



**THE**

CANADIAN BAPTIST

*2016 Advent Reader*

Cover:

Vincent Van Gogh, Starry Night Over the Rhone, 1888

Inside:

Camille Pissaro, The Louvre Under Snow, 1902

Pierre Auguste Renoir, Coucher de soleil à Douarnenez, 1883

Claude Monet, Waterlilies, 1904

Gauguin, Die Küste bei Bellangenay, 1890

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Welcome to the 2016 Canadian Baptist Advent Reader!

Each year Canadian Baptists from across the country help us prepare our hearts and minds to celebrate the birth of Christ by leading us through a series of Scripture readings and reflections. We are so grateful to our incredible writers who give their time and talent to lead our Canadian Baptist family in worship.

With writers from the Canadian Baptist family from across the country, each reflection uniquely demonstrates our geographical diversity and unity of faith and purpose. We hope you will be blessed by participating in this series of readings and that you will be encouraged by the faith and faithfulness of your fellow Canadian Baptists.

All of us—from the west coast to the east coast and everywhere in between—wish you a wonderful Advent season and a very Merry Christmas.

Jacqueline Solomon  
Communications Associate, CBOQ

## November 27, Rev. 21:3-5

Jacqueline Solomon, Spring Garden Church, Toronto, ON, CBOQ  
Communications Associate, CBOQ

*Immanuel. God with us.*

This has been a difficult year for planet Earth. Climate change remains an ongoing threat. Refugees have been constantly in the news as they flee from conflict, oppression and persecution. There have been hurricanes, earthquakes, famines, terrorist attacks, places of political upheaval and countless untold personal tragedies.

...Merry Christmas?

I don't know about you, but I find it easy to be overwhelmed by the bad news that seems to be pouring in on every news channel. Every day my mailbox is filled with letters from worthy causes all raising money to try and solve some real and terrible problem. It is heart-sickening to see the many calamities our fellow men and women are facing around the world. Even as the good seed is struggling to grow, the weeds seem to get bigger and bigger. It is easy to despair and surrender to hopelessness and let the weeds take over. Except for one glorious hope: Jesus is coming back.

*Immanuel. God with us.*

Humanity continues to make a mess of things, but Jesus is coming to make everything new. He will pick us up, dust us off, fix what is broken, wipe away every tear and everything will be alright... forever more. He has and will redeem us. In the now and the not yet, we live in hope.

*Immanuel. God with us.*

## November 28, Ex. 15:12-14

*Ceal McLean, Kitsilano Christian Community Church, BC, CBWC  
Website Manager & Senior Editor, CBWC*

Few passages in the Bible sustain the giddy joy of Exodus 15, the Israelites' joyful song of release and relief. After hundreds of years of enslavement in Egypt, the Israelites are free and their enemies are destroyed: an event of such miraculous magnitude that only God in his mercy and power could make it happen.

This exultant song of rescue establishes the biblical pattern of redemption: from bondage to freedom, from suffering to wholeness, from fear to hope, from sin to salvation. God overturns the ways of the world to create a new pattern and does it decisively. Our enslavement to sin and death is completely, irreversibly, finally over and finished because of God's love and mercy. As Mary proclaims generations later in joyful anticipation of the birth of Jesus, the proud are scattered, the hungry are filled and the rich are sent empty away—the established order is upside down. From that beginning point, God is guiding us in a direction away from past bondage and struggles towards a new way of being characterized by love, mercy and holiness, towards His holy habitation. This is a lifelong journey, one that is guided by God who is always with us and beside us, leading the way.

## November 29, Isaiah 11:1-5

*Steve Hopper, Liverpool and Brooklyn Baptist Churches, NS, CBAC*

It is a picture I have seen many times as I have walked through the woods. Where once stood mighty tall trees, all that is left are large stumps. Dead branches that once held beautiful leaves now cover the ground: brittle, as the life giving sap has long been drained from their core. It seems like a huge waste of a beautiful forest. No longer are birds able to sit on its branches and sing pretty tunes.

But this is not the end of the story. A closer look reveals that from under the stump, under its roots a sprout has started to grow. It is young and there are only a few leaves on it. I envision other branches growing until the day another mighty tree stands.

The metaphor of a stump was an accurate picture of the true state of the Davidic dynasty. When Isaiah uttered these words, though still in existence, this dynasty had been without royal power for nearly six hundred years. There was still life in the house. God's purposes would not be thwarted.

Even in the midst of weakness, all hope is not lost. The Messiah is coming.

## November 30, Psalm 121:1-6

*Gord King, Broadway-First Baptist Church, Winnipeg, MB, CBWC  
Resource Specialist, CBM*

Most journeys begin with an element of hope. We endure the challenges of travel because we hold hope associated with the destination.

Psalm 121 is a song of Hebrew pilgrims that hoped to worship God in the temple in Jerusalem. They traveled by foot over rough roads. The mountains ahead were beautiful and dangerous. The challenges prompted the question: from where will my help come to face the rigors of the journey?

Our pilgrimage toward Advent is motivated by hope. We desire to meet God in a new and deeper way as we move through the days leading up to Christmas. We long to see God's presence in our troubled world. There are dangers and distractions in the journey to Advent. Perhaps in the past we have been overwhelmed by activities and worries. This year many of us carry anxieties for the world in which we live.

This song of Israel reminds us to focus our hope on God. The Lord is attentive to the needs of his people and protects them on the way. The Psalm ends with the acknowledgement that life is made up of many journeys. God protects our going out and coming in during this life and into eternity.

Let us find ways to nurture the Advent hope of God's redemptive work in the world and in our lives.

## December 1, Daniel 6:26b-27

*Della Bost, First Baptist Church, Puce, ON, CBWOQ/CBOQ*

During Advent, we don't usually think about Daniel being thrown in lion's den because he refused to bow down to a royal statue. There's good reason to do so though: Daniel's commitment to pray.

Prayer changes things. We don't always see what prayer is doing when we pray, but when we pray the act itself gives us the confidence that comes from hope. And there is an element of hope that surpasses all our expectations.

Daniel's prayer turned a whole nation around. His hope that his God could save him from the lions caused King Darius to make a decree that all men tremble and fear before the God of Daniel.

Who is the God of Daniel? The God of Daniel is the one and only true and living God, the God who is forever steadfast and all-powerful. Even now, the God of Daniel still delivers, the God of Daniel still rescues, the God of Daniel still works signs and wonders on earth. His kingdom will stand forever.

Is your hope in the God of Daniel? He alone is the one true and living God. He alone is your bright hope for today... and tomorrow!



## December 2, Isaiah 42:3-5

*Leslie Makins, Mt. Hamilton Baptist Church, ON, CBOQ*

In life it is common to hear messages like “be strong,” “claim your rightful power,” or as the famous song goes, “the only way to the top is looking out for number one.” We connect wealth, power, and strength with security and hope. Yet in this ancient reading Isaiah prophecies about the ministry of one to come. His ministry is in stark contrast to many of our 21st century ideals. He is a king who will not seek human power, rather, he will minister as a servant. Jesus took on human form and as he ministered he brought the restoration of God’s right order into the world... and he is still doing the same! Our world sometimes feels dark, but in Jesus we find a deep and abiding hope—hope for those who are feeling hopeless, healing for those who are sick and justice for the oppressed. The great news is that we are called to be part of his ministry and to humbly join the act of restoring God’s order by being bearers of hope and justice wherever we go.

## December 3, Matthew 12:13-21

*Rod Olson, Awaken Church, Calgary, AB, CBWC*

*Coordinator of Refugees & Uprooted Peoples, CBWC*

How do we hold out our expectant hands in the context of differing opinions and priorities? As human beings, aren't we made for community? The trouble is that sometimes that community gets in the way of us experiencing the fullness of God's abundant healing (John 10:10). Jesus, in this story, knew the Pharisees were out to get him. But think for a moment just how well the man with the withered hand knew he did not belong. This synagogue and its leadership was his community. He would have seen the snide glances in his direction before the question was asked; "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?" He knew it was a trap, Jesus knew it was a trap; a great tension filled the air. But Jesus words cut through that tension.

"Stretch out your hand."

There was no hesitation in the response, the withered hand catapulted towards this man of love, delight, Spirit.

This Advent you are once again invited to hold out your hand to the one who will not break the bruised reed or snuff out the smouldering wick. Justice is won in his great name. Stretch out your hand!

## December 4, Philippians 4:5-7

*Rhonda Y. Britton, Cornwallis Street Baptist Church, Halifax, NS, CBAC*

Kingdom principles often run counter-intuitive to human reasoning. This Scripture states that the best way to get through life's challenges is to turn our attention to others. Through our gentleness in serving others, the presence of God is manifest. This leads us away from our problems to our Problem-Solver.

The Holy Spirit indwells every believer and empowers us. When the trials of life assail, do not fret. Serve! Turn your focus to God. When we pray with hearts of thanksgiving, we are acknowledging our dependence on the one in whom we live, move, and have our being. We are declaring the truth of Christ's victory over the enemy of our souls! That focus on God in prayer lifts us out of the fray, above our circumstances, to a place of peace.

In this season of Advent, as we remember the Lord's first coming and contemplate his return, our eyes must remain fixed on the one who created us and loves us enough to come to us. Before his last ascension, Jesus gave us his gift of peace. Do not be anxious. Reflect on his teaching. His peace envelopes us as we pray, love, and serve others just as he did.

## December 5, John 16:30-33

*Jennifer Fernandes, Program Officer for Latin America, CBM*

We live in a broken world. When we look at the news, when we take a look around us, the consequences of the brokenness of this world are evident in the everyday of our lives. At times, it can feel overwhelming. It can feel unjust. We can feel alone. Jesus tells us that in this world, this is how it will be. It's not a perfect world. Hard times will come. But he also assures us that in him we may have peace and what an assurance that is: "...in me...peace." Jesus reminds us that despite the trouble that we are facing, to remember that he's been there and he's overcome it. And in him, in the one that has conquered the world, we can find peace.

During this Advent season, as we prepare our hearts for the coming of our Saviour, let us be reminded of this readily available peace that transcends our troubles and may we focus on the good news of the birth of Jesus, the Prince of Peace.

## December 6 Isaiah 9:6

*Gordon L Belyea, Église Évangélique Baptiste d'Ottawa, ON, UEBFC*

A year of political conflict to the south could sour anyone on government. How different is the Lord's promise of a coming ruler. Given to those weary and heavy-laden, in darkness, it wasn't just another throw-away line—but salvation. This child who would take on humanity is the Son of God given for us: giving life by taking our sin on himself, giving us righteous standing that we take our place before a holy God, whose own ardent love would accomplish this.

Every leader or follower—nationally, in the workplace, or in the home—must see his or her own conduct judged by this given Son. His rule of justice and peace, inaugurated in his birth, death and resurrection, on which we look back at Advent, will be consummated at his return, to which we even now look forward. Tightrope walkers whose line extends behind and before us, which must be walked if we're to survive our trek, we who confess his name now orient our every action in light of this kingdom which is even now amongst us. Will we, by word and action, bear witness to this given Son, the King whose narrow way is life, joy and peace?

## December 7, Ezekiel 37:26-28

*Margaret Bellamy Tincombe, Kipling Baptist Church, ON, CBOQ*

What a wonderful gift!

A covenant of peace between God and man to have a sanctuary for evermore.

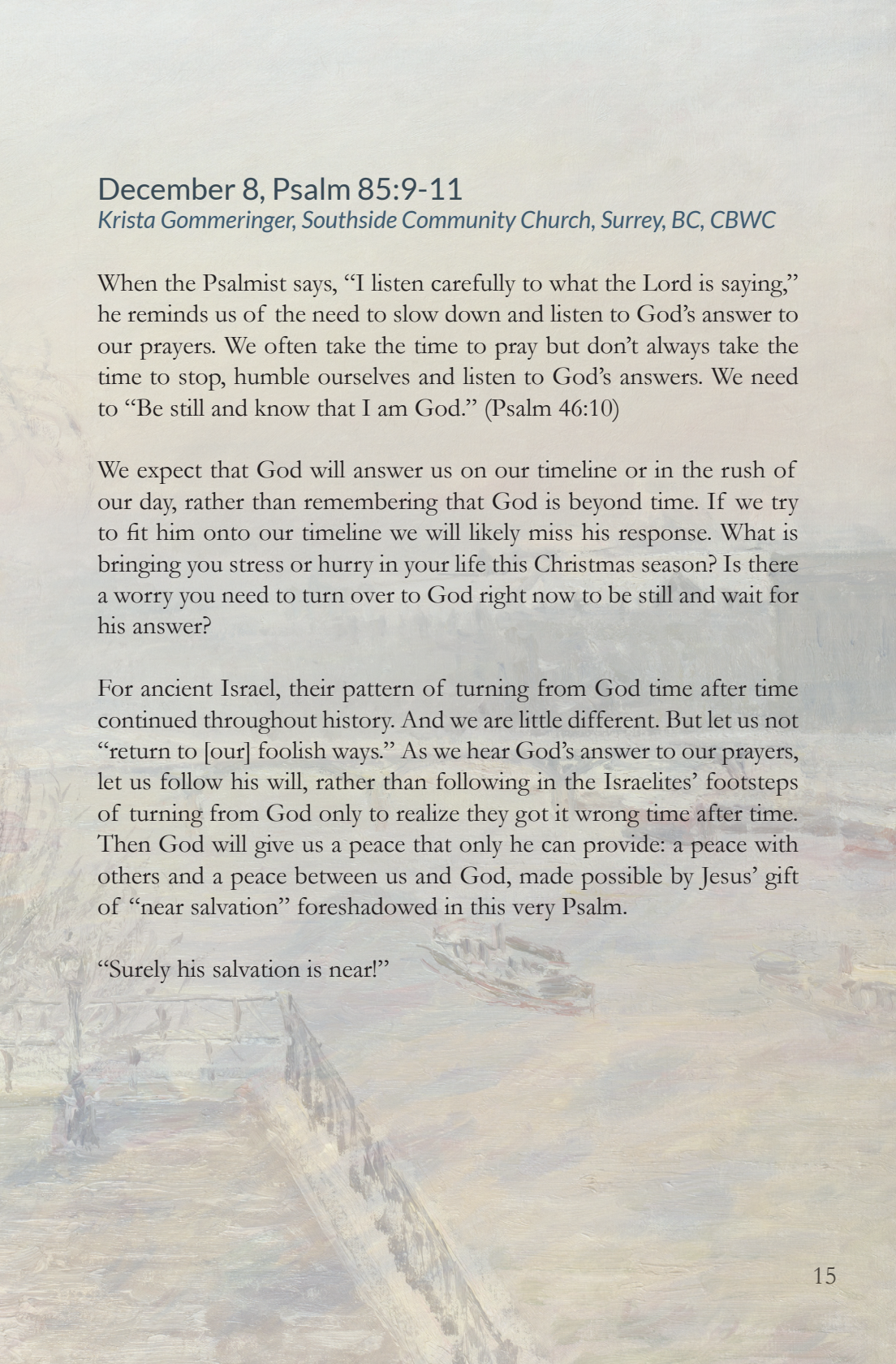
A covenant to be His people, loved, interceded for by Jesus and guided by the indwelling Spirit.

Peace is a product of reconciliation—reconciliation with God first—opening the door for reconciliation with our fellow man. Knowing the greatest Peace-Giver permits us to become true peacemakers, making peace on earth. The gift of Christmas is the only hope for peace in our souls and therefore extends to the world another covenant between us and our fellow man to the glory of God the Father.

Prayer

Thank you Lord for this covenant of peace between you and those who so choose to stop their hostilities with you, forsaking worldly temptations, in order to accept your gift of peace in the birth of a Saviour, Jesus Christ. We thank you for revealing yourself to us, that we may strive to put aside the fruits of our human nature and concentrate on producing the fruits of your Spirit. With your abundant grace and might, free us from the sin that hinders our faith, that we may receive your promises. Stir our hearts, Lord, to prepare the way of your only Son. By his coming, nurture our growth as people of repentance and peace.

Amen.



## December 8, Psalm 85:9-11

*Krista Gommeringer, Southside Community Church, Surrey, BC, CBWC*

When the Psalmist says, “I listen carefully to what the Lord is saying,” he reminds us of the need to slow down and listen to God’s answer to our prayers. We often take the time to pray but don’t always take the time to stop, humble ourselves and listen to God’s answers. We need to “Be still and know that I am God.” (Psalm 46:10)

We expect that God will answer us on our timeline or in the rush of our day, rather than remembering that God is beyond time. If we try to fit him onto our timeline we will likely miss his response. What is bringing you stress or hurry in your life this Christmas season? Is there a worry you need to turn over to God right now to be still and wait for his answer?

For ancient Israel, their pattern of turning from God time after time continued throughout history. And we are little different. But let us not “return to [our] foolish ways.” As we hear God’s answer to our prayers, let us follow his will, rather than following in the Israelites’ footsteps of turning from God only to realize they got it wrong time after time. Then God will give us a peace that only he can provide: a peace with others and a peace between us and God, made possible by Jesus’ gift of “near salvation” foreshadowed in this very Psalm.

“Surely his salvation is near!”

## December 9, John 20:19-22

*Carolyn Steeves, West End Baptist Church, St. John's, NL, CBAC*

The disciples had abandoned him; Peter denied him. They had witnessed Jesus' terrible death by crucifixion and now there was an empty tomb.

At this point in the story, they didn't know that Jesus had risen from the dead. Ashamed and exhausted at the end of a long and confusing day, the disciples are huddled, terrified behind locked doors. What would happen to them now?

Then the risen Jesus enters into their fear and says; "Peace be with you!" I imagine their mouths agape and hear their gasps of shock. Jesus knows what they're thinking: "Is it really you?" That's why he shows them his hands and side. Unspeakable joy quenches the fear.

But he says it again; "Peace be with you!" Why will they need peace? Is it because of what he says next? "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." They were to be Spirit-powered sent ones experiencing a supernatural peace in the midst of trials, sent into a world that was anything but peaceful.

God sent Jesus to fulfill our ultimate need; to experience peace with him. That was peace at a great price; his very life. Jesus sends us to be peacemakers, continuing the work he began. We are to be Spirit-empowered peacemakers infused with the peace of Christ proclaiming as the angels did on that first Christmas; "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests." (Luke 2:14)



## December 10, John 14:26-27

*Rupen Das, Global Field Staff, CBM*

God had been silent for four hundred years. Then he sends his angel to three people, one of whom is a poor carpenter to announce that the long desired Messiah was expected soon. His name was to be Immanuel—God with us—which spoke volumes of how God wanted to be known. He hadn't abandoned his people and his creation. To a people struggling under a brutal Roman occupation, experiencing poverty and injustice, God was telling them that He was now going to be with them because he cared. They were not alone any more.

I remember being with believers from an Iranian Muslim background in Turkey one night as they worshipped Christ in a small apartment. The church was under constant threat of being firebombed by radicals. Ever since fleeing from their homes, they feared for their lives because they had chosen to follow Christ. As they sang songs of worship, every one of them was in tears because of the weight of their pain, suffering and brokenness; they had lost everything. Yet their tears were also of joy as they were able to worship a God who cared and loved them. God was there in that apartment. They knew the power of the Holy Spirit who had led them and guided them. They had a peace which only comes when God is present.

## December 11, Isaiah 2:2-3

*Ann Margret Hovsepian, Temple Baptist Church, Montreal, QC, CBWOQ/CBOQ*

Today's circumstances may not be creating feelings of joy for you. You may be discouraged and dismayed, hurried and harried, twisted and turned. You know the Bible repeatedly calls us to joy—in both the Old and New Testaments—but you think, “No. Not me. Not today. Not in this situation.”

How wonderful it is when we recognize that our joy does not need to be based on the moment we're living in or the conditions we're facing. The Bible doesn't tell us to rejoice about our current state of affairs but to simply rejoice.

When we pause long enough to remember God's promises, when we take a breath and turn our spiritual eyes to our eternal future, then we can experience joy because we know that God's temple will one day rise high above the highest mountain and we who love and follow him will have everlasting fellowship with him there.

Rejoice!

## December 12, John 16:20-23

*Melissa Memmott, St. George Baptist Church, ON, CBOQ*

It's getting closer now. With each passing second, the pain increases quicker, deeper, and sharper. Like a relentless tsunami, the forceful grip permeates lower parts of your abdomen and back. You sink into the pain. The world's longest minute passes by. "We should call the midwives," he says, nervously. You manage to mumble, "Sure." The pain continues on, in waves, building in intensity. In a pause between the waves, he says something along the lines of the joys holding the little one 40 weeks in coming. You can't think of the joy now, not with your back burning up, legs feeling numb, and hormones at an all-time high. All you can do is weep, cry, scream and succumb to its grip. Will it ever end? Will the pain stop? Will the suffering ever cease? A big surge of sharp intense pain occurs; the grand finale. The new life appears. Joy floods your heart. Pain? What pain? As you stare amazed at the revelation before you, skin-on-skin. For all your mourning has turned into dancing, and all your sorrow into joy. Tears of pain are replaced with tears of joy. For the time has come. And you admit he was right. It was all worth it.

## December 13, Revelation 7:16-17

*Gord King, Broadway-First Baptist Church, Winnipeg, MB, CBWC  
Resource Specialist, CBM*

We approach Christmas bearing the wounds of the world along with gifts for loved ones. John, the seer, sees a great multitude of people from every nation gathered before God. They have endured the great tribulation—a time of immense suffering and state persecution when Christians were killed because of their faithfulness. Now they stand before God who promises them an eternal future in which there will be no more hunger, thirst and despair. God personally wipes every tear from each person's eyes. Jesus, who was killed and rose from the dead, will be their shepherd.

Photos of migrants attempting to cross the Mediterranean are among the haunting images of 2016. Many are Christian sisters and brothers from Africa. Paul Rogers, professor of Peace Studies, explained their dangerous flight as the result of the growing disparity between rich and poor, climate disruption and violent suppression. I pray that these women and men someday will stand before God's throne among the multitude from every nation. I ask myself how they will enter into my celebration of the Saviour's birth so that I may take a place beside them without shame or regret in God's kingdom.

## December 14, Psalm 16:7-11

*Matthew Thomas, New Beginning Ministries, Dartmouth, NS, CBAC*

I believe that every person desires to find joy and happiness in life. When I scroll through social media, I see the poetic and inspirational messages about joy and happiness from the enlightened individuals that flood my timeline each day. It seems everybody has a perspective on how to obtain this sense of wonder that often eludes us.

Joy is often described as a feeling of pleasure and happiness. But in a real sense, joy is not so much about how we feel or the circumstances we find ourselves in. Rather, joy is found in God's presence.

In the 16th Psalm, David writes, "you will fill me with joy in your presence." It's the presence of God that creates this sense of bliss and satisfaction in life regardless of the circumstances surrounding us.

It is in his presence where I experience the assurance that God is in control of all the affairs of my life.

It is in his presence that a stillness and confidence surrounds me, reminding me that everything is going to be okay.

It is in his presence that I can praise and worship God in every situation because I know he's working all things out for my good.

It is the joy of his presence that is truly my strength.

## December 15, Luke 1:39-45

*Brenda Halk, Glen Acres Baptist Church, Waterloo, ON, CBOQ  
Strategic Associate, CBM*

Two women.

Two pregnancies.

Both unexpected.

Mary, unwed and pregnant, may have wondered how she would be received by her cousin Elizabeth.

When Elizabeth hears Mary's voice, she recognizes the Messiah in Mary's womb and exclaims in joy. The baby in her womb leaps for joy and she is filled with the Holy Spirit. Both women rejoice with the anticipation of God's promise to give a saviour. Even Elizabeth's baby recognizes the indwelling presence of the Messiah.

Joy is found in the presence of God, not in life's circumstances. I have marvelled at the joy and resilience of people in desperate circumstances who still sing and dance for joy in the Lord's presence: women victims of the war in the Congo who have lived through unspeakable trauma; people in the poorest slums in Nairobi who gather in churches to sing and worship with great joy, confident that God is present even in their dire circumstances. I marvel because I am not sure I could be that strong, or that happy.

But joy in the midst of circumstances transcends happiness. Joy doesn't have much to do with what is going on, whether it is health, grief, finances, war, or possessions. The only condition for joy is recognizing the presence of God; a by-product of living in that presence.

Do we recognize the Messiah among us?

## December 16, Luke 15:8-10

*Dana Barber, Walmer Road Baptist Church, Toronto, ON, CBOQ  
Receptionist, CBOQ*

There are so many ways to read Luke 15:8-10. We can think “Why would you work so hard for something so small? Cut your losses; there are nine more.”; “Of course she will find it; she lost it in her house.” My brain automatically jumps to the stress she must have felt because of losing something worth a day’s wage. Did the woman, as she searched, run through the list of things that money was designated for: bills, charity, etc.? Many of us jump right to the stress response when bad things surprise us or we make mistakes. But keep reading! She finds it! Her perseverance results in something worth celebrating.

Reflecting on Luke 15:8-10, is a beautiful reminder that staying in the stress response is not all there is to a relationship with Christ. Each time I do something that causes a moment of freaking out I can be reminded that God rejoices when I repent of my stress (or anything else). Like the woman Jesus describes, I would be searching frantically if I lost something so valuable and I would tell someone when I found it. I would want someone to celebrate with me. How comforting to know every time I repent, or any sinner, there is rejoicing. There is joy. Good news is getting through and stress is being defeated. As we prepare for Christmas this year, will we make choices based on our frantic responses or will we join the celebration by experiencing the joy that comes from humbling ourselves before the Lord?

## December 17, Matt. 2:9-11

*Keturah Thomson, Ambassador Baptist Church, Windsor, ON, CBOQ*

“When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy.” (Matthew 2:10)

This was the reaction of the wise men to the star. When I was studying this passage to figure out what to write about, I suddenly had an epiphany. God promises Abraham that he will make his descendants, “as numerous as the stars in the sky.” (Gen. 22:17)

Jesus was descended from Abraham, and the way God chose to announce his birth was with a star. I just thought that was really cool.

It calls attention to the fact that God was fulfilling more than one promise through Jesus’ birth. The promise of the Messiah, but also his promise to Abraham that “through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed...” (Gen. 22:18) Because Jesus’ birth was not just about Jesus’ birth. It was about why he came, to take the punishment for Israel’s sins and to extend the invitation of relationship to the Gentiles. I don’t know about you, but I can think of no greater cause for joy than that.



## December 18, Matt. 22:37-40

*Wendy Thom, Shoal Lake Baptist Church, MB, CBWC*

Recently a young family began to attend our church. Over the years the husband had come several times but the wife hung back in fear. She had been rejected by a church once before: when she went dressed in jeans and a T-shirt she was told that she was not appropriately dressed and sent away!

The first Sunday she came, you could see the fear in her eyes but after attending a couple of Sundays, her husband asked if she would like to try other churches. She responded “No, this is our family.” And he replied “Oh, you feel the same way I do! Then this is our church!” They felt loved and accepted and because of that they were now open to hear and respond to God’s love.

We live in a love-starved world that is “looking for love in all the wrong places.” The world teaches us to look out for number one, but God teaches us that love grows and blossoms best as we give it to others. We were created by him in love, and Jesus came to deliver us from our sin because “God so loved the world”.

A life of service for the Lord must begin and end with love. The greatest thing you can do is to love the Lord with all your heart and serve him in love by loving your neighbour as yourself!

## December 19, 1 John 4:7-11

*Angela Wade, Atlantic Community Church, Hampton, NB, CBAC*

Christmas is often a busy time of year with a full list of expectations and preparations. Decorate, shop, bake, give, visit, and the expectation to make Christmas a meaningful, memorable event for family and friends. The one expectation God gave us is to love one another. To do this we must prepare our hearts. This requires us to focus our hearts and hands on him, not on the “to do” list.

Take some quiet time and fully engage with God. Take a few minutes of silence and prepare to hear from God. Read this passage slowly and audibly three times with a focus on each reading. As you read slowly for the first time, notice the theme of these verses. As you read the second time give thanks and praise to God for this incredible sacrificial gift. As you read a third time notice the command, “since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another”.

### Reflection and Challenge

Does your list of preparations hinder you from fully engaging your heart and hands with God? How can you decrease the ‘hustle and bustle’ and be still and embrace the joy of this beautiful gift?

Give a gift of love to someone anonymously. Prayerfully look to see where you can join God in your neighbourhood to show his generous sacrificial love.

Dear Heavenly Father,

We humbly bow our heads in awe of your generosity of love. Gratitude and joy fill our hearts as we remember that you loved us first while “we were yet sinners.” Give us eyes to see and hearts to embrace where you are working in our neighborhoods so we can join you there and lavishly show your love to others. May we be mindful to embrace the joy of your beautiful gift so that we may reflect your love to others and bring you glory that you so richly deserve. Amen.

## December 20, Psalm 36:6-8

*Terry Smith, Bloor West Village Baptist Church, Toronto, ON, CBOQ  
Executive Director, CBM*

Twenty years spent in France were certainly enough to help our family appreciate the joys of a lavish French Christmas meal. We vividly remember the hours spent at friends' dinner tables, indulging in foie gras, endive and walnut salad, fresh oysters, roasted lamb with thyme, marinated goat cheese, and the famous treize (13) desserts. And of course, perfect pairings of wine and champagne for each of the seemingly endless courses. A warm fire, flawless décor, impeccable ambiance. This was a feast of abundance.

While our Canadian tradition may place a premium on the generosity of gifts, our European friends place a high value on the generosity of time. And nothing says love more than a perfectly set table and an abundance of food.

The Psalmist paints a similar picture of God's excessive love. We are invited not only into the warmth and care of his shelter, but there, we regale at his banquet table, feasting from the rivers of his delight, a Hebrew term which depicts the joys of the Garden of Eden.

May love be the food we feast on this Christmas.

## December 21, John 13:33-35

*Renee James, Communications Director, CBWOQ*

The disciples are confused.

Jesus has raised Lazarus from the dead; had his feet anointed with expensive perfume by Lazarus' sister; received the hosannas and palm branches of a great crowd as they'd all entered Jerusalem days ago.

Now Passover has arrived and Jesus, their miracle-working Lord, washes their dirty feet and then answers their questions with the same hard-to-understand prophecies and commands he's offered up all week.

"My children... You can't come where I am going... You must love one another just as I have loved you," he implores them. (emphasis added)

There's so much Jesus doesn't reveal. Perhaps he knows the hammering of nails through bone and wood; the jeers and taunts of another great crowd; his own groans at the very end; the rending of temple cloth... will say all that needs to be said about how he has loved them.

How he loves us.

"My children," Jesus says tenderly.

Because he knows: The disciples cannot love the way he did—attentive, faithful, vulnerable, naked, unashamed—until they hear and accept, in the depths of their souls, the name he calls them.

Neither can we.

"My children."

## December 22, 1 Cor. 2:8-10

*Len Hjalmarson, First Baptist Church, Thunder Bay, ON, CBOQ*

I pity the Romans. In Abraham Maslow's words: "I suppose it is tempting, if the only tool you have is a hammer, to treat everything as if it were a nail."

And the Jews were little different. At least, the ones in power.

And there's the dividing line. The powers that be rarely seem to get it. And when there are glimmers of truth, they are quick to deny them, or find a way to snuff them out.

It's the small ones, the ones with nothing to lose, who seem to get it. And so there is a wisdom of God in "good news to the poor." The Spirit of truth prefers a humble house.

Are we small enough to receive? Are we small enough to be loved? It takes simplicity of spirit to enter the kingdom.

The waiting is worth it.

And so, as Dame Julian of Norwich put it, "All shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well."

God comes to us in weakness and vulnerability. That's the way of love.

Like lightning to the children eased  
With explanation kind,  
The truth must dazzle gradually,  
Or every man be blind. – Emily Dickinson

## December 23, Mark 12:41-44

Ryan Sato, First Baptist Church, Edmonton, AB, CBWC

Imagine this impoverished widow. Her story is a sad one, loss after loss, pushing her to the margins of society and social interactions. She sits in the alleyway across from the local synagogue and watches as several well-dressed teachers of the law parade their way into the courts, with their pouches of clanging coins, taking them out one at a time and dropping them into the treasury. She reaches deep into the pockets of her tattered garment and finds all that she has...two small coins.

Instead of staring at the pompous religious leaders, she closes her eyes and hears again, the words of that compassionate, kind teacher, who's been causing a stir at the local markets and religious meeting places. He knows so much of religion, but speaks with a heart of care and kindness...saying things like: "Many who are first will be last and the last will be first."

Now unashamed, the widow stands tall and runs across the street, entering the synagogue courts and offering the last two coins that are in her possession.

She doesn't give as an ode to a religious institution; she gives in honour of the one who seems to be changing the rules of religion. She gives in honour of the generous, "last-place-seeking" Rabbi.

What can I give him, poor as I am?  
if I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb;  
if I were a wise man, I would do my part;  
yet what I can I give him; give my heart. (In the Bleak Midwinter)

## December 24, Luke 2:8-14

*Craig Woodstock, Woodstock Baptist Church, NB, CBAC*

The night sky served as a canvas for the big announcement. Shepherds were “keeping watch over the flocks.” Life among sheep was hard: sore feet, calloused hands, long days, pungent smells. It was to this group of people that the “Good News” was delivered.

The shepherd’s initial reaction to the message of love was fear. The angel persisted and love broke through. The barrier of fear came down and the shepherds were changed.

They “spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child.” Love never gives up. Love finds a way to reach people. Love is not afraid of getting messy or being with the messy.

Our church recently welcomed a Syrian refugee family. We desired to be a place of refuge for this family. Our love was met with fear and rejection. Love was put to the test. Love does not quit. The journey has been messy—yet faith believes; love casts out fear. Our hope is that they will find the source of all good news and love.

God sent our church a family to teach us what we could not learn otherwise. Love finds a way. Love is not afraid. Love is persistent.

The journey has started and we cannot wait to see how God will use us.

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