



NEW CITY
CHURCH

Advent Journal



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ISAIAH 9:6
"FOR UNTO US A
CHILD IS BORN."

Advent Journal

Dear Reader,

Thank you for taking the time to walk through this daily devotional. As you read, reflect and journal, our prayer is that these simple thoughts from the scriptures will encourage your heart and stir a deeper sense of devotion and appreciation for the gift of our Savior this season.

Merry Christmas!

Pastor Steve Andres and New City Church



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DECEMBER 1

Advent is anticipation and preparation. Hundreds of years before the birth of Jesus, the prophet Isaiah looked ahead to the coming of Christ and said, “*The people who walk in darkness will see a great light.*” As we start this Christmas season, we are inviting God to shine a light on our hearts and lives, to search us and give us clarity and vision for who He is calling us to be and how we should live. We want that light to clarify the way we see ourselves. How can it do that?

1 Peter 2:9 says, “*God has called you out of darkness and into his wonderful light.*” Our destiny is not darkness, it is light. Someone once said, “Every saint has a past, and every sinner has a future.” Just because there is darkness in your past doesn’t mean that you aren’t made for light.

Thank God today for sending light into our world at Christmas, for rescuing us from darkness and putting us on a path to light and life!

1 Peter 2:9 “God has called you out of darkness and into his wonderful light.” NLT



Advent Journal

For Reflection: After today's reading, what are you grateful for?

For Reflection: After today's reading, what are you asking God for?



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DECEMBER 2

Words are a miracle. The act of speaking is incredibly complex. It starts in the speech center of our brains, where a message is sent to our diaphragm telling it to push breath from our lungs, through our throat, making our vocal cords vibrate. Subtle movements of the palate, tongue, and lips shape those vibrations into the sounds we know as words. Those are the mechanics of speech, but words are more than mechanics. Words bring us closer to people. They form bonds and give meaning; they express who we are. Words aren't just for communication, they are for communion.

The Apostle John begins his biography of Jesus saying, *"In the beginning, the Word was with God and the Word was God."* God has always been speaking, inviting us to know Him, but at Christmas He spoke with a thundering clarity, His word expressed in flesh and bone, the language we understand best.

Are you listening to Him speak today?

John 1:1 "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." NIV



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DECEMBER 3

Movies are best with happy endings. Why would anyone want to sit for two hours to watch a story with a sad ending? If we want something to make us sad, anxious or afraid, we can simply look at the world around us! Real life is filled with sad endings, sorrowful moments and bad guys who win. That's why we need to look again at the Christmas story.

The Apostle John says about the coming of Jesus, "*The light shined in the darkness, and the darkness could not overcome it.*" Strange how a helpless baby, born into poverty and oppression, sorrow and death, could be the light that overcomes all darkness. But that's what John is claiming!

What if Christmas really is the moment when light triumphed over darkness? What if what God is doing isn't as fragile as we feel? What if in the end, the coming of Jesus was the once-and-for-all sign that God's love wins? What a hope!

John 1:5 "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness can never extinguish it." NLT



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DECEMBER 4

The Apostle John said of Jesus, *“So the Word became human and made his home among us.”* God sent His word and a person came with it. He moved into the neighborhood and made a home with us! In the original Greek, it says He put up a tent with us. And to everyone familiar with the history of God’s people, that phrasing would remind them of how God went with His people through the wilderness, making a home with them in the tabernacle, leading them to the promise land. It’s a big idea.

When Jesus arrived at Christmas, it was God making a home with us in our every human experience: weakness, irritation, isolation, humiliation, even death. Religion is advice for good living. That’s not Christianity. In Christ, God doesn’t throw advice at us from a distance.

Christmas is God journeying with us in every wilderness experience, guiding us, sustaining us, and making sure we arrive at His good purposes for us.

John 1:14 “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.” NIV



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DECEMBER 5

People who are incredibly talented or beautiful evoke deeply ambivalent feelings in us. On the one hand, we are drawn to them, but on the other hand, they make us feel inadequate in comparison to them. How much more would this be the case in the presence of infinite beauty and power and love?

Everywhere in the Bible where people get near to God, it is traumatic. When Job sees God, he says, *“I have heard of you but now my eyes have seen you and I am undone.”* Moses hides his face. Isaiah falls to the ground and says, *“Woe is me!”* John tells us that when Jesus came to us, we were seeing the glory of God. That’s why when Peter first met Jesus, he fell at his feet and said, *“Go away from me, I am a sinner.”* He saw the glory of God in Christ, and it was traumatic.

But watch! Jesus responded tenderly to Peter, inviting Peter to follow him. The same Jesus who made Peter realize his wickedness, invited him to walk in relationship and purpose, and the world was never the same!

Matthew 4:19 **“Come, follow Me,’ Jesus said, ‘and I will make you fishers of men.’” NIV**

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DECEMBER 6

John chapter 1 says, *“To all who believed Him and accepted Him, He gave the right to become children of God. They are born again—not with a physical birth resulting from human passion or plan, but a birth that comes from God.”* Later, Jesus would tell a man of means named Nicodemus that the only way to God’s kingdom is to be reborn. It was as if Jesus was telling Nicodemus to scrap all the accomplishments, titles, degrees and honors.

What God is building in us through Christmas isn’t a remodel, it’s a complete tear down. As one pastor said, “We aren’t mistakers in need of correction; we are sinners in need of a savior.” We don’t need a second chance; we need a second birth! This humbles the proud and gives hope to the humble. To ALL who believe in Him, He gives the right to be born into His eternal family. That’s the incredibly GOOD NEWS of Christmas!

John 1:12-13 “Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, He gave the right to become children of God— children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God.” NIV



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DECEMBER 7

The deepest desire that we have is to be fully known and completely loved. Most of us have experienced this fear in relationships: what if I have to hide who I am for them to love me? Or even scarier: what if I let them know me as I truly am, and they don't love what they see?

John 1:14 talks about Jesus, *"We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth."* The greatness of Jesus can be summed up in the fact that he was full of GRACE and TRUTH. He came to speak the truth about our selfishness, our sin, our utter brokenness. He sees us as we are. But He came with grace to bear up our sin and shame, and to lead us to forgiveness and healing.

Truth without grace is a hammer, grace without truth is a hoax. Jesus comes with both. He is the one person who truly knows us, and still utterly loves us!

John 1:14 "We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth." NIV



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DECEMBER 8

Family is messy, and the holidays tend to highlight the mess. Matthew begins his account of the life of Jesus with “*The family tree of Jesus Christ, David’s son, Abraham’s son.*” Then there is a list of names and histories that, if you look closely at it, makes you wonder if God made a mistake, because Jesus’s family tree looks like a lot of family trees. There are bright moments, then there are branches that no one really wants to talk about. If you don’t know who that is in your family, it might be you! But the point is that God’s work in and through you does not depend on having a beautiful family tree. You aren’t disqualified by the mess, even if you helped make it.

That’s why this list at the beginning of Matthew is so encouraging. If God would bless that mess, and WORK THROUGH IT to bring His plan of redemption to bear on the world, then why wouldn’t He do the same for each of us and our messy families?

Ephesians 1:7 “In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace.” NIV



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DECEMBER 9

The story of Jesus begins with a scandal of sorts. A young man, Joseph, is engaged to a young woman, Mary, when he finds out that she is pregnant. The Bible says that, *“Joseph was a righteous man and did not want to disgrace her publicly, so he decided to break the engagement quietly.”* But wait! This isn’t God’s plan for Mary or Jesus or Joseph! So the next verse tells us that God sends an angel to Joseph to assure him that Mary wasn’t unfaithful, but instead was carrying the Savior of the world. Remember how it said that Joseph was a righteous man? That’s a detail that matters. Because the Bible promises that God orders the steps of the righteous [Psalm 37:23].

God’s plan might be confusing or counterintuitive, but if we keep our heart right before Him, God will do whatever it takes to keep us in the center of His will, even if that means sending an angel to make the message clear. We focus on having a right heart and God will make sure we take the right steps.

Psalm 37:23 “The LORD makes firm the steps of the one who delights in him.” NIV



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DECEMBER 10

The Bible says about Jesus, “*They will call him Immanuel, which means God with us.*” [Matthew 1:23] In the 1960’s, when a Soviet cosmonaut became the first human to leave earth and go into space, he famously reported that he had visited the heavens and had not found God. C.S. Lewis responded by saying that this was like Hamlet going into the attic of his castle and looking for Shakespeare. How could Hamlet, a creation of Shakespeare, ever hope to find him? Lewis pointed out that the only way would be for Shakespeare to write himself into Hamlet’s story.

Christmas is the infinite God writing himself into our story. It’s God with us in our joys and sorrows, pain and loss. It’s God with us in a way we can know and have access to. Aren’t you thankful today that when we couldn’t find God, God found us? Because of Jesus, we can experience God’s constant faithfulness, not just in joys, but in sorrow and loss. Today, you can be a witness to His with-ness.

Matthew 1:23 “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel” (which means, God with us).” ESV



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DECEMBER 11

The Christmas story is a tale of two kings. King Herod was cunning and ruthless. He built great cities and palaces. He ruled with an iron fist, and no rivalry or disloyalty was allowed. So when the Magi bring word they were in search of a king, Matthew tells us “*King Herod heard this and he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.*” [Matthew 2:3] The Magi left Herod’s opulent palace, with its servants and armed garrisons and set out to find a king. This king was to be born in a stable too small to enter without stooping, laid in a feeding trough for animals, visited not by heads of state, but by common shepherds.

Two kings, two kingdoms, two competing visions of greatness. At the heart of one is power and wealth, posturing and intimidation, and at the heart of the other is a dirty manger, an agonizing cross and an empty tomb. Two kingdoms, and our hearts can only be at home in one.

Matthew 2:6 “But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.” NIV



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DECEMBER 12

The whole town of Bethlehem must have been buzzing with the arrival of the caravan from the east. When Magi arrived bearing gifts for the young family, it was the conclusion of a journey that some scholars believe may have been years in the making. At times it would have been difficult and dangerous, but the Magi made the journey together. And that's important.

There are no supermen or superwomen in God's plan. We need one another. Our lives in Christ are meant to be lived in community. God's image in us is meant to be drawn out and brought into focus by others. God's purpose is for us to journey with others who shape our hearts and lives to be more like Christ.

Who are the people in your life who are journeying with you toward Jesus? Who are the friends who you are committed to walk with through difficulty and disappointment, until you reach Christ?

Matthew 2:1-2 "After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, 'Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.'" NIV



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DECEMBER 13

Someone said, “You can give without loving, but you can’t love without giving.” Think of the spectacle of a caravan of wealthy travelers arriving at a home in humble Bethlehem. The Magi *“saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.”* [Matthew 2:11] It was their love for this child that caused them to give. It was a simple expression of worship and thanks, but God used it in a way they could never have planned. Those gifts made it possible for Mary and Joseph to flee to Egypt and escape Herod’s plan to kill Jesus.

I love to say that your right now resources can make a forever difference. It’s so good to remember that when we give out of love for God and others, God already has a purpose in mind for our generosity, and He is able to do more with our “little” offered in love, than we could with much.

Matthew 2:10-11 “When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him.” NIV



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DECEMBER 14

The Christian story starts off with a place and a date: *“In the days of King Herod, in Judea.”* [Luke 1:5] Luke pins the whole story down to a piece of legislation. He tells us that God became man in the year when Caesar Augustus was taking a census to raise taxes. This is an astonishing claim. God didn’t come to us, “Once upon a time in a land far, far away.” He came to a real place, at a real moment in time, in the middle of social and political turmoil, disease and poverty, power struggles and scheming. He came to a family that was in crisis, to a woman who was powerless.

The first followers of Jesus were so convinced that this is what had taken place, that they called it NEWS, not myth or fiction. GOOD NEWS of God’s love visiting us at our place and in our time of need. This is the NEWS that you need, that our world still needs today.

Luke 1:31-33 “You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob’s descendants forever; his kingdom will never end.” NIV



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DECEMBER 15

Luke's Gospel tells us "*Gabriel appeared to Mary and said, 'Greetings, favored woman! The Lord is with you!'*" Mary is a poor, peasant girl from a conquered people. How could she be called FAVORED? Don't be surprised when God's word contradicts your present circumstances. Jesus was sent to announce good news to the poor. The rich don't need a word from God to tell them that they are wealthy. The joyful don't need a word from God to tell them joy will come in the morning. The strong don't need a word from God to tell them there is strength in weakness.

The Bible says that "*Faith comes by hearing the word of God.*" [Romans 10:17] When God's word contradicts our present circumstances, we need faith and trust to receive it. Luke tells us that in spite of all signs to the contrary, Mary BELIEVED God's word, and because of that, God used her like no other person before or since.

Romans 10:17 "Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ." NIV



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DECEMBER 16

The message that the angel brought to Mary was as troubling as it was exciting. You will conceive a child by the Holy Spirit, and that child will save his people from their sins. But how would Mary explain the child that she was carrying? What would her family think? What would Joseph say? Think of all the questions that were still unanswered. Luke tells us that after the angel shared the plan God had in mind, Mary responded, “*Let it be unto me according to your word.*” [Luke 1:38] And because Mary said YES at that moment, the whole world is different. Every YES to God has an impact beyond our imagination.

We might struggle with questions, doubts or worries, but in the end, if we will say YES as Mary did, we will be astonished at what God will do. What if today we spent less energy debating with God, and more energy discerning where to say YES to God? The world might never be the same!

Luke 1:38 “I am the Lord’s servant,’ Mary answered. ‘May your word to me be fulfilled.’ Then the angel left her.” NIV



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DECEMBER 17

When Mary, carrying the baby Jesus, visits her cousin Elizabeth, also miraculously with child, the Bible says “*At the sound of Mary’s greeting, Elizabeth’s child leaped within her.*” [Luke 1:41] These two women shared a special bond. Both Mary and Elizabeth were filled with a joyful anticipation of what God was doing in their time. And when they were together, that joy seemed to multiply. When we spend time with people who share a love for Jesus and a joy for what God is doing, something inside of us is stirred. Something inside of us seems to leap when we are together.

Who in your life stokes your passion for the things of God? Who in your life makes something jump inside of you when you are near them? Who can say that about you? Our prayer for God is to give us people who do what Proverbs 17:17 says, “*As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another.*”

Luke 1:41 “When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit.” NIV



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DECEMBER 18

In the Bible, God introduces himself as the one who is great beyond measure, but whose measureless greatness is expressed in generosity and care toward those who have nothing to give Him in return. If God had a business card, His title would be, “Husband to the widow, father to the fatherless, shelter for the immigrant and help for the poor.” This “quartet of the vulnerable” shows up over and over in the Bible. And here again, in the Christmas story, God waltzes past the postured and powerful and leaps onto the least of these. He chooses a young girl of no reputation to bear Messiah to the world, and He sends his angel choir to a rabble of poor shepherds on a hillside so they can sing *“Glory to God in highest heaven, and peace on earth to those with whom God is pleased.”* [Luke 2:14]

God’s glory and greatness are never more on display than in the way He loves the weakest and most vulnerable. Have we learned from Him?

Luke 2:13-14 “Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.’” NIV



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DECEMBER 19

In the midst of this account of the creation, there is a passing detail that shows the incredible power of God: *“He also made the stars”* (Genesis 1:16). Today, scientists tell us there are between 100 and 400 billion stars in our galaxy alone, and our galaxy is just one of around 100 billion galaxies. And yet, God made them all, just like that!

God is doing more behind the scenes than we could possibly comprehend! Consider the Christmas story, and how Jesus’ birth fulfilled dozens of specific prophecies about where, how and to whom the Christ would be born. To accomplish this, God was ordering events for hundreds and thousands of years.

What if your life was not just a random unfolding of events? What if your circumstances were not random, but ordered by the wise and loving hand of God?

Isaiah 7:14 “Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel.” NIV



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DECEMBER 20

The Bible tells us that on the night Jesus was born, shepherds were nearby tending their sheep. *“Suddenly, an angel of the Lord appeared among them, and the radiance of the Lord’s glory surrounded them. They were terrified.”* [Luke 2:9] If we aren’t startled and surprised by the Good News of Christmas, then we aren’t thinking about it correctly.

If you think Christianity is going to church, believing certain things, living a certain kind of life, then there is no surprise or wonder that God has chosen you. You say to yourself, “OF COURSE I am a Christian! It’s hard work, but I’m committed!” But if Christianity is something done FOR you, and TO you, and IN you, then the wonder never stops. You don’t graduate from the Good News of God’s love any more than a builder moves on from a foundation. God’s astonishing love for us is the foundation of everything we do in response to Him.

Luke 2:10-11 “But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David, a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord.’” NIV



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DECEMBER 21

The Gospel writers are clear that THIS JESUS is the final and most perfect picture of the infinite God. Jesus said, *“If you’ve seen me you’ve seen the Father.”* Paul said Jesus is the image of invisible God, and the early church fathers articulated it well when they said Jesus is, *“Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father.”*

Christmas is not the story of God showing truth to us, like showing a picture of food to a hungry person. It is the story of God delivering truth to us, spreading out a table for our hungry souls to be satisfied. Christmas is not a theology, a thought or a feeling. It is God given to you and to me. Every other religion teaches us what we can DO for God, but Christmas is about what God has DONE for us!

1 John 1:1 “That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life.” NIV



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DECEMBER 22

A few summers ago, our world experienced the event of a lifetime. People from all around scrambled to witness a very rare total solar eclipse. They were warned: DO NOT LOOK DIRECTLY AT THE SUN! Because if you look directly at it, it could damage your eyes. The only way to see this event was to view it through a special filter.

All throughout the Old Testament, God says to people, “*You cannot look at my glory and live.*” But then the Apostle John tells us, “*No one has ever seen God. But the only Son, who is himself God and is at the Father’s side, has made Him known.*” [John 1:18] This is a staggering claim. Jesus is the filter, the way we can truly see the glory of God. Who is God? What is God like? Just look past the baying sheep, peer over the shoulders of the poor shepherds and the young couple weary from travel. Look into the feeding trough doubling as a bassinet and you will see. There, in swaddling clothes, is the naked glory of God, visible for the first time to human eyes.

John 1:18 “No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made Him known.” NIV



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DECEMBER 23

This Christmas, malls will be open late, sales will be on, and last-minute deliveries will be made. We'll decorate our home, trim the tree and dress our holiday best. Why not? It's Christmas! But when Mary gave birth to Jesus, *"She wrapped him snugly in strips of cloth and laid him in a manger."* [Luke 2:7] At Christmas, God moved away from high fashion to undress. How scandalous that Jesus would set aside all the honors and privileges of heaven to arrive among us in nothing but his birthday suit! The Bible says *"He gave up his divine privileges; He took the humble position of a servant and was born as a human being."* [Philippians 2:7]

This is the truth of Christmas: God set aside rank and title to draw near to us. He was born helpless as a baby only to become helpless again, trading his simple robes for the agony of the cross. It's this embarrassing, beautiful truth that terrifies us: if God chose to be naked, to love vulnerably and sacrificially, shouldn't we?

Luke 2:7 "and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them." NIV



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DECEMBER 24

Mary sang, *“Oh, how my soul praises the Lord. How my spirit rejoices in God my Savior!”* [Luke 1:46-47] In 2016, the Chicago Cubs won the world series for the first time in 108 years. The whole city was celebrating. Crowds of people shouted, “We did it! We won!” But WE had almost nothing to do with it. Most of us didn’t get on the field or even go to a game. But that’s not how we experienced it. We all celebrated like we did it. We identified with them in such a way that when they won, we won.

Here’s the incredible news of Christmas. Jesus came to identify with us in our experience as broken human beings. What we couldn’t do for ourselves, Jesus did FOR us. He lived among us, suffered and died in our place. Then, He was raised to new life on the third day, all so we might say: WE DID IT! This season, God magnanimously, generously invites us to own HIS victory over sin and death and to celebrate as if it is OURS. Because it is.

1 Corinthians 15:57 “But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.” NIV



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DECEMBER 25

Christmas is about a baby that John says was born not of the will of man, but by the breath of God. The mingling of heaven and earth, the eternal word of God dwelling in feeble flesh. A savior is born! No pretense, no empty words, just the spit and mud of solidarity.

Veiled in flesh the Godhead see,
Hail the incarnate deity,
Pleased as man with men to dwell,
Jesus our Emmanuel.

This morning we celebrate how, in Bethlehem, light broke through the darkness, heaven broke through to earth, the kingdom of God was inaugurated, and a future joy dawned in the midst of our present sorrows. Hope broke into our grief. Love broke into our indifference. This is GOOD NEWS for everyone, everywhere.

Isaiah 9:6 “For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”



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