

Transforming THIS CHRISTMAS

2011 Devotions

Lutheran Hour Ministries' 2011 Advent Devotions, *Transforming This Christmas*, is all about what God can do in ordinary, broken lives. It may be strained family relationships, a cracking marriage, going too long without a job, serious illness or even the death of a loved one that has derailed you and drained the hope from your life. Whatever it is, *Transforming This Christmas* tells how God can raise you up above it all, replacing your sorrow with joy, your despair with hope.

Written by LHM's Theological Editor and Writer Rev. Wayne Palmer, these Advent Devotions will encourage and uplift you with the promise that "unto *you* is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:11).

This is God's message to each one of us—written in the life of His Son Jesus—that first Christmas morning.



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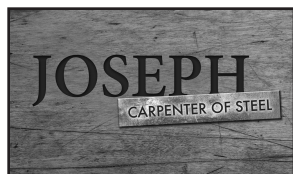


LUTHERAN HOUR MINISTRIES



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2011 Devotions



**Explore the Life of Joseph:
Carpenter of Steel—History’s
Best-known “Average Joe”**

Available in November is *Joseph: Carpenter of Steel*. Hosted by Rev. Greg Seltz, the Speaker

of **The Lutheran Hour**, this **Men’s NetWork** Bible study follows a courageous man of God, who did some very extraordinary things!

Written by Rev. Wayne Palmer, LHM’s theological editor and writer, this four-session Bible study is perfect for use during the Christmas season or to begin the new year. Enriching this study are more than 50 Internet links for gleaning fresh information on this remarkable character and the times in which he lived.

You can find *Joseph: Carpenter of Steel* and all the **Men’s NetWork** resources at www.lhmmen.com.

WHAT IS CHRISTMAS?

For many, childhood memories of Christmas are magical—bright lights, deep snow, and cherished time at home with family and friends. Sometimes, however, the passage of time makes those memories distant and elusive, leaving one to question whether it’s possible to recapture the wonder of Christmas. In *What is Christmas?* Pastor Wayne Palmer reminds us that Christmas isn’t always the bright and cheery affair found in songs or movies. He tells us how this season can be a complicated and difficult time of the year. For families working through hurt feelings, strained relationships—even the oncoming death of a loved one—Christmas can be a trying time.

This booklet reminds us the best things about Christmas are often those impossible to put a price on—time spent together, renewed love, and the true joy the birth of our Savior brings. This **Project Connect** booklet—and dozens of others—can be ordered or downloaded at www.lhm.org/projectconnect.



**NOT THE SAME OLD CHRISTMAS!
Sunday, November 27, 2011**

Read Psalm 80:1-7.

TEXT: Restore us, O God of hosts; let Your face shine, that we may be saved! (Psalm 80:7)

Are you hoping for the perfect, fairy-tale Christmas this year? You know, it’s the kind with award-winning decorations inside and outside your house, family gatherings and parties filled with laughter, everyone excited about your presents and keeping your budget from sinking in the process.

Odds are the next 28 days aren’t going to run that smoothly. There never seems to be enough money; gatherings and parties often have more tension than laughter; and those presents your kids wanted on December 7 aren’t always the same ones they want on December 24!

Maybe that’s the heart of our problem. We mistakenly think we can only have a perfect Christmas if we can avoid any problems in December. The trouble is we’ll never have that kind of December in this world. There will always be problems of one sort or other: unemployment, strained relationships, health problems or loved ones who won’t be with us this year.

But despite these obstacles, you can enjoy a Christmas filled with joy, peace and hope. These devotions are all about doing just that—transforming this Christmas to make it everything it should be, even in the middle of the chaos of life. But you have to know one thing first: there is nothing we can do to transform this Christmas ourselves. Someone else has to do it—a little baby born in the faraway town of Bethlehem.

Come along with us in the coming weeks and see God transform this Christmas for you—no matter where you are or what you will encounter in the next four weeks.

THE PRAYER: Lord God, come to me and transform my Christmas this year. Fill it with joy and light, no matter what my circumstances are. I pray in Your Son’s Name. Amen.

AN EASY CHRISTMAS Monday, November 28, 2011

Read Isaiah 64:1-4.

TEXT: Oh that You would rend the heavens and come down ...
(Isaiah 64:1a)

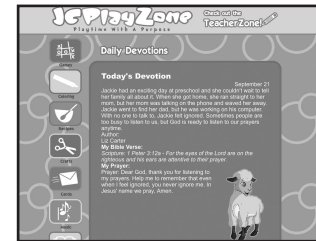
I miss my childhood Christmases. I miss watching dad climb the ladder to hang the lights on our house. I miss Mom sitting in front of a huge stack of Christmas cards. I miss the sound of the mixer and the sweet smell of the cookies my parents were baking in the kitchen. I miss running down the stairs Christmas morning and seeing all those presents wrapped under the tree and waiting for me.

Hmm, maybe the thing I miss most about my childhood Christmases was the fact that I didn't have to do anything to get ready for Christmas! Now my wife and I are the ones climbing the ladder, decorating the house, mailing the cards, baking the cookies, braving the crammed parking lots and stores. Maybe the joy of Christmas got lost somewhere in all the work we have to do to get ready for it.

But wouldn't it be nice to go back and enjoy Christmas once more the way we did when we were kids? It's really possible, you know! I don't mean getting someone else to decorate, bake, shop and wrap for you. I mean stopping from time to time to sit back and let someone else prepare Christmas for you—or should I say, let someone else prepare *you* for Christmas.

That's really what the first Christmas was all about. God opened the heavens and sent His own Son down to us—a human baby lying in a manger. That baby would share our life of sorrow, pressure and toil, and lay down His life to set us free. He did all the hard work. We only need to sit back and receive His gifts this Christmas: joy, peace and hope.

THE PRAYER: Son of Mary, come to us today and help us rest as You prepare us for a joyful celebration of Your birth this Christmas. Amen.



JCPLAYZONE DAILY DEVOTIONS

Proverbs 22:6 tells us to “Train up a child in the way he should go and when he is old he will not depart from it.” Parents, of course, are especially mindful of this important verse when raising their children.

They know that a big part of keeping their children strong in God's Word is to have them exercise their minds daily in prayer and Bible reading. To encourage kids to do this, **JCPlayZone** offers its own original and creative Daily Devotions, written especially for God's littlest followers. These short messages are designed to teach children about God's love and the importance of speaking with Him through prayer. And here's something pretty slick: they're often written by kids themselves. Devotions *by kids for kids—how cool is that?*

To read these little gems, just go to **www.JCPlayZone.com** and click on “Daily devotions.” While you're there check out all the other resources **JCPlayZone** has to offer too!

LENTEN DEVOTIONS

Coming January 2nd will be Lutheran Hour Ministries' 2012 Lenten Devotions. These devotions will delve into the riches of Scripture as it brings to life the final moments of Jesus' earthly ministry as presented in the Gospel of Mark. You will read of His atoning work on the cross and see how His resurrection from the dead is a victory for each one of us. You will find these messages at **www.lentendevotions.net** where they will be ready to download, customize and print for the Lenten season!



We pray these Advent Devotions have encouraged you on your faith journey. God's love and the promise of new life He has given us through the redemptive work of His Son is what the Father's grace is all about. Lutheran Hour Ministries not only offers devotions through the seasons of Advent and Lent that speak of this wondrous grace, we offer daily encouragement as well.

DAILY DEVOTIONS

By visiting www.lhm.org/dailydevotions you can sign up to receive the Daily Devotions. Getting these messages from God's Word is as easy as getting on the Internet. You can read them online, listen to them as a podcast or have them sent directly to your e-mail account. As Speaker of **The Lutheran Hour** for several years, Pastor Ken Klaus has spoke with people the world over. In these devotions, he brings his messages of God's love in Christ directly to you—and it is amazing the impact that Word can have.



Here's what one gentleman said, whose wife was dealing with pancreatic cancer.

"Two years ago she started to listen sometimes with me on the weekends. Then as her illness took away her ability to do everyday things, she started listening daily. ... Ken Klaus' voice was a comfort and his Daily Devotions strengthened both of our faiths. They helped us face the next stage of her life ... joining the Lord. She went home to the Lord August 5, 2011. ... I pray that your ministry continues to reach and strengthen the faithful and plant the seed in the nonbelievers that hear it."

The Daily Devotions from Lutheran Hour Ministries at www.lhm.org/dailydevotions—five, grace-filled minutes that are good any time of day!

WHAT DETERMINATION! Tuesday, November 29, 2011

Read Isaiah 64:5-9.

TEXT: There is no one who calls upon Your Name, who rouses himself to take hold of You (Isaiah 64:7a)

Did you do Black Friday last week? Did you rouse yourself early last Friday and stand in line to take advantage of the sales? Some showed their drive and dedication by camping out early. A few even sacrificed Thanksgiving Day with the family to take hold of the greatest bargains.

Could that kind of sacrifice, drive and dedication transform this Christmas for you? Some people invest a tremendous amount of time and energy to accomplish that perfectly polished Christmas, or to have a home that's the envy of all their friends, or to live a life of power and prestige.

But can that kind of drive really transform this Christmas or this life? What can wealth, power and prestige do when our lives are shattered by divorce, economic collapse, tornadoes and fires or sickness and death? To transform our Christmas and our life itself, for that matter, we need someone who cares about us enough to sacrifice His life for us. We need someone who has the power to overcome all of our problems—including death itself. We need someone who has the drive to see it through to the very end, even when He knows it's going to cost Him His life.

That's what Christmas is all about. The Son of God left His place in heaven to become human and live with us here on earth. He lived a perfect life for us and took our place on the cross, suffering God's wrath for all of our failings. He rose to life again on the third day. When He returns He will raise us from death to live with Him forever.

THE PRAYER: Mighty Son of God, thank You for saving me by Your life, death and resurrection. Transform me that I may take hold of You and celebrate Your birth with great joy this Christmas. Amen.

BROKEN FAMILIES
Wednesday, November 30, 2011

Read John 1:29-42.

TEXT: He first found his own brother Simon (John 1:41a)

Some brothers and sisters get along really well. They get along so well they can work side by side at the same job, then gather together for Christmas and the other holidays. That appeared to be the case for Andrew and his brother Simon Peter in the Bible. They made a living by fishing together. And when the Savior invited Andrew to follow Him, the first thing he did was to find Simon and bring him along. They had fished together all their lives; now they would follow the Son of God together.

I hope your family is that close. But that doesn't always happen. Often get-togethers are more like civil wars. We all know getting together should heighten our enjoyment of Christmas, but sometimes the only way to have a peaceful Christmas is to stay apart.

Transforming a broken-family Christmas is difficult, but not impossible. You just need a peacemaker. The trouble is most brothers and sisters end up on one side or the other. We need someone from the outside to come in and bring peace.

That's where God's Son stepped in. He became human and came into our world to be our peacemaker. First, He tackled our most important broken relationship—the one between God and us. He did that by taking our place and going to the cross to suffer God's wrath for all the wrongs we think, say and do. Having won our pardon from God His Father, He transforms us. He gives us a new heart that feels true love and forgiveness toward our enemies, even if those happen to be our own brothers and sisters.

THE PRAYER: Great Savior, if my family gathers together this Christmas please bless our time together. If there is any festering hurt or offense dividing us, bring us together peacefully through Your sacrifice on the cross. Amen.

SAFE – FOR NOW
The Epiphany of Our Lord, Friday, January 6, 2012

Read Matthew 2:13-15.

TEXT: ... “Rise, take the Child and His mother, and flee to Egypt” (Matthew 2:13b)

After the wise men worshiped the Christ Child, God warned them not to report back to Herod. So they avoided Jerusalem and returned to their country by another route. It wouldn't take long for Herod to realize he had been dupe, and God knew just how furious that would make the old tyrant. So He sent an angel to Joseph in a dream.

The angel warned Joseph of Herod's murderous intent and told him to get up immediately and flee to Egypt. So in the middle of the night Joseph arose, took His wife and her Child and led them to safety in Egypt.

Jesus escaped death this time, but He would not escape it forever. He had a date with death—actually a *battle* with death—a battle for all the spoils. About 30 years later, Jesus would go back to Jerusalem to be arrested, tried, condemned and nailed to a cross. And by His death and resurrection on the third day He would swallow up death forever.

But before that day He grew up and preached about God's Kingdom to the people of Israel. If you go to your local church this Sunday you will see Jesus' mighty miracles and hear His glorious Words.

Next month, beginning on Wednesday, February 22nd, we will begin a new set of devotions. These will follow Jesus as He boldly makes His way to the cross to set us free from death and hell.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, thank You for coming to share our life in this world and winning salvation and eternal life for us by Your life, death and resurrection. Keep us in this faith until You come again to restore Your creation and bring us into eternal glory. Amen.

MURDEROUS ANGER

12th Day of Christmas, Thursday, January 5, 2012

Read Matthew 2:12, 16-18.

TEXT: ... (Herod) became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under. ... (Matthew 2:16b)

Herod was troubled at the wise men's appearance. Matthew added the mysterious words, "and all Jerusalem (was troubled) with him." Why were the people of Jerusalem troubled? Because they were terrified by Herod's impulsive moods. They knew all too well what happened when Herod was troubled.

The king had married 10 different women, but his favorite wife was named Mariamne. He was so jealous of her he twice ordered her to be killed if he failed to return from a dangerous mission. That way he could be sure no other man would ever have her. In time he became suspicious of her and had her executed anyway, as well as her brother, her grandfather, her mother and the two sons he had by her. With a sick history like that, it isn't too surprising that Herod had no qualms about executing Bethlehem's young boys—just as long as it meant the death of a rival King of the Jews.

It is strange but Jesus Christ, the mighty Son of God, came into the world He had created, but that world rejected Him ... and still does. Like Herod we want to live our lives on our own terms—not on His. Yet Jesus still came into our world despite our rejection, and permitted Himself to be nailed to a cross to suffer and die for our sins so that all who repent of their sins and turn to Him may receive forgiveness and eternal life.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, You came to this world even when You knew the opposition and hatred You would face. You willingly went to the cross to suffer for my selfishness and sin. Receive my thanks and praise now and forever. Amen.

A POOR CHRISTMAS

Thursday, December 1, 2011

Read 1 Corinthians 1:3-9.

TEXT: So that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 1:7)

This Christmas season you probably know people who are struggling to make ends meet, are out of work, or even losing their house. Maybe one of these people is you! Being stressed about our finances makes it difficult to have a holly, jolly Christmas.

Is there any way to transform a financially troubled Christmas so you can have joy and peace, even when you can't make ends meet or see the light at the end of the tunnel? Let's take a look back to the first Christmas.

When God's Son came into the world He embraced the poverty of life on earth. It didn't matter what family He was born into. Even Bill Gates and his wife are poor compared to the riches Christ left behind in heaven. But His Father didn't choose a wealthy couple like the Gates to be His mother and foster-father. He didn't even choose a middle-class couple living in the suburbs. He chose Mary and her carpenter husband Joseph, a couple who had just moved and had next to nothing at the time of Jesus' birth.

God's Son was familiar with poverty on earth. He even spent His last years on earth as a homeless man. Yet He became poor so that He could make us rich—not in material possessions in this life, but in spiritual gifts. These include the peace, hope and joy we seek most at Christmas. Then when Christ returns on Judgment Day, we will share His heavenly wealth, living in the mansions He is preparing for us.

THE PRAYER: Great Savior, visit us with the assurance that You will provide all that we need for this life and the life to come, so that we may be filled with peace, hope and joy this Christmas and always. Amen.

**FEELING UNIMPORTANT?
Friday, December 2, 2011**

Read Mark 11:1-7.

TEXT: ... “The Lord has need of it” (Mark 11:3b)

How do you like Christmas shopping? Are you looking forward to playing “chicken” for that elusive parking spot? Are you excited about your chance to push your way through the crowded aisles? Do you get a thrill out of arm wrestling for that last box on the shelf?

Wouldn't it be great just once to be an important person? Imagine walking down an aisle and watching people step aside to let you pass, or standing in front of an empty shelf and having someone hand you that must-have present you want to give your kids. Best of all, imagine everyone motioning you to the front of the line at the checkout!

On that first Christmas when God chose to send His Son into our world as a tiny baby, we might have expected Him to choose an important family. Perhaps it would be the Jewish high priest, the ruler of the Jews, or even the Roman Emperor himself. Instead, the most important person ever born lived as the obscure Son of Joseph and Mary—two very ordinary and unimportant parents.

That's how Christmas can transform us. God's only Son became unimportant in the world's eyes to make you and me important in God's eyes. He credits His perfect life to us as if we were the perfect ones. Then He took all our failures, faults and sins on Himself and suffered and died in our place on the cross to free us from God's wrath.

The hustle and bustle of Christmas shopping may make you feel unimportant, but this Christmas the birth of the Christ Child shows just how important you are to God.

THE PRAYER: Lord, thank You for becoming unimportant in the world's eyes to make me important in God's eyes. Transform my view of You and of myself this Christmas. Amen.

**OVERFLOWING JOY
11th Day of Christmas, Wednesday, January 4, 2012**

Read Matthew 2:9-11.

TEXT: And going into the house they saw the child with Mary His mother, and they fell down and worshiped Him. ... (Matthew 2:11a)

Few people enjoy Christmas more than children. Simply recall their unbridled enthusiasm and the wonder and jubilation beaming from their faces as they rush down the stairs on Christmas morning. The joy of the wise men might have actually topped theirs. Matthew says, “When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy.”

The Magi travelled a long way to see Jesus. They heard God's Word telling them where His Son would be born. They saw the star go ahead of them until it stood over the house, and they saw the King of Israel—probably only a toddler at the time. They fell before Him and presented Him their precious gifts.

What an amazing picture! These weren't children running down the hall to see the presents waiting for them under the tree. These were grown men—important, dignified, well-educated men. Yet they were gripped by an incredible joy impossible for them to contain.

We know so many things they didn't know. We know this was God's eternal Son. We know He came to live the perfect life we can't. We know He grew up to heal the blind, deaf and lame, to drive out demons and raise the dead. We know He died on the cross and rose again to give us eternal life. But with all of that, do we share their overwhelming joy at our Savior's birth, life, death and resurrection for us?

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, fill me with joy at Your first coming to save us from our sins. Then on the Day You return to judge the living and the dead fill me with overwhelming joy to worship and praise You forever. Amen.

A COOL WELCOME

10th Day of Christmas, Tuesday, January 3, 2012

Read Matthew 2:3-8.

TEXT: When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled
(Matthew 2:3a)

When they arrived in Jerusalem the wise men must have been shocked. The whole city should have been worshipping their newborn King, but no one had a clue He had even been born. Even King Herod was totally ignorant of this fact and had to consult the religious leaders—the chief priests and scribes—to learn the Christ was to be born in Bethlehem, the city of David.

Herod was not happy to hear the news that a new king had been born. He was a foreigner himself: an Idumean, a descendant of Jacob's brother Esau. He owed his kingship over the Jews to the fact he had been at the right place at the right time—befriending a Roman leader some 35 years earlier. Despite the great architectural and engineering feats he had accomplished, Herod was a deeply troubled man who jealously guarded His power and suspected everyone of plotting to take his kingdom from him. So he secretly gathered what information he could from the wise men on the false pretext “that I too may come and worship Him.”

Interestingly, the Jews and Gentiles had separate pieces of the same puzzle. The Jews knew from the Old Testament where the Christ was to be born but not when. The Gentiles knew when from the star, but not where. Piecing this information together, the Gentiles were able to seek and find God's Son, while most Jews were content to go on living without Him.

You have heard the whole story of Jesus' birth to save us from our sins. What difference will this Christmas make in your life?

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, it is amazing how few of Your people rejoiced at Your appearing. Strengthen my faith in You that I may be among those who look forward to Your coming on the Last Day. Amen.

FLYING UNDER THE RADAR

Saturday, December 3, 2011

Read Mark 11:8-10.

TEXT: And those who went before and those who followed were shouting, “Hosanna!” (Mark 11:9a)

I've always loved the way my dad hung the Christmas lights on our roof when I was a kid. I looked forward to the day when I was grown and could hang them on my own roof, around the doors and windows, on the bushes and along the driveway. I just knew people would line up for hours and drive hundreds of miles to come and see our wonderful, amazing lights.

I find it amazing that the Son of God wasn't born in a glamorous palace, mansion or five-star hotel. He flew in under the radar and was born in a shelter for animals and laid to sleep in a feeding trough.

Even when He was grown and rode into Jerusalem to battle our greatest enemies—the devil, death and hell itself—He didn't put on a show. He didn't ride a gleaming chariot or a powerful war horse; He rode a humble donkey. He didn't lead a powerful army into war; He hung alone on a bloody cross receiving God's punishment in our place.

He still comes to us today in that same meekness and lowliness. He doesn't shout for our attention. Instead, He invites us to come to His Church where He comforts us with His promises, reassures us of His forgiveness and gives us confidence He will provide for all our needs.

One day the mighty Son of God will stir up His power and come again. But this time He will come in overwhelming might, majesty and glory. He will drive out all our enemies forever, judge the living and the dead and bring all believers to His eternal home.

THE PRAYER: Son of God, prepare me for Your coming on that last great Day, so that trusting in You as my Savior, I may share Your glory forever. Amen.

NEED REVIVING?
Sunday, December 4, 2011

Read Psalm 85.

TEXT: Will You not revive us again, that Your people may rejoice in You? (Psalm 85:6)

Christmas is an exhilarating time of the year for many, but others find it frustrating and depressing. All it takes is an empty spot at the Christmas table, a lost job, a divorce, or bad news from the doctor, and the joy and exhilaration of Christmas is swallowed up completely. This is especially true since these problems will still be here in three weeks when everyone else is shouting, “Merry Christmas!”

Transforming this kind of Christmas is impossible for us, but not for God. The first thing to remember is God never intended our lives to be shattered by such sorrow. He created this world to be and remain perfect—no sorrow, no loss, no divorce and no death—ever! Our first parents Adam and Eve brought this disorder into our world when they disobeyed God.

God could have abandoned His dying world, but He decided to revive it instead. There in the Garden where Adam and Eve had sinned God promised them He would send His Son to restore humanity and this world in which we live. Christmas is the first chapter in God keeping His promise.

The Savior was born to restore fallen people to their loving Father by His perfect life and innocent suffering and death on the cross. Three days later Christ shattered the grave and rose in glory. His resurrection guarantees that death won't have the final victory over our loved ones or us. When Christ returns to restore the world on Judgment Day, death will completely lose its hold on us and life will be perfect forever.

THE PRAYER: Savior of the world, stir up Your power and come to me in my hurts and sadness and reassure me of Your love and Your power to help. Amen.

IMPORTANT VISITORS
9th Day of Christmas, Monday, January 2, 2012

Read Matthew 2:1-2.

TEXT: ... behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem. (Matthew 2:1b)

During these last days of the Christmas season we turn to the wise men. We mentioned briefly last week that these men were counselors and advisors to their king. They were considered experts in nature, astrology and medicine. While studying the heavens, they spotted a special light that announced the birth of a great king. God had placed it in the sky to guide them to His Son.

There are many mysterious things about the wise men. We aren't sure what country they came from; though they certainly didn't come from the Far East—the Orient. We don't know how many there were; we only know they presented three gifts to Jesus. We don't even have enough information to know the nature of this “star.” The Greek word can refer to a comet, a conjunction of planets or a special miraculous light God placed in the heavens. But one thing is clear: the star convinced them the great King had been born.

As they arrive in Jerusalem, the capital city of Israel, one great mystery remains for them. They ask King Herod “Where is He who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw His star when it rose and have come to worship Him.”

Throughout this Christmas season God has shown you the certain fact that He sent His Son Jesus into our world to save you from your sins. Will you be like the wise men, leaving everything behind to worship your Savior and learn more about Him?

THE PRAYER: Heavenly Father, give me the certainty You gave the wise men, that Your Son was born King of the Jews and my King. Move me to worship Him and want to know more about Him. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

THE PERFECT NAME
New Year's Day, Sunday, January 1, 2012

Read Matthew 1:20-25.

TEXT: And at the end of eight days, when He was circumcised, He was called Jesus, the Name given by the angel before He was conceived in the womb. (Luke 2:21)

Have you noticed through all these devotions up to this one I have not used the name for Mary's Son, the newborn King of the Jews? I've been following the Jewish custom of not naming the baby boy until he was circumcised on the eighth day after his birth. Well, today is the day.

For the first time God's Son sheds His blood and shares the pain we experience in this life; it will certainly not be the last time. His circumcision places Him under His Father's covenant with Abraham. He will carefully obey God's rules and requirements. But being God's Son He doesn't do it for His own sake; He puts Himself under God's Law for our sakes. His perfect life will earn our place in heaven, and when He sheds His blood on the cross He will remove the curse of hell from us.

That is why He receives the name God had chosen and revealed to both Mary and Joseph through the angels He sent to visit them. It was a very common name at that time; its Hebrew equivalent still is today—Joshua. His name means, "The Lord saves." Every other man who ever bore that name was pointing to the Lord in heaven who alone could save him. This Child is the Lord Himself who came down to earth to save His people. And His Name is Jesus, the Lord who saves.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, thank You for bearing the Name that reveals the purpose for Your birth and life among us. You are the Savior who has delivered us from God's wrath and promised our eternal home in heaven. Keep us in this faith until You return on the Last Day. Amen.

TOO BUSY
Monday, December 5, 2011

Read Isaiah 40:1-5.

TEXT: And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed (Isaiah 40:5a)

It's only the fifth of December, but many of us are in a near panic. There are so many things to do to get ready for Christmas: presents, decorations, cookies, cards, parties, and the list goes on and on. (Is it just me, or are they speeding up the Christmas music like the last minute of a Mario game?) With all the hustle and bustle where can we find the peace and joy we most want this Christmas?

It makes me think of that first Christmas when Mary and Joseph had just traveled 80 miles from their home in Nazareth to the little town of Bethlehem. Mary was about to give birth and Joseph was trying to find a place for her. I imagine he knocked on quite a few doors, but no one could make room for the out-of-towners. Finally, they settled on a shelter for animals.

How many of those people would have gladly opened their homes if they knew who was standing outside? Each of them was busy with their own lives and families—too busy to welcome God's Son into their home.

In the brief moments of these devotions God's Son is quietly knocking at your door too, waiting for you to set down all your Christmas preparations and welcome Him inside. He has come to remove your guilt, calm your fears, carry your burdens and provide for your needs. He wants to assure you God is at peace with you because of His perfect life and innocent suffering and death, and when He returns you will live with Him in unending peace and joy.

THE PRAYER: Great Son of God, thank You for coming to me in this hour. Quiet the busyness in my mind and fill me with Your peace and forgiveness, so that I may resume my Christmas preparations with joy and gratitude. Amen.

WORN OUT
Tuesday, December 6, 2011

Read Isaiah 40:6-11.

TEXT: All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades” (Isaiah 40:6-7a)

Christmas decorations don't last forever. Take Christmas lights, for instance. Bulbs grow dim, and before too many years only half the string is glowing. After a few more years, the wires grow too thin and brittle to use safely anymore.

But decorations aren't the only things that wear out; decorators do too. As my mom grew older she swapped her six-foot tree for a three-foot tree she put up on a table. Eventually, she even stopped taking off the lights and ornaments after Christmas. She simply covered it up and put it in a corner in the basement. The following December she carried it back up, uncovered it, set it on the table and it was good to go!

I hate to think of it, but I know a time will come when I will be too worn out to pull out the ladder and cover our house in lights. One day our wonderful seven-foot Christmas tree may have to be replaced with a three-foot tabletop tree. Maybe you too are worn out, and that is cutting into the joy you used to feel at Christmas. The reason we age, wear out and eventually die is because our first parents disobeyed God's clear commandment in the Garden of Eden. Their disobedience brought aging into our lives with all its bad side effects.

But the Son of God came that first Christmas to pay for Adam and Eve's disobedience—and ours as well. Through His innocent suffering and death on the cross He won our Heavenly Father's forgiveness. When He comes again on Judgment Day He will change our lowly bodies so they will be perfect forever: free from aging, suffering and death.

THE PRAYER: My Lord, thank You for giving us eternal life by Your sacrifice on the cross. Transform this Christmas by reassuring me that when You return You'll make me new to live with You forever. Amen.

A PEACEFUL NEW YEAR
New Year's Eve, Saturday, December 31, 2011

John 14:23-27.

TEXT: ... and His Name shall be called ... Prince of Peace. (Isaiah 9:6b)

The Seventh Day of Christmas always falls on December 31: New Year's Eve. It's a good time to look back on the year now closing. In 2011 we saw powerful tornado outbreaks, wildfires, droughts and the devastating earthquake and tsunami in Japan. The world-wide economy is still shaky and you can add your own personal struggles. 2011 was anything but a peaceful year.

Do you have any hope that 2012 will be better? It all depends where you pin your confidence. If you are relying on an economic recovery or favorable results in the 2012 elections you'll never find lasting peace. You won't find it in perfect health or relationships either.

As it turns out, the secret for finding peace in troubled times is the same as finding joy in the hectic weeks before Christmas. Our only hope is the Son of God born in Bethlehem. He removed all the powers that disturb our peace with God. By His life, suffering, death and resurrection, the Prince of Peace removed our sins, satisfied God's wrath, took away our guilt and closed the doors of hell, while opening wide the gates of heaven.

Through the Baby of Bethlehem you can enter this New Year with hope, confidence, joy and peace. Because no matter what will happen in the next 12 months, God's Son will be at your side to see you through every struggle, problem and crisis. And when the Last Day comes, whether it falls in 2012 or 5012, our Savior will return to gather all believers into His Kingdom where we will enjoy His perfect peace forever.

THE PRAYER: Almighty Son of God, thank You for winning our peace by Your life, death and resurrection. Give me Your peace throughout this New Year that I may share Your salvation story with the world. Amen.

WHAT KIND OF KING?

6th Day of Christmas, Friday, December 30, 2011

Read John 13:31-35.

TEXT: ... and His Name shall be called ... Everlasting Father (Isaiah 9:6b)

In these 12 days of Christmas we are looking at the Names God gave to describe what kind of a King His Son, the Baby of Bethlehem would be as He ruled over His father David's kingdom. Today we consider the name "Everlasting Father."

Our world has seen all kinds of kings: tyrants, dictators, warriors and politicians, but the Baby of Bethlehem will rule as a father. He won't be a self-centered ruler dedicated only to increasing His own fame and glory. He will dedicate His rule to the benefit of His subjects. Like a good father the Son of God will train, guard and provide for His people in wisdom and faithfulness.

I hope you had that kind of a father growing up: a good, kind and gentle man. But if not you can take comfort that the Son of God is and always will be that kind of a king and father for you. All earthly fathers have one major drawback: no matter how good or bad they are, they are all mortal. My own father died 19 years ago. So many times I've longed to hear his advice and encouragement as I've struggled to be a good husband, father and pastor.

Isaiah reminds us this Savior rules as an everlasting father. This father won't grow old and weak; He won't suffer from senility. God's Son will indeed die on the cross, but He will rise again on the third day to be our ever-present help in all times of trouble.

THE PRAYER: Everlasting Savior, I thank You for being a father to all of us who believe in You. Continue to guide, encourage, provide, guard and correct us as we go through this life into the next, that we may praise You in joy forever. Amen.

TIME IS TICKING

Wednesday, December 7, 2011

Read 2 Peter 3:8-10.

TEXT: The day of the Lord will come like a thief (2 Peter 3:10a)

We have an artificial Christmas tree now, but during most of my childhood we had freshly cut trees. There was always a risk in using cut trees. It was not just the sharp needles, but the risk of fire. We had to keep the tree watered as best we could, but week by week the needles dried out and the risk of fire grew. From the moment that tree was cut down a clock was ticking.

A clock is ticking for us as well. It started the minute we were born. We don't know how long we have, but every day, every month, every Christmas we come closer to our last hour. Like the Christmas tree's falling needles, so our gray hair, wrinkles and aches and pains are persistent reminders for us.

But the clock is ticking on our human race too. God has set a day when His Son will return and this present world order will cease. All people who have ever lived will be raised to life and will stand before Him for judgment. Those who put their trust in Him will inherit eternal life in a new earth where time will not matter and everything will be perfect forever. Those who reject the Savior will be cut off and suffer under His wrath forever.

The clock is ticking for you and me. This may be your last Christmas, and there is always the possibility He will come before Christmas. Today is the day to set aside every earthly distraction and listen to His offer of forgiveness, peace and unending joy.

THE PRAYER: Mighty Savior, remind me that my time on this earth is short, as is the time that remains before You return. Turn my mind toward eternal things, that confessing my failings I may receive Your forgiveness and eternal life. Amen.

BROKEN PRESENTS
Thursday, December 8, 2011

Read 2 Peter 3:11-14.

TEXT: Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be (2 Peter 3:11a)

When I was a child the mystery of Christmas revolved around one thing: what presents am I going to get this year? When I look back I have to laugh because only one of those toys and games is left: my little, yellow, metal bulldozer. Everything else has been lost, broken or trashed.

There is an old saying, “The only difference between men and boys is the price of their toys.” And it rings true when we look at how much work, time and effort we put into getting our dream house, car, RV or boat. But how long do they really last?

This year thousands of people lost everything they owned to fires, floods, tornados, earthquakes and hurricanes. If God spares us these natural disasters, we will lose all our possessions anyway. They will wear out, we will die or God’s Son will return and consume them with fire. That’s why Peter asks, “What sort of people should we be?”

The answer is found in the manger at Christmas—the real mystery of Christmas. Our Savior became one of us so He could repair our broken relationship with God our Father. He lived a perfect life to make up for our rebellious life. And He took the punishment we deserve for our disobedience and suffered in our place on the cross.

As you look back to past Christmas presents or forward to this year’s Christmas presents, remember they won’t last. The only thing that will last is your relationship with your God, and with those who trust in His dear Son.

THE PRAYER: Son of God, I know my earthly possessions will not last, so please shift my focus to the things that will: my relationships with You and with those who will share eternal life with me. Amen.

INCREDIBLE POWER
5th Day of Christmas, Thursday, December 29, 2011

Read Matthew 8:23-27.

TEXT: ...and His Name shall be called ... Mighty God (Isaiah 9:6b)

Last June tow truck driver Pedro Arzola was working under a 1990 Cadillac Seville when the car lurched forward. The front right tire ran over his torso and dragged him about 10 feet before he was finally pinned under the rear tire. He yelled to his wife to help him. Even when she was joined by two strangers they were unable to lift the car.

That’s when Danous Estenor, an offensive lineman for the USF football team walked by. Hearing the screams he joined them but was also unable to budge the car at first. Then he backed up, felt energy come into him and tried again. This time he was able to lift the 3,500 pound car and save Arzola’s life.

At one point or another in our life we will all face troubles larger than we are, situations from which we can’t save ourselves. We will experience that helplessness when our last hour on earth comes. No one on earth will be able to save us—no doctor, lawyer, celebrity—not even a football player.

Isaiah wrote, “To us a Son is given ... and His Name shall be called Mighty God.” No situation we face is too difficult for the Baby of Bethlehem. The devil and all his fellow fallen angels tried every trick in the book but were unable to overpower Him. Even as He was dying on the cross the mighty Son of God was able to crush the devil’s head while paying for our sins. By His resurrection He has defeated death and opened for us the doors of heaven.

THE PRAYER: Savior of the world, thank You for Your great might. You have crushed all my enemies and promise to be at my side always. Protect me through this life and bring me to heaven when You return. Amen.

NO COUNSELORS NEEDED
4th Day of Christmas, Wednesday, December 28, 2011

Read Matthew 13:53-58.

TEXT: ... and His Name shall be called ... Counselor (Isaiah 9:6b)

Would you invest money in the stock market without asking advice first? Perhaps, if you were a broker, but most of us aren't. Would you construct an addition to your house without first consulting an architect or an engineer? If you want to avoid a lot of headaches, it is wise to seek the advice of trustworthy counselors.

Wise leaders do that too. Presidents have their cabinet; kings have their counselors. In fact the wise men who followed the Christmas star were just such advisors. Having studied a wide range of subjects their kings counted on them to give expert advice whenever they needed it. Even the wisest kings like Solomon needed their advisors.

But the Child of Christmas is different. The all-knowing Son of God has no need for counselors. In fact, instead of surrounding Himself with wise, educated men to give Him advice, He will surround Himself with simple, unschooled men and be their Counselor. Our perfect Counselor is incapable of giving bad advice. He knows you better than you know yourself and He has the answers to any financial, health, relationship or other problem you will ever face.

But, more importantly, your Savior knows your greatest problem is your sin, which stirs up God's wrath against you. Knowing the only way to resolve that hostility was to take our guilt upon Himself, He willingly died in our place on the cross. He completely satisfied all of God's righteous requirements so that we can enter heaven forever. Furthermore, He stands ready to help and advise us through every other difficult circumstance we will ever face.

THE PRAYER: Savior, thank You for Your wisdom, grace and love. Forgive my sins and guide me all the days of this life as You bring me to my eternal home. Amen.

THE CHRISTMAS LIST
Friday, December 9, 2011

Read Mark 1:1-5.

TEXT: ... "Prepare the way of the Lord, make His paths straight."
(Mark 1:3b)

"He's making a list, and checking it twice, gonna find out who's naughty and nice ..."

Those can be terrifying words to a young boy. My whole Christmas depended on how I acted. If I slipped up just once I risked finding a lump of coal rather than the great presents I was looking forward to.

What would you think if I told you someone really is making a list? But the consequences of being on this "naughty" list are a lot worse than finding a lump of coal in your stocking. Being on Christ's naughty list means eternal punishment and unending suffering. Do you think that's bad? It gets worse.

When God's Son returns to judge all people, He will not overlook a single time we have slipped or stumbled. If we want to be sure we'll end up on the "nice" list, we have to be totally perfect every moment of every day of our lives. Do you think God's standards aren't fair? Too bad! That won't change God's mind or get you off His naughty list. Only one thing can do that, and that's what Christmas is really all about.

God sent His only Son to earn *your* spot on the nice list. He obeyed God's Law perfectly every day of His life. When you trust in Him He credits His perfect life to you, landing you squarely on the nice list. And then He took our place on the naughty list, suffering on the cross to satisfy God's wrath against our sins. Because of your Savior, you can be confident you will inherit eternal life and all the wonderful gifts God's Son has earned for you.

THE PRAYER: Savior, thank You for coming down at Christmas to provide the way for me to inherit eternal life. Receive my joyous thanks now and forever. Amen.

EMPTY FLUFF
Saturday, December 10, 2011

Read Mark 1:6-8.

TEXT: ... “After me comes He who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie.” (Mark 1:7b)

When I was a kid I liked going to see the mall decorations. They always had huge trees with gigantic ornaments and monstrous presents that were perfectly wrapped in the shiniest paper. I always wished they were sitting under our Christmas tree. But then one day mom shattered my dreams by telling me they were just empty boxes wrapped up in fancy paper.

On the other hand, when we went to grandma’s house on Christmas day, our unmarried uncle Hans always had presents for us under the tree. But they weren’t wrapped in fancy paper; he wrapped them in newspaper. On the outside they couldn’t compare to the mall’s presents, but on the inside uncle Hans’ presents were always the most cool, wonderful toys and games five boys could ever ask for.

This world offers so many things that look wonderful on the outside but end up being empty fluff once we tear away the wrapping. Possessions, popularity, power, riches—they look so good on the outside, but they can’t bring us lasting joy or inner peace.

But on the other side of Christmas there is a baby lying in a manger. No flash, no polish—instead it’s kind of like uncle Hans’ newspaper-wrapped presents. But take the time to open up that manger and study that child and you will find the mighty Son of God who came to earth to live, die and rise again for you. That’s a gift from God that will never disappoint.

THE PRAYER: Heavenly Father, thank You for giving us the greatest Gift of all—Your own Son. Give us a deep appreciation for all He offers us. We pray in His name. Amen.

WONDERFUL
3rd Day of Christmas, Tuesday, December 27, 2011

Read Mark 7:31-37.

TEXT: ... and His Name shall be called Wonderful (Isaiah 9:6b)

We are surrounded by wonderful things. Consider the advances medicine continues to make. In the late 1990s removing a kidney meant weeks of recovery and a 10-inch scar. In one decade improvements in robotic surgery have made it possible to remove a kidney through your belly button and be back at work in a few days. What things cause you to pause in wonder in astonishment?

Far more amazing and wonderful are the things the Baby of Bethlehem did when He grew up and began His public ministry. Without medication or surgery He restored sight to the blind and hearing to the deaf. He restored shriveled limbs and enabled lame and paralyzed people to get up and carry their mats without having to go through weeks and months of painful rehabilitation.

It is even more amazing to consider who this newborn King *is*. This baby is fully human in every way, but He is also God. Being God He can do amazing things, like stopping storms dead in their tracks simply by speaking, or strolling on the waves of the Sea of Galilee. Being God’s Son, He drives out fallen angels with a word and revives the dead.

Still more amazing, being God He can take the sins of the whole world on His strong shoulders and carry them to the cross, where He will satisfy God’s wrath against every man, woman and child who has lived or ever will live. And because He is God—when He is buried in a borrowed tomb—He will rise to life on the third day.

THE PRAYER: Savior, You are indeed a wonder. Thank You for coming down from heaven to live with us and save us from our sins. Keep me in faith until the day I can look upon You in wonder forever. Amen.

STRONG SHOULDERS

2nd Day of Christmas, Monday, December 26, 2011

Read Isaiah 9:1-2, 6-7.

TEXT: ... and the government shall be upon His shoulder ...
(Isaiah 9:6b)

Are you surprised these Christmas devotions aren't over yet? After all, you've been living and breathing Christmas since Thanksgiving, maybe even before. Christmas Day is over and it's time to put away the decorations and take down the tree, right? Well, not exactly. Remember that Christmas song, "The Twelve Days of Christmas"? Yesterday was the first day and today is the second; we have ten days more to go before Christmas is officially over.

So let's look a little closer at the Baby lying in Bethlehem's manger. Who is He? And why has He come? Hundreds of years before the Christ's birth, God showed the prophet Isaiah much about the Savior's life: His birth of a virgin (chapter 7); His message (chapters 11 and 42); and even His death and resurrection (chapter 53). For a few days we will look at one of these prophecies.

Isaiah begins, "To us a son is given." He is speaking of God giving King David a royal heir—His own Son. When he says, "the government shall be upon His shoulder" Isaiah shows us the strength of this royal Son. The weight of God's Kingdom will rest on His shoulders, and He will be strong enough to carry it—all by Himself.

None of your problems is too great for our King to handle. In Matthew 11:28 He invites us, "Come to Me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." No matter what load you carry, our Savior offers to lift it to His strong shoulder and carry it for you; you need only walk alongside Him.

THE PRAYER: My Savior and King, thank You for putting Your shoulder to my burdens—first by suffering and dying to carry away my sins, and now carrying all my earthly burdens as well. Thank You for giving me rest. Amen.

CAN WE GO BACK?

Sunday, December 11, 2011

Read Psalm 126.

TEXT: Restore our fortunes, O Lord (Psalm 126:4a)

Do you wish you could go back to your childhood Christmases and the thrill you felt spotting the first Christmas lights, smelling the Christmas cookies baking or tearing into your Christmas presents?

Our first parents Adam and Eve knew that feeling. When God created them He surrounded them with beautiful trees and abundant fruit. All of nature was in harmony. Best of all they could talk to God face to face. Life was absolutely perfect. That all ended when they ate the fruit God had forbidden. Driven from the garden they were forced to live by their sweat and hard work. How often did they think back on the glories of their garden home and wish they could go back?

Because of their sins—and ours—life is full of pain, sorrow and loss. Wouldn't it be great to go back to the garden where we wouldn't have to labor and toil, grow old and die? Actually, that's God's plan. When His Son returns on the Last Day He will renew the heavens and the earth. He will drive out all forms of sin and suffering and renew this world to make it a perfect home forever.

But like Adam and Eve we aren't fit to live in God's presence the way we are. We must be wiped clean of our disobedience and sin. But that is why God's Son came that first Christmas. He came to take our place and satisfy God's perfect justice by His own perfect life and innocent suffering and death. Through the faith He gives us He makes us holy so we can live with Him forever.

THE PRAYER: Savior, take away my sins and transform my Christmas celebration this year, so looking forward to Your return and my home with You in Paradise I may know greater joy than in my childhood Christmases. Amen.

TRAPPED IN OUR DUNGEONS
Monday, December 12, 2011

Read Isaiah 61:1-4.

TEXT: ... the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives (Isaiah 61:1b)

December can get pretty gloomy. The sun sets earlier each day and the darkness stretches longer every night. All that darkness can play with our minds, giving us a depressed, hopeless feeling like we are locked in a dungeon.

The problems we experience in our lives can do the same. Many of us live from paycheck to paycheck and having to figure out how to add Christmas presents and a trip back home without sinking the ship is no small feat. Maybe you face a marriage or close friendship that is on the rocks and know that anything you say can and will be used against you. Perhaps your health problems are getting worse without any end in sight. Maybe you struggle against a guilty conscience that won't let you rest. Or maybe you are drowning in grief from a loved one's death.

That's the amazing thing about Christmas; God's Son didn't run away from our problems. He was willing to dive right into the darkness of our world. He healed the sick, fed the hungry and showed His power over demons, storms and death itself.

Though totally innocent He allowed Himself to be arrested, put in chains and condemned to death on a cross for us. Being sinless, He took all our sins upon Himself and suffered the punishment we deserve. By His death our Savior demolished the dungeon of sin and by His glorious resurrection He threw the doors wide open. He comes to us today to shine His light and guide us into His perfect freedom and peace.

THE PRAYER: Son of God, thank You for coming to share our life in this dark world and setting us free by Your life, death and resurrection. Forgive my sins and break the chains that hold me down this Christmas so that I may celebrate with joy and freedom. Amen.

FACE TO FACE
Christmas Day, Sunday, December 25, 2011

Read John 1:1-14.

TEXT: And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen His glory (John 1:14a)

One of the greatest things about Christmas is getting together with family and friends. How wonderful to actually see them face to face, instead of only hearing their voice on the phone, seeing them on Skype or reading their words in an e-mail.

That's what made the first Christmas so special. For the first time, people could look into God's eyes and see Him face to face. And it wasn't the terrifying face of a powerful and angry God they saw. Rather, it was the face of a tiny, newborn Baby. This chubby face will one day be the face of a man, and it will show His great compassion for the sick and needy, comfort for the grieving and concern for the lost.

These tiny fingers that curl around the fingers of Mary and Joseph will later touch the blind and the deaf and heal them. They will stretch out to take a dead girl by the hand and raise her to life again. These little hands will be stretched out and pierced with nails to pay the full price for all our sins. And finally they will be pried off of a cross and laid in a tomb.

Three days later those lifeless hands will move once more, as the Lord rises from the dead. That night and in the coming days He will hold them out to show His followers the nail marks that prove it is Him—risen and alive forever! One day we will stand before Him face to face, looking into His eyes, and touching His glorious, nail-scarred hands.

THE PRAYER: Son of God, thank You for taking Your place as a man among us, and laying down Your life to save us. Fill us with joy as we wait for the day when we too will see you face to face. Amen.

EVERYTHING READY?
Christmas Eve, Saturday, December 24, 2011

Read Luke 2:6-20.

TEXT: And she gave birth to her firstborn Son and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths and laid Him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. (Luke 2:7)

Ready or not, here it is! Christmas has come. But what if you don't have every string of tinsel hung, every light glowing, every candle in place, every gift wrapped and under the tree, every card mailed, every cookie baked, and every place set at the table? Then you are in good company; Mary and Joseph didn't have everything together when the first Christmas came either.

When the time came for God's Son to be born they weren't in their home in Nazareth, they were far away in the little town of Bethlehem. They weren't snuggled in a warm, dry room, but in a shelter for animals. They couldn't lay their newborn in a nice crib; they only had a feeding trough. But even in the chaos of the first Christmas, God was working out His perfect plan.

This may not be your perfect Christmas, but remember Christmas isn't all about presents, decorations, dinners and parties. Christmas is all about the Christ Child, and remembering why He came into our world. He came to make you ready for His final return to judge all people by taking away your sins so you can stand tall on that great day. If you remember that He has conquered death and every other enemy that stands in your way, then you are ready for Christmas.

So relax, rejoice and enjoy this Christmas; all the preparations are complete. God has done it all through His Son, the Babe of Bethlehem.

THE PRAYER: Heavenly Father, thank You for this holy night in which our Savior was born. Strengthen my faith in Him now and always, that I may live with You forever when He returns. In His Name. Amen.

SHOP TILL THEY DROP
Tuesday, December 13, 2011

Read Isaiah 61:8-11.

TEXT: I will greatly rejoice in the Lord (Isaiah 61:10a)

I guess it's about time to start my Christmas shopping; I can't tell you how much I'm looking forward to getting cut off from my parking spot at the last second or getting bumped aside by mobs of rude shoppers searching for the perfect gift!

It's strange that people show such impatience and selfishness during the season we celebrate the humble birth of God's Son. God didn't force the innkeeper to throw guests out to make room for His Son to be born. He meekly accepted whatever shelter was left, even if that meant His Son had to share a space with animals. God the Father didn't demand the nicest cradle for His Son, but was content for Him to be laid in a manger—a crude feeding trough.

The sad fact is that often we have to be numbered with the rude and the selfish. We are impatient, aggressive and impulsive. We push and shove and trample anyone who stands in our way. We excuse ourselves by pointing at those who step on our toes, or we claim there will be nothing left for us unless we push and claw to get the things we want and need. But no matter what anyone else has done, we have to answer to God for every thought, word or deed we do.

Thankfully, God's Son came to exchange His perfect life for our less-than-perfect life. He paid for our disobedient, self-centered life by laying down His own on the cross. For His sake our guilt is taken away and His perfection is given to us.

THE PRAYER: Savior, thank You for the meek and humble way You lived Your life—always putting others before Yourself—even to the point of dying on the cross for us. Give me patience and joy so that in small ways I may make this season less stressful for others. Amen.

**WILL IT BE A MERRY CHRISTMAS?
Wednesday, December 14, 2011**

Read 1 Thessalonians 5:16-22.

TEXT: Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18a)

Would you like to get to the end of Christmas Day in 11 days and be able to honestly say you had a merry Christmas this year? What about if you stayed up all night Christmas Eve putting toys together? What about if you know you'll have to wait in line on the 26th to exchange half the presents you got? What about if *you know who* ends up being a total pain at Christmas dinner? Would you still like to say you had a merry Christmas?

We will never have the merry Christmas God wants us to enjoy if we base our happiness on having perfect circumstances. He must raise us up above our circumstances and teach us to base our Christmas joy on His Son's birth, no matter what circumstances surround us on December 25.

That's why we have to take time to stop and go back to the first Christmas. God's Son was born into this imperfect world to share our difficult and painful circumstances. Even the circumstances of His birth were pitiful, lying in a feeding trough in an animal shelter. Throughout His life He was misunderstood, mistreated, oppressed, mocked and ridiculed. He even ended up being nailed to a cross.

Terrible circumstances indeed, but by His sacrifice and death He restored our broken relationship with God our Father and made it possible for us to share eternal life in a perfect world. When we base our Christmas joy on the Christ Child's life, death and resurrection—along with His promise to return and take us to our eternal home—then we'll find joy—not just this Christmas, but every day forever!

THE PRAYER: Son of God, thank You for coming into this world to restore us to our Heavenly Father. Focus our minds on You that we may rejoice no matter what circumstances we encounter. In Your Name we pray. Amen.

**DETAILS, DETAILS
Friday, December 23, 2011**

Read Luke 2:1-5.

TEXT: In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus (Luke 2:1a)

Are you a perfectionist? Do you lose sleep because of that one burned out light bulb on your roof? Are you horrified at the bare spot on your Christmas tree? Do you think God is a perfectionist like that?

Consider the first Christmas. Mary's pregnancy was progressing nicely. Joseph had been ready to divorce her when he first discovered she was pregnant, but God the Father sent an angel in a dream who told him Mary was pregnant by the power of the Holy Spirit (see Matthew 1:18-25). With Joseph at Mary's side, everything was falling into place to welcome God's Son into the world, except for one tiny little detail.

Through the prophet Micah God had promised His Son would be born in David's hometown of Bethlehem. Mary was 80 miles away in Nazareth. If God the Father had overlooked this small detail our Savior's birthplace would have been Nazareth and Micah's prophecy would have proven false. But God is the ultimate perfectionist, so He worked through the Roman Emperor to get Joseph and Mary down to Bethlehem to fulfill Micah's promise.

Did you notice I called God the ultimate perfectionist? God is absolutely perfect and He demands absolute perfection of us. He can't ignore any sin, no matter how small it may appear to us. Thankfully, God is also a God of love, grace and mercy. Our Father sent His Son to live the perfect life we can't live—and credits His perfection to us. And He laid every one of our sins on His Son so that He could suffer and die in our place. Because of His life, death and resurrection, we are free to live with Him in heaven forever.

PRAYER: Son of God, thank You for fulfilling all Your Father's righteous demands for me. You are the source of my peace this Christmas, and always. Amen.

IT'S IMPOSSIBLE!
Thursday, December 22, 2011

Read Luke 1:34-38.

TEXT: And Mary said to the angel, “How will this be, since I am a virgin?” (Luke 1:34)

“It’s impossible!” Is that thought echoing through your mind with just 72 hours left and all your Christmas preparations staring you in the face? Or is it your reaction to someone’s well intended “Merry Christmas!” greeting? How can it possibly be merry knowing when the sun comes up December 26 you’ll still be facing the problems and struggles you’re facing today?

Mary had her own “it’s impossible” to deal with. How was she to become pregnant with God’s Son if she and her betrothed husband Joseph had not yet come together? The angel reassured her nothing is impossible with God. There was no human father? That’s not a problem for God. The Creator Spirit who hovered over the earth throughout creation will come to hover over Mary, to overshadow her. By His almighty power God’s Son will be conceived within her. He will not come from a human father. His only Father will be God, the Father Himself.

It was necessary and it was perfect. If Mary and Joseph had conceived this child, he would have inherited their sinful nature the same way we inherit our parent’s sinful nature. Being conceived of a virgin without a human father, the Savior’s sinless conception replaces our sinful conception. His holy childhood replaces our rebellious childhood; His spotless life replaces our life filled with selfish thoughts, piercing words and harmful actions.

You may well be facing impossible tasks today. If so, look to God the Father, whose Son lived, died and rose to life again to save you from your sins. Trust your problems to His all-powerful hands and enjoy His peace this Christmas.

THE PRAYER: Heavenly Father, I’m easily overwhelmed by the impossible problems I face. Take them into Your almighty hands and fill me with joy at Your Son’s birth. In His Name. Amen.

WHY A VIRGIN’S SON?
Thursday, December 15, 2011

Read 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24.

TEXT: He who calls you is faithful; He will surely do it. (1 Thessalonians 5:24)

Are you getting tired of Christmas already? Stores put their Christmas displays up in September and they’ve been piping in Christmas music since Thanksgiving—maybe before! It’s tempting to think that in just ten more days you won’t have to hear the same old songs over and over. That’s too bad because an important theme pops up in a lot of Christmas songs—the virgin mother and her baby.

Did you ever stop and wonder why God’s Son would need to be born of a virgin? You could certainly say He already has a Father—God Almighty—so He doesn’t need a human father. But there’s another important reason.

When Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit they changed completely. They became self-centered and evil and passed their poisonous nature to each of their children at conception. Each generation of mothers and fathers continues passing this sinful, selfish nature on to their children.

Since God’s Son had to be perfect and spotless to save us, the Son of God was conceived and born of the virgin Mary without a human father. Since He was a perfect, faultless human, that Son could take our place and suffer His Father’s punishment on the cross for all our sins.

So even if you’re getting tired of hearing the same old Christmas songs over and over, keep your ears open for the message of the virgin—and her Son—who came to save us from all our sins.

THE PRAYER: Heavenly Father, thank You for sending Your Son to be born of a virgin so He could be our Savior. Deepen my understanding and appreciation of His conception, birth, life, death and resurrection so that I might rejoice this Christmas and always. In my Savior’s Name I pray. Amen.

**WHAT ARE YOU LOOKING AT?
Friday, December 16, 2011**

Read John 1:6-8.

TEXT: There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ... He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light. (John 1:6, 8)

Have you ever taken a close look at a manger scene? There are a bunch of figures all gathered together: Mary and Joseph, the shepherds and the wise men, perhaps even some sheep, camels and a donkey. Usually they aren't placed in little groups talking among themselves. Instead, they're focused on that Baby whose birth brought them all together in that place.

What if you were one of the characters in that manger scene this Christmas? Would you be focused on the Christ Child like the others, or would your attention be somewhere else? Would you be gazing out to the side, staring at the Christmas tree and all the presents lying under it? Would you be scanning the kitchen and dining room thinking about Christmas dinner? Would you be staring into the family room where friends are gathered for a Christmas party?

All those things are great parts of Christmas, but only one thing belongs in the center as the focus of our Christmas celebrations. That is God's Son, born on Christmas day. The mighty God became one of us and came into our world to share our life, to suffer and die in our place, and to rise to life again to guarantee our eternal future.

His birth brings joy, hope, comfort and peace to all our Christmas celebrations. He is always with us to provide our needs and protect us from all harm until the Last Day when He will come in glory to bring us to our everlasting home.

THE PRAYER: Son of God, Christmas holds so many distractions. Please focus my mind and heart on Your birth so every part of my Christmas celebration will be more meaningful. Amen.

**TIME TO GO TO WORK
Wednesday, December 21, 2011**

Read Luke 1:26-33.

TEXT: ... you will conceive in your womb and bear a Son (Luke 1:31b)

Wasn't it great to be a kid at Christmas? You didn't have to do anything. You could just sit back, watch mom and dad do their part and wait for Christmas day to come! Until I grew up, I never realized all the hard work mom and dad put in to making Christmas so great, especially for five boys who deserved lumps of coal in their stockings!

That's just like God our Father. He put a lot of thought and effort into the first Christmas. He first announced it the day Adam and Eve disobeyed Him (see Genesis 3:15). In the following centuries He made many promises about how His Son would become one of us and suffer and die to save us from our sins.

Finally it came time for God to set His plans into motion. First, He had to choose a human mother for His Son. He could have chosen any of David's descendents, but He chose a girl from a little town called Nazareth. He sent the angel Gabriel to tell her the good news.

Mary was completely amazed. Like every one of us, she was an undeserving sinner. Yet God forgave her sins for the sake of His Son and chose her to be that Son's human mother. No child sitting in front of a Christmas tree ever felt the excitement Mary felt knowing the mighty Son of God was growing in her womb. This was the Child who would reign from King David's throne forever.

THE PRAYER: Heavenly Father, thank You for all You did for me through Your Son. Help me celebrate Your incomparable love this Christmas and always. In His Name. Amen.

CHRISTMAS MYSTERIES
Tuesday, December 20, 2011

Read Romans 16:25-27.

TEXT: ... the mystery that was kept secret for long ages has now been disclosed (Romans 16:25b-26a)

Over our lifetime Christmas is a series of ever-changing mysteries. Our childhood mystery “What’s inside the wrapping paper?” becomes “Where did they hide the presents?” becomes “Is this Christmas the right time to give her an engagement ring?” becomes “How will we be able to afford presents for the kids?” becomes “What can I buy someone who already has everything?”

Is there any Christmas mystery left for you? Is there anything about the season that makes you smile in wonder? Does anything still thrill you and send a shiver down your spine?

There is a mystery—a mystery greater and more wonderful than all the others combined. And that mystery isn’t wrapped in colorful paper; it’s wrapped in swaddling clothes. It isn’t laid under the tree; it’s laid to sleep in a manger. It’s the Baby born in Bethlehem.

What’s so mysterious about that? It’s the fact that this Baby is the almighty Son of God, stooping down to become one of His creatures: a mere human. Why would He want to expose Himself to all the hurt and suffering in our crazy world? Why would God be willing to become our substitute and earn our way to heaven by His perfect life, and to suffer and die in our place on the cross?

That is the greatest mystery, a mystery God has revealed to the world. It sends a shiver down your spine to ponder what kind of love moved Him to do all of this for you.

THE PRAYER: Son of God, Your willingness to be born of a virgin, to share our life and to be our Substitute is an incredible mystery to me. Fill me with wonder, joy and gratitude for Your amazing grace and love. Amen.

APPEARANCES ARE DECEIVING
Saturday, December 17, 2011

Read John 1:19-28.

TEXT: ... “Make straight the way of the Lord” (John 1:23b)

It’s easy to pass by the manger scene without giving it any thought. All we see is a small human baby lying in a manger. But this Baby is the mighty God who created all the heavens and the earth. His mother feeds Him and changes His diapers, but He provides food for all His creatures and holds all the stars in place. His foster-father Joseph guards His life, but He commands the wind and the waves.

As this small Baby grows to manhood this same wonder continues. He who formed the mountains and valleys learns to be a carpenter in Joseph’s shop. He, who spread out the galaxies in the universe, walks from place to place teaching and proclaiming God’s Kingdom to all. He, who commands all the forces of nature, surrenders Himself to be arrested, beaten, whipped and nailed to a cross. And it is through His bitter suffering and death He wins our pardon, forgiveness and peace.

Why did He do it all? Why did He set aside His majesty, glory and power and come to live in our world? He did it because of His intense dedication to His Father, who loved the world so much He gave His only-begotten Son to save us, and because of His own undying love for you and for all people.

Our Savior still comes to us in the same quiet, mysterious way today. He invites you to His Church this weekend where you will hear His ancient Word and learn more about Him who gave His all for you. There He will prepare you to celebrate His birth with a profound joy, peace and hope next weekend.

THE PRAYER: Son of God, Your birth is a profound mystery: God became human to live with us. Open my mind to hear Your Word of salvation and to believe You are God’s Son, my only Savior. Amen.

PROMISES, PROMISES
Sunday, December 18, 2011

Read Psalm 89:1-5, 19-29.

TEXT: I will establish your offspring forever, and build your throne for all generations. (Psalm 89:4)

One week to go. Will you have everything ready for Christmas? At Thanksgiving we always have great Christmas plans, but as December unfolds we often find we can't follow through. It's like the year I promised our son we would cover the roof with lights. That Thanksgiving we were hit with an ice storm. That was followed by an unusual cold spell that kept the ice around our house right up to Christmas. So much for my promise.

We make all kinds of good plans and promises and fully intend to keep them. But many times we end up failing. Sometimes we don't think things through well enough or we run into obstacles beyond our control. Other times we just end up being too lazy to see them through. Thankfully, God's promises never fail like ours. Standing high above all He has created, nothing can prevent Him from doing whatever He wants.

In fact, Christmas was His answer to a promise He had made long, long before. God promised Adam and Eve that one of their descendants would crush the head of the serpent that had tempted them to disobey God's Word. Later He promised King David that one of his descendents would sit on his throne and rule as King forever and ever.

When the time was right God kept His promises to Adam and Eve and David. His own eternal Son was conceived of the virgin Mary and was born in Bethlehem. He suffered and died for our sins, then rose again to rule as our King. It is His Kingdom which we will see with our own eyes when He returns on Judgment Day and reigns with us forever.

THE PRAYER: Lord God, thank You for being faithful and keeping all Your promises. Strengthen my confidence and trust in Your Son, my Savior. I pray this in His Name. Amen.

UNCHANGABLE PLANS
Monday, December 19, 2011

Read 2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16.

TEXT: ... the Lord will make you a house. (2 Samuel 7:11b)

Isn't it a nice feeling to be sitting here on the Monday before Christmas knowing you've snagged one of this year's "hot" gifts that no one else can find? It's the present your daughter has begged and prayed and pleaded for since September. You have it wrapped and ready. You can just imagine how thrilled she will be when she opens it. The only problem was her comment to you this morning. "You know that video game I wanted, Dad? I don't want that anymore. Instead, I want ___."

Sometimes life changes that quickly too. Things we thought were dependable and reliable suddenly collapse: the economy, our job security, our retirement savings, our health, our marriage. No matter how hard we try we can't secure our life or our future. In the end we will die and all our plans will crumble into dust.

That's when the true meaning of Christmas comes clear. At Christmas, God stepped into our shaky lives and said, "Don't worry about trying to secure your future. I've got it covered." Since Adam and Eve's disobedience to God's command is the root cause of all the devastating things that happen in our world, God made a plan to undo that damage and make our future completely secure.

And so the Christ Child was born. He has built us a solid and secure future by His perfect life, innocent suffering and death and His glorious resurrection. Christ will come again on Judgment Day to remove all the things that cause chaos in our world, and we will live with Him in perfect joy and bliss forever.

THE PRAYER: Savior of the world, thank You for stepping into our quickly changing lives and revealing Your good and unchangeable plans for us, especially Your plan to bring us into Your unshakable Kingdom. Amen.