

WEEK #2 – BEGIN THE JOURNEY IN PEACE
December 1-7, 2008

MONDAY – December 1st

CENTERING BREATH PRAYER: Prepare my heart...as I travel in peace.

O God, who calls to us to prepare for your coming, I seek your peace and the comfort only your Holy Spirit can bring. As I begin to travel the road to Bethlehem, teach me how to seek you and to prepare the way for your Son to enter into my life more completely. In the name of the Christ Child I so eagerly await, I pray. Amen.

SCRIPTURE: Isaiah 40:1-5

KEY VERSES: Isaiah 40:3-4:

(3) “A voice of one calling: ‘In the desert prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God. (4) Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain” (NIV).

Yesterday we officially began the season of Advent. We spent some time looking at the concept of waiting upon the Lord and how we might renew our strength through that waiting. But Advent is not just a time of waiting (in whatever meaning you have decided to accept), it is also a time of preparation. Now here is an activity to which I can well relate – prepare meals, prepare our homes (the decorating, etc.), prepare gifts (the shopping and wrapping, etc.), prepare for the parties and the programs, but how do we “*prepare the way for the Lord?*” How do we make “*a highway for our God?*” And where is the “*wilderness?*” Where are the “*valleys,*” “*mountains,*” and “*rough ground?*” John, called by some “the Baptist” and others “the Baptizer,” lived in the desert (“*wilderness*”) and prepared God’s people for the coming of Jesus by calling them to repentance. He called them to see that they needed a Savior so when Jesus came, they would be ready to receive him. Even in the secular world we see this idea as Santa “*knows who’s naughty and nice,*” projecting the idea to children that the good gifts are only for the well behaved (good) children and not for the naughty (bad). God also has wonderful gifts for the righteous (good) people and eternal condemnation for the unrighteous (bad). Without repentance, without asking for forgiveness, without preparation, we are not ready to receive these “good gifts” because we have not recognized our need for a Savior. Without repentance we are not classified with the righteous since we cannot be righteous without a Savior and we cannot accept a Savior if we do not recognize that we need one.

As we begin to travel towards Bethlehem, perhaps our first act of preparation needs to be one of introspection. Have I indeed repented of my sinful nature and asked for forgiveness? Have I truly accepted Jesus as my Savior and my Lord? If your answer is no – this Advent season is a good time to prepare yourself to accept God’s promises available to you, by repentance of your sinful nature so that your heart, as well as your mind, is ready to accept not only the Christ Child, but the Savior and Lord you are seeking. If your answer is yes, then look for obstacles that you have placed in your life that make it difficult for you to receive God’s good gifts including the gift of peace. It may be some major “mountain” of sin that you’ve never allowed God to remove. It may be a “valley” of despair that you have not entrusted to God to bridge for you. It may be lots of “rough ground” made up of small hurts and resentments built up so that your “*highway for your God*” to reach you is bumpy instead of smooth. Such obstacles hinder our peace so our road to Bethlehem is difficult instead of

peaceful. Looking for these things and repairing them is a process. Don't expect them to all jump out at you at once and smooth away overnight. In fact, this preparation is a part of life's faith journey, not just the short journey to Bethlehem this Advent season. But most of all, don't try to do all the work yourself – remember to “*wait upon the Lord*” who is present with you and will work along side you to do this preparation. I think the most important difference between being a Christian and other faiths is that we are not alone. We have a living God who is always present and always works with us so that we may become the person God wishes us to be. So even though we are challenged to “*make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God,*” at the same time we may confidently turn this task over to the living God to accomplish rather than worrying about how we can finish such a monumental task. God desires to be a companion, not a tyrant or some distant deity who only deigns to notice us once in a great while (such as Judgment Day). Only a God who loves us and desires to be with us would give up his only Son to come live with us and then to die for us. It means a lot more than Eternal Life – it also means having a living, loving God present with us each and every day. Even in our introspection and attempts to change our sinful nature, we can count on the loving presence of our God, who wants us to become closer and closer to God each day. This time of preparation can be one of joy and peace and bring us immense comfort because we have such a loving God. Our “*highway for our God*” can be straight and smooth, even over the “mountains” and in the deep “valleys” of life because we are never alone on the road.

ADDITIONAL SCRIPTURES: Matthew 5:43-48; Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13; Mark 1:1-8

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND/OR JOURNALING:

1. What obstacles have I put in God's path between us?
2. What hurts and resentments have I held onto that make my journey to God bumpy?
3. Have I truly repented of my sinful nature and entrusted my life to Christ as my Lord and my Savior?

SUGGESTIONS FOR ACTION:

1. Find someone who has hurt you and pray for him or her today. Pray for God to work in both your heart to forgive and his or her heart to draw nearer to God.
2. Make a list of the hurts, resentments and obstacles that you thought of and entrust them one by one to God to overcome.

Dear Lord, help me to prepare a way for you to come into my heart this Advent. Help me to forgive others who may not have you in their hearts and who are totally frustrated in this busy time of year. Help me to surrender my hurts and disappointments into your care instead of throwing them onto your highway, keeping you away. Bless those who have hurt me and let them also turn to you this holiday season. Help me travel the road to Bethlehem in peace. In the name of and for love of Jesus, the Christ, I pray. Amen.

TUESDAY – December 2nd

CENTERING BREATH PRAYER: Help me listen for your voice...as I travel along.

Dear Lord, help me to listen to your words and learn of you. Open my ears so that I might hear you more clearly each day I we move further along the road to Bethlehem. Show me the faithfulness that brings your peace and your steadfast love and show me how to live in righteousness as your child. Prepare my heart to receive your Son into my life once again. In the name of Jesus, the Christ Child, I pray. Amen.

SCRIPTURE: Psalm 85:8-13

KEY VERSES: Psalm 85:8, 10:

(8) “I will listen to what God the Lord will say; he promises peace to his people, his saints – but let them not return to folly (10) Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other” (NRSV).

Preparation; I'm sure we're going to get a little tired of that word. But, after all, isn't that what Advent is all about? Well, we did say something about waiting, too. The waiting is supposed to renew our strength. And, boy do we need that during this time of year! So, we're waiting and we're also doing a little introspection – looking into our hearts to see what we haven't, as yet, turned over to God to handle. So now, in Psalm 85 we're being asked to listen. Uh oh! Listen! That's even harder than waiting for some of us. And even worse, we're supposed to listen to God! HOW?! I mean, come on – have you ever heard God speak out loud, you know, with words, like people? In fact, we look very suspiciously at someone who hears “voices.”

But, God does speak to us. The Bible is full of God's words to us. Are they any less valid for being written instead of spoken into our ears? God also “speaks” to us through other people – but of course, that means we have to sift what's being said through a spiritual sifter to know if those words are really God or just that person. (I guess that means you had better sift my words, too.) Sometimes God speaks to us in our inner being – not necessarily in words – but in feelings and impulses through the Holy Spirit living inside us. But, we need to send these through that spiritual sifter, too, to see if they are consistent with what we know about God. Whew! I'm not sure I'm really up to all that! First you tell me to read the Bible to listen to God, then you tell me to listen to other people and inner feelings and then you tell me I have to be careful to see what comes from God and what comes from people! I don't think I'm really ready to listen to God.... But you are reading this – that's a start. And, you can at least read the scriptures along with these devotionals. God can speak to you through them. You may even decide to read the suggestions for additional reading. You can also pray for God to open your spiritual ears to hear what God wants you to hear and make a part of you. Remember, listening to God needs to be cultivated and is a process, even as “*preparing a highway for our God*” is a process. As God says to us in 2 Peter 3:8 “*With the Lord a day is like a thousand years and a thousand years are like a day*” (NIV). So, if we take a lifetime (far less than a thousand years) to learn how to listen, or surrender to God, or anything else we try to accomplish in our spiritual life, to God it will be like we did it all in an hour or so. What a wonderfully patient and loving God we serve!

When we listen with our heart, instead of just our ears, God blesses us. We may stumble, misunderstand, “hear” it wrong, but God will still bless us. Why? Because “*we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose*” (Romans 8:28 NIV). That's a promise we can hold in our hearts

always. These are words of our God that sing in our hearts and bring peace into our souls. They bring us peace in the storms of life and tell us that our efforts to know and understand God are appreciated, even when we fall short. (And isn't that everyday?) Some of you reading these devotionals may say – that's easy for you to say – you've got a great devotional life! But that's *far* from the truth. God is teaching me and speaking to me as I write these as much (and maybe even more) as teaching and speaking to you (I hope). My listening skills and my progress toward what God wants me to be are just as halting and hesitant as anyone else's. I'm just going about it in a little different way.

Faith that God is in charge and sees in us the finished vessel, not the imperfect one we see in the mirror, can bring us a sense of peace. But where does that faith come from? Romans 10:17 tells us that *"faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ"* (NIV). So, we're back to listening – and not just to listening, but, actually hearing God's message. Hearing God's message means to grab hold of it and make it a part of you. Our key verse Psalm 85:10 tells us that love, faithfulness, righteousness and peace are all related. So then, God's love, displayed so wondrously in Jesus – his birth, life, death and resurrection, – produces in us faith as we hear the message and make that message a part of us. By accepting that message we are made whole and God sees the finished vessel God is creating in us. That act of love and creation within us can calm and liberate us into that *"peace that passes all understanding"* spoken of in Philippians 4:7. Let us hear and rejoice in the message that the angels brought to the shepherds so many years ago *"Fear not: for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be for all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior, which is Christ the Lord...Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men"* (Luke 2:10-11, 14 KJV).

And so, we *"wait upon the Lord"* renewing our strength, and repent of our sinful nature, smoothing a *"highway for our God,"* and now listen to God's message of joy and peace so that we may hear the message and build our faith. The road to Bethlehem brings us many opportunities to do all three.

**ADDITIONAL SCRIPTURES: Isaiah 40:1-2, 11; 2 Peter 3:8-15a; Romans 4:24-5:5;
Luke 2:10-14**

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND/OR JOURNALING:

1. How do I listen to the Lord?
2. What is God saying to me today?
3. How can I be more open to God's word in my life?

SUGGESTIONS FOR ACTION:

1. Spend some extra time in quiet reflection and prayer for your spiritual ears to hear God's message to you.
2. Be a messenger of peace to someone today – a quiet, loving presence for someone caught in the "storms" of the day.

Dear Lord, thank you for your wondrous love that would send your only Son to live among us and to reconcile us to you. Help me to listen to you today as I travel so that I might be open to your guidance. Open my spiritual ears that I may hear your message. Show me a glimpse of the vessel I may become by your power. And, help me to bring your peace into someone's life today. With praise and wonder for your love and in your Son's name, I pray. Amen.

WEDNESDAY – December 3rd

CENTERING BREATH PRAYER: As I travel along...help me anticipate you in peace.

Ever loving God, teach me the joys of anticipation. Help me learn to savor the experiences which you give during this busy time of year. Give me comfort in my times of anxiety and peace within the rush. Prepare my heart for your Son as I continue my journey of faith with you. In the name of the Christ Child I eagerly await, I pray. Amen.

SCRIPTURE: 2 Peter 3:8-15a

KEY VERSE: 2 Peter 3:14:

“So then, dear friends, since you are looking forward to this, make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him” (NIV).

Advent is not just a time of waiting and preparation it's also a time of expectation and anticipation. Our key verse reminds us that our anticipation, our *“looking forward to this”* requires effort on our part *“to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him.”* But, this verse follows 2 Peter 3:8 that tells us that *“to God a day is like a thousand years and a thousand years is like a day.”* God is patient and as we've talked about before, God does not expect us to become perfect instantaneously. We can all relate to this idea of time being both slow and yet at the same time, rushing past. How many times have we looked back and said, *“Where has the time gone?”* At the same time we may also look back and have trouble remembering something done a few days ago because so much has happened it seems like a year since that time. Although the waiting and the anticipation may seem to take forever (remember the old ketchup commercial; Anticipation – *“It's slow good”*), events may rush on by so that when Christmas does come, we'll say, *“Where has the time gone?”* But, it is also full of expectation of wonderful things. So, anticipation is patience with peace and joy. But, it is not passive waiting – it's active waiting. Advent is full of action (you know – the shopping, the cleaning, the decorating, the parties...).

So, how can we keep the joy, the wonderful expectation, and the peace in this season? That's not an easy question to answer, because we so often get caught up in the activities of the season and just get carried along for the ride. But, if we can savor each moment along the way, this anticipation can truly be special. Let's take a look at how we decorate, for example. First of all – for whom are you decorating – yourself or others? Why are you decorating – for joy in the Lord you want to share, or because it's the proper thing to do? How are you decorating – as drudgery, something that has to be done, or as an outward expression of the joy you have in the season? It is hard to savor the experience when it is done as drudgery, something that is expected and to meet someone else's expectations. Do you love the Lord? Are you indeed looking forward to his coming with great joy? If your answer to these questions is yes, then surround yourself with things that remind you of that joy. Enjoy the tree as a symbol of his everlasting love, the wreaths that remind us of our eternal, never-ending God, the bells that proclaim the good news with their ringing, and the carols that sing in your heart. Take time to savor the memories that the ornaments evoke. Add new memories with new ideas and new decorations or new ways to use the old. Turn on some music that you enjoy and, if possible, share the time with someone you love. If time is a problem, do it a little at a time, but enjoy it as you go – savor the experience. Other activities can be savored as well – the shopping – remember the love or friendship you bear the people for whom you are shopping. You may want to do a little at a time, rather than trying to do it all at the last minute (very frustrating). Another activity that's difficult for most of us to savor is the cleaning.

Perhaps, if we can put on some music and sing or hum along while we work we can at least make it a little more bearable. Are you beginning to get my drift? The events in which we participate are not in control of us unless we allow them to do so. With God's help we can have control over our responses to the events that surround us during this wondrous, but hectic season. We will be speaking more about this in later devotionals, but for now just remember that savoring each moment of each day is a way of saying, "thank you" to God in all things as Ephesians 5:20 reminds us to do. As we travel the road to Bethlehem, savoring the moments as we go, peace will become more apparent as the frustration level goes down.

If you have read the entire passage from 2 Peter, you know that the key verse refers to anticipation of our Lord's second coming rather than his birth. Last week we also looked at a scripture passage about the second coming. Perhaps we look at this because, in spite of popular opinion, Christmas is not the end of the story, but the beginning. The second coming is the end of the story. Just as the whole of creation rejoiced in the beginning of God's plan of salvation for all of humankind, so, too, should we anticipate the final coming of our Lord. In its coming, all the old, imperfect things will come to an end and all that's beautiful and wonderful will come to completion in Christ. So our sense of anticipation in the beginning of God's plan, the birth of Jesus, is certainly joyous and noble, but it shouldn't be the end. If we leave Jesus in the manger or even on the cross, we have missed the whole point of Christ's birth. Luke 2:22-38 tells about Simeon and Anna, two people who had spent their lives in anticipation of the arrival of the Messiah. When they saw the young Jesus, brought to the temple for dedication, they recognized him as that Messiah. Their waiting was over. God had fulfilled the promises of the scriptures. But the Messiah was far more than just the Savior of the Jewish nation. He is the Savior of all humankind. And, he is returning – whether you believe he is coming in the clouds as literal scriptures say or coming in our hearts as we respond to Him – he is coming! Let us rejoice and await his coming with great anticipation: "It's slow good."

ADDITIONAL SCRIPTURES: Ephesians 5:18-20; Luke 2:22-38

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND/OR JOURNALING:

1. How can I savor each and every moment during this day?
2. Am I allowing the events around me to control my life?
3. Am I anticipating Christ's return in glory with the same joy that I anticipate the celebration of his birth?

SUGGESTIONS FOR ACTION:

1. Find ways you can savor the moments in the activities of this day.
2. Do something today with a friend or family member and share it fully in joy.

Holy Father, help me to savor each and every moment today in the peace of your presence. Help me be open to the joys of each activity, even ones which do not appear to be joyful. May I give you thanks and praise in all situations, not just the pleasant ones. Show me how to be a witness to the love and joy that the upcoming celebration of Christ's birth should be. Let me anticipate your second coming with as much joy as I anticipate celebrating your birth. With love and wonder in your name, I pray in peace. Amen.

THURSDAY – December 4th

CENTERING BREATH PRAYER: Comfort my heart...and let me travel in peace.

Comforting God, as I go through this day along the road, keep me in your comforting hand. Prepare me to spread your comfort and joy to those around me. Show me ways to be available to others while fulfilling the tasks of this day. In your loving name, I pray. Amen.

SCRIPTURE: Isaiah 40:1-2, 11:

KEY VERSE: Isaiah 40:1:

“Comfort ye, comfort ye my people,’ saith your God” (KJV).

“Comfort ye, comfort ye my people,’ saith your God” (KJV). The great masterpiece by Handel called “The Messiah” begins with these words. It begins quietly with a solo tenor. Like most Handel compositions, it soon becomes very complex, but it begins simply and quietly with these simple words. *“Comfort ye my people.”* God says we are to comfort his people. But, who are these people of God and when do they need comfort? In 2 Peter 3:9 from yesterday’s reading we learned that God is patient and delays the final coming because God wants everyone to come to repentance. So, God must consider everyone to be his people. That means we should be ready to comfort anyone who needs it, whenever they need it.

Yesterday we talked about anticipation as active waiting. Part of that activity can be bringing comfort to those around us who are hurting. For most, Christmas is something to look forward to, to anticipate with great joy. For some, however, it is a time of loneliness, frustration and dread. There are many, right here in our midst, who have never learned the wonderful joy that accompanies knowledge and belief in our Savior. There are others who have belief, but who have experienced circumstances that have beaten them down so that they have lost their sense of joy and anticipation and especially their peace. Perhaps, those of us who still know that peace, comfort and joy have failed to share it with those who are so badly in need of it. If we, as our key verse yesterday stated, are to *“be found spotless, blameless and at peace with God,”* we need to be actively looking for these people. I know, I know, this is such a busy time of year, who has time to go out looking for more things to do? That’s not precisely what I mean by actively looking for lonely people. What I do mean, is that we need to be open, so that we recognize opportunities to meet the needs of those people around us who are not filled with our peace, joy and anticipation in the season. It doesn’t take a great deal of time to be friendly and open to people around us. During this time of year, people are often abrupt and cold to one another. Simple courtesy, a smile and acknowledging the presence of those around us can mean a great deal to someone who is feeling lonely, harried or unwelcome. What may be harder to imagine is the added zest and simple enjoyment that you will have in looking for these opportunities. After all, isn’t your day more enjoyable when you are smiling, speaking cheerfully with those around you and genuinely relating peaceably with those you encounter? Often a lot of our own frustrations come because we react instead of respond to the circumstances around us. In spite of what we like to believe, the circumstances around us do not control our attitudes. We’ve all known people going through awful storms in their lives, terrible illness, financial trials, loss of loved ones, etc., whose attitudes are cheerful, pleasant and peaceful. Such circumstances could easily lead to bitterness, loneliness or frustration. But, circumstances are not in control, God is. How we face circumstances is a matter of choice. What others see when we face life’s circumstances is our witness. How we respond to people around us is the greatest witness of all. So, when we are rushing around shipping, partying, decorating, etc., let’s respond positively to those around us and witness to our Lord.

Perhaps, it is also good to be reminded once more that how we treat others is how we treat Jesus (Matthew 25:31-40). The scripture speaks of the big things – feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and imprisoned, etc. But, if we do these large things unto our Lord when we do them unto others, is it not safe to think that speaking harshly and impatiently to others is also the same as speaking harshly and impatiently to our Lord? If we believe this to be true, then, perhaps, we will think a little more before we speak. Perhaps, we will remember to apologize when we react unfavorably instead of respond with thoughtfulness and love. When we can do this, we witness to the joy and peace that Jesus came to bring us. We become peacemakers instead of the uncaring, insensitive people who see nothing to celebrate in this season. And, perhaps, we can begin to appreciate the fact that Christmas (or Advent) is not just a day, or a season, but a fact to celebrate and anticipate all the time. Perhaps, when we become peacemakers and comfort bringers to others, we also will find comfort for ourselves on the road to Bethlehem.

ADDITIONAL SCRIPTURES: Matthew 25:31-40; 2 Peter 3:8-15a

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND/OR JOURNALING:

1. What does it mean to me to comfort God's people?
2. Who do I know in need of some special, kind words today?
3. Am I reacting or responding to the circumstances around me?

SUGGESTIONS FOR ACTION:

1. Be especially aware of the people with whom you come into contact today and go out of your way to respond to them in a positive way.
2. Be a friend to someone new today.

O Lord, thank you for your great patience. Open my eyes to see those around me in need of your comfort. Let me be open to be a peacemaker for someone today. Help me to be a witness to the love and joy that the upcoming celebration of Christ's birth should be. Let people around me know that you are in charge of my life and that you are the only hope for the world. Bring a sense of hope to someone today who is truly in need of your hope and, if it is your will, let me be the bringer of that hope. In the name of my Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ, I pray. Amen.

FRIDAY – December 5th

CENTERING BREATH PRAYER: May I rejoice along the road...so that you will speak peace.

God of peace, speak to me today as I continue to travel . Show me how to rejoice and give you thanks in the midst of this busy and sometimes difficult season. Fill me with your peace within all the tasks of this day and help me to speak peace to those around me. In your holy name, I pray. Amen.

SCRIPTURE: Zechariah 9:9-10

KEY VERSES: Zechariah 9a, 10b

(9a) “Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion; shout, O daughter of Jerusalem... (10a) And he shall speak peace unto the heathen: and his dominion shall be from sea even to sea and from the river even to the ends of the earth” (KJV).

“Rejoice in the Lord and he shall speak peace” (author’s paraphrase). Simple, right? Well, yes and no. The concept is simple: rejoice and God will speak peace, but the reality is, we are not able to rejoice easily in all circumstances; therefore we often have no peace. One of my favorite, though less often sung, Christmas carols is “I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day.” The words were written by Henry W. Longfellow many years ago. It speaks of the bells ringing to proclaim Christ’s birth and the message of the angels to the shepherds declaring that He (Jesus) brings “Peace on earth, good will to men!” In the third verse the author speaks of despair over the lack of peace, with hate being strong and mocking God’s message.

Perhaps, you are one who needs the comforting we talked about yesterday. How do you rejoice and give thanks when someone you love dearly is nearing death or just passed away? Or, perhaps, you’ve just received word that you or someone you love has cancer or AIDS or some other major debilitating disease. Or, you’ve just lost your job, your marriage, or...you fill in the blank. If you are there, perhaps that third verse of despair of peace on earth seems the end of the story. But, it’s not. God’s promises are real and neither the song, nor God’s promise of peace on earth ends there. The song goes on to say that the bells keep on ringing, proclaiming that God is not dead or asleep and that wrong will fail and right prevail. God sent Jesus to bring eternal peace. He does this through reconciliation; first by reconciling us with God, but, also, by teaching us to be reconciled with each other. The angels in Bethlehem proclaimed both peace and good will toward men – not just with God, but one another, through Jesus who was finally arriving in this world. This was something to shout about, something to rejoice in!

But, how?! How do we rejoice when everything around us is crumbling? I think the key is trust. If we have given our life into God’s care and asked Jesus to be our Lord as well as our Savior, we can trust God completely. That means that no matter what our circumstances are, no matter how bad it seems to be, God is able to handle it and will do so. We can rejoice, because we know the end of the story. A few years ago, when I was facing surgery, a well-meaning friend told me I should seek a second opinion, because someone she knew had the same surgery and died. Now, my surgery was not likely to lead to death, but it was certainly a possibility. I found out something about myself that day. I realized that I was not afraid, because I trusted God, even if there would be complications, pain or even death. I had complete peace and I knew that it came from the trust and fact that I knew who I was and whose I was. I could rejoice in that renewed faith. In Philippians 4:4 we are told to “rejoice in the Lord always.” Then in verse 6 we are told, “Do not be anxious about anything, but in

everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God" (NIV). I think that perhaps verse 8, which tells us to think about things which are true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent or praiseworthy, gives us a clue as to how this may be accomplished. It is difficult to be anxious when I'm thinking about a beautiful view, listening to beautiful music, thinking about true friends, remembering past joys or dreaming new dreams for the future. When the pain and anxiety of the moment threatens to overwhelm you, try changing your thoughts. Perhaps, you will find yourself rejoicing in the Lord instead of despairing; and being filled with the *"peace that passes all understanding"* instead of pain, loneliness or anxiety.

I found it very interesting that the key verse 10b reads *"and he shall speak peace to the heathens"* in the KJV, *"He will proclaim peace to the nations"* in the NIV and *"he shall command peace to the nations"* in the NRSV. *"Speak," "proclaim,"* and *"command."* In some ways these seem different, but God spoke and the universe was created, the angels proclaimed peace to the shepherds, and Jesus commands peace for all. God doesn't *"suggest"* peace, or say we *"might have peace,"* God *"commands"* peace. It is a promise and it is absolute. And, as one of my former pastors always said, "That's good news."

ADDITIONAL SCRIPTURES: Psalm 85:8-10; Philippians 4:4-9

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND/OR JOURNALING:

1. How can I rejoice when I really don't feel like rejoicing?
2. Do I really trust God to take care of my life in all circumstances?
3. When I'm feeling overwhelmed by my life, what are some good things I can think about to break the chains that keep me from rejoicing?

SUGGESTIONS FOR ACTION:

1. Make a list of good thoughts that you might dwell upon when faced with hard circumstances.
2. Spend some time with someone who is hurting today and share some good thoughts with them.
3. Write a note to someone who is hurting today and share some good memories you have experienced together.

Dear Lord, I rejoice in your birth and look forward to celebrating it with you once more. Thought sometimes I may not feel like rejoicing, I thank you for loving me enough to send Jesus that I might be reconciled to you and my fellow human beings. Help me to trust you completely, even when things seem totally out of control. Fill me with your peace so that I can proclaim the good news of Jesus and witness to your great glory and love for us. Help me be a peace-bringer to someone who is without peace as I walk the road to Bethlehem, today. In the name of the one who is worthy of all trust and praise, Jesus, my Lord and Savior, I pray. Amen.

SATURDAY – December 6th

CENTERING BREATH PRAYER: Holy Christ Child...be my shepherd of peace.

Holy Christ Child, who became my shepherd, I look forward to the celebration of your birth toward which I travel. Help me to understand the care you give each of your children like a shepherd cares for the sheep. Show me how I need to depend on your love and care each day of my life. Be with me this day as I call upon your name in which I pray. Amen.

SCRIPTURE: Isaiah 40:9-11

KEY VERSE: Isaiah 40:11:

“He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep” (NRSV).

Sheep and shepherds, what an unlikely group to be the first to hear the good news! Isn't that just like our God, always doing things in the most unlikely ways! I mean shepherds, for goodness sake – poor, uneducated, etc. Who's going to listen to a bunch of shepherds hearing angels in the middle of the night!? And sheep – dirty, smelly and dumb – I mean really dumb animals! Of course, I have to admit shepherds and sheep were not quite as unusual back then as they would be now. And, they were awake while everyone else was asleep. King David started out as a shepherd and he turned out pretty well. Come to think about it, God was actually pretty fond of shepherds. In fact, Jesus was later to call himself the Good Shepherd in John 10:11-18 – taking care of all of us lost sheep. Uh-oh – now I'm comparing myself to some of those dirty, smelly and DUMB sheep! Well, Isaiah 53:6 says, *“We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all”* (NIV). You see, sheep take a lot of care; they tend to wander off, they follow anyone they think of as a leader, they have problems with their feet (hooves), predatory animals (like wolves) find them easy prey – especially the lambs, and they eat the grass clear to the roots so it can't grow back and give them more food! All in all, they take a lot of care.

So, how am I like one of them? Well, let's see; I'm willful (I want to do things my own way), I listen to everyone who says, “follow me” (sometimes), I'm greedy (I want to keep everything for myself and have it all now rather than sharing it with others – like sheep eating all the grass so cows can't find anything to eat), I get hoof-in-mouth disease often (you know, saying something hurtful, or stupid without thinking), and I say and do and think things all the time that are unclean or unhealthy that must stink in God's nostrils. Come to think of it, I really do need a shepherd! Of course, sheep are really so dumb they are also innocent. I can't always say that about myself; however, God sent his Son, Jesus, to be my shepherd. He took all my sins (all those awful characteristics, thoughts, and actions) upon himself so that I could be innocent as a lamb! Then, after all of that, he gently leads those of us who have others depending on us (like children, parents, spouses, Sunday school classes, friends or a congregation). When we are weary (like a little lamb after a long day climbing the hillside) he tenderly picks us up and holds us, giving us comfort. You know, maybe it's not so bad being like a sheep when you have a shepherd as good as ours! In Matthew 11:28-29, Jesus invites us to come to him when we are weary, anxious, or burdened with anything. We can give him all our troubles – we can trust him to handle them. He promised to give us rest (and complete peace). How does he accomplish this? Well, there are many avenues God uses; sometimes by leading us to specific scriptures or spiritually uplifting books, sometimes through music, a beautiful painting, a poem, a sunset (or sunrise if you're able to be up that soon) and often God uses people – friends, pastors, counselors, etc. Prayer and meditation or even journaling can

also give you rest. Since God often uses people, sometimes we are the receiver of the comfort, but sometimes we are the giver. Sometimes, sharing the company and the laughter of friends can be the best of all. Of course, to have a friend means you have to be a friend. Maybe there is someone around you who needs a friend and they are looking for you and don't yet know it. But always, whether you have a friend around or are alone, you have Jesus, who is the best friend of all, and he never leaves you and he always loves you and accepts you – even when you have hoof-in-mouth disease or have wandered away from him. Just ask for him to be there and he is! No wonder the angels proclaimed, “*Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace, good will toward men*” (Luke 2:14 KJV). This marvelous “good shepherd” has just been born – who better to hear the good news first than shepherds. And we, like the one “*who brings good tidings to Zion*” in Isaiah 40:9 can lift up our voices and shout, *Behold your God!*” to the world. This Advent we can be bold, rejoicing in the middle of any turmoil because we have the Good Shepherd to lead us and even carry us when we need it. We can comfort those around us because we have received comfort. What a God! Shepherds and sheep, what perfect recipients of God's good news!

ADDITIONAL SCRIPTURES: John 10:11-18; Isaiah 53:6; Matthew 11:28-29; Luke 2:8-20

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND/OR JOURNALING:

1. How am I like a sheep?
2. How am I like a little, lost lamb?
3. How can I be a shepherd for other sheep?

SUGGESTIONS FOR ACTION:

1. Do something unexpected for a friend today (send a card, call him on the phone, send a funny e-mail, leave something on her doorstep, etc.).
2. Invite someone you see as a future friend to do something with you soon (maybe even today).

Good Shepherd, thank you for taking such wonderful care of me, one of your sheep. I am so wayward and often so lost. Help me to turn to you first as my friend and companion. Show me another lost lamb around me who needs my friendship. Use me during this Advent journey to reach out and make someone else's burden a little lighter. And help me spread the good news of peace on earth amidst the commercialism that surrounds me. In the name of Jesus, my Good Shepherd, I pray. Amen.

2nd SUNDAY IN ADVENT – December 7th

CENTERING BREATH PRAYER: May I build relationships...conceived in peace.

Dear Lord and Savior, as I continue to prepare for your birth, fill me with your Spirit and renew my heart with your saving grace. Teach me how to love so that I might bring peace and comfort to others. Show me how my relationship with you needs to carry over into my relationships with others. In your saving love, I pray. Amen.

SCRIPTURE: Mark 1:1-8

KEY VERSES: Mark 1:7-8:

(7) “He proclaimed, ‘The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals.’ (8) I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit” (NRSV).

Well, here we are, nearly two weeks into these devotionals and the end of the first full week of Advent. Are you prepared yet; got all your cards out, shopping and wrapping finished, all the baking done and your house all cleaned and decorated and ready for all your guests? Are you laughing at me in hysterics yet? How about your heart? Is it full to overflowing with peace and good cheer? Are all your faults corrected and are you ready to proclaim his coming to everyone you meet? Have you smoothed out all the bumps on your highway for the Lord and are you joyfully and expectantly waiting for his appearance? If you weren't laughing hysterically before, you should be rolling around on the floor by now! Because, if you can say yes to all my questions here, you are already a saint in heaven waiting in perfection for all the rest of us mortals to get with the program.

So, okay, we're not all prepared and ready for the Lord or our guests yet. We've come back to that preparation idea. And, our scriptures have taken us back to John “the Baptizer” preparing the way of the Lord. All this last week we have been working on relationships. I recently saw a poster that read “Everything I need to know I learned in Kindergarten” and I have since learned that it is the title of a book by Robert Fulghum. It went on to list some of the rules we had then and how they relate to us as adults. I was really impressed with it and could see the reality behind it. But, Jesus went a step further and distilled how we should live into just two rules: 1. “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind” (Matthew 22:37 NIV) and 2. “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:39 NIV). All the rest of the law of God and most of our man-made rules stem from one of these two commandments. They tell us what our relationship with God and people should be. It's all about love – not *eros*, the romantic, sexual emotion – but *agape*, the unconditional, selfless, sacrificial love – the kind of love that would lead God to hang on a criminal's cross and die for you and for me. This is why John says in vs. 7 that he (John) is not worthy to stoop down and fasten his (Jesus') sandals. John also tells us in vs. 8 that Jesus will “baptize with the Holy Spirit.” John teaches us to repent and turn to God, but Jesus takes us beyond repentance and into a relationship with God. It is in the relationship that we meet the Holy Spirit. All week we've been working on our relationship with God, through repentance and trust, the renewing of our minds, listening for God's direction and taking comfort from our Good Shepherd. We've also been working on relationships with the people around us, giving comfort, renewing friendships, forming new relationships into friendships and shepherding our fellow sheep. To build these relationships we have an extraordinary source of strength and wisdom, comfort and power in the Holy Spirit who dwells within us. Without Jesus we could not have the special relationship with the Father that his sacrifice made possible. Without the Holy Spirit, we would not have the unlimited access to Jesus for our daily comfort and remembrance that he

promised to us in John 14:16-17. Although Jesus was with the disciples, the Holy Spirit is in us giving us that unlimited access to God – the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. It is also that same Holy Spirit who leads us into Christ-like relationships with one another if we will only follow! When we do follow, we prepare the way of the Lord, like John, for others to see the truth of the Christmas season. And, that truth will set us free to rejoice and proclaim our joy for all to see. If we build these kinds of relationships, it won't matter if all the cleaning and decorating got done, or the cards all got sent, and what we do get done will be done with peace and joy because of the relationships we have built not only with God, but with each other. When we are weary and overburdened with trying too hard to fit everything into our day, we can turn to our Holy Spirit Comforter for rest and renewal. As we continue to travel along the road to Bethlehem, we can do so in peace and the comfort that we have in our relationship with the Christ Child and the Savior he became. We can also travel content that the Christ Child helps us with the relationships which we have with the people all around us.

Are we all prepared and ready yet? Of course not! But we are getting there one step at a time. Should we be ready yet? Of course not! We've only begun to prepare. We don't need to have everything done yet. But we are on our way. And the journey is exciting!

ADDITIONAL SCRIPTURES: Matthew 22:36-40; John 14:15-21; John 16:5-7, 12-15

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND/OR JOURNALING:

1. What kind of relationship am I building with God?
2. Am I aware of the Holy Spirit within me and the power he gives me to build my relationships?
3. What kind of relationships am I building with the people I see today?

SUGGESTIONS FOR ACTION:

1. Thank the Lord for living within you and intentionally share your day with God.
2. Think of something new to do with someone with whom you are building a relationship.

Holy Father, Blessed Redeemer and Comforting Holy Spirit, I humbly thank you for loving me enough to want to build a relationship with me. I am well aware that I do not deserve your love. You are so wonderful and your love is so complete that I am in total awe. It is incredible that you would want my love enough to bear my sins. It is even more amazing that you would want to dwell in me, sharing every moment of my day as I continue the journey to Bethlehem! Make those moments special, so that your glory will be seen by those around me today. Help my interactions with those I meet today reflect your love for them. In all your wonderful names, I pray. Amen.