence, the people were pushed to make the shift. There was a return to the heart of worship. From that experiential journey with his church, Matt Redman penned the song. That is amazing!

What about us? Are we relying on the external devices of the world and not tapping into the internal witness of God with us? What is your experience when you sing? Praise? Pray? What happens when all of the music fades, everything else stripped, and you are left to come to Jesus, just as you are?

Jesus said in the Gospel of John 4:24, "God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." This is the true essence of worship. It is not about the head but the heart. It is the spirit of man reaching outward and upward to the Spirit of God. Spirit is stirred by the Holy Spirit, connecting us to the truth of who God is in our lives.

What is so incredible is how we are no different from the congregants at Matt's church. Sometimes it will take being stripped of everything before we are willing to step into the heart of worship.

### Scriptures about Worship
- Exodus 20:2-6
- Deuteronomy 10:21
- Deuteronomy 29:10
- 1 Samuel 15:22
- 2 Kings 17:38-39
- 1 Chronicles 16:23
- Nehemiah 9:5-6
- Psalm 29
- Psalm 75:1
- Psalm 86
- Psalm 99
- Psalm 100
- Isaiah 29:13
- Daniel 2:20
- Daniel 3:16-18
- Jeremiah 20:13
- John 4:21-24
- Romans 12:1-2
- Hebrews 12:28-29
- Revelation 4:8-11
- Revelation 14:7
When the music fades
All is stripped away, and I simply come
Longing just to bring
Something that’s of worth
That will bless Your heart
I’ll bring You more than a song
For a song in itself
Is not what You have required
You search much deeper within
Through the way things appear
You’re looking into my heart, yeah
I’m coming back to the heart of worship
And it’s all about You
It’s all about You, Jesus
I’m sorry, Lord, for the thing I’ve made it
When it’s all about You
It’s all about You, Jesus

King of endless worth
No one could express
How much You deserve

Though I’m week and poor
All I have is Yours, every single breath
I’ll bring You more than a song
For a song in itself
Is not what You have required
You search much deeper within
Through the way things appear
You’re looking into my heart, yeah
I’m coming back to the heart of worship
And it’s all about You
It’s all about You, Jesus
I’m sorry, Lord, for the thing I’ve made it
When it’s all about You
It’s all about You, Jesus

‘Cause it’s all about You
It’s all about You, Jesus
‘Cause it’s all about You
It’s all about You, Jesus
I’m sorry, Lord, for the thing I’ve made it

‘Cause it’s all about You
It’s all about You, Jesus

Let us pray: Dear Lord, help us cultivate the heart of worship in the simplicity of devotion to You. Let our ambition be one of dwelling in Your presence and being surrounded by Your glory. We desire to honor You in all our ways. According to Psalm 27:4, let us behold Your beauty, and dwell in Your house all the days of our life. Help us to discover Your will, be touched by Your spirit, and know the purposes of Your heart.

Lord, just as the writer of Psalm 42, writes, as the deer pants for streams of water, so our soul pants for you, O God. Our soul thirsts for You God, for the living God. When can we go and meet with You? For our tears have been our food day and night. While others may ask, Where is our God? We know that you are with us.

In difficult times, open our hearts to receive Your revelation. For You are our very present help in times of trouble. Because You are the rescuer of our souls, You hide us in the secret place, in the shelter of Your tabernacle, and we are safe. I am confident of this: I will see Your goodness in the land of the living. So, I will be still and wait patiently for You. Amen.
The Magnificat
And Mary said: “My soul exalts the Lord, And my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior. For He has had regard for the humble state of His bondslave; For behold, from this time on all generations will count me blessed. “For the Mighty One has done great things for me; And holy is His name. “AND HIS MERCY IS UPON GENERATION AFTER GENERATION TOWARD THOSE WHO FEAR HIM. “He has done mighty deeds with His arm; He has scattered those who were proud in the thoughts of their heart. He has brought down rulers from their thrones, And has exalted those who were humble. “HE HAS FILLED THE HUNGRY WITH GOOD THINGS; And sent away the rich empty-handed. “He has given help to Israel His servant, In remembrance of His mercy, As He spoke to our fathers, To Abraham and his descendants forever.”

Luke 1:46-55, NASB

This song is often called the Magnificat, the first word in the Latin translation of this passage. Mary's song frequently has been used as the basis for choral music and hymns. The text indicates that Mary offered authentic worship by glorifying God in song for what God was going to do for the world through her.

Verses 48-50 give us the basis for Mary's praise. She was mindful of her humble and lowly state. She knew, based on human standards that she was insignificant as a person. She also knew that she had nothing to offer God but her obedience. Further, she knew that she needed a savior.

Her statement began with her speaking about God's recent actions on her behalf; then turned its attention to God's activity on behalf of and against others. She boldly proclaimed that because of God's mercy, grace, compassion, and infinite wisdom, awaited change was coming. Why? Because she now understood that God was in the reversing business. So, she gave praises about a God and to God who is capable of overturning human structures and powers in an unforgiving world.

Change, because God chose to take that which the world would discard and uses it as an instrument to bring salvation for the world as a whole.

Because of this blessing from God, all nations would call Mary blessed.

Not because she was perfect but because she serves as a model of humility, obedience, and submission to God. Just as the Gospel of Matthew records Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, "God blesses those who are poor and realize their need for him for the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs" (Matt. 5:3).

Notice that the picture of God in Mary's song is one of a champion of the poor, the oppressed, and the despised. In the unlimited creative power of God, Mary will give birth to the Son of God, Jesus Christ, who will save the entire world.

So, as we wait for the anticipated celebration of the birth of Christ, let us take time to consider our spiritual birth and the reversal of circumstances. We were once lost but now found. We were once bound by sin but now are made free. Let us also consider how much God will use us, who are nothing, in accomplishing something, all for God's divine purposes. Let us offer God a new level of obedience this season and sing a new song of praise!

Let us pray: Dear God! You are so excellent and worthy of praise beyond our human capability. Yet, we come as humbly as we know how to lift our hands, open our hearts, and utter mere words of thanksgiving for who and what You are in our individual and collective lives. Let us sing a new song of praise and worship as we wait for the anticipated coming of Your Son, Jesus Christ. Amen

Artwork by Jan Richardson
Gabriel and Mary
They Didn’t Know

So often we read scripture from the lens in which we currently live and based on what we now know. Unfortunately, the characters in this well-presented story didn't have that luxury. The truth is that when the Romans ruled the civilized world, they controlled a lot by human standards, and the rulers were considered much like Gods. But they knew very little about the plans of God. By contrast, Joseph controlled little. But he knew what was said to him through God's messaging angel.

Let's look at the story. Caesar Augustus issues a decree for a census of the Roman Empire for probable tax collection purposes. Caesar didn't know that his decree went out in God's perfect time. Joseph knew that even though it was against his better judgment that he must obey Caesar's order, and as head of the family, he must travel to the place where his ancestral records were kept. So, the expecting parents, Joseph and Mary, left Nazareth and journeyed 70 plus miles to the Judean village of Bethlehem. But the Roman authorities didn't know that it was all part of God's plan and made it possible for Mary to give birth to Jesus in the very town that was prophesized in Micah 5:2.

After the long journey to town and looking for lodging, they found no room available for them in the inn. The innkeeper didn't know who Joseph was nor that the baby his fiancé’ was carrying would be the King of kings. Had he known, the innkeeper would have made room and rolled out the red carpet. Instead, he directed them to a cave (stable) for shelter, the place were animals slept nearby in the open with no conveniences. He didn't know.

Sometimes we think we know ourselves and what we would do in situations. We believe that we are obedient and doing God's will. But when we face discomfort or inconvenience we immediately think that we have misread God, or God has somehow made a mistake.

God did not make it easy for Joseph and Mary. The road was long, and difficult. People misunderstood them and didn't know the plan God had for their life. God did not provide a luxury five-star hotel for them, but instead, God chose to bring His Son into the world in less than modest surroundings. The lesson for us is to know that when doing God's will, we are not guaranteed comfort and convenience. We may not know all the details, but we are to know that God will work everything out according to God's perfect plan.

Let us pray: Dear God, we don’t claim to know all the details of what You are doing, nor how You are going to do it. But we do know that You hold our future and whatever You do it is all good because You are a good God. Amen
Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem, saying, "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw His star in the east and have come to worship Him." When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. 4 Gathering together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. 5 They said to him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for this is what has been written by the prophet:

‘AND YOU, BETHLEHEM, LAND OF JUDAH, 
ARE BY NO MEANS LEAST AMONG THE LEADERS OF JUDAH; 
FOR OUT OF YOU SHALL COME FORTH A RULER 
WHO WILL SHEPHERD MY PEOPLE ISRAEL.’"

Then Herod secretly called the magi and determined from them the exact time the star appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and search carefully for the Child; and when you have found Him, report to me, so that I too may come and worship Him.” After hearing the king, they went their way; and the star, which they had seen in the east, went on before them until it came and stood over the place where the Child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. After coming into the house they saw the Child with Mary His mother; and they fell to the ground and worshiped Him. Then, opening their treasures, they presented to Him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

Matthew 2: 1-11
People who have been churchgoers for any period have undoubtedly heard many accounts of the birth of Jesus. The story moves the hearer from the imagery of the prospective parents traveling to Bethlehem for the census. Weary from the journey and unable to find suitable lodging at the inn, they were subsequently reduced to less than comfortable sleeping arrangements. It appears to me that part of the story's uniqueness is that it moves from the message of obedience and sacrifice to a demonstration of authentic worship.

While the shepherds were watching their flocks in the fields near Bethlehem, an angel told them the good news of the birth of the Savior and Messiah, Jesus Christ. They went to find the baby Jesus and offered God praise and worship.

Yet there were also wise men, known as magi, who were watching and waiting. They were waiting with a spirit of expectation and anticipation and watching for the sign of the Messiah's arrival. Then suddenly, there is a brilliant star in that sky that rested over where Jesus was born. Knowing that they needed to find the new King, they followed that star to where he was. However, upon arrival, they could not just walk inside. The entrance required the magi bow down as they entered. As they made their way inside and saw mother with child, they did not see a king and his court, but a baby wrapped in strips of cloth. Yet, they bowed down and worshipped him.

Today as we celebrate the anticipated birth of Jesus and recall the Christmas story. We feel more than the expected warmth of hot chocolate, the Christmas tree lights at night, the exchange of presents wrapped in colorful paper, and other fond memories of the holiday season. We feel the gift of God's love spread to all of humanity a little thicker during the Christmas season. We are reminded that the gifts of love can come through weary immigrant travel, the one who has no place to lay their head, the weak, disinherit, and the oppressed. We remember Jesus, the gift of God that did not come in fanfare but came in the form of a baby wrapped in strips of cloth. Let us take the lead in turning the holidays back into a time of reflection and bow down in authentic worship with a new sense of purpose.

Let us pray:
Dear God, It seems that through the years that we have moved far from the true meaning of Christmas. It has become easy to get tied up in the fanfare of the holiday season with all the food, gatherings, and commercialism. So, please help us to focus on You in every way. Let us simplify our activities and traditions so we can focus our celebration on Your birth.

Let us offer You thanks for coming to earth so You could redeem us. When we think of the extent to which You were willing to go in order to save us, we want to shout, to celebrate, and to cry with thankfulness. You love us so much, and we are so grateful for that love. Without You, I would still be lost. But because of everything You have done for us, today we are free; our lives are blessed. You are our Joy. You are our Peace.

We know that You are no longer a babe in the manger. You are Lord of lords and King of kings, but we still need to see the weak and lowly baby wrapped in strips of cloth and asleep in a trough, humble ourselves bow down and worship Him.
Bow down and worship Him,
Worship Him
Oh, worship Him
Bow down and worship Him,
Enter in
Oh, enter in
Bow down and worship Him,
Worship Him
Oh, worship Him
Bow down and worship Him,
Enter in
Oh, enter in
Bow down and worship Him,
Worship Him
Oh, worship Him
Bow down and worship Him,
Enter in
Oh, enter in
Consuming fire
Sweet perfume
His awesome presence fills this room
This is holy ground
This is holy ground
This is holy ground
So come and bow down
Rev. Sheila P. Spencer
Director of Christian Education and Faith Formation
Assistant to the President of Disciples Home Missions
Telephone: (317) 713-2634
E-mail: sspencer@dhm.disciples.org

Wilma Shuffitt
Ministry Associate
Telephone: (317) 713-2639
E-mail: wshuffitt@dhm.disciples.org

www.discipleshomemissions.org