**Tea Time for Your Soul Advent Guide 2012**

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December 2—First Sunday in Advent

**A Guide to Advent - Preparing Your Life for Christmas**

Christmas has become about: making sure that absolutely no one is disappointed, creating magical memories, cooking fabulous food, which they should eat without gaining a pound. We are to think up and buy perfect presents for everyone they know, send out Christmas cards, decorate our homes, host parties, and have all the above done by December 24th. Is the idea of Advent, counting down to Christmas; more of a timer that you must race against to prove your worth? If so, you are not alone. But, why not let Advent–anticipating the truths of Christmas reveal the truth about whom you are and why you are here? This year, really listen to the message of Christmas and model your Christmas after receiving God's gift of His Son, not what you see in a Hallmark Christmas movie. Each week of December, we will count down to Christmas together through the time-honored tradition of lighting a candle for Advent. I hope you will find guidance for getting off the Christmas Pleasing Merry-go-round and discover the true freedom that Christmas brings.

**Week One: Light One Candle for HOPE**

I love that the ancients started here in preparing our hearts for Advent. You will definitely need large doses of hope this Christmas. I know you. You will try to make everyone happy. You will make your best attempt not to let anyone down. I've got news for you. You will. I can guarantee it. This is why you need to remember your Hope Candle and keep it lit during your season of Advent.

The candle of hope is the prophecy candle. It is a reminder that the prophets told about Christ's coming hundreds of years before he was born. What is your hope this Christmas? Is your list similar to mine?

* a house decorated early enough to enjoy
* good family relationships
* gift receivers surprised and pleased with their gifts
* a Christmas meal that turns out tasty and satisfying
* Christmas cards to stir old memories and help keep in touch with loved ones
* Christmas parties and events that are joyful
* worshipful experiences
* safe travels
* don't spend more than I budget

As I review my hopes for Christmas, I know that I am not going to get everything I want. That doesn't keep me from hoping. In fact, the best way I can hope is to pray about what I hope for. And, like the prophets of old, I need to realize that God's timing is not my own. When Isaiah told the people of Israel; *For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace* (Is. 9:6), he had no way of knowing who Jesus really was and when He would come. There were hundreds of years separating the prophecies and their fulfillment. Are you willing to hope even when you can't see you hopes happening? Romans 8:24, 25 points out; *For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what he already has? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.*

Why not write down your hopes in a prayer to God. Perhaps you hope for an opportunity to share Christ with an unsaved family member. Maybe you just hope that you can get through the holiday without a big blowup. It may be your hope that you don't overspend like last year. Is your hope just to not give the family food poisoning from your first turkey dinner? God wants you to hope. Hope is not demanding. It is unrelenting faith in God.

**Follow these three tips to creating hope for your Christmas.**

1. Don't stress. Most holiday stress comes from thinking you have to please everybody. Do less this year. Say "No" to some things with confidence. Know that saying "yes" to every person, party invitation, and charity will definitely land you in the stressed out zone. Realize that the world can go on without you, but you cannot go on without proper sleep, exercise and mental relaxation.
2. Be joyful. Hum along to Christmas tunes. Make it the most wonderful time of the year, because it is. Jesus came to earth to make it possible for you to have a relationship with God. That is something to celebrate. Practice praying without ceasing by asking God to show you the joy in each task: wrapping gifts, decorating, baking, card writing shopping, and all the others.
3. Be with joyful people and prepare for grumpy ones. Make sure you have time to share joyful moments with others this year. And for those negative people who live in your house, or you will visit this holiday season; accept their faults. Don't let yourself be abused by them, but don't let unforgiveness extinguish your holiday cheer.

Next week of advent, we will light a candle for love. If you don't have an Advent Wreath, you might go out and get one; to remind you that counting down to Christmas begins with hope. Remember to light one candle for hope for a peaceful Christmas.

**First Sunday of Advent**

Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness, and put on the armor of light, now in the time of this mortal life in which your Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the living and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal; through him who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

December 3

How NOT to Have a Merry Christmas

Have you been listening to the Christmas advertisements?  I want to challenge you to stop and fully receive the message of Christmas they bring.  They tell you that the true joy of the season is found by purchasing their latest bargain for someone you love, but they don't stop there.  The real enticement is to get you to think more about yourself.  The messages end by encouraging you to buy gifts on sale for your friends and family and save most of your money picking up something you really want.  After all, the advertisements imply, you are sure to get bad gifts from everyone else in your life.   
   
When I think of the messages I receive about Christmas from the world, it sends me running back to Christ to find the true meaning of Christmas.  Jesus didn't come as a baby so that I could have a rationale for splurging on myself once a year.  He didn't come to wear me out chasing a dream holiday.  He didn't come so that I would remember the homeless and hungry only in December.  He came to be my Savior.  He came to make a relationship with God possible.  
   
He also put me in charge of telling others about the true meaning of Christmas.  It’s sad to think about how empty Christmas is without Jesus, yet that is exactly what Christmas is like for over half the people you live, work and interact with each year.  They are living the dream of Christmas that will never satisfy.  Even if they could buy everything they wanted for themselves and everyone they love, they would never be satisfied.   
   
When I listen to the messages from the world around Christmas, I stop and face the empty feelings so many must be experiencing as this season comes and goes in their lives.  They were created for a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, not to replace their disappointment with Aunt Gertrude’s sweater with a shiny new car.  And by the way, what is so wrong with wearing Aunt Gertrude’s crazy Christmas sweater with a smile and wrapping yourself in the warm feelings that though she doesn't have the best taste in clothes, she does love her niece enough to buy that gift?  
   
If you want to miss out on a Merry Christmas, listen to the advertisements that bombard you every day.  If you want to have a Merry Christmas, reflect on the life of the baby that was born.  He lived His life focused on loving His Heavenly Father and telling everyone how much He loved them.  I just read an article this week about what the unchurched think of Christians and most of them said that they would attend church with us if we will ask.  The best way to have a Merry Christmas is to share the story of Christmas with those who don't know, but who have hearts that were designed to accept the story.  
   
This year I hope you will spread the joy of Christmas to the people in your world who do not know Jesus.

Take some time to pray and ask God to show you someone you can share His love with at Christmas this year.

December 4

Joseph is Chosen for a Special Purpose

God plans every detail of our lives. He offers us the opportunity to join Him in His work. Because He is infinite, He can prepare good works for every one of us to do for His glory (Ephesians 2:10). God had big plans for Joseph’s life. No one would have suspected that Joseph, the gentle carpenter, would become the step-father to God.  
  
Fathers always play a back stage role when their wives are having a child. Joseph was no exception. What we know of Joseph from Scripture is very limited. We do know that he was a loving follower of God. We know that God gave him a special responsibility while he lived on this earth and, from all indications; it seems that he fulfilled his role very well. Even when Joseph first heard that Mary was pregnant, he didn’t respond in wounded jealousy. He knew that he shouldn’t marry a woman who had been unfaithful to him, but he didn’t want to publicly disgrace her. He was not a hothead either. He could have reacted right away; we know he at least took one night to sleep on it because the Scripture tells us that God spoke to him in a dream (Matthew 1:18-25).  
  
God’s message to Joseph was changed his view of his options. The angel told him that he should take Mary as his wife because she was pregnant by the Holy Spirit. Joseph did everything the angel told him to do. He married Marry, kept her a virgin until after Jesus was born and named the baby Jesus. He went beyond that to providing for his Son, teaching Him the craft of carpentry, and providing religious training. The last time we know of Joseph was when Jesus was 12 and was left in Jerusalem. Joseph was by Mary’s side as they searched the city for their budding teenage son. When they found Jesus, it was Mary who spoke. Joseph was ever quiet and in the background. We think that Joseph probably died before Jesus’ public ministry. We know he was not living when Jesus hung on the cross because one of His seven sayings from the cross was taking care of his mother and putting her into the care of John the Apostle.   
  
As we enter the Christmas season this year and reflect on Joseph, he is a great example of how to live your life as a pleasing sacrifice to God (Romans 12:1-2). Joseph didn’t have to be in the spotlight to serve God. He was willing to be in the background. It’s important to remember that service in the background does not go unnoticed by God. He designed us that way. Joseph didn’t argue with God about why his life was turning out the way it was, rather he embraced God’s purpose for his life.  
  
Most of us are like Joseph, the good works that God has prepared for us to do won’t get much attention from the world. Maybe God created you to share the gospel with your neighbor. Perhaps there is something about your personality or your story that will reach a person as no one else was able. Maybe God’s good works for you are to volunteer at a homeless shelter, perhaps in the back room sorting the clothes, the job everyone hates to do. Good works come in all sizes, big and small. Each good work is as important to God as the other. Why not take a lesson from Joseph and live your life accepting the good works God gives you to do. I’m sure it will help you have a Merry Christmas.

What do you think is the most important work you have done for God?

Who do you know that works hardest for God but gets rare attention?

December 5

The Innkeeper at Bethlehem

Every Christmas pageant must have an innkeeper. His part in the Christmas story appears at a critical moment. The suspense turns tragic as the famous innkeeper turns the pregnant couple away. At last he redeems himself somewhat by offering the shelter of his barn. Any child is proud to play this role in the pageant.  
  
Interesting, it is not a role that is written in the real Christmas story contained in the Gospels. The only mention of the inn is the context of an explanation for why Mary and Joseph placed Jesus in a manger. The Innkeeper has become popular from the dramatic retelling of the story, not from the Gospels.  
  
How did Mary and Joseph end up outside of an inn and where the animals are kept? There were inns in the time that Jesus was born, but they were usually in larger cities. Jesus Himself referred to an Innkeeper in the parable He told about the Good Samaritan. It is probable that no inn existed in the town of Bethlehem because it was such a small village. The term inn can be interpreted “a place of lodging,” thus it did not necessarily indicate a hotel type residence. In fact, an inn could be used to describe the way a caravan of people made lodging together as they traveled. Their animals and belongings would be right beside them as they settled up for the night, usually around a public well for safety and convenience.   
  
What kind of inn was it that offered no room for Mary and Joseph? It might have been that Mary and Joseph came to the home of one of their relatives, along with all the other relations who were required to travel to Bethlehem to register for the census. Perhaps they were offered hospitality and food, but when it came to finding a private place to have a baby, their needs were unique from the others who had sought shelter. Perhaps they were sent out to the place the animals were kept in order to find the privacy they needed for the birth of their child. The manger, the feeding trough for the animals, was a creative makeshift cradle for the time they spent sleeping outside.   
  
We must not conceive of the Innkeeper as an inhospitable, barely compassionate brute. We must begin to look at him as a loving family member, offering the best of convenience to his special relatives who had traveled a long distance. The fact that there was no room in the inn was not an indication that Jesus wasn’t welcomed and wanted by the people in Bethlehem. Indeed, preparations were made for His birth; even though they didn’t think of Him as their Savior, they thought of Him as their relative and they wanted to create the best environment possible for a birth to take place under the circumstances.  
  
It makes me think about the readiness of my own heart. Have I made every preparation possible to welcome Jesus into the home of my heart? Will I make whatever adjustments are necessary in order to give Him the best place possible in my thoughts, hopes, and dreams this Christmas? It seems Jesus’ relatives at the inn where Joseph and Mary sought refuge made room for Jesus. What about you? Is there room for Jesus in your Christmas season? Are you making whatever adjustments are necessary for Him to feel most welcome in your heart? Is there room for Jesus in your Christmas season? Are you making whatever adjustments are necessary for Him to feel most welcome in your heart?

December 6

**Advent is About Patience**

How have you been feeling this Advent season? Have you had regular times of stillness and wonder about God and what He did by sending His Son to earth as a baby? Are you growing spiritually after each Christmas service you attend? Are you smiling more this season? Are you getting more rest or less? Are you able to schedule your regular exercise and eat healthy food?  
  
I can relate to you if you have to admit that you find yourself losing ground rather than making spiritual progress during the Advent season. Do you ever wonder why? After all your attempts to make this Christmas different from last year you yell at your husband, you spend too much money, you over-commit to parties. It's not just you. You have a cunning adversary who is constantly looking to trip you up. Satan tempts us when we are weak. I know that I can grow spiritually weak during the Advent season. If I don’t watch out, I will become a prime target for Satan’s schemes.  
  
Jesus was weak when Satan tempted Him. Satan waited until Jesus was the most tired and hungry before he set in after Him out in the wilderness. Be aware, your adversary the devil, is constantly looking for ways to trip you up. Don’t you just know that he is behind the crazy mess that Christmas has become for so many? We are told in 1 Peter 5:8 to be alert to the devil. Be alert that he wants to steal the love, joy and peace of Christmas. The best way you can keep Satan from stealing your Christmas is to take some time to sit still and take in what Advent has to teach us.   
  
We not only need to be alert to Satan and find time for stillness, but we also need to heed Jesus’ example in how to resist him. Jesus used God's Words from the Bible to fight off the temptations Satan brought before Him. God’s Word is the best possible way to fight off temptation.  
  
Here are some words to help you fight Satan during Advent. When you catch that nasty spirit Christmas brings out in the post office line the mad dash for the most in-demand toy quote Psalm 37:7:

Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him; do not fret when men succeed in their ways, when they carry out their wicked schemes.

When you get overwhelmed by the parties, baking and things you need to do, remember Isaiah 40:30-33:

Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagle; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.

When you find yourself being angry with the people in your household, remember that your precious Heavenly Father is slow to anger and He can help you be that way too:

And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness. (Exodus 34:6).

It will take the power of the Holy Spirit to give you the patience you need to experience an Advent that brings glory to the Father. Remember, it’s not the Grinch who stole Christmas, but you do have an enemy who wants to keep you from fully receiving the message of God’s love this Advent Season.

Are you weary?

December 7

**Daily Worship**

I heard the best definition of worship the other day.  Worship is loving God.   When you define worship in this way, you come closer to experiencing what you are created for.  We were created for worship, but sin totally devastated our natural inclinations toward worshipping God.  
   
On a recent mission trip, we toured ruins of a pyramid that was built to worship the sun.  Inside this pyramid hundreds of remains of human sacrifices were found.  In the twenty-first century we do not find many people worshipping like that.  There is a lot of worship taking place.  Baby boomers worship their children by trying to give them all the lessons, material possessions and opportunities that they never received as children.  We worship our sports stars, musical performers and entertainers as heroes.   Most of us worship ourselves.  This kind of worship never truly satisfies.  Like the sun worshippers all you have at the end of the day is loss of life.  When you worship the wrong thing, it destroys your life.  
   
God knows this, so the very first commandment He gave us is to love Him.  That might seem egocentric on God's part.  It is not.  God tells us to love Him because He knows our natural propensity to love ourselves and destroy our lives.  Loving God will give you a satisfying life, while loving self and worshipping anything other than God will destroy your life.  
   
In John 4:23 Jesus said, "Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks."  How you worship reveals a lot about your relationship with God.   
   
Worship is not attending church once a week and singing some songs with a group of people.  Worship is giving and receiving God's love every day.  Worship is waking up to the beauty of a crisp fall day and thanking God for making this day.  It is noticing the beauty in God's creation.  It is looking into the star-filled night and wondering, Who am I that God would think so much about me?  Worship is thanking God for all the work you have to do today and inviting Him to help you order your priorities and give you strength to get it all done.  Worship is staying ever mindful and thankful that Jesus Christ has died for you.  Worship is noticing the big and small ways that God is intimately involved in your day.  
   
Do you worship daily?  You were created for that purpose.  Try one day of worshipping God throughout the day and see what changes in your spiritual life.

December 8

**What Are You Resolute About?**

What is it that you are determined to do no matter what? What pursuit do you find yourself chasing no matter what the results? Perhaps you don’t really think about what drives you. Jesus modeled single-minded drive toward one purpose while He lived on earth.

Luke 9:51 says, *As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem.* Jesus had a resolute purpose to follow God's plan for His life. His whole goal for living was to be ready for the time when He would be taken up to heaven. He wanted to stand before His Father and be able to show that He did everything He was given to do during His time on earth.

As the time approached for Jesus to be taken to heaven Jesus didn’t stop and question God's plan. He didn’t look for other ways to save the world. He didn’t take time to enjoy some of the pleasures of earth He hadn't been able to experience. He didn’t take a brief vacation in Hawaii, or travel to Asia for some rest and relaxation. He set His heart, mind and body in the direction of Jerusalem.

This caused me to question myself: *What are you resolute about?* Shamefully, I could come up with a few I hate to admit. One, that my husband loves me the way I want to be loved. Two, that I finish my to do list for the day even if it means missing out on important conversation. Some days I find myself resolute about just doing nothing, letting my to do list and everything I need to do go undone while I oversleep, waste time watching TV or get involved in other mindless pursuits. When am I resolute about doing God's will?

The time is approaching for us to go to heaven. Each day we are one day closer to our eternal destination. As this time approaches, what are you resolved to do? If you knew for sure that Jesus Christ was returning to take you back to heaven tomorrow, what would you spend your time doing today? It seemed that Jesus asked Himself that question. Each day was a pursuit of God's plan for His life.

I don’t know about you, but I want to be resolute about the right things.  Reading these words about Jesus caused me to stop and realize that if I am not resolute about God's purpose for my life; I will be resolute about my own goals.

I love this Covenant Prayer by John Wesley:

*I am no longer my own but Thine.  
Put me to what Thou wilt, rank me with whom Thou wilt;  
Put me to doing, put me to suffering;  
Let me be employed for Thee or laid aside for Thee,  
Exalted for Thee or brought low for Thee;  
Let me be full, let me be empty;  
Let me have all things, let me have nothing;  
I freely and heartily yield all things to Thy pleasure and disposal.  
And now,   
O glorious and blessed God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit,  
Thou art mine, and I am Thine.   
So be it.  
And the covenant which I have and one earth let it be ratified in heaven.*

*AMEN.*

Write a prayer about what you are resolute about.

December 9

Light One Candle for Love

The second candle of Advent is the Bethlehem Candle and it symbolizes the preparations made to receive the Christ child born in Bethlehem. It is the candle of Love because making preparations for Christ to be born required a lot of love and sacrifice. Mary had to be prepared by her love and devotion to God to be considered for the calling of being the mother to Jesus. Her love for God is evident in her confident reply to the angel sent to tell her about God's plan. She simply said: I am the Lord's servant, May it be to me as you have spoken. (Luke 1:38) Joseph's heart had to be radically transformed by love for Mary and trust in God, not to divorce her, but to accept that the child was God's Son and that his fiancé was still a virgin. It was love for Mary that motivated Joseph to be so persistent in finding the shelter of a stable in a town without vacancies. The couple lovingly received their son and tenderly cared for him by wrapping in warm cloths and making a bed for him from the manger. Love and preparations are rarely noticed. It is usually the final product that gets all the attention. Lighting a candle for love is putting the emphasis on the way you prepare for Christmas, as much as what happens on that day.

Just like Mary and Joseph there is a lot you must do to prepare for Christmas this year. You might be packing for a journey, or preparing for the birth of a baby too. Most of us are preparing by shopping, baking, decorating. All of the things we do for Christmas require preparation. We have to plan ahead. The preparing and the planning are not necessarily easy. Everyone loves the final result, but most underestimate the work and effort involved. It takes sacrifice, work and planning to make Christmas come together. When you light a candle for love, you are acknowledging your motivation to put out the extra effort you do at Christmas is because of your love for God and His people.

When you light a candle for love this advent, let it remind you to keep love in your heart through all your preparations. That means when you sit with your blinker on prepared to pull into a close parking space and someone comes in from the right and steals it from you; you can choose love for God and drive on, rather than cussing and screaming. If the perfect gift you were so excited about buying doesn't even get a word of thanks, move on without withholding acceptance.

Many women don't realize that giving real love at Christmas involves delegating responsibilities to others. Sometimes doing it all is really self-serving, a fear of sharing the attention, rather than a true service to others. People genuinely enjoy helping in the kitchen, wrapping gifts, going to the post office, running out to get something you forgot. Let others be a part of the process of creating a Merry Christmas. Enjoy spotlighting their contributions and allow sharing the preparations to be part of Christmas joy.

Take care of yourself. One way you can hinder a Merry Christmas for everyone is to burn yourself out with the preparations. If you plan more than you can do, spend or eat, and don't leave time to sleep, reflect and get replenished; you will end up putting a damper on everyone's holiday. Even if you have to do less than you wanted (perhaps let the Christmas cards go this year) it's better for you to be sane and happy at Christmas. Keep a list of the things you wanted to do this year, but didn't get time too, or the issues that caused the most stress, and make better preparations for next year. For example, if you had to skip the Christmas cards, buy some for half price after Christmas and send them out in January, or keep them and write on your calendar to have them ready by October next year.

Don't forget that a lot of love can sprout from a little in the world's perspective. The prophet Micah is the one who told us that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. (Micah 5:2) But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times. This small town in Judah would be the birthplace of the Greatest Ruler ever known. Not only was the Messiah born in a small town, he was born to peasant parents. If the wise scholars of Israel were waiting for Messiah, they would never have expected Him to be the baby Jesus who was born there seemingly by accident. Jesus' parents weren't even among the socialites of Nazareth. No one of importance would have known them in Bethlehem. Yet, they were the first to experience real Christmas. Just like the first Christmas, the joyful celebration isn't dependent on how much money you spend, how much sleep you miss, and how hard you work; it is dependent on whether your love for Jesus Christ is the center of your Christmas.

As you are making all those preparations this Christmas, make sure to keep your candle of love burning bright.

**Second Sunday of Advent**

Merciful God, who sent your messengers the prophets to preach repentance and prepare the way for our salvation: Give us grace to heed their warnings and forsake our sins, Redeemer; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

December 10

**Why Merry Christmas?**

It isn’t politically correct to wish people a Merry Christmas anymore. Striking reality given the fact that Christians stole the date from the pagans. The church fathers decided to celebrate Christ’s birth on December 25, not because it was the most likely date of Christ’s birth, but because it was the date of a pagan holiday of idol worship and gift giving.  
  
Now the non Christians want their holiday back. Christians and non Christians alike have just about succeeded in turning it into a season of stress, overspending and emptiness. That’s not enough. Some have been in a secret campaign to extinguish Christ from the season at all.  
  
Christians are fighting back. They are threatening to withhold the mighty dollar from stores who won’t acknowledge that the evergreen that sells in the season is a Christmas tree, not a Holiday tree. What is all the fuss about and is it worth it to stand up for Christmas, rather than concede to wishing everyone a Happy Holiday?  
  
The church fathers had in mind a hope to help us focus on the Advent of Christ to the earth through His birth in a stable, and the Advent yet to come as a conquering King. The season is to begin the fourth Sunday before Christmas, so that we will have plenty of time to take in the great miracle of Immanuel—God with us. The focus from the beginning was preparation for Christ.   
It’s important for us to think about our own lives, no matter what our opinion of companies who refuse to acknowledge Christ. The real question is: How much have you acknowledged Christ this Christmas season? Has it been a Merry Christmas in your heart? Have you taken time to spend with Christ in the midst of all the shopping, decorating, baking, traveling? Have you sat down and reflected on the wonder of Advent? Have you been thinking about the Second Advent—when Christ returns for us?  
  
When you think about Christ’s advent to the earth you think about love. Christ left heaven to enter this earth as a helpless, tiny babe. How much love filled His heart for Him to come to earth, knowing He would be rejected and crucified? He came because of His great love for us, not wishing that any would live in a fallen world forever. As you reflect back on your experiences this season, perhaps there have been some loveless moments. Maybe you got in a fight with your spouse about how much money you spent. Maybe you grumbled loud enough for others to hear when someone jumped in line ahead of those who were waiting longer. Those are the things that happen when you are pursuing a Happy Holiday. Your heart will be filled with love when you are truly focusing on having a Merry Christmas.

Has it been a Merry Christmas in your heart?

Have you taken time to spend with Christ in the midst of all the shopping, decorating, baking, traveling?

Have you sat down and reflected on the wonder of Advent?

Have you been thinking about the Second Advent—when Christ returns for us?

December 11

**Divine Absurdities**

There are so many Divine Absurdities in this life. God just does not see this world the way we do. We tend to look to our bank accounts, the sizes of our houses, the trips we can take to measure our blessings. It’s not that way with God.  
  
It was at the moment of incarnation that Mary, the mother of Jesus, understood the reality of Divine Absurdities most fully. When Jesus came into her life, she understood the deep realities of this world that so many miss. She had better insight into God than the greatest theologians who ever lived. Read what she says about God;

And Mary said: My soul glorifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me—holy is his name. His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation. He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things, but has sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, even as he said to our fathers. (Luke 1:46-55)

One of the Divine Absurdities that stands out to me in this song from Mary’s heart is that He has filled the hungry with good things, but has sent the rich away empty. I never feel this more intensely than when I am in the presence of the world’s poor. The poor are truly hungry. What they wouldn’t do if they were able to eat the scraps that I throw away after dinner. I recognize my own extravagance when I am in a third world country and take my daily supplements. Even though I always get a decent amount of food each day, I also add some vitamins and minerals that I think my body needs. Yet, these hungry people are filled with good things, while the rich go away empty.  
  
The sad thing is that the rich don’t even know they are empty. They are so full of their riches that they don’t realize how empty they are. I couldn’t recognize my emptiness in my richness either. I can’t see my emptiness until I attend church with the poor. Their love and devotion to God is what shows me how little I really have. I know not all poor are satisfied with good things, and just because you are rich doesn’t mean you are empty.   
  
It’s important to think about the Divine Absurdities in this life. The world is full of them. Forgiveness is one. Giving your first fruits—your tithe—is another. Loving your enemies is one of the most absurd of all. Living by the truth of these Divine Absurdities will make you break forth in song. Mary was speaking for us all when she said that God has been mindful of the humble state of His servant. The greatest of all God’s Divine Absurdities is that Jesus Christ’s sinless life can be transferred into us. I really love His Divine plans; perhaps they aren’t so absurd after all.

What Divine Absurdities do you notice in the world?

December 12

**Advent is all About Favor**

During the Advent Season once again I am reminded of God’s great favor toward mankind. When the church fathers designated the four Sundays before Christmas as the beginning of the church year and a season of penitence and self-examination, it didn’t take long for the season of Advent to become a season of joy, anticipation and celebration.   
  
I can easily understand why. It is hard to meditate on the Christmas story without becoming simply overwhelmed by God’s favor. His favor towards us and great love for us overwhelms the reality of our sin.   
  
Isn’t that why God sent Jesus? I know there are many feelings that come with the season of Advent. The absence of a loved one, the busyness, the pressure, and debt are a few examples of some of the realities that produce negative feelings at Christmas. Everyone can feel favored if they will let their hearts open to the messages of Advent.  
  
Mary, the peasant girl chosen one to be the mother of our Savior, was favored. The angel Gabriel told her, Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you. (Luke 1:28). She wasn’t the only one. When the angels came to the shepherds the night of Jesus birth, they announced, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests (Luke 2:14).   
  
Have you opened your heart to God’s favor to you this Advent? Do you fully take in what it means that God sent His only Son as a baby?   
  
I love the truth that we are all favored by God. In our human relationships we are always seeking to be the favorite. We want to be the favorite child, the favorite boss, the favorite employee. We think that others have to be out of favor in order for us to be the favorite. The reality with God’s favor is that I can experience myself as deeply favored by God and not take away from any of the favor He has for you. He has enough favor to go around to all of us.  
  
Perhaps the greatest way that God showed His utter favor for mankind in all of human history was by sending us Jesus. Though His heart ached from the absence and the torture of His coming death for the sins of all, His favor for mankind outweighed His personal loss and suffering.  
  
Advent is a season of anticipation and patience—looking for Jesus’ second coming. It is also a season to celebrate the sense of being highly favored by the God of the Universe.   
  
It almost wants to make me break out in song and rejoicing. Though I am a sinner, God has bestowed great favor on me. I want to sing like Mary, My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed… (Luke 1:46-47).

Are you mindful of your favored state?

Do you called yourself blessed?

Have you opened your heart to God’s favor to you this Advent?

Do you fully take in what it means that God sent His only Son as a baby?

December 13

**Unwrapped Gift at Advent**

Who has ever heard of someone not unwrapping their gifts at Christmas? I remember a woman telling me the story of growing up very poor during the depression and drawing the number for the most beautiful gift under the tree in her school classroom gift exchange. She told me how she thought it was so extraordinary that she didn’t even unwrap it when the other children were tearing their gifts open. She protected it from the snow on her walk home and put it by her bed so she could continue admiring the splendor of her gift. By January, she finally unwrapped it.   
  
The whole world has been given a gift to unwrap. It is the greatest, most valuable gift that will ever be given. Its wrapping is multifaceted, with images of a tiny baby surrounded by admiring adults and animals, a crucified Savior, a prayerful teacher, a ruling majesty, a Divine incomprehensible figure to behold. The gift of course is Jesus Christ. God gave Him to the world (John 3:16). Unfortunately, this gift has simply been refused by the majority of the inhabitants of this world.  
  
It’s more than a shame, really; it breaks the heart of God. God has worked hard to offer this gift; it has been given with the greatest of personal sacrifice. It should be the most precious gift anyone has ever received.   
  
Though God continues to offer the gift of His Son, the majority of the world still rejects His great favor. Jesus’ very own hometown rejected the gift of Christmas. Luke 4:14-30 records the Sabbath when Jesus was asked to read the day’s Scripture which opened to Isaiah 61:1-2. He read, The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor (Luke 4:18-19). Then He sat down and told them that today this scripture was fulfilled before them (Luke 4:21). And they were at first amazed, then angry enough to drive him out of town.  
  
The people of Nazareth are a microcosm of the world at large. We have been offered this amazing gift. We have been told about the year of the Lord’s favor. What we believe about this information will define our eternal destiny. The gift is given for the taking. The offer is free and unlimited. There are no lines in which to wait in or post office boxes in which to pick it up. It is simply the most glorious gift offered by the ultimate Giver. It is simply up to us to receive the gift of the Lord’s favor. It is very important to keep in mind that if you refuse the gift of the Lord’s favor you will not be able to avoid the day of vengeance of our God (Isaiah 61:2).  
  
I pray that you have received your gift of salvation and that you are discovering how incomparable this gift is to all other gifts you have ever received.

How have you unwrapped God’s gift to you again this Christmas?

December 14

**Whom or What Do You Love?**

If you are not sure whom or what you love, just check out your checkbook. Look around your house at the way you decorate. You will quickly discern whom or what you love. It’s a vital question to ask yourself. It is important to ponder the object of your love for the sake of your soul.  
  
Jesus said that all the commandments can be fulfilled by loving God with all your heart, mind and soul and your neighbor as yourself (Matthew 22:37-39). Tina Turner may have asked *What’s love got to do with it?* But God says that love has everything to do with it.  
  
The second week of Advent is a strategic time to examine whom or what you love. The focus of your love will determine the health of your soul. There is only one way to have a healthy soul and that is to love God. If you do not love God with all your heart, mind and soul, you will love the world. You cannot have a healthy soul when you love the world. St. Augustine said that we either love God to the point of self-contempt or we love ourselves to the point of contempt for God. Augustine doesn’t define self-contempt as a hatred of oneself, rather as a freedom from single minded focus on one’s selfish desires and pleasures. I think a better way to say it is that we either love God so much that we are free of our own self-focus, or we love the world so much that we have lost a sense of God.   
  
When you love God to the full extent of your human ability to love you will discover that you so completely trust Him that He could tell you the craziest thing and you will be obedient. That’s the kind of love you see in Mary after the angel came to tell her that she was going to be pregnant with the promised Messiah. Mary is a perfect example for us of what loving God will do for a soul.  
  
Luke 1:26-38 records this interaction between God’s messenger, Gabriel, and the young woman, Mary, the one who would become the mother to our Lord. Surely Mary could not fully understand the complete message the angel brought her that day. Love doesn’t have to understand; what love needs is to trust. Mary showed the love we think about at Advent. Mary’s words, *May it be to me as you have said* (Luke 1:38) can also be translated, *I love you God.*   
  
When you love God, you think more highly of spiritual realities than physical realities. When you love God, you don’t get caught up in the appeal of the world. When you love God, you begin to notice you are not as focused on yourself and your needs.  
  
Love is an incredible emotion. Love can rescue your soul from despair and emptiness. Loving God and loving your neighbor the way you naturally love yourself is the greatest experience this earth has to offer.

Who do you love well?

Who do you have trouble loving?

December 15

God's Amazing Love Makes You Wonder

Christmas Eve, 2004, my family and I were at our third church related event. My children used to lament being the children of two Christian Counselors, now they know the woes of being the children of two ministers whom God called to two different churches. It was a lot of church, but that is what made the message of Christmas more poignant to me.  
   
This day of three church-related events was not the most church I enjoyed this Christmas season. There were special Christmas concerts at school and each church that we juggled to attend. What I am hoping to convey to you is the idea that I had been exposed to the Christmas story and the traditional Christmas passages not just on Christmas Eve, but during the entire Christmas season.   
   
So it was me who was most surprised of all to hear the message of Christmas the way I did in my last Christmas service of 2004. The passage being read was Isaiah 9. It’s my favorite part of Handel’s Messiah. For to us a child is born, to us a son is given. I'm starting to sing it now.   
   
Though I love that passage, I guess I have tuned out the last phrase of Isaiah 9:7. I never heard it like I heard it that Christmas Eve. The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this. Then it hit me:  this is the message of Christmas. It is God’s zeal for us that made Christmas happen at all.  Christmas is all about the actions of a zealous God.  He loved us so much that He made Christmas happen. As I sat in the pew I was revisited by the wonder of God’s incredible love for me.  
   
It was an amazing discovery that I had been missing the entire Christmas season. I had considered the delight of my children in opening their gifts (well, not as much delight now that they are teenagers, but happiness at least). I'd thought about my own anticipation regarding Christmas—all the shopping, baking and decorating that I had offered to bring Christmas cheer to my family. I even complimented my husband on more than one occasion for his great attitude in putting up lights to share cheer with our neighbors and helping me in the above tasks.  What I had not considered was the zeal of the Lord that made Christmas happen. God is the creative force behind the creation of every good work in this world. His presence in the world has never been absent. His zeal for us causes Him to remain deeply involved in all the happenings of this world.  
   
It is indeed the zeal of the Lord Almighty that has brought me into an eternal relationship with Him through the birth, death and resurrection of His Son. I'm delighted to be the object of His zeal.   
   
Do you know how much zeal the Lord holds for you?  It’s an awesome thought!

What do you think about when you consider the zeal of the Lord?

Do you have zeal for the Lord?

**Third Sunday of Advent**

Stir up your power, O Lord, and with great might come among us; and, because we are sorely hindered by our sins, let your bountiful grace and mercy speedily help and deliver us; through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom, with you and the Holy Spirit, be honor and glory, now and for ever. *Amen.*

*Wednesday, Friday and Saturday of this week are the traditional winter Ember Days.*

December 16

Light One Candle for Joy

In the season of advent, the candle of joy is the shepherd candle because of the joyful way the shepherds responded to the good news they heard. My daughter says that the Shepherd candle is her favorite candle. I tend to agree with her. It is the pink candle and highlights the joy of the season. Joy must be shared with others, it can't be kept secret. Christmas is a season for sharing. Most charities show an increase in participation at Christmas. All of the sharing is evidence of the utter joy Jesus brought to earth.

When I think of joy in its purest sense, I think of new believers. They seem to exude a glow that sparkles throughout their faces. The reality of their salvation through Christ can best be described as contagious joy. Joy is a gift from God. It results from knowing God. It doesn't come from our circumstances.

Paul was one of the most joyful apostles. His letter to the Philippians is all about the joy that became his through Christ. He told us to rejoice all the time. Philippians 4:4 says; Rejoice in the Lord always, again I will say rejoice! Paul's joy was apparent in very grim circumstances. He wrote the letter from his prison in Rome where he sat on death row. He definitely didn't need to wait for his wildest dreams to come true in order to find exuberant joy. Joy doesn't flow out of circumstances. Its source is much deeper than what is happening on the outside of us. In fact, the most joyful people I have met have overflowed in joy in spite of some of the most difficult circumstances.

During this season of Advent, we can receive the gift of joy or squelch its power to energize our Christmas. Joy is a gift from God, but we must take time to be with Him in order to receive the joy of knowing Him. You can't buy joy, you can muster up joy. Real, genuine joy is a result of being loved by God. It is the fragrance of being in His presence.

In the busy Christmas shopping, baking, decorating, burning yourself out...you could use some real joy. Your shopping safari will turn into a joyful celebration when you spend time with God while you shop. Ask Him to help you find just the things you need at just the right prices. Invite His presence into your world of Christmas and be amazed by the joy it will bring into your life.

You may be like the shepherds, experiencing your same old day to day working environment. You are feeling just like last year, down to the wire and still a lot of shopping to do. Suddenly you become afraid. Afraid that Christmas will be here and will reveal what a failure you are at getting the right size, finding a beloved gift, not burning the Christmas dinner. When suddenly the message of Christmas bursts through into your life, you open your heart to the angel's message and you stop what you are doing and go to be with Jesus. After the shepherds saw Jesus, they didn't go back to their sheep watching life right away. They ran through the town of Bethlehem and shouted the good news to everyone they met. Jesus Christ is born!

Stop right now and light one candle for joy. Enjoy the joy-filled message of Christmas. Recognize that though you are a lowly shepherd, Jesus came to earth to be with you. Don't miss the joy that being with Jesus brings. Don't be surprised if you spend time with Jesus and other people begin to notice that you are filled with joy. Remember what your Sunday School teacher taught you is true, real joy comes from ordering your life: Jesus first, then others, then you.

December 17

**Everyone Loves a Party!**

Are you planning to attending lots of Christmas parties? Are you the type that likes to stay safe at home? Do you make your own party with you and your pets? There are lots of ways to celebrate Christmas.  
  
I don’t think God is celebrating Christmas the way we do. But that’s not because He doesn’t love a party Himself. God is the one who instituted Festivals and Celebrations as well as Holidays for repentance and preparation. God is planning the ultimate party called the Bridal Feast of the Lamb. It’s the celebration of the union of Jesus Christ and the church—all who have believed in Jesus while on earth. I don’t know what the best party you have ever been to is, but this party will top all parties. It has been a long time in the planning so the experience of it will be figuratively and literally out of this world!   
  
Have you ever felt awkward after mentioning a party to which someone wasn’t invited? You don’t have to worry about talking openly about this party because everyone is invited. There is no one who has ever been born who has not received a personal invitation to come to the party. Sadly, some will be too caught up in the measly offerings of this world while they live here and won’t take the time to RSVP, and they will miss out on the greatest celebration in the universe and a whole lot more.  
  
I bet you’ve spent time getting ready for a New Year’s party if you are planning to attend one. There’s even more preparation if you are giving a party. We have all received an invitation to God’s party and those who think about what to wear and what to bring to that party will enjoy it so much more. What will you wear? All who are allowed to attend the party must be wearing Christ’s robes of righteousness (Rev. 22:14). You need to make sure that you have received the robe. When you believe in Jesus as the Redeemer for your sins, you are automatically given this robe. You can’t get into the party without it.   
  
I can just imagine how it feels for God to go to all the preparation and all the effort to get ready for this party, but many won’t be able to attend. There must be a sense of loss and sadness, but that never causes Him to ignore those of us who do desire to come near. When Jesus told the Parable of the Wedding Banquet, He ended with these haunting words, "For many are invited, but few are chosen" (Matt 22:14). That thought won’t ruin the party, but it gives us something to think about. He will fill us with the joy of His presence and love. The party Host, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, the Great I Am, will be the central beauty of the wedding feast. It will be so fulfilling to be in His presence taking in His glory and receiving His love. Every guest will feel just as special to the Host.   
  
In the meantime, enjoy the parties you attend on earth. Drive safely and be careful on big party nights. Every time you get ready for a party on earth, consider the best party in the world, the one that will be thrown in heaven. Remember to tell everyone you know.

How are you looking forward to God’s party?

December 18

**Surprised by Joy**

There are so many times in my life that I have been surprised by joy. One of the most vivid was the birth of my first child, Rachel. Her birth was a total surprise in that she was three weeks early. I was so excited to meet her; I remember telling the doctor in the office that day how anxious I was to hold this sweet baby. All the anticipation and expectation could not come close to what it felt like to actually deliver a healthy human being into the world—in 3.5 hours of labor. (I felt you needed that detail to understand how extravagant my joy was.) I just could not get over the fact that I had cooperated with God in this act of creating a new life, an eternal soul. I never slept a second for a 24 hour period; I was so struck by joy.  
  
I’ve been surprised by joy in hard times. I have experienced spiritual warfare in ministry that was taking down others who were ministering with me, but the more I submitted to God the greater joy I felt. I could not contain the joy. It made me feel sorry for the others who had to be around me because I knew misery loves company and I couldn’t help the spiritual reality that was happening in my soul.  
  
Joy is not the same as happiness; it is much deeper and much higher. It has nothing whatsoever to do with the circumstances you find yourself living through. Joy is catching a glimpse of heaven.   
  
The shepherds were transformed on Christmas night into joyful bearers of good news all around the town of Bethlehem. Luke 2:16-18 describes their behaviors after they heard the news from the angels that Jesus was born: *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, all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them.* The word “joy” is not mentioned as an adjective describing the shepherds, but their actions remind me of times of joy in my life, hurrying, seeing, spreading the word in a way that raises amazement in others. I wonder if the surprise visit on the hillside set them up for greater joy. Surprise is often linked to joy as well.  
  
Recently I was surprised by joy when I followed my own instructions for beginning this Advent Season by rising before dark (Jesus’ favorite time to pray) and spending time in quiet reflection. In Texas, that first day of Advent was an unseasonably warm morning with a cloud covered sky. My first surprise was that the darkness lingered and the birds welcoming the day were silent for much longer than I expected. I came to this time expecting things to be a certain way and though they looked much gloomier, they produced deep joy.   
  
If you are finding yourself wishing for joy, let me tell you a guaranteed place you can find it. God says that you will be surprised by joy when you stop looking for joy in the things that please you. Isaiah 58:13-14 says, *If you keep your feet from breaking the Sabbath and from doing as you please on my holy day, if you call the Sabbath a delight and the Lord’s holy day honorable, and if you will honor it by not going your own way and not doing as you please or speaking idle words, then you will find your joy in the Lord, and I will cause you to ride on the heights of the land and to feast on the inheritance of your father Jacob. The mouth of the Lord has spoken.*

Joy is riding on the heights and feasting on your inheritance; it is an emotion that only the Lord can give you and it is fully satisfying to your soul.

When have you felt this kind of spiritual joy?

December 19

God Is Born in the World of Men

This holiday season we focus on the fact that Jesus was born. God became incarnate in human flesh. The God of the Universe humbled Himself to the point of becoming one of us.  I could not state it more directly than Paul who wrote, "Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus. Who being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped.  But made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in the human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!" (Philippians 2:5-8)  
   
When Jesus was born He took on human nature.  This actuality often goes unnoticed. We are so proud of our human flesh.  We worship our bodies. But for Jesus, the state of being in human flesh was quite a demotion. We get a glimpse of how He really is at the transfiguration and in Revelation 1. Suffice it to say that He is magnificent. At Christmas He was born into our world.  He came to the slums. He endured the smells and the darkness and the disasters because He loves us. God was born into the world of men.  
   
When Jesus grew older, He told us that we must be born again.  Herein is another detail that gets too little recognition in our lives. The fact is that when we are born again we take on His divine nature. Mysterious as it sounds, God promises that we can be transformed from our sinful nature simply by believing that Jesus is Lord.  This is the complete opposite of what Jesus experienced. Jesus was born into human flesh; we are born again into Divine Spirit.  What a tradeoff! I actually become like Him.  My whole DNA is transformed by becoming born again.  
   
This explains the scriptures that state, "For it is written: Be holy, because I am holy" (1 Peter 1:16). God can have such high hopes for me because He has put Himself in me.  I have been reborn, taking on His divine nature. What could I become if I let my rebirth take root and mature? God knows. He believes. He longs for me to fully embrace my heavenly nature the way His own son was willing to enter His human nature even to the point of dying a torturous death on a cross.  
   
When I stop and ponder what it means that Jesus was born into the world of men, I also reflect that I have been reborn in the world of God. These two births are completely incomprehensible, yet indispensable to relationship with God.  
   
This Christmas season we celebrate Jesus’ birth, but also our own rebirth. Jesus glorified God by becoming a member of the human race. There is no greater joy you can bring to God than becoming a member of His heavenly Kingdom by being born again. Don't let another Christmas season pass without receiving your glorious destiny that Jesus’ birth made possible. Jesus was born so that you could be born again.

What circumstances do you remember leading up to the moment that you first believed that Jesus died for *your* sins?

December 20

**Advent Is a Season of Change**

How do you prepare for Advent? John the Baptist gave this advice: Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven is near (Matthew 3:2). Repent is a word with little appeal to our human nature. We don’t really know quite what God wants us to do. Does He want us to walk around in sackcloth and ashes? Should we sit around thinking about how much we sin until we cry? I think God is after a change of heart and Advent can help us get there.  
  
What God wants most from us is that we change our mindset from the cares of this earth, to the wonder of His Kingdom. Advent heralds a change. It ushers in a renewed interested in God’s Kingdom on earth.. In Advent, there is often a change in seasons; we even had a little snow and ice in Dallas to escort in Advent this year. I had to change my closet and dig out my winter coat from the very back. The season of Advent invites us to change our focus from the everyday to the time when our Savior first came to us wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.  
  
That Advent two thousand years ago marks the preparation for the Kingdom of Heaven to arrive on earth. Our King was preparing to be born and finish His work of redeeming mankind by His sacrificial death. He now reigns in heaven until the time is just right for Him to return to earth and claim all citizens of heaven to reign and rule with Him.  
  
It’s not easy to remain focused on the Kingdom of Heaven. It seems much less complicated to think about the bills to pay, the shopping and baking to do, the carpool to drive. All of these earthly concerns are in our face every day. It is a season, such as Advent, that causes us to stop and ponder the questions, Why did Jesus come as a baby? What was God up to?   
  
There was a change in the world that occurred that wonderful day when Christ was born. God’s redemption time clock was moving forward just as He had promised the prophets long ago. Advent reminds us that God did fulfill His promises and that He will continue to fulfill His promise of the earthly reign of Jesus Christ after His second coming to earth.  
  
Advent asks me to open my heart to eternal destinies and heavenly promises. It calls me from the mundane work of living day to day to reconsider the Kingdom of Heaven and cry out to God to bring it to earth quickly. It encourages me by seeing that even after long centuries of waiting, God did fulfill His promises just like He said. It reminds me that there are still promises to be fulfilled.  
  
In the meantime, I prepare by repenting; repenting of my puny view of my life and what I am here to do, repenting of being caught up in a worldly mindset that tells me a dream Christmas will satisfy my soul, repenting of spending too little time reflecting and meditating on the true meaning of Christmas.  
  
Spend some time this Advent season becoming mesmerized by the promises of God and the Heavenly Kingdom He has established on earth of which you are a citizen.

How have you prepared spiritually this Advent Season?

What benefit has this brought to you?

December 21

The Art of Encouragement

So I’m having one of my ordinary days. Things aren’t going so bad. Okay, I’m a little behind schedule, but what’s new? I always think I can get more done than I really can. I’m not too frustrated; I’m just trying to get everything together and get ready to leave for work when I get a call from my friend George Marchmont.  
  
There’s something about talking to George Marchmont that just puts a smile on my face. He’s called to tell me how much he and Janet enjoy reading the weekly **Tea Time for Your Soul** messages. He’s quick to give Janet all the credit for reading them because his eyes are too bad to read anymore. He doesn’t want to take up too much of my time, but he wants me to know that God is using the messages I write to speak to many people. Before he called I didn’t think I was feeling all that bad; but after I hung up, I felt so much better. I’m not the only one who feels so uplifted and encouraged by George and Janet. They are a team of encouragers.  
  
It makes me think of Barnabas. His real name was Joseph but the apostles called him Barnabas because it meant “Son of Encouragement” ([Acts 4:36](http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/index.php?book_id=51&chapter=4&verse=36&version=31&context=verse&interface=print)). Every time his name is mentioned in Scripture it is in reference to something good he has done for others; selling land to give to those in need, bringing Paul to Antioch, defending John Mark’s fitness for mission work. He was one of those people who was known not so much by his name as by his character. When people thought of him they didn’t think of Joseph the Levite; they thought of the way he was constantly encouraging others.  
  
I’ve got to think, what would the apostles call me? I guess I would be lucky if they just called me Debi. What other name would characterize how I live each day? Barnabas was known as an encourager, but he was also known to be full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a good man as well [Acts 11:24](http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/index.php?search=Acts%2011:24&version=31&interface=print). It was the Holy Spirit working through him that made him so encouraging to others. Wouldn’t it be great to live your life so full of the Holy Spirit that people remembered the Holy Spirit’s work within you more than they remembered your name?  
  
If you want to have the kind of impact on people that Barnabas had, you too need to be full of the Holy Spirit and faith. There was nothing in Joseph, called Barnabas that made him especially given to encouragement. It was the power of the Holy Spirit released in him that enabled him to live such an exemplary life. Start living full of the Holy Spirit and be prepared to be given a new nick-name!

Who encourages you?

Who do you encourage?

**Saint Thomas** *December 21*

Everliving God, who strengthened your apostle Thomas with firm and certain faith in your Son’s resurrection: Grant us to perfectly and without doubt to believe in Jesus Christ, our Lord and our God, that our faith may never be found wanting in your sight; through him who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God now and for ever. *Amen.*

December 22

Getting Rid of Bitterness

I can't think of anything more damaging to the soul than the root of bitterness. Every one of us has been hurt by another member of the human race. Most of us have multiple wounds that fester inside of us. We often underestimate how damaging bitterness can be to our souls.

God offers the only alternative to bitterness and that is forgiveness and trusting Him with revenge for what was done to us. At first glance this might appear to be a thoughtless gesture to overcome the horrid result of someone else’s sin against us. How could forgiving that awful person bring us any kind of peace? But once you've obeyed God and experienced the healing power of forgiveness, you will understand.

David knew the power of forgiveness and trusting in God to avenge those who sin against us first hand. Although a great leader and called a friend of God, David also had his failures. Through those times of failure, David learned the secret of overcoming disappointment and bitterness. The secret was forgiving that person through the power of God (He didn't even know the full expression of God’s forgiveness through Christ as we do.) and not seeking revenge!

David clearly displays the attitude God can work with when we are in the trench of bitterness. In 2 Samuel 16:5-14, we find David as the target of unfair criticism. Shimei, a man from Saul’s clan, curses David and throws rocks at the King of Israel. David’s associates are enraged at the thought of this man’s actions; asked David if they could go and cut off the man’s head (2 Samuel 16:9). David’s response totally surprises me and everyone who reads this passage. He chooses to leave this man in God’s hands. Rather than take his own revenge (as he could easily do), he believes that God could be working through this man to remind David of his humble estate. David wants to practice forgiveness and trusts God to seek revenge at the proper time because He believes God knows better than he. David is the victim of cursing by this man, and the victim of stones thrown at him, but he is not the victim of bitterness. Bitterness has not taken David captive and rendered him powerless as a servant of God.

If you read the story in context, you will also note that this incident happens in the midst of David’s son Absalom’s rebellion against him. David was able to overcome these great acts of disrespect and disregard against him through clinging to God for the right perspective. It is only natural for people to defend when attacked. David’s associates were so angry they wanted to cut off the head of the man who disrespected David so. It is natural to seek revenge and fill up with bitterness, but that only gives Satan room to work in your life. It takes getting rid of bitterness to leave room for God to overcome the horrible act of sin against you. Ephesians 4:26-27 says, In your anger do not sin. Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry and do not give the devil a foothold

What bitterness is threatening your soul?

What steps do you need to take to rid your soul of bitterness?

December 23

Light One Candle for Peace

Can you feel it? Do you have the peace of Christmas? Some might think a question like that is crazy to ask in the midst of the countdown to Christmas. Anxiety, yes, heartburn, occasionally, panic, almost, but peace...can't remember what that feeling is. The last candle of the advent is the angel candle because it was the angel's message that there will be peace on earth.

What was the meaning of their message in Luke 2:14, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests? What is this peace about which the angels spoke? It is a peace that passes understanding. Turning your anxieties into prayers is your pathway to peace. The peace on earth the angels promised is for here and now. Eventually, Jesus will return to earth and bring peace through creating a whole new heaven and earth minus Satan, demons and unrepentant men and women. That day will come. But, the peace is to all men now.

Have you ever experienced peace in your soul in spite of turbulent surroundings? That kind of peace is the mark of a favored Christian. Peace is a natural byproduct of being in touch with the truth that you are favored by God. I love this story of the Irish priest who went out into the rural parish. As he was walking, he passed an older peasant praying by the side of the road. The priest commented, "You must really love God." The peasant looked up and said, "Yes, he's very fond of me." Here was an old peasant man, with little to have peace from a materialistic perspective. But, peace doesn't come from what you own. You don't receive it from how many people you know. It isn't achieved by doing great things. Peace is the lasting knowledge that you are favored by God. If you have God's favor, then literally, what else could you need?

I won't be surprised if your overwhelming feeling isn't peace this close to Christmas. You are most likely still wondering if you can afford just one more present, or how you can make both of those parties in between the basketball playoff games. Yes, it is most hectic in your life right now. Still, you can have peace. Follow Philippians 4:6-7 and Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. You can have peace. It comes through prayer. Why not pray about the things that have you anxious right now.

You will light the candle of peace this Christmas, by never being anxious, but by praying about your anxieties. The flame of peace burns brighter with each prayer that you pray.

**Fourth Sunday of Advent**

Purify our conscience Almighty God, by your daily visitation, that your Son Jesus Christ, at his coming, may find in us a mansion prepared for himself; who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. *Amen.*

December 24

Lighting All the Candles of Advent

As we light all four candles of Advent we can’t help but be reminded of the prophecy of Isaiah 9:2, “The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.” Jesus is the light, the first born of creation, foreshadowed in the first lights of creation (Genesis 1:3). On the fourth Sunday of Advent you light all four candles. The light will only be brighter on Christmas day when you light all four candles and the white Christ Candle in the middle.  
  
The fourth candle reminds us of the peace we now have with God because our Prince of Peace has come to us as Isaiah announced in Isaiah 9:6, “For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”  
  
During this last week of Advent we remember the peace that Jesus brought us. He brought us peace with God. Before His one and final sacrifice for sin there was no hope of eternal peace. Since He came to us as a babe in a manger, grew up and lived among us, He demonstrated in His life and teachings that He was indeed a Wonderful Counselor. His death and resurrection verified to us that He is Mighty God as that one act has the power to save the whole world from our sins. He showed us that He is our Everlasting Father and taught us how to see God as our Father and His Father. Jesus’ purpose in coming to us was to make everything right and restore us to the peace we were created to enjoy. He is called our Prince of Peace.   
  
The peace of advent is important to the story as the angels sang, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests” (Luke 2:14), which is why the fourth candle of Advent is the angel candle remembering the peace the angels foretold.   
  
Serenity is the cry of your soul. Although you live in a world torn apart by the realities of sin, you live with a God who brings you peace. There is a peace that passes understanding (Philippians 4:7). Do you know that peace? If you don’t, what keeps you from lighting this forth candle of Advent, the candle of peace receiving the message the angels brought to the shepherds? When you let the light of Christ penetrate your darkness, you will find peace. You won’t be able to explain what happened and why you are trusting God even though you can’t see a way out of your problems, but you will be able to witness that there is a peace that doesn’t make sense but is just as real as if it did. May your Christmas be blessed by receiving the Prince of Peace into your Christmas and into your life.

In this season of advent as we light the Christ candle we are reminded that Jesus not only came once, but has promised to return for us. The Christ candle represents the true meaning of advent–actively waiting for Christ to come back into our world, not as a suffering servant, but as the conquering hero. Christmas will soon come and go in the year 2007, but our waiting for Christ should be a year round endeavor. Jesus last words to His disciples before He left this earth were about watching and waiting and expecting His return. You light the Christ candle when you commit to live your lives in anticipation of Jesus' return. Are you living the way you would like to be living when Christ returns for you?

I hope you have enjoyed a blessed Christmas and delightful advent season.

December 25**-The Nativity of Our Lord: Christmas Day**

O God, you make us glad by the yearly festival of the birth of your only Son Jesus Christ: Grant that we, who joyfully receive him as our Redeemer, may with sure confidence behold him when he comes to be our Judge; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

*Or this*

O God, you have caused this holy night to shine with the brightness of the true Light: Grant that we, who have known the mystery of that Light on earth, may also enjoy him perfectly in heaven; where with you and the Holy Spirit he lives and reigns, one God, in glory everlasting. *Amen.*

*Or this*

Almighty God you have given your only-begotten Son to take our nature upon him, and to be born (this day) of a pure virgin: Grant that we, who have been born again and made your children by adoption and grace, may daily be renewed by your Holy Spirit; through our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom with you and the same Spirit be honor and glory, now and for ever. *Amen.*

December 26—12 Days of Christmas

The West generally acknowledges a twelve-day festival, starting on [December 25](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/December_25), and ending on [January 5](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/January_5), known as [Christmastide](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christmastide) or the [twelve days of Christmas](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Twelve_days_of_Christmas)

Christmastide (also Christmas or the Christmas season) is one of the seasons of the [liturgical year](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liturgical_year) of some [Christian](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christianity) churches. It tends to be defined (with slight variations) as the period from [Christmas Day](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christmas_Day) to [5 January](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/January_5), the day before the start of the octave of [Epiphany](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Epiphany_%28feast%29). This period is also commonly known as the [twelve days of Christmas](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Twelve_days_of_Christmas), as referred to in the [Christmas carol](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christmas_carol) "[The Twelve Days of Christmas](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Twelve_Days_of_Christmas)", or [Yuletide](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yuletide) as in "[Deck the Halls](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deck_the_Halls)". During the season various festivities are traditionally enjoyed and buildings decorated. In some countries, by superstition it is bad luck to leave the decorations up after [Twelfth Night](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Twelfth_Night_%28holiday%29).

In the [Roman Catholic Church](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roman_Catholic_Church), Christmastide begins at the Christmas Vigil Mass and runs until the feast of the [Baptism of the Lord](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Baptism_of_the_Lord), which falls on the Sunday after Epiphany (on [13 January](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/January_13) in the pre-Vatican II calendar) and, in some more traditional Catholic circles, the Christmas season was formerly extended as far as February 2, the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord/Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary ("[Candlemas](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Candlemas" \o "Candlemas)"). The Solemnity of Christmas itself begins on the Vigil of Christmas and continues for eight days in the Octave of Christmas. In the [Church of England](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Church_of_England), the Christmas season begins at Evening Prayer on Christmas Eve and ends before Evening Prayer on the Eve of the Epiphany (which may be celebrated on [6 January](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/January_6) or on the Sunday between 2 and 8 January).

The Twelve Days of Christmas and the associated evenings of those twelve days (Twelve-tide), are the festive days beginning the evening of [Christmas Day](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christmas_Day) (December 25) through the morning of [Epiphany](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Epiphany_%28Christian%29) on (January 6). The associated evenings of the twelve days begin on the evening before the specified day. Thus, the first night of Christmas is December 25–26, and [Twelfth Night](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Twelfth_Night_%28holiday%29) is January 5–6.

Over the centuries, differing churches and sects of [Christianity](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christianity) have changed the actual traditions, time frame, and their interpretations. [St. Stephen's Day](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/St._Stephen%27s_Day), for example, is December 26 in the Western Church and December 27 in the Eastern Church. December 26 is [Boxing Day](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boxing_Day) in the United Kingdom and its former colonies; December 28 is Childmas or the [Feast of the Innocents](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Massacre_of_the_Innocents). Currently, the 12 days and nights are celebrated in widely varying ways around the world. For example, some give gifts only on Christmas night, some only on Twelfth Night, and some each of the 12 nights. What remains constant is celebrating the birth of Jesus on December 25th, and a period of twelve days and nights following leading to Epiphany.

Source: [www.wikipedia.org](http://www.wikipedia.org/)

How does acknowledging and celebrating the church year and festivals touch your spiritual life?

**Saint Stephen** *December 26*

We give you thanks, O Lord of glory, for the example of the first martyr Stephen, who looked up to heaven and prayed for his persecutors to your Son Jesus Christ, who stands at your right hand; where he lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, in glory everlasting. *Amen.*

December 27

December 27

Why Did I Just Eat That? ]

Food consumes the air time on radio and television. The commercials for food includes the tantalizing, “how great food is” advertisements, as well as, the ones that promise to help you say “no” to food temptations, or at least how to avoid letting your body get fat if you give into them. Food and not getting fat are on our minds daily.

In addition to being tormented by food, we also are well educated about food. We know what kinds of food are good for us, and which ones we should avoid or sample rarely. We know that how we eat not only effects our weight, but our health, our skin, our brain functioning. Still, daily we could ask ourselves “Why did I just eat that?”

In counseling I ask individuals who are working on eating disorders to stop and ask themselves that question. They don't really like the assignment. It is a very frustrating question to be asked, but I keep on asking them to think about it nonetheless.

I'm sure it was a question on the minds of Adam and Eve for their lifetimes. Although they had every kind of food available to them, “trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food” (Genesis 2:9); they wanted what they were told would do them harm. God was clear in His instruction “You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die.” (Genesis 2:16, 17)

Their story is not too distant from ours. “Why do you eat the foods that you know will do you harm?” At the core the reason is your stomach deceives you. Your stomach might tell you like the serpent told the woman “You will not surely die.” In fact, so many times your choice to eat that food you know is wrong to eat is because you are feeling tired and you think eating it will give you energy. You are wrong. After you eat, you might get a sugar high that lasts a few minutes, but it drags you down further than before. You eat because you are so lonely and you don't know how to make it go away, so you think if you eat you won't be feeling how lonely you are. When you are done eating you discover how wrong you are, because you feel more loneliness than ever. You eat because you are anxious about the new assignment from your boss; you are worried that you can't do what she wants. You eat to give you clarity, so you can do a better job. After you are done, you discover that you have lost thirty more minutes and you are no further ahead in accomplishing the daunting task. You eat because you feel you deserve it, since you have been eating so well lately. You tell yourself that you will just have this one cookie, which turns into two, three, four, and even some popcorn on top of that. Now you feel like you deserve shame because you are so out of control.

I'm not trying to make you feel guilty. God created food. He didn't have to create us with a need to eat, but He did. However, just like Adam and Eve, we need to trust God about what is best to eat and not to eat. We so often replace God with food. We turn to food to comfort us, to distract us, to shield us. God wants to do that. In fact, He wants to help us more than ever when we discover, we don't have power within ourselves to stop eating the things that do us harm. He wants to be your strength. He wants you to trust Him. So, start asking yourself; “Why did I eat that?” then “How can I trust God for that need instead of food?” and you'll soon find yourself closer to God and less out of control with food. When we don't let our stomach deceive us, it reveals the truth, we need God even for our daily bread, after all that is how Jesus taught us to pray (Matthew 6:11).

How have you cared for your body during Advent?

What changes would you like to make in the new year?

**Saint John** *December 27*

Shed upon your Church, O Lord, the brightness of your light, that we, being illumined by the teaching of your apostle and evangelist John, may so walk in the light of your truth, that at length we may attain in the fullness of eternal life; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

December 28

**Suffering Is Part of the Story**

The news is full of reports of human suffering in your community and around the world. Hurricanes, earthquakes, wars, human tragedies devastate this world

Jesus seemed to embrace His suffering in a way that can be an example for us. The disciples had all come on board. They had been with Him through the good times, feeding of 5000, hundreds of healings, great teaching, and even arguments from the religious leaders.  It was time for Jesus to ask them the golden question. These 12 from His inner circle should be able to know by now who He really is. He asked them straight out. Who do you say I am? Peter answered, The Christ of God (Luke 9:20).

That’s great. That’s important. You must get this fundamental fact down before you are ready to handle the rest of Jesus’ story. Jesus is the Christ of God, the Son of God. Have you come to know and understand that fact yet? When you do, you are ready to understand more. Jesus went on to warn them not to tell anyone who He is, while at the same time exposing them to the deeper reality of His purpose on earth.

He told them The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life (Luke 9:22). In the same lesson about knowing Who Jesus is, the disciples were also taught that being the Son of God meant embracing suffering. Jesus seems to connect being the Son of God with the mission of the Son of God. Who He was and what He must do seemed to fit nicely together in Jesus’ mind.

Many of us do not feel very chosen by or close to God when we are faced with suffering. In fact, we might be known to make some horrible accusation about God when we hurt. We feel that God has slighted us by not protecting us from the pain that overwhelms our lives. For Jesus, this was not the case. It was definitely because He was the Son of God that the fact of suffering did not unnerve Him. The fact that He would have to suffer the most immense kind of suffering any human being has ever known did not make Him question whether He was the Son of God or whether God loved Him.

The suffering was a part of His purpose on earth. He didn’t like it. He didn’t look forward to it. But, He was sure that it would need to happen.

Suffering was part of Jesus’ story. He told them plainly, now that you know that I am God’s Son I have more to tell you about myself. I am God’s Son and I will suffer. I will be rejected and killed, and on the third day raised to life.  This is all part of my journey. I want you to know that I am not afraid of My suffering, I accept My suffering. That doesn’t make it any less painful, but it does make it have a purpose in my life.

How has suffering been a part of your life?

Have you blamed God for not being kind enough for the way you have suffered, or have you clung to your identity in Him to help you recover from the suffering?

**The Holy Innocents** *December 28*

We remember today, O God, the slaughter of the holy innocents of Bethlehem by King Herod. Receive, we pray, into the arms of your mercy all innocent victims; and by your great might frustrate the designs of evil tyrants and establish your rule of justice, love and peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

December 29

**Getting Unstuck**

I can almost guarantee every one of you reading this knows the kind of day I am having. I'm just not doing what I know I should be doing. I'm eating junk that is making my stomach sick. I'm watching TV, when I have a list of stuff that needs my attention more. I've developed a headache, and when I'm not feeling guilty for the way I'm living this day, I'm feeling tired. I would go take a nap if I thought I could go to sleep.

It's Monday and I've just returned from a Retreat where I was able to both spend quality time with God and with my son. I had a wonderfully draining weekend. To make matters worse, one of the things of my list of “Things to Do” is to write a spiritual article for **Tea Time for Your Soul**. I honestly thought of sending an old one. Then I remembered; this is a valuable lesson for all of us. Paul confessed the reality of sin he struggled with in Romans 7:19-21 “For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do--this I keep doing. Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it. So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me.”

What do you do when you keep doing what you know you don't need to be doing, and you don't do what you know you should?

1. Recognize the power of your sin nature. (Romans 7:21-23) You would think today would have been a day of spiritual blessing. I've spent quality time with God. I couldn't sleep on the retreat, so I ended up passing the time praying. I felt connected with God all weekend and saw Him at work in many ways. When I woke up this morning. rested, in my own home; I experienced the let down of disconnection to God. I forced myself to spend time with Him, but was plagued by distractions. I tried to fight it, but gave into the “Here’s something easier...” thoughts that led me away from Him. It wasn't until 2:00 p.m. that I took the time to recognize what was going on. I've been making choices to give into the thoughts of my sin nature. With each choice I've put more and more distance between myself and God, and moved deeper into despair.
2. Ask for Rescue. (Romans 7:24) Even earlier in the day I had been crying out for rescue. I didn't like what I was doing, but I didn't really mean it. Sometimes we have to hit bottom before we will call out to God and mean it. We can say we don't like the choices we are making with our lives, but what we mean is we don't like the consequences of the choices. God waits until we honestly cry out to Him. He knows when we are really asking for rescue and when we are simply asking for Him to make it easier on us to do our own thing. When I finally asked for Him, He showed Himself to me.
3. Put one foot in front of the other. (Romans 7:25) Now you are waiting for the last step to getting unstuck. You want to know the powerful secret to automatic spirituality. Guess what? There's no such thing. Paul says just keeping thanking God all the while you try to live for Him knowing that your sinful nature is still there trying to trip you up. Thank God that you don't have to be held prisoner to your sinful nature. Thank God that He is there to rescue you. Thank God that although your life is not totally victorious over sin, you can have victory over one sin at a time, if you live in and through Him.

So, I'm officially unstuck. I've completed this article and I’ll move into the other stuff of my day. Let God show you how to get unstuck in your life.

December 30-First Sunday After Christmas Day

The Secret to Life

James Taylor said that the secret to life is enjoying the passage of time. He felt that any fool can do it; there ain’t nothing to it (James Taylor, Secret ‘O Life). I’m not sure if I agree that there’s really nothing to it, but I do believe that there is something very important in this life to appreciating the meaning of time and discovering how to fully enjoy it.  
  
Time is something we experience on this universe. Happiness has something to do with connecting to the eternal and acknowledging that time is temporal. Jesus came to offer life and offer it more abundantly (John 10:10), that abundant life is eternal life. Our life on this earth is only abundant when we understand how it relates to eternity.   
  
I believe the concept of time in heaven is very distinct from what we experience on earth. I don’t think our loved ones could be happy in heaven if they were still trapped by time, ticking off the seconds until the ones they love are out of their pain. I believe that even if they can see us living our lives, they take it in with a knowledge we don’t possess, and see our experience of time with divinely inspired eyes.  
  
So what is the secret to enjoying the passage of time? Haven’t the happiest times in your life been when you’ve become unconscious of time? That was a little taste of heaven. How long is ten minutes when you are waiting in the Doctor’s office to find out the diagnosis after your biopsy? How long is a toothache, or a traffic jam? It was probably at the moments that you were most unaware of the passage of time that you have enjoyed the most. That’s when you were experiencing a taste of eternity. It could have been as simple as enjoying an evening of rich conversation with an old friend. Perhaps it was the moments you spent on the phone with your first love.  
  
You can either look at your life as a never ending coach flight across the Atlantic seated near the restroom, or you can sit back and begin a meaningful conversation with the young man sitting to your left. What you do with your time makes all the difference. God knows there is really something to it, that’s why he gave us His Word—the Bible to help us navigate the passage of time right into an eternity in His presence.  
  
We were not made for time, but for eternity. So, yes James Taylor, the secret of life is enjoying the passage of time. And how do you do that? It’s really quite difficult, but true that any fool can do it. You enjoy the passage of time most fully when you can gain an eternal perspective. Even if you are living right in the middle of the most difficult moments of time you have ever experienced, you can enjoy it by remembering you are just passing through.   
  
Time is not eternity. God has set limits on our suffering. He has given us a timed test; it is our lives. We can see our whole existence as a test of whether we learn the secret to life. Matthew 6:19, 20 says, Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and trust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. Use your time storing up heavenly treasures and you will have learned the secret of life.

How do you enjoy the passage of time the way the Bible instructs?

What is the secret to life that you would write about in a song

December 31

**He Will Make All Things New!**

I just love a New Year. It seems to bring with it a sense of hope that everything that went wrong in the year before no longer exists, and I can move forward fresh and clean with no mistakes, mishaps or misfortunes.  
  
Is it possible to become so eager for something new that I discard something valuable? I began to question this after what I did yesterday. For months an ugly calendar hung on the side of my refrigerator. It is not a calendar that I keep important dates, rather one that offers reference to the time and place when I am in the kitchen. Last year, we forgot about this calendar and we ended up using the back page of the one from the year before. It wasn’t a solution I particularly liked, but it did the job and I was not industrious enough to do anything else about it.   
  
When December 31st arrived I made a decision. That calendar was coming down. I would at least replace it with something that changed each month. I pulled it off my refrigerator and looked over its garden scenes from the year before noting how beautiful they were and wondered why I didn’t appreciate it more. Wishing for a calendar like that old one, I grabbed one that came in the mail for free and put it up, prepared for January 1  
  
On New Year’s morning my husband noticed that I was ahead of the game for the year and had already changed the calendar. He asked, What did you do with the calendar that was here? I told him I threw it away the day before. That’s when he explained that he had bought a new calendar months ago that started with the remaining months of the year. I had thrown away a brand new 2007 calendar filled with garden scenes he picked out just for me.  
  
We went outside to the trash bin and searched out that calendar. It was bent and crumbled, but salvageable to use for this New Year. Presently it is being pressed under some heavy books, but eventually I will pull it out and hang it on my refrigerator. Its creases will remind me, not to throw out what was important from the past.  
  
God doesn’t throw out what is old to make it new. He didn’t destroy the world when Adam and Eve sinned. He didn’t completely destroy the world when He was forced to begin anew with Noah and his family. He makes us new from the material we are before Him. Colossians 3:10 says, and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator. We all want a new self for the New year, but remember that God will renew all that we have experienced, including, mistakes, mishaps and misfortunes. All we have experienced has the potential to be renewed, bringing us deeper into the knowledge of God and closer to the image we bear of His likeness. God makes things new without discarding any parts of you. I like the way Eugene Peterson paraphrases Colossians 1:3 in the Message. Now you’re dressed in a new wardrobe. Every item of your new way of life is custom-made by the Creator, with his label on it. Enjoy the process of being renewed in the coming year!

January 1—The Holy Name

What Kind of Diet Have You Considered?

It’s January, the traditional season for starting a new diet. The television is rampant with ideas of ways you can fulfill the dreams of a leaner you. There’s a lot of hype about diets, and I wanted to have you consider a whole new diet for the New Year. The good news is that this diet has nothing to do with food.  
  
Paul was a dieting Christian. Although, as a strict Jew, he did adhere to the diet that God prescribed in the Old Testament, he didn't force this diet on new converts. Neither did he profess the health qualities of a Mediterranean Diet. The kind of dieting advice he gave concerned a spiritual diet. He wanted to make sure that after he had preached to others he kept himself fit for God’s kingdom. He exhorted us in 1 Corinthians 9:24-27:

Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the game goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.

I think if Paul were preaching somewhere on the earth at this time of year, he would challenge us to put as much thought into a diet for our souls as we do for a new diet for our bodies. Has the thought of improving your spiritual condition even crossed your mind this year? What can you do to improve your spiritual state? Just like losing weight, spiritual growth takes hard work. Spiritual growth doesn't just happen. You need to put yourself on a spiritual diet if you are serious about seeing positive results.  
  
There are a variety of ways that you can put yourself on a spiritual diet. You might need to diet from specific activities—such as listening to secular music, or hanging out with certain friends. You might want to diet from TV at night so you have time to read and reflect instead. Perhaps you are so over committed volunteering at your church that you don't have time to sit and be with God. I hate to step on toes here, but maybe your mind is so obsessed with your New Years Resolution to lose weight that your soul is sagging and you haven't even noticed.  
  
As you are listening to all the ideas for great new diets for you to try this year, why not stop and consider what you might do to start your spiritual diet? Take some time to pray about it because the greatest Spiritual Trainer knows what would be the perfect spiritual diet for you. Let me know how your spiritual diet is going!

What is your spiritual diet for the New year?

**The Holy Name**

Eternal Father, you gave to your incarnate Son the holy name of Jesus to be the sign of our salvation: Plant in every heart, we pray, the love of him who is the Savior of the world, our Lord Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, in glory everlasting. *Amen.*

**January 2**

**God Really Does Know What He Is Doing**

I must say that this week has been one of overwhelming surprises from God. It’s not that God meant them as surprises. He promised to give me wisdom, provide all my needs, and guide me to His will. It’s me who didn’t really believe that He would do all that He said He would for me!  
  
Jesus told us, "But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well" (Matthew 6:33). Why is it that even though I know this promise, I don’t trust God to do it? Why don’t I walk in faith? Why do I give into worry? What is it about me that doubts that God will be there for me, that He will give me the strength, wisdom and guidance I need?   
  
It doesn’t take too much of living here on earth until we get used to people letting us down. They may not do it on purpose, but they just can’t be counted on. Before long, we start feeling that same away about God. When He doesn’t make our problems go away, or He tolerates the evil of awful people way too long, we think He is just like every other person in our lives. We don’t believe He is there for us unfailingly. Each time we try to get our needs met on our own, we doubt God’s goodness to us. I don’t really believe God will give me everything I need because I have been discouraged by my misunderstanding of God’s provisions.   
  
Jesus told us to think about God’s kingdom and forget about what we want. We naturally do totally the opposite. It comes logically for us to seek first all these things. We never consider whether we are following God’s best. Many times we don’t think He wants to be consulted on the things we can do for ourselves. We focus our lives on our needs, our wants, and our desires first and hope to have time for His kingdom too. Jesus says, if you have things you need, stop seeking after them. Indeed, forget that you need them. Seek God’s kingdom. Look for the ways that you can be a servant of God. Then be surprised by the amazing ways he meets your needs.  
  
What it took for me to stop seeking my own needs, rather seek God’s kingdom was the overwhelming reality that there was no way one earth that I could meet my own needs. I did not have enough wisdom to figure out my problems. I didn’t have enough strength to get all that I needed to get done completed. I stopped worrying about what I couldn’t do, and kept my focus on what God’s work was. That’s when the surprises came flooding into my life. I realized that God really does know what He is doing!  
  
Now why didn’t I believe that in the first place, before I could really see it? I don’t believe God is who He says He is and that He loves me the way He says He does. If I really believed that I am a part of His Kingdom and that He has made me righteous through Christ then I would see that I already have everything I really need. Are you focusing on the Kingdom of God and Jesus’ righteousness rather than your needs?

What do you think you need right now?

What does it mean for you to be focused on the kingdom of God this week?

Answer later: How were the needs written above met?

January 3

Good, Pleasing and Perfect Will

Discovering God’s will is interesting to most people. We would like to consider what God’s will is for our lives and decide if we want to follow it. We find doing His will compelling in some ways and terrifying in other ways. The truth is that most of us don’t wake up each morning with the thought: I wonder what God’s good, pleasing and perfect will is for me today!  
  
The reason for that can be deduced from Romans 12:1-2,

“Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.”

The reason we don’t think of God’s will as good, pleasing and perfect is probably because our minds are focused on a different definition of good, pleasing and perfect.. That should be freeing news in some ways. It’s not that God’s will is something to be feared; it is that God’s will is something that requires the right kind of mind—one that is not conformed to this world.  
  
You might think that loving God’s will means loving God. That is not necessarily true. You can believe God, love God and even believe He cares for you and not love His will if you haven’t loved Him with all your mind. Loving God with all your heart is believing God is good, loving and kind. Loving God with all your mind is believing God is good and His ways are good.  
  
Thomas Keating says, “…the prayer of the day asks that we be shown, the good, the acceptable, and the perfect will of God. This prayer suggests that there are three degrees of submission to the will of God. The good will of God is the will above every other affection. And the perfect will of God is his will above every other love including ourselves.” [1] Keating didn’t make a suggestion about the acceptable will of God. I might add the acceptable will of God is when we respond to His will above our own will. We can only fully accept God’s will when our minds are transformed enough to believe His will is perfect and good.   
  
If you are having trouble knowing the will of God, turn your attention to knowing the goodness of God. Your mind won’t accept what it doesn’t believe to be good. Oh that we could all honestly pray the prayer of St. Francis:

God:  
I offer myself to Thee to build with me and to do with me as Thou wilt.  
Relieve me of the bondage of self that I may better do Thy will.  
Take away my difficulties so that victory over them may bear witness to those I would help.  
Of Thy power, Thy love and Thy way of life, may I do Thy will always. AMEN.

January 4

**Living On Purpose**

I love buying a new calendar. I've spent my morning organizing and coordinating the calendars that record my life. I have a large notebook size one that lays open on the kitchen counter on most days, even though it has a drawer reserved just for it. It is the most detailed calendar I have. In it I stuff the invitations and flyers that contain the pertinent information about the event scheduled. It has all four of our schedules. On the refrigerator hangs a pretty calendar. This is the one I look forward to buying each year. This year it contains pretty garden scenes and an inspiring scripture verse. I only write major events on that calendar like birthdays, trips, and such. In my purse I carry a pocket size calendar. It contains an abbreviated schedule of family plans and obligations.

When I filled out my calendar, it was crowded from January until May and slows down after that. The next six months are very much accounted for with games to attend, speaking opportunities to fulfill, special events and trips. At the beginning of this new year, I need to ask myself "Do I sense God's delight in the way I live my life?" "Is there anything on my calendar that displeases Him?"

I've got an easy way to check out His answer to my question. All I have to do is read His Word to find out what kinds of events He wants me to have on my calendar. When I spend time surveying what God has to say about my life, I find that there are seven specific areas that matter most to Him. In fact, He emphasizes each of these important issues about living by telling me that I will be rewarded for how I manage them. This year, I plan to write down ways I can please Him in these seven areas along with the other appropriate items in my calendar. I want to challenge you to do the same. What are these seven different areas that God longs for you to be thoughtful about?

1. How you spend your money. (Matthew 6:19-21)
2. The spiritual disciplines you practice. (Matthew 6:5-8, 16-18, I Corinthians 9:17, I Corinthians 4:5)
3. Your relationships. (Matthew 10:40-42, Luke 14:12-14, Mark 9:41, Luke 6:32-36, I Thess. 2:19-20, Hebrews 6:10)
4. Standing up for your faith. (Matthew 5:11-12, Luke 6:22-23, Rev. 2:10, James 1:12)
5. When you dedicate everything you do to Him. (Colossians 3:23-25, Romans 12:1)
6. When you treasure God's word. (2 John 1:7-8)
7. When you are diligent in waiting for His second coming (2 Timothy 4:8, Luke 12:35-48, 16:1-12, Mark 13:32-37)

Take some time to read over the seven areas and review the Scripture promises. Under each category, write down things you are presently doing under each category. Pray about how God might want you to focus on one or more of the areas of your life for the New year.

Living on purpose is one of the best ways to joy, peace and contentment. As you pull out your new calendar, think of how you can live this next year to please Him.

Which of the seven areas do you do well?

What goals can you make for the New year in one of these seven areas?

January 5

**Have You Gotten Your Passion On Purpose?**

Socrates said, "The unaware life is not worth living."  Yet, that is the way most of us spend each day.  By that I don't mean that we live a day without being in touch with reality.  Rather, for most of us, we spend our days so much in touch with real life that we end up living unaware lives.

In my book, Passion on Purpose, I challenge people to take a deep, long look at all the things we are so busy doing, and compare them to the things Jesus tells us to do.  What I have found that if I don't take time to become aware of my life, I end up doing lots of important things, but not the things that are important to Jesus.  My hope for the book is that it will help people think about their lives, become more purposeful in the way they are busy.

The idea of living a passion on purpose first knocked me into awareness in 1994.  It was after a trip to Europe. The Berlin Wall had fallen and all everyone in Europe was talking about was the Euro.  American media wasn't even covering the historical issue of common currency in Europe at that time. I wasn't a devout student of Revelation, but the signs were definitely pointing to the one world government I knew was prophesied in that book.   I had to stop and ponder; what if Jesus were to come back in the year 2000?  I wrote a list of things that I thought God would want me to be doing.

When I started writing the Passion on Purpose, I found the scribbled notes I had written so many years ago.  I was surprised to find that many of the items on my list matched with the study of God's word I was doing in order to write the book.  It was very encouraging.  Is pleasing Jesus every a thought when you make plans for how to live your life?

Brennan Manning challenges us to think about our lives.  He writes; "The paltriness of our lives is largely due to our fascination with the trinkets and trophies of the unreal world that is passing away.  Sex, drugs, booze, the pursuit of money, pleasure and power, even a little religion, suppress the awareness of present risenness.  Religious dabbling, worldly prestige, or temporary unconsciousness cannot conceal the terrifying absence of meaning in the church and in society, nor cans fanaticism, cynicism, or indifference." (Brennan Manning, Abba's Child, Navpress, p. 120)

Can I challenge you once again to consider these seven areas that please Jesus, and ask you to become more aware of how your own life reflects His priorities?

1. Jesus gives heavenly reward to those who use their financial resources for His kingdom (Matt. 6: 119-21).
2. Jesus gives rewards for the spiritual disciplines we practice with the right motives (Matthew 5-8, 16-18; 1 Corinthians 9:17; 1 Corinthians 4:5)
3. Jesus gives rewards for standing up for your faith (Matthew 5:11-12; Luke 6:22-23; Revelation 2:10; James 1:12).
4. Jesus gives rewards for the way you treat others (Matthew 5:11-12; Luke 6:22-23; Revelation 2:10; James 1:12).
5. Jesus gives rewards for dedicating everything you do to glorify God (Colossians 3:23-25, Romans 12:1).
6. Jesus gives rewards for keeping God's Word pure (2 Jon 7-8; Revelation 2-3).
7. Jesus gives reward for being watchful for His return (2 Timothy 4:8; Luke 12:35-48; Mark 13:32-37).

January 6**—Epiphany**

**The Gift of the Magi**

We think of the Magi as three wise men who traveled from Africa to honor the birth of the King of the Jews. We really don’t know how many magi there were, only that three gifts were presented, and the scripture just informs us that they were from the East, although they most likely traveled out of Africa first to Jerusalem, then to Bethlehem.

What else we discover about the Magi lingers by reading between the lines of their short chapter in the Bible recorded only in Matthew 2:1-13. There was so much more to their story and so much more we could find out about them, but these short thirteen verses describe how much we can learn from their lives. First of all, they were curious about spiritual things. It’s doubtful that they made regular treks chasing kings. This was most likely a once in a lifetime journey. They seemed to be focused on this one king. They didn’t have the writings of the prophets; else they would have gone directly to Bethlehem, rather than Jerusalem. Along their way they learned more about the king whose special star appeared to announce his kingship.

Have you seen the plaque that says, “If it had been three Wise Women instead of three Wise Men, they would have asked directions, arrived on time, helped deliver the baby, cleaned the stable, made a casserole, and, brought practical gifts.”

It might be a funny joke, but it is not necessarily biblical. The wise men did ask for directions and brought very practical gifts. I can’t presume too much about cleaning the stable, helping to deliver the baby, arriving on time, or making a casserole.

These Wise Men have a lot to teach us about wisdom and about the most important lesson in life. These men were wise by earthly standards. They were known by those in their community as men of knowledge. They knew more than the common man about the stars and other important kinds of thinking. But that is not what made them wise.

The Wise Men were wealthy. They had the wisdom to earn and invest money in such a way that they could lavish expensive gifts on strangers and make long, costly journeys to distant lands. This was most uncommon for the overwhelming majority of the inhabitants of the world at that time.

# The Wise Men were ingenious in dealing with people. They had come so far, but not being sure exactly where the star was leading in such a large country, they stopped by the palace of the current King of Israel—King Herod to ask for the specifics. King Herod told them that he too wanted to worship this new king. The Wise Men were very perceptive to the king’s conniving. They did not return to King Herod to tell him about the child after they were warned in a dream.

# What truly made them Wise Men by God’s standards was their response to Jesus. They bowed down and worshipped the child (Jesus) and gave Him their best gifts (Matthew 2:11). Proverbs 9:10 says, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.” The reverent fear of the Lord of Lords is what made the Wise Men wise.

# It doesn’t require a PhD to be wise. What made the Wise Men wise was their knowledge of the Holy One. Do you know and worship Jesus? Worship Him today and you will find yourself a little wiser.

**The Epiphany** *January 6*

O God, by the leading of a star you manifested your only Son to the peoples of the earth: Lead us, who know you now by faith, to your presence, where we may see your glory face to face; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God now and for ever. *Amen.*