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5 Lessons for Advent

Student Guide

by James Evans

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Acacia Resources

The biblical witness singles out acacia wood for its uniqueness. The only wood mentioned in the building of the ark of the covenant, the tabernacle and the altar is acacia. Acacia wood is listed with other precious objects—gold, silver, fragrant incense, onyx stones—given to honor God.

The name *acacia* symbolically ties BCE's curriculum initiative to our biblical heritage. The acacia tree represents the wise value attached to the family, the diversity within families and the durability demanded for growing healthy Christians, whether they are singles, couples with children or senior adults.

Today's acacia tree is known for its ...



Value

Some acacia trees have fragrant flowers used in making perfume. The seeds are edible. The bark is rich in tannin, a substance used in tanning, dyes, inks and pharmaceuticals. Furniture, cars, tools and gunstocks are made of the hard lumber from the acacia tree.

Diversity

Some 1,200 species of acacia trees and shrubs exist throughout much of the world, including Africa, Australia and North America.

Durability

The acacia species is tough enough to survive the semiarid regions of Africa where its roots sink deep to capture the rare water which runs quickly into the soil.

Acacia Resources will guide Christians and draw them godward, as the ark of acacia wood guided the people of Israel in their journey and represented the presence of God in their midst.

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Hoping Against Hope

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'Tis The Season

Healthcare professionals term it “seasonal depression.” Every year during the holiday season stretching from Thanksgiving to New Year’s, thousands of people report having feelings of despair, loneliness and hopelessness.

Some experts say the feelings are a physiological response to the shortening of the days. Longer periods of time in artificial light contribute to feelings of depression and low energy. But it may not be artificial light that is the problem. The problem may be that we have too much darkness on the inside of our lives.

The holiday season is presented to us in glimmering images of family joy and festive celebration. We are reminded at every turn that this is the season to be jolly. There is a subtle suggestion underlying the marketing surrounding the season that Christmas, just by showing up on the calendar, should automatically make us happy and joyful.

But for many people, the season alone does not deliver the gaiety it hypes. Family unity, paraded across television screens as America’s norm, does not match the family terror in which many men, women and children face everyday, including Christmas Day.

The shameless and conspicuous messages to consumers to spend, spend and spend some more, stands in stark and cruel contrast to the desperate poverty many families live with every day, including Christmas Day.

The sumptuous feasts and warm homes that decorate the covers of magazines during the holiday season mocks the homelessness and hunger much of our world lives with every day, including Christmas Day.

Even the spiritual promise of Christmas, the promise of “peace on earth among those whom he favors,” seems empty and false in the face of urban and suburban violence.

It’s no wonder that for many people feelings of hopelessness and despair increase during the Christmas season. The reality of life so often does not match the ideal of our contrived, commercialized Christmas.

Occasionally, the despair and darkness become too much to bear. As men and women seek relief from their pain and answers to the insoluble questions of life, invariably they resort to unhealthy ways of dealing with their circumstances. The suicide rate increases dramatically each year as Christmas Day approaches. Incidents of spouse and child abuse also increase, as do drug and alcohol-related crimes.

So what are we to do? Should we give up celebrating Christmas because it promotes depression? Are we wrong to associate the Christmas story with hope? Are we wrong to make the season a time of worship and celebration? If the message of Jesus coming into the world does not deliver the hope it promises, why should we continue to celebrate it?

Many churches, as well as families, have found the celebration of Advent a helpful way to fill the season with meaning. Beginning four weeks before Christmas, the celebration marks the time approaching Christmas Day with a reminder of how the gift of God in Jesus Christ came into the world.

The promises of the prophets are read and remembered. The awe and wonder felt by the witnesses of Jesus’ birth are studied and appreciated. The worship celebration associated with his birth is taught as the proper response for people of faith to the gift of God.

The purpose of Advent is to connect our need for hope with the longing of the Israelite people who waited so long for their Messiah to appear. They were waiting for hope, and with hope. We are in much the same place. We hope against hope that as we meet the Christ who is God’s gift, hope will dawn in our lives and in our world.

Luke 1:46-55

The Bible provides ample witness to the harsh realities of a world filled with inequities and difficulties. A persistent message throughout the Scriptures is that God is not pleased when people are crushed under heavy burdens of oppression, injustice and despair. A recurring promise is that God will vindicate the lowly and give them hope. This hope is given profound, poetic expression in Mary’s beautiful song known as the Magnificat (Lk 1:46-55).

In the narrative preceding the song, Mary encountered the angel Gabriel who told her she would be the mother of the promised Messiah. Gabriel also told Mary her cousin Elizabeth was pregnant. Both of these were unlikely and surprising pregnancies. Mary was unmarried, and Elizabeth was past childbearing age.

The Scriptures report several instances of amazing births. We think immediately of Sarah and Hannah. Both of these women were characterized as “barren.” In each of the scriptural instances of barrenness, God used the situation to demonstrate God’s ability to bring life out of death. Giving a child to a woman who was barren served as a powerful image of life-giving hope.

Of course, Mary was not barren, but she was unmarried. The principle remains the same. The life coming to bring hope and light into the world would be a gift from God.

To confirm what she had heard about Elizabeth, Mary went to see her cousin. As soon as she came into Elizabeth’s presence, the child in Elizabeth’s womb leaped. Elizabeth interpreted her baby’s reaction as a sign from God. She blessed Mary and the child she was to bear as the “fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord” (Lk 1:45).

At this point, Mary burst into song. The tenor of the song is reminiscent of Hannah’s (1 Sam 2:1-9). Mary’s song reflected her station in life. She praised God for looking with favor on “the lowliness of his servant” (v. 48).

The main thrust of the song praised God for what the coming Messiah would accomplish for all people. Luke, through Mary, gives eloquent expression to what scholars have called the “great reversal.” Those people on the top, economically and politically, will be thrown down. Those people on the bottom, the oppressed and the poor, will be exalted. God favors the downtrodden with mercy (vv. 52-54).

Mary’s song serves as a subtle warning to those who seek power and privilege as a way of life. On the surface, the accumulation of wealth and status seems to provide a hedge against the uncertainties of life. Money equals power, and power equals safety.

But the security created by wealth is an illusion, as Mary’s song asserts. Those who seek insulation from life’s difficulties by way of wealth and elite-living will find themselves completely overthrown. They end up not only insulating themselves from the uncertainties of life but from God as well.

This is perhaps an additional, subtle warning to those who have great possessions. Trying to insulate ourselves from danger often means isolating ourselves from the poor and needy around us. If we try to maintain our place of safety while doing nothing to relieve those who

struggle in our midst, we are guilty of keeping our wealth at the expense of the needs of the poor and powerless.

The main part of the message is addressed directly to those most likely to feel oppressed. God overthrows the mighty and exalts the lowly. Those who have lived trapped at the bottom will find themselves in places of comfort and abundance. This was and is a message of great hope.

Romans 8:24-25

There is some truth to the claim that the great reversal heralded by Mary and others has not taken place. It may be possible to point to individual situations and certain political and economic improvements and say it is happening, or beginning to appear.

But the words are primarily a vehicle of hope. They are intended to sustain us through time and in all the painful disappointments we experience.

Paul said, “Hope that is seen is not hope” (Rom 8:24). In other words, if we get too much into the practical and functional side of fixing what is broken, we may be tempted to stop believing in the ultimate fulfillment of Mary’s song. Settling for temporal gains, we give up on a comprehensive vision that brings hope to all people.

Paul concluded, “If we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.” The word “patience” here literally means “to bear up under.” The hope instilled in us by the gift of Christ does not bring hope by eliminating life’s pain. Jesus’ gift of hope allows us to “bear up under” pain or disappointment. Hope keeps us going, keeps us from giving in to despair.

Putting Hope to the Test

All of this sounds wonderful, but does it work? Is it real? Can we really expect our faith in Jesus to create in us a hope that will allow us to face the difficulties of life?

My friend Charles is a missionary. A few years ago, his wife Betty developed Alzheimer’s disease. In her early fifties, she was one of the youngest people ever to have the terrible disease.

The course of the disease was rapid and tragic. Within three years of developing the first symptoms, Betty was completely bedridden. She could not feed herself or care for her personal needs. Sitters were required to stay

with her every day. And of course, as the disease progressed, she did not recognize anyone, including Charles.

Charles continued to work a full schedule. He was faithful and effective in all his duties. In the evenings, he would send the sitters home and care for his wife throughout the night himself. Even though she did not always recognize him, his presence seemed to provide a calming effect on her.

The pain in his life was evident. The fatigue showed on his face. He aged noticeably during the long ordeal.

After Betty died, Charles and his family built and furnished a prayer room in the office complex where Charles works. The prayer room was dedicated to Betty's memory. The room is used to pray for families in distress. It is also used by families in distress, families seeking peace and hope from God.

Charles turned his grief into an active part of his missionary work. He is particularly effective with families who struggle with Alzheimer's and other diseases of lost capacity. Through his own pain, he has found a deeper and more profound way to help others in pain.

Charles's faith in Christ sustained him and his family during a difficult and painful time. He found hope and purpose even in the midst of great personal loss. He uses that hope now to give hope to others.

The gift of Christmas is a gift of hope. Because Jesus is present in our lives, we can experience hope in all situations.



Peace and Peacemaking

Luke 1:78-79; John 14:25-27

Peace On Earth

While attending seminary, a friend of mine adopted an interesting habit. He began greeting everyone he saw by saying “Shalom!” He used it to say hello, and he used it to say good-bye. At first I thought he was just being trendy, using the word much like people use the word “ciao!” Eventually I asked him, “What’s up with all the ‘Shalom’ stuff?” He explained.

The word *shalom* was used as a greeting and a farewell by ancient as well as modern Hebrews. This was probably also true for early followers of Jesus. But the Hebrew usage was more than mere greeting. The word was intended as a prayer that one person offered for another as they met, or as they parted.

The word itself means *peace*. But it means peace in a wonderfully broad and expansive way. Shalom means healing, hope, wholeness, prosperity, health, as well as the absence of conflict. The prayer of shalom is for people to become whole, fully mature, at peace with God, with themselves, and with the world.

“The world needs peace,” my friend explained. “We need to experience in our lives the shalom of God—healing, hope and the absence of conflict between us. I say it as my prayer for every person I meet.”

My friend’s insight points out a harsh reality. There exists in the life of every person and in every community the need for peace. We do not have to look too far to know this is true.

The evening news is filled with sad stories of broken lives. Men and women lost in a world of prosperity, seeking but not finding meaning for their lives. Their bodies are often found in our cities’ trash heaps, the sad remnants of people in search of peace.

Our communities mirror the struggle going on in individual lives. In the South, blacks and whites clash over a flag from a war long over but not forgotten. Rich and poor tangle over schools and property taxes. People of faith struggle with other people of faith over whose prayer will be heard at the local football game. Often the political process plays on these

divisions, amplifies them, pitching neighbor against neighbor, simply to win an election.

In the wider world, the absence of peace is epidemic. Brush-fire wars burn incessantly. Unrest, poverty, oppression and injustice fuel popular and contrived revolts. Greedy and ambitious leaders, along with well-meaning enlightened ones, rally innocent citizens to give allegiance to conflicting visions of order.

Few moments in history have been more in need of peace than our present moment. We need not peace just in the sense of an end to conflict, but peace in the sense of shalom. Peace that integrates personality and character. Peace that builds faith and hope. Peace that finds a way to help fragmented individuals find wholeness before they fracture and divide communities. Peace that creates community.

The Christmas season always turns our thoughts toward peace. During times of war, there is often a Christmas cease-fire. We sing hymns about the “Prince of Peace.” The story of Jesus’ coming into the world fills us with a longing for things to be different, for peace to come. Peace is our need and our prayer. Where can we find it, and from where will it come?

Luke 1:78-79

The New Testament speaks eloquently and often to the longing for peace. In the *New Revised Standard Version*, the basic word for peace appears some 96 times in the New Testament. The Gospels feature the word 26 times with 13 of those being found in Luke, more than in the other three Gospels combined. This includes three occurrences in the birth narratives. Biblical peace is not just an absence of conflict; it is peace in the midst of conflict.

We are all familiar with the angelic announcement to the shepherds. “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace among those whom he favors!” (Lk 2:14). Also, the prophet Simeon (Lk 2:25-32) upon seeing the child Jesus announced, “Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace” (v. 29). But it is in Zechariah’s prophecy that we see the fullest use of the prayer for peace (Lk 1:67-79).

The story of Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, begins when he encountered the angel Gabriel in the temple (Lk 1:5-25). Zechariah was serving his course as lead priest in the temple. Priests might wait a lifetime for an opportunity like this. Some were never chosen.

Zechariah was standing before the altar while the people outside were praying. We can assume that Zechariah was also praying. It was customary—and expected—that the priest would offer prayers on behalf of Israel. The prayers would be for forgiveness but also for redemption. During the long siege under Roman rule, the people of Israel prayed daily for freedom. They prayed for the Messiah to come.

The angel informed Zechariah that his prayer had been heard (Lk 1:13). We might assume the angel referred to the prayer Zechariah had offered for redemption. He told Zechariah he and his wife, Elizabeth, would have a child and that the child would be the forerunner to the coming Messiah. Is it possible that while praying for Israel, Zechariah was also praying for a child?

If so, it was perhaps a prayer he had prayed in the past, but prayed no longer. Zechariah pointed out both he and Elizabeth were past the age to bear children. The angel reminded Zechariah that with God all things are possible. Then the angel told Zechariah that because he did not believe the angelic message, he would be mute until the child was born.

After John was born, Zechariah's voice returned. He used his newfound voice to praise God and pronounce a powerful and beautiful passage of prophetic poetry. The prophecy is known as the Benedictus, from the first word in the Latin text of this passage.

Zechariah's prophecy is divided into two sections. The first praised God for sending a "mighty savior" (v. 69). In this section, Zechariah announced that all the enemies of God's people would be defeated. The second part of the prophecy describes what effect Jesus' coming into the world will have. The language here points to mercy, forgiveness and praise.

The closing verses declare Jesus' coming into the world will "give light to those who sit in darkness" (v. 79). Zechariah went on to say the light of Jesus will "guide our feet into the way of peace."

The idea of a "path" or a "way" was a common means for referring to way of life, or living. The way we live, the choices we make, the wisdom we follow, are all part of "our way." The early church often referred to themselves as followers of "the Way" (Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22). The early church was committed to the truth of Jesus' wisdom and the meaning of his life, death and resurrection. They were a community built around Jesus' own mission. In other words, they were seeking to follow the path walked by Jesus.

The message could not be clearer. Peace in our lives and in our world results from learning Jesus' ways. Jesus' coming offers us an alternative to the darkness and futility so many people live with and in every day. His presence in our world and in our lives provides a way for us to experience life differently than we ever have before. We are allowed the merciful opportunities to overcome our broken, fragmented existence with a new wholeness.

John 14:25-27

This insight is made explicit in John's Gospel. Set in the context of preparing the disciples for his departure, Jesus tells them that he will not leave them comfortless.

"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you" (Jn 14:27).

Jesus gives his own wholeness, his fully integrated self, to us. Jesus becomes our peace by giving us his peace. In him we are made whole by means of his wholeness.

Notice how Jesus contrasts the peace he gives and the peace the world offers. We can cite many instances in which the world offers peace, but it does not seem to happen. Whether it is at the hands of "peacekeepers" or fighting a "war to end all wars," the path to peace the world offers often leads away from peace towards violence.

Christ's presence creates the opportunity for real peace. We have the opportunity to experience wholeness, mercy, forgiveness and healing. As we become whole persons, not divided and fractured within ourselves, we can begin to work for peace in our neighbors' lives.

Doing Peace

There is an old saying that goes, "Hurt people hurt people." The truth of this proverb has been acted out time and time again.

In the '70s, the leading employer in my hometown shut its doors and went out of business. Seven hundred men and women were suddenly without a paycheck.

I was in a position to observe several of the families as they dealt with this crisis. Some shrugged it off and simply found employment elsewhere. A few took their savings and went into one business or another. A few of the older ones simply retired.

Others had more difficulty with the transition. One man in particular could not let go of his anger and sense of betrayal. He wrote venomous letters to corporate headquarters. He even talked to a lawyer about the possibility of a lawsuit.

His anger simmered into heavy bouts of drinking. His wife was working and bringing home a meager paycheck, but his drinking ran through their tiny income quickly. The financial situation grew worse every month. They were in danger of losing their home.

Eventually, his wife confronted him with his drinking. She told him she was tired of working while he stayed home and drank. His anger and frustration boiled over. In a fit of rage, he beat his wife almost to death.

After prison, and counseling, and the labors of some caring Christian neighbors, the man gradually put his life in order. He and his wife reconciled. He went to work in a local grocery store and eventually became assistant manager. He began attending church with his family. He never drank again. He found a path that led to peace.

The wars and violence we see in our world are reflections of the broken and fractured lives of people in the world. In Jesus we have a way to “guide our feet into the way of peace.” As we find peace for ourselves, we are able to make peace with others.



Love Unlimited

Luke 2:1-7; I John 3:18-24

Loving the Unlovely

Every other word that came out of Mel's mouth was profanity. His shrill voice communicated anger, threat and hate. His scarred, stubbly face was a road map of his life of violence and pain. His ragged clothes were dirty and smelled of urine and vomit. I was shocked and terrified. It was my first visit to the jail.

I was on staff of a small church in south Alabama. The pastor had persuaded the church to engage in a weekly jail outreach ministry. He wanted us to make real connections with the inmates, befriend them and try to make a difference in their lives.

We took Bibles and other reading material to distribute to those who were interested. Nearly all of the inmates wanted a Bible. We also put together small care packages that included soap, combs, toothbrushes and toothpaste, and deodorant.

Each package also had a quarter taped to it with a phone number to the church. There were volunteers available to take calls, counseling and encouraging the inmates any way we could. Inmates could call the church if they needed help or just use the quarter to call home.

Most of the people we met were sad figures with tragic stories of bad luck and bad choices. Most of the offenses were drug and alcohol related. These people offered little threat and were mostly open to our efforts.

But Mel was frightening. He had been arrested during a bar fight in which he put three grown men in the hospital. He had also seriously injured one deputy during the arrest. Mel was in a maximum-security cell by himself. And he wanted to remain by himself.

I recall one of the guards describing Mel as "beyond hope."

"He may be beyond hope," the pastor replied, "but he is not beyond love."

The pastor tried his best to reach Mel. He talked to him and tried to find out about any family Mel might have. He brought Mel clean clothes and magazines to read. He tried to find common interests, or anything they

could talk about together. The pastor was committed to finding a way to reach this hard, violent man. In fact, the pastor ended up spending as much time with Mel as he did with the other inmates combined.

I don't know if the pastor was making any progress or not. But before any obvious breakthrough occurred, Mel was transferred to another facility, and we lost track of him. I was always impressed by how the pastor went to extra lengths to reach out to him. I asked him about Mel on more than one occasion.

"To God," the pastor said, "we all look like Mel."

At first, that offended me. In my worst days I had never done the things Mel had done. I voiced my disagreement.

"You miss the point," he said. "You assume I meant that God sees you as Mel. I meant God sees Mel as you, and me, and the rest of us. God sees past the failure to the person underneath. His love reaches out to us to draw that person out into the light."

The Christmas story is about God going to extraordinary lengths on our behalf. Jesus' coming into the world is the ultimate act of a God who loves us. God sees past our failure to the person underneath our failure. God reaches out to us in love to draw that person into the light.

Luke 2:1-7

The story of Jesus' birth is draped in lowliness and humility. Jesus was born into a poor, oppressed family living in an occupied country. They were forced from their home to benefit a powerful leader who would do little to benefit them in return. One of Rome's primary interests in an occupied territory was the collection of taxes. These monies were used to maintain Rome at the center of its power. Little, if any, of the tax revenue was used to improve the lives of the people who were forced to pay it.

Jesus' family was subjected to dangers, fears and deprivations. Travel was difficult and fraught with danger. The highways, though nominally guarded by Rome, were in fact treacherous. Arriving in a community that was not their own, they were forced to seek lodging where they might afford it. Since many travelers were moving about fulfilling Rome's demand for revenue, Jesus' family was denied even the most basic of creature comforts.

In short, Jesus was born and raised among people that we might consider

the most desperate in the world. What meaning are we to draw from all of this? If we believe that God acted in history to make God's self known to all people through Jesus of Nazareth, then why choose such a lowly beginning? Why not appear as a child in a royal family, or a family of wealth and privilege? Why not appear in the family of a great thinker or philosopher?

God's decision to send Jesus into an impoverished family during a time of oppression and displacement sends a powerful message about the character of God's love. If Jesus had appeared among the privileged of the world, it would have been too easy for the privileged to claim him for their own. People of means seem to have a way of monopolizing the best things in life. And it would have been far too easy for the poor and powerless to believe Jesus was not for them, since so many of life's good things are clearly beyond their reach.

By coming to poor and downtrodden people, by walking the path of the weak and oppressed, God is able to say through Jesus, "No one is beneath God's love, no one is beyond it, no one is above it." God's love is for everyone.

The family in which Jesus was raised exercised a key role. The Scriptures make it clear God chose Mary and Joseph carefully. As parents, they exercised a crucial influence in the life of their child.

The Romans inflicted violence, oppression, poverty, cruelty and prejudice on the Jews. It would have been easy—and perhaps understandable—for Mary and Joseph to be filled with resentment toward the Romans. It would have been easy—and perhaps unavoidable—that they would communicate this resentment to their son.

Rather than resentment, however, it seems Mary and Joseph taught their son love and respect for persons. Jesus emerged from childhood with a vision of how the world might be brought together by God's love—a love he must have learned about from two loving parents.

I John 3:18-24

The writer of 1 John certainly understood God's love in this way. John declared our belief in Jesus enables us to love one another (v. 23). A single commandment exists for us to follow, John said. We are to have faith in God's Son Jesus Christ and "love one another."

For John, this love is not just a warm, fuzzy feeling of affection. Nor is

love an abstract, positive attitude we hold toward people. Love is action—proper action toward people in need. To have love is to act lovingly toward others. This is how we know the love of God is in us (v. 24).

If we are not careful and attentive, we can easily allow our own difficulties and disappointments to dampen our love and cause us to turn inward, away from people in need. If we are not devoted to living out the meaning of Jesus' love in us and for us, we can easily allow resentment and petty envy to create divisions between us and the people we should be helping. If we are not willing to see the fault and failure in all of us, we can easily allow people who are difficult, mean or unlovely to frighten us from doing the one thing we have been called to do—loving them!

Loving the Unlovely

Throughout high school, my daughter's best friend was a young man. They didn't date, and both of them claimed there was no romantic interest. They were just best friends. They spent all of their free time together. In fact, he was around so much we began referring to him as our adopted son.

Upon graduating, the young man announced to his family he was a homosexual. They were stunned and devastated. His stepfather told him he could no longer live at home. Nearly all of his friends distanced themselves from him. All but one—his best friend.

When my daughter heard the news, she was shocked and confused. She came home and asked a very interesting question.

"Daddy," she began, "my friend is gay. What are you going to say about it to him?"

I had often considered the question of homosexuality in the abstract, as a point for discussion and theological reflection. I had even counseled with homosexual persons who were trying to make sense of their lives and were seeking direction.

But my daughter's friend was another matter. With him it was personal. We loved him and cared about him. My daughter's question had an edgy, probing quality to it that made me uncomfortable.

"What should I say?" I asked, probably stalling for time.

"You should say that you still love him," she said. "Even if you don't agree with what he is doing, or think it wrong, that is not a reason to stop caring

about him or to be mean to him. We can still love him, can't we?"

God looked into our world and certainly saw many things he did not like. There are things we do, and behaviors we adopt that are far beyond the scope of what God intends for us. There is failure enough for us all to have our full portion of blame and guilt.

But God sees the person beneath the failure. God offers Jesus as a remedy for our failure. With Jesus in the world and in our lives, it becomes possible for us not only to experience God's love, but also to show it to others. We, who were once unlovely in God's sight, are empowered to love those who are unlovely in our own eyes.

As we are able to show love to others, we make it possible for God's love to be seen, felt and embraced.



Joy to the World

Luke 2:8-20; John 15:11

Joy In the Midst of Suffering

In an intensive-care waiting room one day before Thanksgiving, I witnessed the capacity for joy in the midst of suffering. My friend, Allen, was in the hospital facing the final stages of pancreatic cancer. His wife, Alice, was in the waiting room watching the clock and waiting for the next scheduled visiting opportunity. Family members were allowed to visit for fifteen minutes every two hours. This routine had gone on for two weeks and Alice was exhausted.

There was another woman in the waiting room along with her two sons. Her husband had suffered a heart attack and was in critical condition. She held her two boys close to her as they waited for the next opportunity to visit. The fatigue and fear was evident on their faces. It was obvious from their clothing the family was very poor.

After the noon visitation the two families were back in the waiting room. Alice's daughter, Ruby, had joined the gathering along with her daughter, Allen's only grandchild. The sadness and anxiety was thick in the room. Both families sat in silence. After a few moments, Ruby let out a big sigh and said, "Well this is a fine Thanksgiving, don't you think?"

Alice looked over at the other family, then back at her daughter. "Well, it is Thanksgiving, isn't it? Why don't we just have Thanksgiving right here, right now!"

She went to a pay phone and called a local restaurant. In a short while, the waiting room was filled with the warm smell of turkey and dressing, hot rolls, and pumpkin pie. As the food was uncovered, Alice invited the other family to join in.

"There's plenty of food here for all us. We'd love for you and your boys to share with us."

Tears filled the eyes of the woman as she guided her sons toward the food.

"Thank you," she said.

As the two families shared the meal, the heaviness of their concern seemed to lift. There was laughter and the sharing of memories of better days.

There was a brightness that entered the room. There was joy!

This capacity for joy in the midst of difficulty is a gift from God. Joy is different from mere happiness. Happiness is tied to circumstances and is often fleeting and fickle. But joy is constant. Joy is the result of recognizing the presence of Christ in our world and in our lives.

Joy is not tied to circumstances. Joy is present when times are good and when life gets hard. Joy allows us to face even the most difficult circumstances with confidence and courage.

As we move through the Advent season together, we have an opportunity to renew our understanding of the origins of the joy which has graced our world. Renewing our understanding allows us to renew our experience of joy as a foundational element in our lives.

Luke 2:8-20

Jesus was born in the most humble of settings. We know a manger was a feeding trough for animals. That means Mary and Joseph had taken shelter in a barn of some kind. This would have taken one of two forms in the first century.

Occasionally, homeowners would dig out a place under the house, something like a modern basement, to house their animals. This met the obvious need of providing shelter for the animals. But it also helped provide heat for the house.

The other option was to keep animals in a cave somewhere near the house. There is considerable evidence this was a widespread practice and has led some scholars to believe that Jesus was born in a cave outside Bethlehem.

Jesus' birth was attended by Mary and Joseph and the animals housed in the cave. But an unexpected invitation was offered to view the newborn king. The invitation was offered to a group of shepherds watching their flocks in a field outside of Bethlehem. Angels sent from God offered the invitation.

Shepherds were among the lowest persons on the social scale in first-century Israel. Because of the influence of Psalm 23 and images of the Good Shepherd, the modern Christian world has romanticized the life of shepherds. But the social and economic realities of the first century put shepherds at the bottom of the pecking order.

But pecking order does not deter God. Luke tells us “an angel of the Lord stood before them.” The shepherds found this a terrifying vision, but the angel comforted and calmed them with an incredible message.

“I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people” (Lk 2:10). The expression that is translated “I am bringing you good news” is the verb form of the word for “gospel.” Literally, the angel said, “I am bringing you a gospel of great joy for all people.” Of course, the gospel he was referring to was the birth of Jesus, the Savior of the world.

After the angelic announcement, there suddenly appeared a gathering of heavenly beings, singing and praising, “Glory to God in the highest!” The entire universe was brought to praise by the events transpiring in the small town of Bethlehem.

After the angel departed, the shepherds went immediately to Bethlehem to see if what they had seen and heard was true. They found the baby—along with Mary and Joseph. Jesus was wrapped in “bands of cloth,” or what other translations refer to as “swaddling clothes.”

This was not the way a baby of privilege and status entered the world. The bands of cloth used to wrap the newborn might be called “rags of poverty.” The shepherds would have immediately recognized the low estate of the family and their new infant.

The contrast could not be greater. On the one hand is the lofty angelic announcement of the birth of a universal savior. On the other hand are the humble surroundings and obvious poverty of Jesus’ family. The angelic announcement that the joyful good news is for “all the people” takes on special significance, as the shepherds who are poor encounter the Savior of the world adorned in the rags of poverty.

That this special announcement was made to shepherds is an indication of the depths of the meaning of the gospel. The offer of life and meaning contained in the gospel message is for everyone, and especially for the lowly, the poor and the humble.

This fact was not lost on the shepherds. Realizing their low station in life, realizing God had made special provisions for them, sparked in them awe, wonder and rejoicing.

It is worth noting neither the arrival of Jesus nor the angelic announcement changed the social standing of the shepherds. The world did not suddenly begin to view them as trustworthy and true. Their wages did not suddenly

increase or their work conditions improve. They remained the same poor, scorned people they were before. There was, however, one noticeable difference.

Though still poor and probably despised, they had seen the heavens ablaze with the announcement of God’s most gracious gift. Their lives were changed, not in outward circumstance, but in inward perspective. The joy that filled their hearts and found expression in their voices transcended their circumstances. Encountering Jesus, the fulfillment of God’s promises, allowed them to rise above their station and be filled with joy.

John 15:11

How is this sort of experience possible? John’s Gospel states Jesus himself is the basis for true joy. Jesus declared his teaching and presence can impart to us his joy. “I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you.”

The heart of the New Testament message is that the God of joy came into the world as a human being. Jesus’ birth was announced as “good news of great joy for all people.” His life was marked with a joy he expects his followers to experience fully.

Joy vs. Happiness

A friend of mine who works as a pastoral counselor told me recently that she was struck with the sheer number of clients who came to her with practically the same complaint. “They all say almost the same exact thing,” she said. Many of her clients entered counseling because they did not feel happy about their lives.

Sometimes legitimate reasons cause unhappiness. Loss of a loved one or a major, unplanned career change is certainly a disruptive event. But many people who complained of a lack of happiness could not identify a specific cause for their feelings. Instead, they were aware of a vague, undefined feeling of restlessness and anxiety causing them to doubt the value and purpose of their lives.

As my counselor friend probes deeper into the lives of these people, she is often surprised to learn they are successful people in many areas of life. Many have good jobs, nice homes, and healthy, normal families. So why aren’t they happy?

My grandfather had a way with quips and folk wisdom. I heard him say on

more than one occasion, “Happiness is what you feel when you think you’ve got what you want. That’s why nobody in the world is happy!” Through the years I have found his wisdom to be right on target.

People seek happiness through the acquisition of possessions or power. They acquire the possessions and power, but still remain unhappy. So, they try more or different possessions or power. Still no happiness.

The reality of this frustrating cycle of seeking and not finding happiness has led some to embrace the pop wisdom that “happiness is an illusion.” That may or may not be true. However, Grandpa was right. If happiness is sought in acquiring a list of “wants and wishes,” it will never come. We either can’t or don’t get what we want, or we get it and find out it cannot, or does not, deliver the happiness we are seeking.

Joy, on the other hand, is a different experience altogether. If happiness is what we feel when we think we’ve got what we want, then joy is what we feel when we discover we already have what we need.

Joy is not tied to circumstances. Joy, for Christians, is the result of a relationship that creates a new way to view the world and ourselves. A genuine experience of joy allows us to face situations that may bring unhappiness. Sorrow may come, but it cannot defeat or extinguish our new world outlook. Sadness, hurt, pain, loss, even grief, may bring tears, but the presence of Christ in our lives provides an underlying sense of joy. This joy sustains us as we live our lives and seek to be faithful to God who loves us.



Praise God from Whom All Blessings Flow

Luke 2:36-38; Matthew 2:1-12

I am a habitual people-watcher. The human animal fascinates and intrigues me. The variety and diversity of people in the world is a delight to behold. Of course, I realize people are probably watching me as well. But if they find me as entertaining as I find them, I don't even mind.

People are most interesting to watch when they are placed in settings where they clearly feel out of place. The modern world offers many opportunities. One of the best places, however, for this kind of watching is airport terminals.

People who travel offer an array of bodily and facial responses. They range from dazed and confused to focused and intense. Some march through the terminal like warriors on a holy crusade. Others tiptoe through as if they hope no one will notice them.

Some are just bored. The long lines, the long waits, the relentless hum and buzz of airport noise are mind-numbing.

Others are obviously frightened. Will they make their plane? Will their plane be on time? Will they make their connection? Will their luggage arrive at the right location? Will their plane take off and land safely?

Still others are stressed to the limit. The tension is obvious in their tired eyes, their tight jaws and rigid faces. Their frustration often bubbles out as anger, vented toward their children or unsuspecting flight attendants.

Amazingly, after nearly thirty years of watching people in airports, I rarely see a happy traveler. In fact, the most frequent expressions of happiness are when someone emerges from the boarding tunnel and is greeted by a loved one.

Our modern lives may be mirrored in these air-terminal experiences. Fleeting moments of happiness and excitement are off set by long periods of boredom, anger, stress, fear and fatigue. Maybe there is some hidden awareness we are stuck in a life in which we feel out of place. We don't know what our roles are, or how we should proceed. Is this the way life should feel?

In the old Westminster Larger Catechism, a discipleship aid from another

generation and tradition, the first question posed to new converts was this: "What is the chief and highest end of man?" The answer called for by the catechism is, "Man's chief end is to glorify God, and fully enjoy him forever."

How much do we really enjoy God? How many people experience life's daily journey as something exciting and pleasurable? How many of us are guilty of squandering our time whining about the bad things that have happened to us, instead of fully enjoying the many good things we have in abundance?

We have just journeyed through Advent. The shopping, the parties, the family gatherings are all behind us. We are facing a new year with a return to the same old routine. What would happen if we managed to carry the love, hope, joy and peace of the Christmas season into our daily lives and routine?

How would our lives be different if we consciously sought out reasons to praise God—to enjoy God fully? Our study for this Sunday provides excellent resources for doing just that.

Luke 2:36-38

Part of the problem in seeking to live a life marked by praise is our unwillingness to discipline ourselves to wait for God. We are like modern football players. We are more than ready to point to heaven when we score a touchdown or make a big play in life, but what do we do when life causes us to fumble? Or if we lose the game altogether? Or if the game goes on and on with no clear outcome in sight? How do we praise and enjoy God then?

Anna the prophet lived what some might consider a tragic life. Women in ancient Israel married young, some as early as fourteen years old. This was more than likely the case for Anna, as well. Anna only lived with her husband for seven years before he died. A young woman, certainly in her early twenties, Anna found herself a widow.

Widows faced difficult choices in the ancient world. There were no safety nets of social support in the ancient world such as exist today. People were dependent on their families to care for them if they were unable to care for themselves. If there was no family to support them, they were often forced to live lives of desperate destitution.

Women had few, if any, economic opportunities. Consequently, widows

were often hard pressed to survive. Some women resorted to prostitution; others relied on begging. Both options stripped women of what little dignity they possessed. The conservative Hebrew society of the first century looked with scorn and disgust on women who chose to live lives on the street.

There were some charitable resources available from the temple. Apparently, Anna found some support from this source and had devoted herself to the temple in response. Night and day, Anna fasted and prayed in the temple. While sadness and hardship marked all other aspects of her life, the spiritual side of her life flourished. She found reasons to enjoy God fully every day.

The close relationship Anna forged with God prepared her to see God at work where others might not have noticed. Anna somehow became aware of Jesus' presence in the temple. Perhaps she overheard Simeon's remarks, or maybe she simply saw the child herself. But the moment she saw him, she knew! This child was the fulfillment of the promises, the hope of redemption.

Spiritual insight is directly related to our devotion and dedication to God. The closer our lives are to God the more we will be able to recognize God at work. Knowing that God is at work in our lives and in our world, becomes the basis for our ability to praise God. If our eyes are blinded to the reality of God's presence in Christ, we become open to cynicism and despair.

This is especially true for someone like Anna. Life's circumstances had given her every opportunity not to praise, not to believe, not to hope. But her devotion and dedication gave fresh eyes to see the hand of God at work in our world.

Matthew 2:1-12

On the other end of the spectrum from Anna is the response of the Magi. These were not kings, as the popular Christmas song suggests, but rather astrologers, scientists, men of learning. From their home in the east, possibly Persia, the Magi had heard the Hebrew prophecies of a special king to come. Seeing a star of unusual character, the Magi were led to believe it was a heavenly sign marking the arrival of this special king. They journeyed together to Israel to find the king and pay him homage.

Obviously these were men of some means. The travel alone would have been costly. Apparently they had followed the star for nearly two years.

Also, the gifts they gave Jesus reflect some financial means. Gold, of course, would be a precious and expensive gift, but frankincense and myrrh were equally extravagant offerings.

Here were men of status and wealth—the two things many people believe bring purpose to life—gladly spending what they had in the hope of meeting the King of the world. In finding what they surely thought was the ultimate discovery, they humbled themselves in worship and adoration. Their experiences of worship were magnified as we consider what it cost them to find the child.

For the Magi, as well as for Anna, a devotion and willingness to see God at work opened for them the privilege of seeing the beginning point of God's greatest gift. Their willingness to give of themselves, and wait for God became the doorway to an opportunity of joyful praise.

Praise Him, Praise Him!

I received word that the wife of one of my best friends had died suddenly. I got to Carl as quickly as I could. As I entered his house, we embraced, and he wept for several minutes.

We sat on the sofa afterwards and looked through photo albums nearly all night. Every picture was a memory and a story. My friend faithfully recalled each detail.

As I started to leave, he touched my arm and said, "I want the service for Caroline to be a celebration of praise. Caroline was much too vibrant, too alive, to have a sad funeral. If she were here, she wouldn't stand for it!" Carl stopped and laughed at the sad irony. Then he continued.

"I want us to sing some great hymns of the church. And I want you to lead the church in a litany based on Proverbs 31:10-31."

He walked over to a bookshelf and pulled down a worn copy of the hymnal used by his church. He flipped through the pages for a moment, then handed it to me.

"Here," he said, "This one."

There in the back of the hymnal, among the responsive readings, was an arrangement of Proverbs 31:10-31.

The service was vibrant and worshipful. Several people spoke, describing Caroline's contribution to the community or to their lives. She was a

mother, an accomplished educator, a world traveler, a faithful member of the choir, a lifelong Sunday School teacher, the list of involvements went on and on. At the end, I spoke of God's comfort, hope and eternal life.

The service concluded with those present lifting their voices together in a reading of Proverbs 31. Carl's eyes glistened with tears as he lifted his voice along with the others, celebrating the memory of his wife, and praising God for her life.

It was a tribute to a life well-lived. More than that, the service was an offering of praise and thanksgiving. Though Carl and his family were hurting, they were still able to praise God and give thanks for the many years they had shared together.

I have thought of that service many times. Carl and I have spoken of it on many occasions. Not only was it a fitting tribute to his wife, but the service was also a fitting reminder of the way we are to live our lives.

We journey through life carrying a mixed bag. We face good and bad, joy and sadness, pain and pleasure. We gain things, and we lose things. But in all things, and in all circumstances, the greatest step we can take is to love God and to seek to enjoy God fully with the whole of our lives. This is why we were made and how we will find our ultimate fulfillment as human beings.

