

**WEEK #1 – PREPARE FOR THE JOURNEY WITH THANKSGIVING AND HOPE**  
**November 24-30, 2008**

**MONDAY – November 24<sup>th</sup>**

**CENTERING BREATH PRAYER: Prepare my heart...to travel with thanksgiving.**

*Awesome God, as another frantic holiday season begins, I set my face towards Bethlehem and the arrival of my Savior. As I prepare for Thanksgiving Day this week, I stop to reflect that a spirit of thanksgiving is a very special way to begin the journey. It is so easy to get caught up in the daily hassles and the stresses of the day that I often forget to say thank you for the blessings which accompany the difficulties. Our journey through life may not always be easy, but you are always with us and I need to remember that. Thank you for coming into my life and thank you for your company as I travel. May I never forget to say thank you. It is in the name of the Christ Child, toward whom I travel, I pray. Amen.*

**SCRIPTURE: 1 Corinthians 1:3-9**

**KEY VERSES: 1 Corinthians 1:4, 9:**

**(4) “Every time I think of you – and I think of you often! – I thank God for your lives of free and open access to God, given by Jesus. (9) God, who got you started in this spiritual adventure, shares with us the life of his Son and our Master Jesus. He will never give up on you. Never forget that” (THE MESSAGE).**

How easy it is to forget the many, many blessings which we are freely given by our loving and gracious God. As we start into this hectic, even frantic, holiday season it is especially good to stop and reflect on what we have received and pay tribute to the Lord who has made all good things possible. Our scripture passage today offers thanksgiving for people Paul thought of often. What a lovely tribute to these fledgling Christians in Corinth Paul gives in these opening verses to his first letter to them. Though Paul may give some strong words of admonition, even criticism later, he makes it very clear in his opening statements that these people to whom he is writing are very special to him. He thinks of them often and gives thanks for them and their faith. Does that mean that they were perfect Christians living wonderful, productive lives of faith? Hardly! They were fractious, quarreling, immature Christians with a great deal to learn about the ways of Christ. Yet, Paul loved them dearly and desired to see them grow into more spiritual individuals.

Who do we think of often...friends...family...church family? Are we able to give thanks that these people live “lives of free and open access to God, given by Jesus?” For some of them this may be an applicable prayer of thanksgiving. For others, it may not be the reason you think about them or why you might give thanks for their lives. There are a myriad of reasons to give thanks for someone about whom you think often and love dearly. The point here is not the “why” of the prayer of thanksgiving, but the time taken to be thankful. Here in the United States, Thanksgiving Day, a special holiday celebrated on the fourth Thursday in November, is a day set aside to give thanks for all the blessings of the year. Many countries do not have a national day set aside for such a purpose (and many here in the States don't use this day for this purpose, either.) Yet, such a day, coming about a month before the celebration of Christ's birth, is a meaningful holiday that can prepare us for the full steam ahead, no holds barred, never-ending round of preparations; decorating, cooking, baking, shopping and wrapping that can sap our strength and erode our determination to celebrate Christ's birth in a meaningful way. As great an ideal as Thanksgiving Day is, the reality for

most of us is that this day is more about food and family gatherings (and often, football), than it is about giving thanks to God for all our blessings. As we begin this week's journey toward Bethlehem, we can prepare for the journey best by offering thanks before we begin and before we get too stressed out over the first holiday of the season. Paul begins his letter to the Corinthians by offering thanksgiving for them, even though he is about to admonish them for many things. We, too, can begin our week, before we even get to Thanksgiving Day, by offering thanks for the people we have been blessed to have in our lives. It doesn't matter if they frustrate us at times. We can still give thanks for them and let God know how much we appreciate having them with us.

The other verse I have singled out from today's reading reminds Paul's readers, and that includes us, that God has begun a spiritual adventure within us which God will not abandon. What a blessing, indeed! We are about to embark on a journey toward the celebration of Christ's birth, a season called Advent. It truly is a great, spiritual adventure. Our constant companion on this journey is our Lord and Savior, the Christ Child whose birth we prepare to receive once more. What better companionship could we ask for when we begin any journey? Who knows what the Lord has in store for us along the road to Bethlehem? Let us begin in a spirit of thanksgiving and bring that same spirit along with us on the road. God will never give up on us. Let us give thanks and never forget.

**ADDITIONAL SCRIPTURES: Philippians 4:4-7; Colossians 2:6-7;  
1 Thessalonians 5:16-18**

**QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND/OR JOURNALING:**

1. How well do I remember to give thanks to God in all things?
2. Who do I think of often for whom I can give thanks?
3. How does it make me feel to remember that Christ will complete the work he has begun in me?

**SUGGESTIONS FOR ACTION:**

1. Make a list of the people for whom you wish to give thanks during this week of Thanksgiving.
2. Spend a special time in prayers of thanksgiving today.
3. If you do not already have one, prepare a sacred space for your devotional time throughout the holiday season. It can be very simple, but it will help you focus on your worship time.

*Heavenly Father, as I enter into this holiday season, help me focus on you and the birth of your Son, Jesus. I begin preparing for the journey by offering prayers of thanksgiving for all those whose lives are precious to me. As I offer these prayers, may I find joy in the remembrance of the blessings they have brought into my life. As I offer thanks for the beloved people in my life, I also remember the great adventure your Son has begun within me and offer my heartfelt thanks for staying with me when I falter. I am so grateful that you will not abandon me no matter what happens. Please finish what you have begun in me through the Jesus, my Savior, in whose name, I pray. Amen.*

**TUESDAY – November 25<sup>th</sup>**

**CENTERING BREATH PRAYER: Help me travel...with a heart full of hope.**

*Dearest Lord, as I prepare for the holiday journey on the road to Bethlehem, I come to you with an expectation that hope will guide my way. The knowledge that you are the God of our salvation, given in a little child, is a special gift of hope for me. When I become bogged down in the minutia of the holiday preparations, let me come to you with an expectation that hope will guide my days and your presence will accompany me on the journey. May I always remember your awesome deeds and the deliverance you have already brought when life seems to drag me down and my hope seems distant. In the name of Jesus, who brings salvation, I pray. Amen.*

**SCRIPTURE: Psalm 65**

**KEY VERSE: Psalm 65:5:**

***“By awesome deeds you answer us with deliverance, O God of our salvation; you are the hope of all the ends of the earth and of the farthest seas” (NRSV).***

The hope expressed in Psalm 65 is full of joy and praise both for and from all of God's creation. Our Psalmist expresses this hope through an offering of praise which catches us up into a joyful accounting of just a few of the awesome deeds which stagger the imagination and sweep us into the whirlwind of nature in all its glory. As we prepare for Thanksgiving Day just a couple of days away, we are reminded that praise is due the Lord, our God, and the whole earth renders such praise, even when we forget or neglect to do so. Many of us are already caught up in the whirlwind of preparations for company or travel for the first of the holiday celebrations which fall into the last six weeks of the year. Here in the US we kick off this season leading into the Christmas celebration with parades and community celebrations ushering in a season full to the brim with decorating, shopping, cooking and baking, preparing gifts, food, parties, pageants, special worship services, and other time-consuming tasks. Though these activities may be meaningful, they sap our energy and sometimes our joy. But we must never let them sap our hope. When we feel the pressures mounting and the joy receding, let us cling to the hope we have in the Christ Child, who brings us the salvation we do not deserve, but so desperately need. It is hope which spurs us on when all seems overwhelming and exhausting. Perhaps the most important thing which keeps my focus on the hope embodied in the celebration of Christmas and all the hoopla that surrounds it, is to constantly remind myself that without the Christ Child, there would not be any hope for our world at all. We certainly have made a mess of it and continue to destroy more than we create each and every day. Sometimes, we forget the joy inherent in the holiday season because we are unable to see past the moment, a moment which may be so full of stress that we are unable to look beyond it to the reason for the season: Jesus, the Christ Child.

But, such short sightedness is just what we must strive to overcome. Keeping our eyes on the Christ Child, the one for whom we, presumably, are doing all these activities, is the one certain way to find our hope that the season is meaningful and that we will survive, perhaps even thrive, within them. Decorating our homes, businesses and public spaces reminds us of the beauty of God's world and the light which God brings into our lives through the tiny Child whose birth we are preparing to celebrate. Beginning with Thanksgiving, we can assure ourselves that the journey will be worthwhile, even when it seems very difficult and unending. Beginning with a spirit of thanksgiving, we find hope to continue. When we are in the midst of all the preparations both for this week's celebration and those that are to come, we can claim

our joy and our hope by offering our activities to the Lord as an offering of praise and adoration. Let us offer our decorating, cooking, cleaning, gift buying and wrapping, pageants, parties and worship services to the Lord and expect the Lord not only to accept our gifts, but to participate in them. Let us offer them as gifts of praise and love. Something special may just happen in our journey. We may just find more hope than we ever imagined. And our hearts will be full to overflowing.

**ADDITIONAL SCRIPTURES: Romans 5:1-5; 2 Corinthians 1:3-7**

**QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND/OR JOURNALING:**

1. How can I find hope in the busy-ness of the holiday season?
2. Why should I spend some of my precious time during the holiday season in quiet time with the Lord?
3. What relationship might there be between thanksgiving and hope?

**SUGGESTIONS FOR ACTION:**

1. Create a special worship service (either by yourself or with your family) to dedicate the holiday season to the Lord and ask for special participation of the Lord in the various tasks which will confront you in the coming weeks.
2. Start a special blessings journal to use during your devotional time. Write down all the blessings of the day. See what hope for your future is held within those blessings. Give special thanks for the blessings you have written.

*Thank you, Lord, for being with me on this holiday journey. Fill my heart and soul with hope that I will not travel alone, but that you will continue to accompany me each step of the way. When the tasks of the day seem to overwhelm me, remind me that you are in charge of the day and not I. I'm sorry that I am so forgetful of the many blessings you give me every day. Please bring them to my attention so that I may bring you thanks for them today and every day. In the name of the Christ Child, who comes to bring me hope, I pray. Amen.*

**WEDNESDAY – November 26<sup>th</sup>**

**CENTERING BREATH PRAYER: May I never boast...of my own power or might.**

*Lord of the abundant life, it is so easy to lean on my own accomplishments and deny your hand in the blessings which surround me. As I prepare for the feast tomorrow, may I give you the credit for what you have done in and through me. My life would be nothing without your abiding presence and the love with which you have showered me. My blessings overflow and my own accomplishments are as nothing. Though it is a good feeling to do things well, let me never believe that I have accomplished them without your gifts, presence and leadership. In your holy name, I pray. Amen.*

**SCRIPTURE: Deuteronomy 8:7-18**

**KEY VERSES: Deuteronomy 8:10, 17**

**(10) “You shall eat your fill and bless the Lord your God for the good land that he has given you. (17) Do not say to yourself, ‘My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth’” (NRSV).**

Food! In this country, Thanksgiving Day means sumptuous feasts. We not only eat our fill, but stuff ourselves waaay beyond full. For many, if not most, of us, Thanksgiving Day is a time for family gatherings in which every favorite food is prepared and shared with laughter, catching up on the happenings since the last gathering and remembering the love which binds them together as family. Often, this is the largest gathering of family which takes place each year. It is easy for the spirit of thanksgiving to fall by the wayside instead of taking center stage during the festivities. Though some families have developed a meaningful tradition of sharing the blessings of the year for which they are thankful, most have not. In many cases, even in families with a highly professed faith, a special prayer of thankfulness for the meal before stuffing themselves, is the extent of the attention given to the Lord on this day. In other families, even this small attention is lacking. How can we break this inattentiveness to the Lord without taking away from the validity of the family emphasis of the day? Perhaps one way is to recognize what we are doing. Our scripture passage today reminds us that the land which brought the Israelites an abundance of food and prosperity was given to them by the Lord. They had been delivered from slavery, shepherded through the wilderness with food and water provided from heaven and led into a land which could sustain them in plenty as long as they remembered who gave them the land and whose power brought them the wealth. We live in a land of plenty, a land rich in resources by the grace of God. There are so many places on this earth where God’s children, both grown and growing, live in abject poverty, where food and clean water are luxuries which are often lacking. To consume the copious amounts of food which we have on Thanksgiving Day in the United States borders on madness sometimes, and though we cannot provide those who are starving with the food upon our tables, perhaps one way we might give thanks for our abundance which would be pleasing to the Lord would be to contribute to one of the agencies which work to bring food and water to such people. There are hundreds of them to choose from. I typed in the words – global food ministries – into a search engine online and had 100 pages of results and I know that if you change the parameters of the search you would get other results as well. There is a global food crisis being felt here in the United States as well as the rest of the world. What a special way to thank the Lord for our blessings than by sharing those blessings with someone who is less fortunate than ourselves.

For those of us who will be celebrating “Turkey Day” tomorrow, let us remember from where our blessings come and bring a true spirit of thanksgiving into the day. If the family gathering will not make a place for it, let us find some other ways to say, “Thank you, Lord” whether that “thank you” is a spoken prayer, a special memory of God’s wonders, or a sharing of God’s blessings with others, let us gladly remember that it is not our own strength and power which have brought us our blessings, but that of our gracious and generous Lord.

**QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND/OR JOURNALING:**

1. How do I bring a spirit of thanksgiving into my life?
2. What are some of the blessings which are in my life for which I might be tempted to take the credit?
3. How can I share the blessings of food and fresh water with my global neighbors?

**SUGGESTIONS FOR ACTION:**

1. Develop a way for the family to express thankfulness for blessings tomorrow. Example: Get a branch from a tree and place it in a container so that it stands like a tree trunk. Cut out leaf shapes in fall colors (or find some already made) and have them with a pen and some tape by the tree branch. As family members arrive, have them write something for which they are thankful on a leaf and tape it to the tree. Place the filled branch where everyone can see it as a reminder of all the blessings the family has acknowledged.
2. Find a place where you can share food and/or water with someone in need either in person or through an agency.

*Bread of life, as I stand at the brink of Thanksgiving Day, I would ask your blessings on my family and friends. I also ask you to bless someone I don't know who is in need of food or water today. May my family's celebration remember you tomorrow as we enjoy our time together and may I remember to give you thanks continually as in your blessed name, I pray. Amen.*

## THURSDAY – November 27<sup>th</sup>

### **CENTERING BREATH PRAYER: May thanksgiving...fill my heart and my soul.**

*Precious Lord, as I celebrate Thanksgiving Day, may my heart be filled with gratitude for all the blessings you have bestowed upon me. May my family realize the wonders you have given to us as we celebrate together. Be present with us in our celebration, sharing our joy in you and in one another. May the wonder of this day outlast the bitter days we often have and the joy we share in one another brighten our lives when we separate. In the name of the one who has given us his life in place of ours, I pray. Amen.*

### **SCRIPTURE: 2 Corinthians 9:6-15**

### **KEY VERSES: 2 Corinthians 9:15**

***“Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!” (NIV).***

Today I will keep my message brief since most of us will be spending the day in celebration with family or friends. We have spent several days preparing for this day of feasting and laughter. May we not forget to include the Lord in the festivities. As we travel past this day into the season of Advent, may we take a spirit of thanksgiving into our lives and revel in the hope that is given through the birth of the Christ Child. The indescribable gift of reconciliation and abundant life which comes to us through the Christ Child can never be matched. It is the culmination of all our hope and worthy of praise, honor and all the thanksgiving we can offer. May your day be blessed and may you offer praise and thanksgiving as you travel through the day.

### **QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND/OR JOURNALING:**

1. How will I bring praise, honor and thanksgiving into this day?

### **SUGGESTIONS FOR ACTION:**

1. Have a blessed day, full of laughter and joy and thanksgiving.

*Blessed Lord, I come before you today ready to celebrate with my family and friends all the blessings I have received. I give you thanks right now for the Christ Child soon to come again and for my many, many blessings. I look forward to the day I can face you and tell you of all the joys you have brought into my life. Thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you for my life, for my family, for Christ and for every blessing I have now or will ever have in my life. In the name of the Christ Child who has taught me how to love, I pray. Amen.*

## FRIDAY – November 28<sup>th</sup>

### **CENTERING BREATH PRAYER: As I prepare to leave...help me watch for you.**

*Precious Father, as I leave Thanksgiving Day behind and prepare to leave on the road to Bethlehem, may I take the spirit of thanksgiving I have found along with me. Let me always keep watch for you along the road so that I will not lose my way. The season of Advent becomes so very hectic and it is easy to take my eyes off you and stumble along blindly. Help me to remember that when I watch for your directions, the tasks of the season can take on new meaning and be filled with joy. When I forget to watch for you I can get caught up in the world's view of the season and miss your presence. Help me keep my eyes fixed on you and the Christ Child I am traveling towards. In the name of that same Christ Child, I pray. Amen.*

### **SCRIPTURE: Mark 13:24-37**

### **KEY VERSES: Mark 13:35-37:**

**(35) “Therefore keep watch because you do not know when the owner of the house will come back – whether in the evening or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or at dawn. (36) If he comes suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping. (37) What I say to you, I say to everyone: ‘Watch’” (NIV).**

Keep watch! It kind of reminds me of the Boy and Girl Scout motto: Be Prepared. I was an avid Girl Scout as I was growing up. My mother was a troop leader and I became a camp councilor during my college years. The lessons I learned there were ones which can help me in all parts of my life. The motto, Be Prepared, is one which is valuable in all walks of life. Watching for Christ's coming is the theme for today's scripture passage. We are reminded that no one knows the time when Christ will come again and we need to "Be Prepared." It has always puzzled me why the Advent season begins with a scripture passage about Christ's second coming. One Advent booklet's author suggests that Advent is not about preparing for the birth of Christ, which has already happened, but preparing for the second coming or the end of the story. I'm not really sure that I believe that since, for me, Christ continually comes to us whenever we are ready to welcome him. Advent is a time of preparation for the Christ. For me, it is preparation for a renewal of my relationship with Christ. It helps me to welcome the Christ Child and walk with the story of his birth and the life he lived toward the salvation he came to bring. It is rewarding for me to relive the birth stories and the warmth that a child brings into our lives. Welcoming the Christ Child again and again helps to strengthen the ties I have with my Savior. So, what do I do about this second coming story which admonishes us to be ready for Christ's coming in all his glory? I think an important part of this passage is to remember to keep watch for the Christ in all parts of life. The author of this scripture passage is not really telling us that we can never go to sleep. That would be a little silly, since human beings require sleep. Nor is the author telling us that Christ only comes sometime during the night and therefore we should do our sleeping during the daytime so that we can keep watch during the night! But the author wishes us to be prepared to welcome Christ anytime and to watch for the coming of Christ into our lives.

Perhaps Christ will come in a blaze of glory at some future time in an ending of all things as we know them. There is certainly some prediction of this event in several places in scripture, including the one placed before us today. But, for me, it is much more important that I keep watch for the ways in which Christ is working in the world today and how I can be a part of that work. When I see Christ working to protect his children in need of food, shelter, comfort, education, etc. through people like you and me, I can participate in Christ's mission.

When I am not keeping watch, I miss what Christ is doing all around me and miss the opportunity to grow into the likeness of Christ. When I am not watching, I miss seeing Christ in those around me. When I am not watching, I become less than the person Christ wishes me to become. When I am not watching, I miss the Christ! It does not matter if the coming of Christ I miss was the blaze of glory in the sky or in the simple cry of a child in need. Watching for Christ is the important issue. If we do not see Christ in those around us and in the opportunities present in the world now, how will we be prepared to welcome him at the end of time? It is not the physical sleeping we do to renew our bodies from which we are to refrain. It is the sleep of the spirit we are warned against, which fails to be alert to the Christ working all around us and to the love and compassion that characterizes the Christ. Being prepared for the Christ means growing daily into his likeness, into his loving and compassionate nature. As we prepare to journey with Mary and Joseph along the road to Bethlehem, let us be alert, keep our spirit awake to the possibilities which the Christ may send our way. As we take to the road, let us keep watch.

**ADDITIONAL SCRIPTURES: Matthew 25:1-13; Luke 12:35-40; 1 Corinthians 16:13**

**QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND/OR JOURNALING:**

1. In what ways can I watch for the coming of the Christ?
2. How can I prepare for the coming of the Christ?
3. What might I miss by not watching?

**SUGGESTIONS FOR ACTION:**

1. Keep a journal of your encounters with the Christ. List the ways in which they occurred and the outcome.
2. Explore ways in which you might encounter the Christ and watch for them.

*O, Lord, I am not sure what the best ways to encounter you may be, but I want to be open to the possibilities. My eyes are not always focused upon you and I pray that you will open my eyes so that I might see you more clearly each and every day. As I prepare to travel with Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem, open my eyes wide to see the pathway. My life is not always ready for your presence. Prepare me to respond to your arrival no matter when or how it may come. Teach me how to watch for you. In your loving and astonishing name, I pray. Amen.*

## SATURDAY – November 29<sup>th</sup>

### **CENTERING BREATH PRAYER: May my journey be blessed...with restoration.**

*Holy Christ Child, as I prepare to leave for Bethlehem to receive you once more into my life, restore a right spirit within my heart so that I can be restored to favor with my Lord. May the journey toward Bethlehem be a continual restoration. Many things have become out of balance during this past year. Let this Advent journey bring me back into focus upon my Lord and Savior through the rebirth of Christ's Spirit within my heart. May I find a blessing within the journey of restoration that leads to Bethlehem. In your blessed name, I pray. Amen.*

### **SCRIPTURE: Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19**

#### **KEY VERSE: Psalm 80:3:**

***“Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved” (NRSV).***

What does the word restoration bring to your mind? To me, it conjures up the image of an antique piece of furniture carefully stripped of its old varnish, sanded smooth, broken sections fixed or replaced and made strong again, new paint or stain applied (sometimes many coats) and a finish to make it both functional and beautiful once again. What does the one doing the restoring see in this old, broken down and often ugly piece of furniture? Perhaps, she remembers this table sitting in her grandmother's home as the center of many wonderful Thanksgiving meals. Perhaps, he remembers it as the crib his father used. Perhaps, it is a dresser that she has never seen before, but the imagination sees the beauty it might have had long ago. You have to look beyond what the eyes tell you, if you are to make the effort to restore something. We are like that old, broken down and often ugly piece of furniture. Our edges are rough, our paint or varnish is faded or chipped, our joints are failing...do I need to go on? Often, when we look at each other, or even in the mirror, we don't see much worth. How wonderful it is to have a God who sees beyond all these external flaws and sees the beautiful creation that we were meant to be!

We are about to enter the season of Advent and it can be a great adventure of reflection, as we examine ourselves and our worth to God, who sent Jesus to be born and live among us. Usually, we don't see ourselves as very worthy of that special kind of love. The wonder of the Advent season is that God does see us that way! God created each and every one of us as a unique and special person. We were given various gifts and talents to nurture and share. We were embraced in a very special love by God, the Creator. But, sin covered us with dirt, stamped on our talents and gifts, and beat us down so that the wonder and love of God was far away from us. And, then came Jesus, born as a baby and raised in our world, with all its heartaches and disappointments. He showed us a better way to live and gave us hope for the future, even when the present seems hopeless. He came to buy us back from sin and to restore us to a perfect relationship with God.

The psalmist contends that if we could see God's face we could be saved. I think the psalmist was close, but the salvation comes first, through Christ's sacrifice. Then, we can look upon the face of God with different eyes; restored eyes; eyes that have been transformed by the Holy Spirit. With these new, restored eyes we see the face of God in each person we meet. When we use these new, restored eyes we see God's glory in the lives of the people around us. Seeing God in others through the eyes of a new creation brings hope, joy, peace and especially love, both to the one doing the looking and ones being seen. Salvation has already come, we have only to receive it. Transformation continues every day as we release more and more of ourselves to the Holy Spirit to renew and restore.

Before we reach Bethlehem and the birth of the Christ Child, we have much traveling to do. The road will have many twists and turns, peaks and valleys and we will get tired and discouraged and doubt the end will ever come. But, the journey is worth the trouble. Whenever we begin to think that we cannot make it through to the end of the journey, we can always remember that God's face shines upon us and we have been saved by the Christ Child whose re-birth we travel to witness once more. Restoration is a part of the journey, a part of the twists and turns, peaks and valleys. Restoration comes with a price. We cannot become a new creation without giving up the old. It is not an easy process and requires much time and patience. It hurts to be stripped of our old varnish, sanded and repaired. We require much painting and finishing. Perhaps that is the point of the journey. But when it is finished, we shall be gathered together at home in the presence of our God forever. God's love is ready to meet us in actions of restoration, transformation and salvation today. What a glorious way to begin the Advent journey! Let us open ourselves to the process and see what this Advent will bring!

**ADDITIONAL SCRIPTURES: Zephaniah 3:18-20; Isaiah 57:17-19; 2 Corinthians 3:17-18**

**QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND/OR JOURNALING:**

1. Do I really dare to ask for restoration? Why?
2. Do I really want to be transformed into the image of Christ? Why?
3. When I look into the faces of others do I see the face of God? How?

**SUGGESTIONS FOR ACTION:**

1. Find something in your house that needs to be restored. If possible think about restoring it. Let it be a reminder of the restoration happening in your life.
2. Look at the faces of the people you see today and try to see God in them.
3. Share with a friend or loved one something you have noticed has been "restored" in his or her life.

*Awesome God, who restores my soul, let your face shine. As I begin to travel the road to Bethlehem, transform me into the image of Jesus a little more each day. Open my eyes that I may see your face in those around me. May I see with your eyes and love with your love, full of action in joy and peace. Help me to see the value of each person I see and help each one be restored to the hope only you can give. In the name of Jesus, the Christ Child, whose birth began my restoration with you, I pray. Amen.*

## 1<sup>st</sup> SUNDAY IN ADVENT – November 30<sup>th</sup>

### **CENTERING BREATH PRAYER: What wonders await...this splendid journey!**

*Dearest Lord, as I begin to travel the road to Bethlehem today, I pause to wonder what wonders may await. It is so easy to get caught up in the frustrations of the season that I often forget to watch for the wonders you have in store for me throughout the journey. A couple of days ago I thought about how I should watch for Christ in my everyday life. As I leave today to travel toward Bethlehem, help me learn how to wait for the Christ Child to lead me to himself. In his holy name, I pray. Amen.*

### **SCRIPTURE: Isaiah 64:1-9**

#### **KEY VERSE: Isaiah 64:4:**

***“For since the world began, no ear has heard, and no eye has seen a God like you, who works for those who wait for him!” (NLT).***

As we come to the end of this first week in our holiday devotionals, we finally reach the beginning of Advent. We have explored a spirit of thanksgiving and prepared to begin the Advent journey along the road to Bethlehem. Advent is a time of anticipation, preparation, joy, decorating, frustration, rushing back and forth, programs and parties, and shopping. But most of all it's a time of waiting. It seems a little contradictory to speak of waiting at the same time that we rush around doing all these things and also call this season a journey to Bethlehem. But in actuality it is a combination of all these things. Since most of us do not do waiting very well, we tend to rush around doing the shopping and decorating and attend the parties, etc. so that we won't have to wait. In this way the season of Advent will rush on by, Christmas will be here and gone, and we will have survived another busy, frustrating season without anything special happening. But what if we anticipate the wonders God might have in store for us along the road? What if we wait for God's leadership in the journey and watch (as we have already been cautioned to do) for opportunities to encounter the Christ along the way?

The KJV of the Bible in Isaiah 40:31 says, *“But they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and shall walk, and not faint.”* Now there's a thought – renew our strength – hmm? Maybe waiting is not so bad, after all. But what does it mean to “wait upon the Lord?” Does it mean to sit around and wait for God to zap us with some special revelation or super-charged energy? The NIV translation reads “hope in the Lord.” That's a little different view. Hope is a positive word that renews us when we think there is no solution to a problem. So perhaps “wait upon the Lord” means to see “hope” in a “hopeless” world. That is certainly what the Christ Child was born to bring. To “wait on” someone may also mean to serve them. To “wait upon the Lord” may mean to “serve the Lord” as in Psalm 100:2, “serve the Lord with gladness and come before his presence with singing.” So perhaps it is in serving the Lord that we renew our strength. I think, perhaps, it may be a combination of all these things. We might combine seeing “hope” where others do not and sharing that “hope” with others as one means of serving others. It's sort of like being a vessel for the “hope” that God brings into the world through the Christ Child. Sometimes, just sitting still, being quiet and alone with God, as we're doing together right now can bring a sense of peace and renewal that just 15 minutes alone might not give. Placing our hope and trust in God frees us from the worry and stress of life and brings strength to face the next challenge. And serving God through worship and action, although sometimes physically exhausting, brings an inner strength that cannot be matched.

Today's key verse, Isaiah 64:4 say that no one has ever known a God like ours, because God "works for those who wait for him!" God is not passive. God sent God's son – Jesus the Christ – so we might be reunited with God in love. This is the restoration the Christ Child came to bring. As we travel the road to Bethlehem, waiting on the Lord to work for us, let us anticipate the God of action who chose to live among us, to die for us and to come again each time we need God's love. If we are not watchful, are not waiting (in all its possible meanings), are not ready in our hearts, we may miss God's action in our own lives. Isaiah 64:8 tells us that God is a potter and we are the clay. Clay doesn't do anything! The potter gives the action; the clay receives it and becomes a vessel. God also fills the vessel with God's presence, the Holy Spirit, living within each vessel lovingly shaped to hold God's Spirit which brings the hope we can share with others. As these vessels, we can wait in the Advent season and God will flow out from us to draw others to God. This journey along the road to Bethlehem gives us a place for this "waiting" to take place and we will be renewed and this Christmas we will know that something special – something wonderful – has happened for those who "waited upon the Lord!"

### **ADDITIONAL SCRIPTURES: Isaiah 40:31; Psalm 100**

### **QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND/OR JOURNALING:**

1. What does it mean to me to "wait upon the Lord?"
2. How can I be more open to God's shaping of my vessel?
3. How can I focus on the hope of the Lord the Advent season instead of the rush, rush, rush of the world's secular holiday?

### **SUGGESTIONS FOR ACTION:**

1. Spend some time this week quietly relaxing with God (listening to music, reading the Bible or uplifting material – not for study – but just for pleasure, or writing down reflective thoughts).
2. Share some quality time with a member of your family or a close friend, just to be with him or her.

*Precious Lord, teach me to wait. I'm not very good at waiting. I can think of all kinds of things I could be doing. Help me to remember that the doing, when it's done with you, can also be waiting. Help me to be a reflection of your love to others as we "wait" together to celebrate the birthday of our Lord. As this season of Advent rushes on, help me to stay centered on the reason for the season – Jesus – and what He means to the world. Help me to remember that you are a God of action – actions to draw us to you out of your vast love. Let me also be a person of action, showing your love to all around me as I travel the road to Bethlehem. Let me not lean on my own strength, but remember you are within me loving them. In the name of and for love of Jesus, the Christ, I pray. Amen.*