



taking
THE Advent
story
home



an Advent devotional
from Vibrant Faith Ministries®




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Dear Friends,

Getting back to the truth and simplicity of the Advent and Christmas season – isn't this what we strive to do? That was our goal, and hope, for Taking the Advent Story Home. We want to help you experience the season of Advent, as you prepare your hearts and homes for Christmas, without adding to the clamor.

Each day of this devotional eBook provides a Scripture, taken from Taking Faith Home or Taking God's Story Home (both of Vibrant Faith's lectionary-based [bulletin inserts](#)). Also included daily is a short devotion and four-key activities to do with your loved ones. The whole Vibrant Faith team came together to author this devotional, and each day is fully written by a member. Our office team, coaches, many board members, several associates and writers for the Faith Formation Learning Exchange and Vibrant Faith @ Home have contributed to this devotional!

We are so excited to be able to offer it as our gift to you, and pray this little eBook is a blessing to you and yours this Advent season, as you prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus.

Blessings,
Anna Rendell, VFM Social Media Coach & Manager
Editor of Taking the Advent Story Home



Luke 2:4-14 (NLT)

...because Joseph was a descendant of King David, he had to go to Bethlehem in Judea, David's ancient home. He traveled there from the village of Nazareth in Galilee. He took with him Mary, his fiancée, who was now obviously pregnant. And while they were there, the time came for her baby to be born. She gave birth to her first child, a son. She wrapped him snugly in strips of cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no lodging available for them. That night there were shepherds staying in the fields nearby, guarding their flocks of sheep. Suddenly, an angel of the Lord appeared among them, and the radiance of the Lord's glory surrounded them. They were terrified, but the angel reassured them. "Don't be afraid!" he said. "I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people. The Savior—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born today in Bethlehem, the city of David! And you will recognize him by this sign: You will find a baby wrapped snugly in strips of cloth, lying in a manger." Suddenly, the angel was joined by a vast host of others—the armies of heaven—praising God and saying, "Glory to God in highest heaven, and peace on earth to those with whom God is pleased."

Sunday, December 1, 2013

Matthew 24:42-44

Therefore, stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But know this, that if the master of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.



Devotion

One of the hardest discipleship lessons for Christians really is learning to SEE. Sometimes we protect and cushion and even medicate ourselves so that we can't see the injustice and sin and greed and mess of the world. But mostly, we still feel all that. Even for disciples, it is harder still to see the Spirit active, and God with us, and Jesus intervening in our lives. But that's the amazing thing about learning to follow Jesus as a disciple. It is really about learning to stay awake. Staying awake not to protect ourselves, but to be able see Jesus when he comes. And he promises that he will come. It takes practice to learn to see him when he's coming. So let's start looking!

Caring Conversation

Talk with your family about an event that happened in the last 24 hours that caused you to pause and wonder, even just a little. How do you think God might be involved in that conversation or occurrence? How might God be trying to draw you closer?

Ritual and Tradition

Listen to a favorite Christian hymn or song together. What do you find yourself thinking about or learning about God as you listen?

Service

Write down the name of a person you know who especially needs help SEEING Jesus right now. Write down one small, 'do-able' thing that you can do to help that person, so that he or she might be able to see Him.

Nancy Going, Interim Executive Director



Monday, December 2, 2013

Matthew 24:3-14

And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.



Devotion

At first glance this Bible passage may seem scary. Talk of the coming of the “end of the world” can seem very ominous indeed. This kind of Scripture is called “apocalyptic” literature. The word means “revelation”. What is being revealed reflects the life of those first century Christians. They were surrounded by a violent world full of wars and conflict, false prophets and liars misled many, and they were persecuted for being Christians. In these tough and difficult circumstances Jesus is encouraging his followers to endure, stay faithful and preach the Gospel of God’s kingdom. Do you think your faith is tested like Jesus followers? Pray this prayer: *Lord Jesus, there are wars taking place in our world and many people deceiving others. Bring peace to your world and help me be an instrument of your peace.*

Caring Conversation

Predictions about the end of the world have been made many times. Why do you think there is so much interest in wanting to predict the exact time and day the world will end? If you knew the end of the world was coming, how would you live differently?

Rituals and Traditions

Strive for peace by saying “Peace Be With You” to the people you meet this week.

Service

This Bible passage talks about wars and conflicts. What can you do for those who have served in a war, or have been a victim in a war? For example, thank a veteran for serving, or go to this website and help Syrian refugees: <http://blog.lwr.org/2013/09/help-syrian-refugees/>

Dr. Paul Hill, Executive Director



Tuesday, December 3, 2013

Psalm 23(CEV)

You, Lord, are my shepherd. I will never be in need. You let me rest in fields of green grass. You lead me to streams of peaceful water, and you refresh my life. You are true to your name, and you lead me along the right paths. I may walk through valleys as dark as death, but I won't be afraid. You are with me, and your shepherd's rod makes me feel safe. You treat me to a feast, while my enemies watch. You honor me as your guest, and you fill my cup until it overflows. Your kindness and love will always be with me each day of my life, and I will live forever in your house, Lord.



Devotion

In today's world, more than ever, we need reassurance and a reminder that our Lord and shepherd is with us and watching over us always. This verse speaks to each one of us in different ways. Whether living in the Washington DC area where the shooting at the Navy Yard took place, or in Colorado where flooding devastated and displaced hundreds of people from their homes, we question where to turn and wonder with whom we can talk about our greatest fears. These are two very recent examples of dark valleys. No matter what our age or where we live, each one of us has been touched in some way by unsettling news. When it comes to being afraid and experiencing fear, whether young or old, we are affected. How we live and the steps we take to feel more protected are important and become a priority. From homes to schools to communities, building and strengthening relationships through our faith is essential.

Caring Conversation

The shepherd's rod is used to guard both the sheep and the shepherd. It is also used as a tool to bring wayward sheep back to the flock. Think of a time when you were afraid. When you have been afraid, have you ever envisioned our Lord and shepherd's rod to make you feel safe? How might this verse help you deal with fear in the future?

Ritual and Tradition

Write these words from Psalm 23 on a sheet of paper, *"Your kindness and love will always be with me each day of my life, and I will live forever in your house, Lord."* Choose a consistent time each day to read them as a reminder of God's love and protection.

Service

Do you know of someone in your congregation, a neighbor, or family member who is serving in the military? List their names, pray for them, and make plans to send cards and letters to let them know you are thinking of them and praying for them.

Debbie Streicher, Project Coordinator for Milestones Ministries



Wednesday, December 4, 2013

Matthew 24:45-51

*“Who then is the faithful and sensible slave whom his master put in charge of his household to give them their food at the proper time? **Blessed is that slave whom his master finds so doing when he comes.** Truly I say to you that he will put him in charge of all his possessions. But if that evil slave says in his heart, ‘My master is not coming for a long time,’ and begins to beat his fellow slaves and eat and drink with drunkards; the master of that slave will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour which he does not know, and will cut him in pieces and assign him a place with the hypocrites; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”*



Devotion

When I was growing up, sometimes my parents would go out and leave me with my older brother to take care of me. My parents trusted that my brother would be kind and responsible while they were out. Sometimes the both of us thought we could “go wild” while mom and dad were out. That wasn’t a good idea. When my parents came home, they always were able to figure out we had been up to something, and then we had to deal with the consequences. Jesus is telling a story that is similar. While we await His return He is asking us, “How will you live and what should you do?” Like my brother and I, some people might just figure they can do anything they want and live as they please. Jesus teaches His followers do to something else. Jesus asks us to be faithful and take care of others. Pray this prayer: *Lord Jesus, help me to be faithful, honest and loving towards others even when no one is looking. Amen.*

Caring Conversation

Have you ever done something you shouldn’t have because “no one was looking?” What was it? Have you ever done something very commendable “when no one was looking?” What was it?

Ritual and Tradition

Make it a habit to do one good deed for someone else every week. Make sure it always remains a secret - don’t claim credit for it.

Service

Identify something you can do that will help someone else, yet no one will know that you did it. For example, clean the bathroom in your house, but don’t claim credit for it. Or do the dishes. Or vacuum the rugs. You get the idea - do it in secret.

Dr. Paul Hill, Executive Director



Thursday, December 5, 2013

Luke 17:22-37

Then he said to the disciples, "The days are coming when you will long to see one of the days of the Son of Man, and you will not see it. They will say to you, 'Look there!' or 'Look here!' Do not go, do not set off in pursuit. For as the lightning flashes and lights up the sky from one side to the other, so will the Son of Man be in his day. But first he must endure much suffering and be rejected by this generation. Just as it was in the days of Noah, so too it will be in the days of the Son of Man. They were eating and drinking, and marrying and being given in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and the flood came and destroyed all of them. Likewise, just as it was in the days of Lot: they were eating and drinking, buying and selling, planting and building, but on the day that Lot left Sodom, it rained fire and sulfur from heaven and destroyed all of them—it will be like that on the day that the Son of Man is revealed. On that day, anyone on the housetop who has belongings in the house must not come down to take them away; and likewise anyone in the field must not turn back. Remember Lot's wife. Those who try to make their life secure will lose it, but those who lose their life will keep it. I tell you, on that night there will be two in one bed; one will be taken and the other left. There will be two women grinding meal together; one will be taken and the other left." Then they asked him, "Where, Lord?" He said to them, "Where the corpse is, there the vultures will gather."



Devotion

The Pharisees tended to judge things by their appearances, and Jesus' words and actions did not seem fitting for the kind of king they envisioned. The king we seek to follow ate with sinners and tax collectors, stood up for the oppressed and washed other people's feet. Is this the kind of king you're willing to follow?

Caring Conversation

Share with others or perhaps, make a note in your journal, about the people in your life that have modeled a life of servanthood. In what ways do you model a servant lifestyle to others?

Ritual and Tradition

Place three pennies in your left pocket before you leave home. Transfer a penny to your right pocket after you've offered a word of affirmation or thanks to another person. Make it a commitment to thank and bless at least three people every day.

Service

Write down two "random acts of kindness" that you'll seek to complete today. After completing these acts, write down how you felt about the experience.

Jim LaDoux, Director of Coaching & Training



Friday, December 6, 2013

Jonah 1:17-2:10

But the Lord provided a large fish to swallow up Jonah; and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights. Then Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the belly of the fish, saying, "I called to the Lord out of my distress, and he answered me; out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and you heard my voice. You cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the flood surrounded me; all your waves and your billows passed over me. Then I said, 'I am driven away from your sight; how shall I look again upon your holy temple?' The waters closed in over me; the deep surrounded me; weeds were wrapped around my head at the roots of the mountains. I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever; yet you brought up my life from the pit, oh Lord my God. As my life was ebbing away, I remembered the Lord; and my prayer came to you, into your holy temple. Those who worship vain idols forsake their true loyalty. But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay. Deliverance belongs to the Lord!" Then the Lord spoke to the fish, and it spewed Jonah out upon the dry land."



Devotion

This story really isn't about a big fish swallowing Jonah. Rather it's about our ongoing struggle to surrender our lives to God's will? It says more about our desire to control every aspect of our life and how difficult it is to give up that control to God and to others. What do you struggle to let go of in your life? What prevents you from surrendering yourself to God's will?

Caring Conversation

Share with others – or just with yourself – the answer to these questions: On a scale of 1-10 (10=very much) how important is it to you to be in control of situations? At what times do you feel the least in control? Can one actually be in control, or is control a myth?

Ritual and Tradition

When engaging in prayer throughout the day, hold out your hands (palms up) as a sign of your openness to God's Spirit blowing in and through your life, and the ministries you participate in.

Service

Throughout the day, at home, work or school, offer prayers to God for each person you encounter. Rather than seeking to control or dominate these situations, seek to be fully present and actively engaged in what others have to say.

Jim LaDoux, Director of Coaching & Training



Saturday, December 7, 2013

Daniel 6:17-27

*A stone was rolled over the pit, and it was sealed. Then Darius and his officials stamped the seal to show that no one should let Daniel out. At daybreak, the king got up and ran to the pit. He was anxious and shouted, "Daniel, you were faithful and served your God. Was he able to save you from the lions?" Daniel answered, "Your Majesty, I hope you live forever! My God knew that I was innocent, and he sent an angel to keep the lions from eating me. Your Majesty, I have never done anything to hurt you." The king was relieved to hear Daniel's voice, and he gave orders for him to be taken out of the pit. **Daniel's faith in his God had kept him from being harmed.** King Darius then sent this message to all people of every nation and race in the world: "Greetings to all of you! I command everyone in my kingdom to worship and honor the God of Daniel. He is the living God, the one who lives forever. His power and his kingdom will never end. **He rescues people and sets them free by working great miracles.** Daniel's God has rescued him from the power of the lions."**



Devotions

As I read this scripture, I am reminded of my friend who passed away at the age of 41 from ALS, also known as Lou Gehrig's disease. She, along with her family and friends, prayed for a miracle of healing even though we knew there was no cure for the disease. When visiting her one-day, not long before she was unable to speak, she told me our prayers had been answered. I was quite surprised by this since I had been watching her be able to do less and less. She said she was healed and that she was the healthiest she had ever been - emotionally. Throughout her illness, she had been in conversation with a therapist as well as her pastors, and she felt good about who she was as a woman, a parent and as a child of God. She believed in the promises of God and felt great peace. If she were with us today, she would confirm and lift up verse 26: "*He rescues people and sets them free by working great miracles.*"

Caring Conversations

Do you have a friend or family member who has modeled the faith of Daniel? Share their story with your household.

Rituals and Traditions

Memorize and recite the Joshua prayer when you are in your "own" type of lion's den. "*Be strong and courageous, do not be frightened or dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.*" Joshua 1:9

Service

We all need encouragement during a difficult time. In an artistic way, create a card with the Joshua prayer on it. Send or email it to your family or friends when they are struggling. You could also include the Joshua prayer card with a box of chocolates, flowers or a cup of coffee.

Patty Matthews, Marketing Director

*emphasis added



Sunday, December 8, 2013

Matthew 3:1-12

The Preaching of John the Baptist

“Turn back to God! The kingdom of Heaven will soon be here! Get the road ready for the Lord! I baptize you with water so that you will give up your sins. But someone more powerful is going to come, and I am not good enough even to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.”



Devotion

As children, we all know the excitement when someone special is going to come to visit. The entire family is busy making preparations. The house smells wonderful with all the special foods being made to celebrate the visit. Gifts are made or purchased, and wrapped with brightly colored paper and ribbons. Candles are lit, and the house may be strung with special lights. John the Baptist's job was to get the people ready for the special visit by Jesus. He not only wanted them to turn away from the bad things they were doing, but to make their hearts ready to receive the Lord and to celebrate His coming.

Caring Conversation

What are your family's traditions when guests are expected? Are there foods or drinks that are only prepared on special occasions? Do you enjoy certain music? Talk about your favorite things you do to welcome guests.

Ritual and Tradition

Talk with your family about the origin of a special tradition. How did it get started? Is it relatively new, or has it been passed down for generations? Plan a family night when everyone is in the kitchen helping to prepare a special meal or treat.

Service

Expand your family tradition to include others. If your tradition is to prepare a special food, consider placing that item in a container and sharing it with a friend or neighbor. Enclose a note of friendship and hand-deliver it to your special friend. Or share that tradition by snail-mailing a card or package to a family member or friend.

Carol Parrish, Accounting Manager



Monday, December 9, 2013

Isaiah 40:3-5

A voice cries out:
'In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.
Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;...
Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,
and all people shall see it together...'



Devotion

After 50 years of exile in Babylon, this passage celebrates the Israelites' release from captivity! The journey home is so sweet, it's as if the mountains have been leveled and the valleys filled in! And just as they acknowledged that God remained with them throughout their terrible ordeal, they now give all the credit to God for their joyful reunion with their homeland. How about you? Have you ever experienced sweet reunion, or a true homecoming, or recovery of a lost treasure? Share the story with a loved one.

Now, read and pray over the passage in Matthew 3:3 as you continue your vigil and preparation for the coming of the Christ child. How can you make a straight path for Jesus in your heart?

Caring Conversation

Everyone has hard, tough days now and again. Talk about them with your loved ones. Give each other specific suggestions for how they might lower the mountains of difficulty and fill in the valleys of frustration and gloom for you? Start by saying, "When I'm having tough day, it really helps when you . . ."

Ritual and Tradition

How does your family celebrate when you've made it through a major tough time? Perhaps you've reconciled a serious hurt, or someone has turned the corner toward recovery, or you can finally put a major problem behind you. It's very important to ritualize these experiences! Say a prayer, hug one another, raise a toast . . . do *something* together that recognizes God has been with you through the ordeal and now God celebrates with you!

Service

Who are the people in your midst held in captivity, perhaps by their poverty, their skin color, their native language, their love relationships, their education level, or their social status? What works of mercy or justice can you do to win their release, or at the very least help lower their mountains of struggle and fill in their valleys of isolation?

Leif Kehrwald, Vibrant Faith @ Home



Tuesday, December 10, 2013

John 1:19-28

Then they said to him (John the Baptist), 'Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?' He said, 'I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, "Make straight the way of the Lord."'



Devotion

The people could see God working through John, and they wondered who he was. He responded to their questions by giving witness to Jesus, the Messiah. It's Advent – we are waiting, we are searching. If we are looking for a Messiah who makes the blind see, the lame walk, and the deaf hear, who heals people of their diseases and raises the dead to life, who proclaims good news to the poor, then we need look no further than Jesus.

Caring Conversation

What are two or three of your favorite Gospel images of Jesus?

- π *Messiah* ("the anointed one")—proclaiming the arrival of God's kingdom
- π *Savior*—offering people salvation and forgiveness
- π *Prophet*—calling people to repent and believe the Good News
- π *Lord*—leading with authority and power
- π *Servant*—caring for the poor and vulnerable
- π *Teacher*—teaching the Good News through parables and stories
- π *Healer*—restoring people to health in body and mind
- π *Good Shepherd*—demonstrating a loving and self-sacrificing care for people
- π *Son of God*—being God's beloved son, fully human and fully divine

Can you remember a Gospel story for your favorite image of Jesus? Share your images and story with your household.

Service

This Advent look for these signs of Jesus in our world today—people serving, caring, healing, forgiving, making peace, working for justice. In what ways do people see God working through you? In what ways do you give witness to Jesus in our world today?

John Roberto, Faith Formation Learning Exchange & 21st Century Faith Formation



Wednesday, December 11, 2013

Matthew 12: 33-37

A good tree produces only good fruit, and a bad tree produces bad fruit. You can tell what a tree is like by the fruit it produces. You are a bunch of evil snakes, so how can you say anything good? Your words show what is in your hearts. Good people bring good things out of their hearts, but evil people bring evil things out of their hearts. I promise you that on the day of judgement, everyone will have to account for every careless word they have spoken. On that day they will be told that they are either innocent or guilty because of the things they have said.



Devotion

The Crib

A long time ago there grew in a far-away forest two trees, springing from the same root. They wished never to part, for they were of the same wood and belonged to one another. The young trees grew up, and the stronger and bigger they became, the more they were afraid of the wood-cutters, for they had grown so tall and straight that the whole forest was proud of them. "You two," said the old trees, "are destined for something special." The young trees thought about it a great deal, not knowing whether to be happy or sad. They were not proud, for all created things are at heart glad to do whatever they were created for. So they waited for what would happen. The foresters came and felled one of them; from its timber was made a feeding-trough for cattle. That very trough stood in the shed where Mary lay, with nowhere else to put her Child to sleep. So she laid Him in the feeding-trough, the manger. The second tree went on growing for a long time, and from it was made a cross, the cross to which the Child was nailed when he, like the tree, had grown up. So the wooden crib has a special importance for us. And by and by you will understand why the two, the crib and the cross, belong to one another. *Taken from [A Christmas Crib Book](#), 1960*

Caring Conversation

Discuss with your household: What is one thing about yourself that you would like God's help to change?

Ritual and Tradition

Set up a box or empty crib under your Christmas tree. Each night have family members place pieces of straw, yellow yarn or shredded paper strips in the crib for kind acts done that day that have helped prepare the way for the Lord. On Christmas Eve, when the crib is full, place a nativity figure of the Christ Child in the crib.

Service

As a family, prepare Christmas cookies or treats on plates with cellophane and ribbon, and sort them into gift packages to give away to friends and neighbors. "Prepare the way of the Lord" by praying, by name, for those who will receive these gifts.

Julie Claeys, Shipping Assistant



Thursday, December 12, 2013

Zechariah 2: 10-13

"Shout, and be glad, Daughter Zion. For I am coming, and I will live among you," declares the Lord. "Many nations will be joined with the Lord in that day and will become my people. I will live among you and you will know that the Lord Almighty has sent me to you. The Lord will inherit Judah as his portion in the holy land and will again choose Jerusalem. Be still before the Lord, all mankind, because he has roused himself from his holy dwelling."



Devotion

Welcome. It's a word that we say often but rarely take to heart. If we have manners, we say, "You're welcome" most every day. It just rolls off our tongue. But if we spend some time thinking about it, there are few words that can make us feel at home, like we belong, or as accepted, more than the word "welcome." Pause for a moment and let it sink in. Think about a time when you have felt truly welcomed. Maybe it was how someone welcomed you into their home, church, or even their family. Remember what that felt like, what warmth your heart felt.

This Scripture from Zechariah has a duality of beautiful welcome in it. God asks us to "Shout, and be glad" and "Be still" because He is coming, and we get to simply and purely say, "God, you are welcome." On the flip side, he declares "Many nations... will become my people" and talks of inheritance. God is saying to us, "Child, you are welcome."

During this season of Advent, how are you preparing to welcome Him in – to your life, your home, your heart?

Caring Conversation

Think about someone that made you feel truly welcomed. It may have been a small gesture from their perspective but one that made a big difference for you. Ask to have coffee together, or call them on the phone, and thank them for their gesture of welcome, sharing how much you appreciated their actions.

Ritual and Tradition

Begin a tradition of intentional welcome at your church, job, or school. Each week, say hello to someone new as a small gesture of welcome. That simple habit will go a long way!

Service

With your whole family playing a part, plan & make a meal to welcome someone into your home. Invite them in for a comforting dinner and caring conversation.

Anna Rendell, Social Media Coach and Webinar Manager



Friday, December 13, 2013

Hosea 14:1-7

Return, O Israel, to the LORD your God, for you have stumbled because of your iniquity. Take words with you and return to the LORD; say to him, "Take away all guilt; accept that which is good, and we will offer the fruit of our lips. Assyria shall not save us; we will not ride upon horses; we will say no more, 'Our God,' to the work of our hands. In you the orphan finds mercy." I will heal their disloyalty; I will love them freely, for my anger has turned from them. I will be like the dew to Israel; he shall blossom like the lily, he shall strike root like the forests of Lebanon. His shoots shall spread out; his beauty shall be like the olive tree, and his fragrance like that of Lebanon. They shall again live beneath my shadow, they shall flourish as a garden; they shall blossom like the vine, their fragrance shall be like the wine of Lebanon.



Devotion

Ah, the passion of the prophet Hosea! He marries the prostitute Gomer, whose unfaithfulness is likened to the unfaithfulness of Israel. But God is the jilted lover who will not let go: "I will now allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her" (Hos. 2:14). It is this same passionate God who speaks tenderly to us in the nativity of Bethlehem and from an otherwise forgettable hill called Golgotha. During this Advent Season, let your senses be filled with beauty that captivates the heart, fragrances that please, and tastes that fill us with joy. It must be so for the word of the Lord to Hosea is clear: "I will love them freely, for my anger has turned from them" (Hos. 14:4).

Caring Conversation

Discuss with someone what you are truly passionate about. How might this passion reflect God's love for you?

Ritual and Tradition

Confess your sins to God by reciting Psalm 51 together with your household, family or a good friend.

Service

The beauty and life-giving power of God's creation is used in the Bible to remind us of our loving and merciful God. Do some simple but meaningful act of creation care by reducing the use of electricity or natural gas, recycling trash, or using a reusable water bottle.

David Anderson, Presenter & Coach, Milestones Ministry



Saturday, December 14, 2013

Psalm 32

Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered, ... to whom the Lord imputes no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit. While I kept silence, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long... Then I acknowledged my sin to you... you surround me with glad cries of deliverance.



Devotion

Isolation and loneliness account for a lot of the misery human beings experience. When something has happened to rupture our relationships, we may - out of self-preservation - deny that it bothers us, and perhaps avoid that other person for a while. But, in fact, isolation hurts and loneliness is painful. The Psalmist says that his body was "wasting away in silence;" he knew deep down that God intended better, but he could not break the cycle by himself. Transgression, sin, iniquity and deceit cause us to turn inward, close up, and be somehow OK with mere self-preservation. We know deep down that God intends better for us, but may not be able to break the cycle by ourselves. Advent can help us by allowing God to first break the silence, to invade our isolation and challenge our loneliness. Advent means opening up to receive Emmanuel, God who is "with us." Happiness finally comes to those who allow God to break the silence. Like a prison door that can only be opened from outside, so our happiness can only be initiated by God from the outside. "Happy are those . . ." who hear and then receive the Advent gift of God's presence . . . and then reach out to break the silence that distances them from others. Is God - in Christ - knocking at your door this Advent?

Caring Conversation

Share with a friend or family member about a sin or wrong thought which keeps bothering you, and invite them to do the same. Be patient and kind, and know that this is difficult and may take more than one attempt.

Ritual and Tradition

Let Christ's presence "surround you," during your devotional times by lighting a candle, a reminder that you are not alone nor in the dark.

Service

Consider sending a small gift or note card to someone you feel separated from, praying that such a small gesture might break the silence and reconnect you. Do not be discouraged if that person does not - or cannot - accept your gift of Advent reconciliation; it might take time and happen later.

John Matthews, Senior Pastor (Grace Lutheran Church) & VFM spouse



Sunday, December 15, 2013

Isaiah 55:1-3

Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen diligently to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. Incline your ear, and come to me; hear, that your soul may live; and I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David.



Devotion

As Christmas approaches, many of us anticipate homecoming. Perhaps one or more family members have been away and are making their way home soon. For example, a student studying abroad, a soldier returning home, a teen away on a band trip, a wayfaring young adult backpacking through remote hinterlands. It's always been the human tradition to feast and celebrate when a loved one returns home. And amidst the lavish meal and rich fare, the storytelling is animated and the laughter is hardy! These rituals envelop us in love and comfort. When we place ourselves in God's hands, and heed God's wishes we experience the same. It's like coming home after a long absence. Yet we cannot hold all that rich fare to ourselves. We must love and share with our neighbor just as God has lavished us.

Caring Conversation

Discuss with your family – or answer yourself: what's the best homecoming you've ever experienced? What made it so special?

Ritual and Tradition

Who will you "welcome home" at your family table this Advent/Christmas season? How can you ritualize that homecoming? Raise a toast. Sing a song. Make a special dish. Share stories. Offer a heartfelt prayer of thanksgiving.

Service

Who do you know who can't make it home this Christmas? How can you reach out to him or her? Is there room at your table? How can you make sure he or she gets a taste of some rich fare, and in so doing experiences God's lavish love?

Leif Kehrwald, Vibrant Faith @ Home



Monday, December 16, 2013

Luke 1:5-25

There was in the days of Herod, the king of Judea, a certain priest named Zacharias. His wife was of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless. But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and they were both well advanced in years. So it was, that while he was serving as priest before God in the order of his division, according to the custom of the priesthood, his lot fell to burn incense when he went into the temple of the Lord. And the whole multitude of the people was praying outside at the hour of incense. Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing on the right side of the altar of incense. And when Zacharias saw him, he was troubled, and fear fell upon him. But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your prayer is heard; and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth. ¹⁵ For he will be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink. He will also be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God. He will also go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, 'to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children' and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."



Devotion

In today's passage we see that Zacharias and Elizabeth waited a long time, A VERY LONG time, to have children. They were tested in their patience. Patience is sometimes very hard, especially in this day and age when so many things are immediate. We have a hard time waiting for our computers to respond when they are slow. We can't understand why it takes a friend SO long to text us back. Our patience is tested daily. But what have you really had to be patient for: the birth of a child? An ill friend to get well? An answer to a prayer? What we need to remember is that God is listening. He may not answer quickly but he will answer. Patience....

Caring Conversation

Discuss with your family – or answer yourself- about a time where you had to be patient, and it just felt like 'too much'.

Ritual and Tradition

Do a puzzle. Play a board game. Bake cookies from scratch. All of these activities take patience!

Julianne Simmons, Resource & Inventory Coordinator



Tuesday, December 17, 2013

Luke 1:26-38

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God." Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

Devotion

The Beatles made the words of Mary quite famous and singable: "Let it be..." Although not as famous, Luther said Mary's words were the epitome of faith: "Let it be with me according to your word." They are simple, direct, and full of trust. It is a model of faith that for our everyday lives is worth remembering. In the midst of impossible tasks and daily demands, it is good to be reminded of the lives of Mary and Elizabeth. During this Advent Season, it is fair to realize that disbelief makes a lot of sense and seems so much more sane. When we, like Mary, ponder all these things, it is good we have Jesus, Son of the Most High God, and the Holy Spirit to give us faith and good courage. It frees us to believe in the God who makes the impossible possible and who grants us faith, hope, and love in a world that needs grace, mercy, and peace.

Caring Conversation

Discuss with a friend or family member a "God moment" you have recently had.

Ritual and Tradition

Take time during this Advent Season to pause at the end of your day to reflect on how God's grace and mercy were present to you. Let it become a prayer of thanksgiving.

Service

Be aware of the young mothers and pregnant women around you. Find ways to express support for these women and their families.

Gloria Anderson, Teacher & VFM spouse



Wednesday, December 18, 2013

Matthew 1:18-25

"Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us."

Devotion

Every birth begins in a story. Once upon a time, two people fell in love. Once upon a time, we knew that you belonged with us. Once upon a time, we became a family. Mary and Joseph did not have the smoothest of starts into parenthood. But they did have faith; trust that the messages they had gotten about Jesus, their son, were true. They trusted their son would be extraordinary. Jesus would be the one to save their people from sin. Jesus would be "Emmanuel", "God with us". In the meantime, Mary and Joseph waited in hope and expectation for their son to arrive.

Caring Conversation

Discuss with your household – what do you know about your birth or adoption story? What do your parents or family members remember about expecting your arrival?

Ritual and Tradition

Light a candle and sing together as a household, "O Come, O Come Emmanuel," followed by "Happy Birthday" to Jesus. Have the youngest family member blow out the candle.

Service

Continue to sing about the promises of Jesus' birth, about the coming of "Emmanuel". Get together with some friends, or maybe another family, and go caroling in your neighborhood or at a local nursing home. Or call up, Skype, or FaceTime a family member far away, and announce the promise of Jesus in a song.

Erika Benson Buller, President of VFM Board



Thursday, December 19, 2013

Matthew 9:2-7

And behold, some people brought to him a paralytic, lying on a bed. And when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven." And behold, some of the scribes said to themselves, "This man is blaspheming." But Jesus, knowing their thoughts, said, "Why do you think evil in your hearts? For which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Rise and walk'? But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins" --he then said to the paralytic--"Rise, pick up your bed and go home." And he rose and went home.



Devotion

O God, forgive my sin of paralysis. While not physically paralyzed, all too often I remain stuck in my safe little world, when I know the right thing to do is to speak up, or act up for the sake of others who need my voice or my hands, or my heart. Forgive my silence that gives tacit approval to injustice all around me. Forgive my averted eyes that failed to look into the eyes of the beggar on the corner. Forgive my body and limbs for lounging when they should be helping. But most of all, O God, forgive my cold heart that remains paralyzed with judgment. Let me hear your words, "your sins are forgiven" and I will rise up and go. Amen.

Caring Conversation

Discuss with your family – or answer yourself: in what ways are you guilty of the sin of paralysis? What must you do to about it?

Ritual and Tradition

Gather with those who you love. Or be in solitude. Read aloud the passage above (Matt 9.2-7). Sit in silence and stillness for a long moment. Stretch it to 3 – 4 – 5 minutes if you can. Don't move a muscle. In your silence give thanks for your hands and feet, your head and heart, your eyes and ears, your voice.

Service

In the coming week, think of one way you can serve or help one other person with your:

Hands and feet -

Head and heart -

Eyes and ears -

Voice -

Now, shed your paralysis, rise up and do it.

Leif Kehrwald, Vibrant Faith @ Home



Friday, December 20, 2013

Luke 1:5-25, 57-66

"But the angel said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John."



Devotion

How many times a year do we say, "Don't be afraid"? Could be at a time of Halloween, could be a time when we are getting ready for a test, could be a time when we are meeting a long lost family member or friend, or it could be as we wait for the doctor to get back to us about a blood test result. How many times a year do we say, "Don't be afraid"? These words are incredibly special this time of year, as God is moving in the world to greet Zechariah and Elizabeth, the Shepherds, Mary and Joseph and more. So much of our walk in faith depends on our ability to follow God's call to not be afraid. That call, to be solely devoted to God, to be in God's full presence, is why we are walking today towards the birth of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Friends, don't be afraid, for the Lord is coming! Amen.

Caring Conversation

Discuss with your family, your friends, neighbors or a stranger: When have you been afraid? How have you responded to someone when they have said, "don't be afraid"?

Ritual and Tradition

Begin a conversation each week to label your situations, people or instances of where you are afraid. List them and then pray for God's guidance as you and your family or friends work through them with God.

Service

Seek out a friend, neighbor or a stranger who might be working through a situation in which they are afraid. Remind them of the angel's call to Zechariah and others, who were scared and asked to not be afraid. Comfort them and pray with them, stay in touch with them.

David Holtz, Executive Director, Luther Crest

Vice President of VFM Board



Saturday, December 21, 2013

Luke 1:67-79 (NRSV)

By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.



Devotion

Just a few minutes viewing the news headlines today will tell you that there is too much darkness in our world. The world Jesus was born into also suffered from the darkness of poverty, violence, prejudice, and oppression (by the Roman empire). The Messiah comes to bring the light of God's love to the whole world – to announce that God's love overcomes injustice, brings peace, heals people's lives, and sets people free. How do we bring the light of God's love into the world, into our relationships, into our family? Pray daily that the light of God's love will shine through you to illuminate a world that too often chooses darkness over light.

Caring Conversation

Take time with your household to create "A Christmas Pledge." Use the following example to create your own Christmas pledge. Hang it on the Christmas tree or the refrigerator for all to see. Spend a few minutes each week talking about how each of you is living out your Christmas pledge.

*Believing the true spirit of Christmas, I commit myself to:
Remember those people who truly need my gifts
Express my love in more direct ways
Examine my holiday activities in light of my deepest values
Be a peacemaker within my circle of family and friends
Rededicate myself to my spiritual growth*

Ritual and Tradition

This Christmas Eve prepare *luminarias*. Lighting *luminarias* is an old Hispanic tradition, begun as a symbolic way to light the way for the Christ child. These decorative lights are brown or white lunch bags, folded down about one inch at the top and filled with two to three inches of sand and one votive candle. Arrange the *luminarias* along your walkway or driveway, showing Christ the way into your home. Once it is dark, light the candles and celebrate Jesus' coming again into your family and community.

Service

Bring some light into the lives of those who are in need this Christmas. Find a need in your community or in the world and make that your Christmas project. Bring canned goods to the food bank. Cook a meal for the homeless shelter. Make a donation to build a house through Habitat for Humanity. Sponsor a child or family through World Vision or Compassion International. Visit the elderly who are homebound or in nursing homes. Write to prisoners in jail. Collect toys for children who will not receive Christmas gifts. Become a "light" in your community!

John Roberto, Faith Formation Learning Exchange & 21st Century Faith Formation



Sunday, December 22, 2013

Matthew 1:18-25

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet - "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us." When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son and he named him Jesus.



Devotion

Keeping promises is something we learn about when we're young. In verse 23, we are reminded that, "God is with us." It's a promise that God always keeps.

Caring Conversation

Discuss with your family – or answer yourself – about when or where you are most aware of God's presence in your life.

Ritual and Tradition

If you haven't already done so, start a tradition of lighting candles on an advent wreath every day during Advent, followed by reading the scripture passage each day. During the first week of Advent, one candle is lit each day. During the second week, two candles are lit, and so on.

Service

Individually or as a family, send two Christmas cards to people you don't normally send to, and remind them that "God is with them" as part of your greeting.

Jim LaDoux, Director of Coaching & Training



Monday, December 23, 2013

Luke 2:1-4

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David.



Devotion

There is a lot of buzz and discussion taking place in the United States these days over the use of electronic monitoring by the government. Millions of our emails, texts, voice messages and more are collected and sifted through giant computers in search of terrorist plots. Not everyone is happy about this, and many see it as an infringement of personal privacy, while others see it as the price for safety. Whatever you think of it, it's not new. Governments have always been monitoring their people, tracking them, counting them, and getting into their private lives. Today's text gives us such an example. At the time Jesus was born, the Roman emperor Caesar Augustus put out the word he wanted to count his people. "All the world should be enrolled!" he said. That's a lot of people, but Rome was the big dog, and when Rome barked, the people did what they were told. Enrollment was one way that Rome kept people in control. We forget that Jesus was born in a political hot bed with Rome calling the shots. Jesus birth and later claims to be "Lord" was not a small thing, it was a direct challenge to Roman authority. He got enrolled and his name will never be forgotten. Ironically, whoever thinks of the Roman Empire anymore?

Caring Conversation

What do you think of the idea of governments tracking or monitoring their citizens? Do you think it is sometimes justified? Have you ever thought of Jesus as a political subversive and a threat to Rome?

Ritual and Tradition

What governmental enrollment must all Americans follow by April 15 each year? (Pay taxes). This is an annual ritual. What kinds of things do you thank God for when it comes to our government? What kinds of things do you pray would change? Do you think Jesus would have made a good president?

Service

Joseph had to take Mary on a journey at a most difficult time of her pregnancy. Find out if there is a "travelers assistance" program offered in your community. Call them and find out what they may need to help people who are traveling and in need of help.

Dr. Paul Hill, Executive Director



Tuesday, December 24, 2013

Luke 1:39-45

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zachariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and explained with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among all women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."



Devotion

Elizabeth's story is one of the most loved and poignant stories in the New Testament, and it certainly is among those most frequently read during Advent and the Nativity. A young girl...whom we now know as the Virgin Mary...is unmarried, pregnant, and filled with wonderment over a vision she had seen months before. In the vision, an angel told her that she was to bear a child, a Son of God to be conceived by the Holy Spirit and destined to redeem His Father's creation. It was a hard vision to receive and an even harder one to share, to make credible, to persuade people of. Even having received it in the first place had isolated her from most of her community. And so in time Mary did the one thing still open to her. She went to a beloved older and faith-filled woman, the wife of a priest, and a cousin. She went to Elizabeth. And what Elizabeth gave Mary that day, in receiving her and in perceiving the accuracy and authenticity of her vision, was the courage to go forward and fulfill what she had been asked to do. The result of Elizabeth's godly perception and humble solicitude was...and still is...Bethlehem and the birth of Christ, the king.

Caring Conversation

Discuss with your family...and especially with the adults...the importance of being humbly open, welcoming, affirming, supportive to adolescents and younger adults. Discover whether or not you and/or others around you have a story or two of having found self-effacing and un-self-promoting affirmation from an older person that helped you realize a goal or fulfill a role you might not otherwise have managed to realize or fulfill.

Service

Think of one person who is younger than you, but in whom you see the hand and work of God. Pledge to yourself that within the days of Christmastide you will find some way... a note, an e-mail, a small conversation... to let that younger person know you are aware of the promise their gift holds for the Church and that you are supporting him or her in prayer that the gift may be realized fully.

Phyllis Tickle, Editor, Author, Lecturer

VFM Board member



Wednesday, December 25, 2013

Luke 2:8-14

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host. Praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"



Devotion

Oh, the ironies. Shepherds were a class of people not trusted, whose voices could not be used in court cases. But here they are, the first to get the news, the most-trustworthy news in history. Go figure! The most important and joyous news is given to those least trusted to report it. But that's the way it is in God's kingdom. A manger becomes a throne, shepherds and barn animals become the adoring court, and a vulnerable couple becomes the royal family. This is a kingdom worth watching, worth seeing how it unfolds in the lives of people and from age to age. Thanks be to God for divine reversals that bring peace on earth, and joy and hope to everyday life. And Merry Christmas!

Caring Conversation

Discuss a time when you were given news filled with great joy.

Ritual and Tradition

During the Advent and Christmas Seasons, commit to greet family or friends with the word, "Peace on earth, goodwill to all."

Service

Send a card of support to someone who is going through a difficult time. If possible, make a commitment to visit the individual in person.

David Anderson, Presenter & Coach, Milestones Ministry



Thursday, December 26, 2013

Luke 2: 15-20

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about."

So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.



Devotion

In college campus ministry, one year we did a skit just before Christmas break. We acted out this story from Luke 2 – The Story – from the point of view of those shepherds. There is so much that happens in a few words here. I wonder what phrases they used when they “spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child.” What do you say in that situation? “Excuse me sir, just wanted to make sure you knew – God was born! Yes sir, the angels told us, and then we saw Him.”

All the while, Mary is treasuring. That’s what those of us that are parents do when our children are born – our hearts begin to treasure and to love. Mary gives us another perspective, one that God welcomes.

Whether you are the shepherds, running through the countryside with the news or Mary, quietly pondering it in your heart, know this. God was born. Salvation is here.

Caring Conversation

Discuss with your household – and/or answer yourself – what perspective do you tend to take around Christmas? Is it that of Mary, or the shepherds, or someone else entirely?

Ritual and Tradition

Over the course of a few days leading up to Christmas, read the story in Luke 2 about Jesus’ birth. Each time, try to listen to it from the perspective of a different person in the story.

Service

Shepherds were known for doing the dirty work - literally. Bless someone by taking the initiative to do a task, chore, or project that you know is one of their least favorite activities.

Jared Rendell, Ministry Associate



Friday, December 27, 2013

Luke 21:25-32

Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, "Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel." And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him.



Devotion

"Lord, now let your servant go in peace, for my eyes have seen your salvation." I remember singing this dismissal in worship growing up. I also remember liking this part of the liturgy because it meant that worship was over for another week and it was time to play. Play was what was important as a child, when there were relatively few worries in life. As we grow older, we seem to collect worries along the way, and we are all too aware of our flaws, faults and limitations. Left to our own devices, we don't find much peace in life. Of course, God does not leave us on our own. As we continue to celebrate Jesus, Emmanuel, God with us, we witness again today how our Lord changes lives, fills us with hope, and brings us peace. Because Jesus has come, we like Simeon have peace even in the midst of the troubles and worries of the world, because God has given a light for our darkness, and a future secure in eternal love. No God, No Peace. Know God, Know Peace!

Caring Conversation

Discuss with family or friends the worries and fears we face, and how our faith in God brings us peace?

Ritual and Tradition

In worship we often pass the Peace of God to one another. Include this as a blessing in your daily life with those close to you, laying a hand on their head or shoulder and saying to them, "God's peace be with you." This would be a wonderful ritual to share with a child or grandchild as you tuck them in at night.

Service

While the days leading up to Christmas are usually busy, now that things may be less hectic, take time to visit someone who does not have family or friends with which to share the holidays.

Paul Nelson, VFM board member



Saturday, December 28, 2013

Psalm 98

O sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvelous things, His right hand and his holy arm have gained him victory. The Lord has made known his victory; he has revealed his vindication in the sight of the nations. He has remembered his steadfast love and faithfulness to the house of Israel. All the ends of the earth have seen the victory of our God. Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth; break forth into joyous song and sing praises. Sing praises to the Lord with the lyre, with the lyre and the sound of melody. With trumpets and the sound of the horn make a joyful noise before the King, the Lord. Let the sea roar, and all that fills it; the world and those who live in it. Let the floods clap their hands; let the hills sing together for joy at the presence of the Lord, for he is coming to judge the earth. He will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with equity.



Devotion

Long road trips are my favorite time to let loose and sing at the top of my lungs. In those times, I might be Defying Gravity with the soundtrack to the musical Wicked or Taking the Long Road with the Dixie Chicks. Singing with abandon not only keeps me awake, it inspires my spirit. Maybe this is a way to practice for when I need to sing with abandon in front of real people, in real life. Singing with abandon is one thing; using your voice and influence to speak up for the poor, the lonely or the oppressed is quite another. Psalm 98 shows us that when God's people we can make a joyful noise that all of the natural world can hear and see. So, go ahead and "Dance like no one is watching; Love like you'll never be hurt; Sing like no one is listening; Live like it's heaven on earth." (William Purkey)

Caring Conversation

Discuss with your family – or answer yourself: what would you do if you were really brave? How would you give God praise?

Ritual and Tradition

Watch the video <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UF5V2PEujqs> to Jana Stanfield's "If I Were Brave." Lift up the situations in your life that cause you fear. Pray: *Steadfast, loving God, give me/us the courage to loudly play your clanging cymbal and resounding trumpet. Amen.*

Service

Think of an issue you feel passionate about. Find a way to give voice to your passion by writing a letter, speaking to a public official or otherwise raising awareness about the issue.

Nicole Havelka, Ministry Associate



Sunday, December 29, 2013

Matthew 2:13-15, 19-21

After they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph and said, "Herod will be looking for the child in order to kill him. So get up, take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt, and stay there until I tell you to leave." Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and left during the night for Egypt, where he stayed until Herod died. This was done to make come true what the Lord had said through the prophet, "I called my Son out of Egypt." After Herod died, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and go back to the land of Israel, because those who tried to kill the child are dead." So Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went back to Israel.



Devotion

A number of years ago, I dreamed about a friend of mine with whom I had lost contact. She lived 2,000 miles away, so I mailed her a note and told her I was thinking about her. A few weeks later, I received a letter from her. Then the dreaming started again. No matter what I did, I couldn't shake my friend from my mind. So I called her, and we talked. The dreams started again. I prayed for guidance, and over time, I got the sense that I needed to see her. So I told my friend I wanted to visit her. She said she would like that but that she couldn't see me because of her schedule. When I flew to see her, I found out why: My friend was seriously ill. She had given up and had locked everyone out of her life. My friend cried when she told me how touched she was that I had flown all that way just to see her. Sometimes it takes a lot of faith to act on your intuition, but when you do, good things can happen.

Caring Conversation

Discuss with your family—or ask yourself—about a time you acted on your intuition. What happened? What encourages you to follow your intuition?

Ritual and Tradition

Do exercise 3: learn to look for and pay attention to intuition's subtle messages at www.takingcharge.csh.umn.edu/activities/exercises-developing-your-intuition. What did you discover?

Service

When someone comes across your mind, reach out to that person. Call the person. Email. Or mail a note to let the person know you're thinking about him or her. Follow this type of intuitive guidance to connect with others.

Jolene Roehlkepartain, Vibrant Faith @ Home & Learning Exchange Writer



Monday, December 30, 2013

Jeremiah 31:15-17

Thus says the Lord: "A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping. Rachel is weeping for her children; she refuses to be comforted for her children, because they are no more." Thus says the Lord: "Keep your voice from weeping, and your eyes from tears, for there is a reward for your work, declares the Lord, and they shall come back from the land of the enemy. There is hope for your future, declares the Lord, and your children shall come back to their own country.



Devotion

Background: The Babylonians had just conquered Jerusalem. Ramah was a small border town where the enemy assembled the inhabitants of Jerusalem for their march away into exile. Rachel, who had lived 1000 years earlier, was the mother of the children whose families became the tribes that were being taken into captivity.

Often the world does not work as we would like it to. Frightening things happen, and life does not go as we would choose. Today's passage describes a time when God's people were overwhelmed by enemies, and yet, even then, God says in the darkest day, "There is hope for your future!" The deliverance of God's people would not come for seventy long years. And yet, God's promise is that God is faithful. "If my people who are called by my name will humble themselves and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land." (2 Chron. 7:14) We can depend on God, even in our darkest days.

Caring Conversation

Discuss with your household (or answer yourself) about a time things looked scary and hopeless - perhaps a time when you were afraid. How can knowing that God promises to give us a future help?

Ritual and Tradition

Take a shoebox and make a "Thankful Box" with it. Decorate it with pictures of things and people you are thankful for. Use small strips of paper (like a fortune cookie) and write down 20 things/people you are thankful for. At night before bed, have each member of the family add another thing you are thankful for. On a bad day read three of them. Thank God for those things and ask God for patience to wait for his promises.

Service

Think of someone who is having a difficult time right now. Pray for them to experience God's faithfulness. Then think of some simple way to encourage them: Perhaps write them a note, take them a smoothie or find another way to encourage them with God's promise that "there is a hope for your future!"

Matt Marino, VFM Board Member



Tuesday, December 31, 2013

Isaiah 43:18-19

Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.



Devotion

There is a Chinese proverb that states, "If we do not change our direction... we are likely to end up where we are headed." As we celebrate the end of 2013 and await the beginning of 2014, it is a good time to ask "Where are we headed in our relationship with God, as an individual and as a family?" God tells us in this passage from Isaiah to focus on the new things He is bringing forth in our lives and in the world. Let's take time this New Year's Eve to give thanks for what God has brought forth in 2013 - in our family, relationships, church and world. And let's commit to paying attention more fully to the new things God is bringing forth in 2014 by listening to each other, praying, serving those in need, caring for each other, and joining together with our faith community.

Caring Conversation

Over a special New Year's Eve dinner, have each family member or friends reflect on the past year together and look ahead to the New Year:

- What were the best things we did together in 2013?
- What's one best memory you have of 2013?
- What new things might we do in 2014?
- What's one new hope you have for 2014?

Ritual and Tradition

Pray this blessing each day during 2014: *Loving God, bless and protect us each day, and show us mercy and kindness throughout the year. May our lips praise you, our lives bless you, and our prayer give you thanks. Amen.*

Service

Think about the ways you and your family served those in the need in 2013. Now take time to think about how you can dedicate your time, energy, and money to build a world this is more just, more peaceful, more compassionate, more creation-friendly in 2014. What can you do locally and globally? Look for people and groups serving those in need. Check with your church. Go to www.charitynavigator.org to find reputable organizations. Commit to making a difference in 2014!

John Roberto, Faith Formation Learning Exchange & 21st Century Faith Formation

