



The King Is Coming

Devotional – 26 Days

During the Christmas season, we celebrate the long-awaited arrival of Christ. But we also look forward, to the day when he will come back. This Advent Devotional will guide you through readings from the Old and New Testaments as we learn what the first and second comings of Jesus mean for us today.

December 1, 2016

Seeing God in the Process

Christmas isn't confined to just 24 hours of a tiny little day. It's not even limited to Christmas break. It's an entire season, from the day after Thanksgiving until December 25. Christians celebrate the entire process leading up to Christmas Day. This is called Advent.

Advent is a fancier way of saying, "arrival." It's a time of waiting, of anticipating the coming of something (or someone) great. The holiday season is our time as Christians to wait with great joy and expectation for the birth of Christ. Of course we celebrate Christmas Day, but there is much to celebrate in the days leading up to the day of Jesus' birth. Sometimes it's easy to become focused on the end goal that we forget to appreciate the process of getting there. When we elevate the end over the means, we miss out, because often God does some of his greatest work along the way. For him, it's all about the process, and less about the final destination.

This holiday season, don't focus on your lists of things to do – your Christmas lists, your grocery lists, the list of parties to attend, and everything in between. Don't aim for Christmas Day and miss out on the enjoyment of the days leading up to it. Forget about the presents needing to be wrapped and focus instead on being present in each moment. Take time to celebrate God in the process. He is at work this Christmas season. Don't wait until December 25 to notice.

REFLECT

When we elevate the end over the means, we miss out because often God does some of his greatest work along the way.

RESPOND

1. We all find satisfaction in achieving our goals, but do you enjoy the process? Can you see God at work along the way?
2. One of God's names is Immanuel, God is with us. He is with us every moment of every day—in the big moments and in the small, seemingly insignificant moments. Make a point to enjoy him in all of the moments today. Be on the lookout for Immanuel throughout your day

"And, behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name JESUS. He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest: and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David: And he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end." (Luke 1:31-33, kjv)

December 2, 2016

Hope in God's Promises

What comes to mind when you think about an anchor? Security, strength, steadfastness? Anchors are strong, heavy objects usually crafted from metal. When dropped into the water, they sink and fasten securely into the sand, and have been used for centuries to prevent boats from drifting off due to high winds, choppy waves, or strong currents. They're a necessity for boating and you wouldn't want to be caught off shore in deep waters without one.

Just as boats rely on anchors to keep them safe and secure at sea, we can rely on God to be an anchor for our soul as we walk through the uncertainties of life. He's everlasting, he's strong, and he's immovable. Like an anchor, he digs into our hearts and securely fastens us to him. No matter how deep the waters get, how high the waves crash, or how in over our heads we feel, we can stand firm in God's promises of hope. In high tide or low tide, we can be certain that Christ will stick by our side and keep us steady.

As Christmas comes closer, let's reflect upon God's promises that were fulfilled through the birth of Christ. Our King has come. Our savior has been born. Our salvation has been made visible. Amidst the excitement of the holidays, let's remain anchored in the true meaning of Christmas. Let's remember that Christ came to fulfill God's promises and to hold us steadfast in his love. No matter how deep the waters get, he is our anchor and has come to give us hope.

REFLECT

Think about what you might be taking for granted this Christmas season.

RESPOND

1. List some giants of the faith who had to wait a long time to see a promise fulfilled. Compare how their attitudes to waiting affected the results.
2. In what small ways could you alter your attitude about.

"Which hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast, and which entereth into that within the veil." (Hebrews 6:19, kjv)

December 3, 2016

Wait

Most of us have heard it many times. We know the story of how our Savior, Jesus, was born into this world, and gave us the ultimate hope and future. Our children might even have a starring role in the Nativity play, giving us the opportunity to memorize every word of the angel Gabriel's message to Mary right along with them.

But have we heard the story so often that we take it for granted?

For centuries, the Israelites longed for the Messiah to come into the world and deliver them. They had no idea when it would happen. They lacked the advantage of knowing the who, what, and when, of his birth. We do know...and it gives us the best reason ever to celebrate.

Yet it's in thinking of the future that we step onto common ground with the Israelites. Jesus is proof that God keeps his promises and acts on our behalf, but the season of Advent reminds us there is more. God is not done yet. Advent means "coming".

Christ fulfilled his role as Savior, but he also made a promise to return to his people—this next time—in such power and authority that he creates a new heaven and new earth. He is coming back. Would you be okay with it happening...now?

REFLECT

Think about what you might be taking for granted this Christmas season.

RESPOND

1. List some giants of the faith who had to wait a long time to see a promise fulfilled. Compare how their attitudes to waiting affected the results.
2. In what small ways could you alter your attitude about waiting...shifting from impatient to expectant?

"And now, Lord, what wait I for? My hope is in thee." (Psalm 39:7, kjv)

December 4, 2016

Light

God didn't give Isaiah an easy job. He told him upfront that most people wouldn't listen to his message—a message that included prophecies of the coming of Christ. Yet Isaiah didn't shirk his duty to deliver words of both judgment and hope. Despite his low “message-acceptance rate”, he is considered one of the greatest prophets to have ever lived.

We certainly have it easier than Isaiah. We have the Bible—the Word of God—and Christ's first coming is well documented in history. As Christ-followers, we are commissioned to reflect the light that Jesus brought into a dark and hurting world. Like Isaiah, we are to spread the news of his love and grace. Yet ironically, at Christmastime it's especially easy to get caught up in the busyness and commercialism of the season, focusing on planning parties and buying presents. We may find our thoughts and actions focused on things not all that different from unbelievers.

Christmas can be the loneliest time of year for many people, reminding them of loss, broken relationships and unfilled spaces in their lives. Sometimes, a ray of hope is all they need to hold on just that little while longer. But if we go along with the crowd and remain quiet when we should speak of the greatest hope available, we may be keeping someone from meeting Christ—the source of all light. Let's not let that happen on our watch.

REFLECT

As you go about your day, consider whether someone could tell that you're a Christ-follower.

RESPOND

1. Identify your strengths, such as prayer, acts of service, or speaking the Word of God.
2. Think of specific family members, co-workers, and neighbors who need a little light in their lives. What can you do specifically for them this season?

“The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light: they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined.” (Isaiah 9:2, kjv)

December 5, 2016

See

The Christmas tree has gaps and it's too short. There isn't enough room in the oven for everything, and someone who means a great deal to us isn't coming. This is not how we imagined the holiday.

Sometimes, we become so focused on how we think things should be—how the perfect Norman Rockwell Christmas will solve so many problems—that we fail to recognize or appreciate the incredible blessing of what is.

The nation of Israel had a very specific idea of how the Messiah would come. They were so focused on Christ coming as a warrior to rescue them that many didn't recognize their long-awaited Savior when he actually arrived. Why? He came into this world in the humblest of ways—in a manger surrounded by work animals. He had no need of pomp and circumstance. His idea of what was most important was to pay for our sins and save us through his grace.

Christ's return in glory—when every knee will bow—is yet to come. It will happen in his perfect timing, as part of his perfect plan. For now, let's try to surrender our plans to him and recognize the blessings he places in front of us.

Look again. Maybe that squat tree is decorated with ornaments that tell a story of your family. Was the unplanned casserole taking up limited space made with the help of little hands? (A little eggshell never hurt anyone.) And those faces around your table? Maybe they might have been overlooked and overshadowed had your attention been focused elsewhere. Although God's plan may not match our own, it could not be more perfect.

REFLECT

Determine the areas of your life you are reluctant to surrender to God.

RESPOND

1. In the coming weeks, try to be consciously aware of any preconceived ideas you bring to any event you attend or plan.
2. Practice relinquishing those ideas and be open to what God might want you to see.
3. How might God use you to help others see more of their blessings than their difficulties?

*“The eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that ye may know what is the hope of his calling, and what the riches of the glory of his inheritance in the saints.”
(Ephesians 1:18, kjv)*

December 6, 2016

Expect

Are you ever afraid to hope? Have you ever wanted something so much that when it looked like it might actually happen, you found reasons to doubt?

Zechariah and Elizabeth waited a long time, hoping and praying to have children. But as the years passed and they grew old, it seemed not to be. Yet the day Zechariah entered God's sanctuary to offer incense as part of his priestly duties, the angel Gabriel appeared to him, saying Zechariah's future son would be great in the eyes of the Lord. His son would be John the Baptist—the forerunner of Christ.

This is where Zechariah gets in trouble. He asks how he would know for sure all this was true. It's not hard to picture Gabriel crooking an eyebrow, saying, "And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at the appointed time."

When we're hurt or deeply disappointed, our natural reaction might be to push away hope, and keep our expectations low. But God repeatedly shows that he takes care of his own, and does immeasurably more than we could ask or imagine. Zechariah was blessed with a son beyond any he could have imagined—surpassed only by Christ himself. When asked what his son's name would be, Zechariah wrote, "His name is John." With his renewed certainty and faith, his voice returned.

REFLECT

Consider what you're hoping for this season, and whether you're setting your expectations low.

RESPOND

1. Identify the negative thoughts preventing you from trusting God with your hopes and dreams.
2. Write down a few Bible verses that counter those negative thoughts, and claim God's promises.

"And Zacharias said unto the angel, whereby shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife well stricken in years." (Luke 1:18, kjv)

December 7, 2016

Heirs

Do we use all the resources God has made available to us? As heirs of the Kingdom, we have access to the vast power and protection of Christ. Yet we may only be tapping the surface. It's easy—especially at Christmastime—to keep Jesus in the cradle as a vulnerable baby with bad guys like Herod chasing him, and God protecting him. But he is also an invincible warrior King, set to return in glory to create his eternal kingdom here on earth. We have access to this aspect of Christ, as well—and that includes the family armor.

In Ephesians 6, we are told to fasten the belt of truth, put on the breastplate of righteousness and shoes to proclaim the gospel of peace. We are to take up the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and sword of the Spirit (the Word of God). But do we bother to armor up every day? Or do we go out half-dressed?

Sadly, we need to defend against our “me-centric” world, and what it says we are entitled to have and want. In First Samuel 18:4–5, Jonathan willingly gives up his right as earthly heir to the kingdom of Israel under his father King Saul, in favor of David. “Jonathan stripped himself of the robe that was on him and gave it to David, with his armor, including his sword and his bow and his belt.” Jonathan recognized David as God’s choice. He chose to use his armor in service to David. Compare Jonathan’s reaction to King Herod’s. Herod tried to kill Jesus. But he was fighting not simply a baby, but the King of kings.

REFLECT

Really consider how you picture Christ.

RESPOND

1. Practice putting on the armor of God this week. Which piece fits the easiest? Which is the most difficult for you?
2. How can we use the armor of God to be more like Jonathan and push aside our own interests, for those of our King?

“That being justified by his grace, we should be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life.” (Titus 3:7, kjv)

December 8, 2016

Change

Christmas might be very different this year. Maybe it's your first year as a married couple or with a little one. Or maybe you have no choice but to alter your traditions because the one who used to put up the lights or bake the chocolate chip cookies is no longer there. Maybe you live somewhere new, away from family and friends.

Transition, even for the good, can leave us feeling unsure and unanchored. Sometimes we don't know where to start, or which way to go. In Psalm 119, God's Word is described as a lamp to our feet. In moving forward, we can expect only our next few steps to be lit. Why at our feet? Why not on a series of poles to light up the road for several miles? Why not literally have it lit up like a Christmas tree? Wouldn't that be better? Safer? So we can see where we're going?

Yet relying on God's guidance every step of the way helps build our faith and trust in him. Once we believe Christ is who he says he is, and accept him into our hearts, we step onto this path. If we let him, he will help us form new habits and traditions, and renew our purpose. He may not change the circumstances as we'd like, but we will never walk alone. Although Christ is changing us, we can rely on him to be the same yesterday and today and forever.

REFLECT

Take time to pinpoint what is keeping you from moving forward.

RESPOND

1. What do you want to change in your life? What steps of faith have you taken?
2. Consider setting a reminder for yourself every day to use prayer and God's Word to help you through times of transition.

"Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path." (Psalm 119:105, kjv)

December 9, 2016

God is With Us

There are many exciting things that come along with pregnancy—celebrating with friends and family, discovering the sex of the child, and picking a meaningful name for the child. For Mary, the naming part was already taken care of. She would give birth to a baby boy and he would be called Immanuel: God with us.

God with us. What a concept. No matter where we go, God is with us. No matter how seemingly far we fall, God is with us. No matter how deep into despair we feel, God is with us. In times of great joy or times of insurmountable grief, God is with us. Why is he with us? Because he loves us. He loves us and there is nowhere else he wants to be than right at our side. There's no place too far or wide, too high or low, that the love and grace of God cannot reach us. It's as simple as that.

Christmas is a special time where we gather with family and friends and reflect on everything that has happened that year. The holiday season is not only a time where we look back on the past; we also look forward towards the future. This Christmas, let's reflect on the times God has met us with grace over the past year, and look forward to receiving his love and being more aware of his constant presence as we walk through our daily lives.

REFLECT

God loves us and is with us no matter where we go.

RESPOND

1. Are there times in your life when you have felt the overwhelming presence of God?
2. How can you find time in your schedule to feel the presence of God?

“Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us.” (Matthew 1:23, kjv)

December 10, 2016

A Marvelous Messiah

Isaiah was an eloquent prophet whose words speak to us today, just as he spoke to Judah. Isaiah had an optimistic outlook for the future. He knew that God had greater plans and envisioned God's promises of a world without pain or regret and he faithfully relayed this message of hope through his words.

There are times in our lives when it feels as if God has abandoned us. We find ourselves in difficult situations and get caught in a spiritual slump. What once felt like a time of perfect peace crumbles to chaos as we wonder if he even hears our cries or cares about our hurt. However, Isaiah offers a message of hope: trust God with the future and everything will fall into place. God acts in perfect faithfulness and works in perfect timing. He has planned marvelous things for our lives, although we can only see each piece of his plan revealed in real time. We don't know what things he has in store for our future and when we get caught up in trying to control what he has already planned for us, we create a mess.

God had plans for Mary's life that stretched far beyond anything she could've imagined. A young virgin, she probably didn't picture herself giving birth to a child anytime soon— not to mention the Son of God. However, Mary accepted God's plan for her life and faithfully followed the path he'd planned for her.

As we continue our journey as children of God, let's maintain a hopeful spirit looking on towards a future full of things so marvelous that we can't imagine it. God works every day in our lives and holds our past, present, and future in his hands. Let it go, let it be, and let God work.

REFLECT

God is constantly working to reveal his marvelous plans for our lives and we must trust in his perfect timing.

RESPOND

1. When in the past has God created marvelous things from a hopeless situation?
2. What gives you hope for the future?

"LORD, thou art my God; I will exalt thee, I will praise thy name; for thou hast done wonderful things; thy counsels of old are faithfulness and truth." (Isaiah 25:1, kjv)

December 11, 2016

The Coming Truth

Unlike the other authors of the Gospel, John wrote about the deeper meaning of what Jesus had said and done. John had seen Christ. He'd walked with him, talked with him, and witnessed the light in the darkness that he was. Rather than recount events, John wrote a genuine reflection that told us the truth about Christ—that he was the one true light. John recognized that Christ came to serve as a light in a world darkened by pain, sin, and hate. More than that, he came to give us hope for the future.

The people had heard the words of the prophets and had witnessed the miracles that God had worked for their ancestors, but how could they truly understand the nature of God? God spoke to us in the only way we could truly understand—by becoming one of us. Christ became flesh to dwell among us so that we could see him as a light—an example of how we should live, act, and serve in our own lives. Likewise, Christ came to give us a light of our own and make us beacons in the darkness for those around us.

As the Christmas season nears, we'll see plenty of lights. There will be stars on top of trees, lights draped across yards, and even parades of beautiful light displays for us to marvel at. However, whenever we see those lights shining brightly, let's remember our duty as children of God. Rather than just admire the lights around us, let's put ourselves on display as the brightest and most beautiful lights of all—lights of Christ.

REFLECT

Christ came to bring us eternal light so that we may be light in a dark world.

RESPOND

1. Who serves as a light in your own life?
2. In what way can we become a light in a dark place in our neighborhoods, communities, or cities?

"That was the true Light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world." (John 1:9, kjv)

December 12, 2016

Fruit

It's a blessing to be able to offer someone wet and shivering a wool blanket and hot soup—or to watch a little girl's shy smile break into a grin when she visits her father in prison and he hands her a Christmas present. God gives us a heart for certain ministries and calls us to meet immediate needs at critical times. Whatever our gifts, he expects us to use them to help others. Often, he lets us see the fruit of our labor to energize and keep us going.

Yet we may not always get to see how God uses our gifts and small acts of service to build his kingdom. We may plant a seed that remains dormant for years. We may continue to water what looks like a muddy patch of dirt, without any sign of growth. We may have to coax and nurture the littlest stub or sprout. ...Or we may be blessed to witness the full harvest. But could the harvest take place without the rest happening first?

In Matthew 25, Jesus says, "For I was hungry, and you gave me something to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave me something to drink; I was a stranger, and you invited me in; naked, and you clothed me; I was sick, and you visited me; I was in prison, and you came to me." Jesus views these small acts of service for others as if done to him. In whatever capacity we serve—even if nobody sees or appreciates it—remember we work for an audience of one. Jesus sees. To know he's working through us and in us is blessing enough.

REFLECT

Evaluate whether you're easily discouraged when you don't see quick results from your efforts and how that might be limiting what God wants to do through you.

RESPOND

1. Where could you and your family serve together this Christmas season?

"As every man hath received the gift, even so minister the same one to another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God." (1 Peter 4:10, kjv)

December 13, 2016

A Glimpse of Perfection

Paul had a rough start as a missionary, facing opposition in each city he entered. When he arrived in Corinth, mentally and emotionally battered from his previous stops, he faced yet another crisis. It seemed as if he would receive no rest from his enemies as he sought comfort from God.

We find ourselves in less than perfect situations daily. Whether it's in our jobs, relationships, or finances there are things that go wrong, days that seem endless and stages of life when we wonder if we'll ever find rest again. However, we can find rest in the blessed assurance that there will be a day when all the imperfect moments—all of our failures and shortcomings—will fade away and be replaced by infinite glory. We are children of God and we were chosen to be victorious. Even if it feels like we're losing the battle sometimes, we were hand picked to win the war.

Christmas is a stressful time of year. There are gifts to buy, meals to prepare, and gatherings to organize. It's easy for something to go wrong and throw a wrench in our plans. However, we must remember the true meaning of Christmas. Jesus came to be our savior and wipe away the imperfect pieces of our lives. As we anticipate the coming of Christ, let's remember that when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears. No matter what trials and tribulations we face in this life, there are better days coming—days when all the imperfect will disappear.

REFLECT

Christ is the coming perfection that will make all imperfections disappear.

RESPOND

1. How can you greet imperfect situations with a more positive perspective?
2. In what ways can you help others see past their failures and look towards a hopeful future?

*“But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away.”
(1 Corinthians 13:10, kjv)*

December 14, 2016

Your Humble Highness

A seemingly helpless infant swaddled in rags and tucked away in a manger. What more humble beginnings could you ask for? Jesus—the Messiah, the King of kings, the Son of God, began his time on Earth in a stable. Not only did Jesus begin his life in such a humble setting, he gave up his throne in heaven to take on the form of man and a servant at that. Christ didn't boast, he wasn't proud; rather he spent his life serving others before he made the ultimate sacrifice on the cross to save us.

What a thought. That the King would come to serve and not just serve but eventually surrender his life to a brutal death to save us. It's easy to become proud of ourselves for accomplishing things that we think are important. However, we must remember that Jesus—the only perfect person to ever walk the earth—never once exhibited pride, but rather worked selflessly to save the proud.

This holiday season, let's turn the focus away from ourselves and become a servant to those around us. Just as Christ made himself nothing to give selflessly to those around him, it's also our job to serve others in order to show the light and love of God. Whether it's in our own families or extends into our communities, we were designed to be selfless servants for Christ. He came to be an example to us, now it's our job to live out our purpose by being the hands and feet of Jesus.

REFLECT

Just as Christ was a servant to those around him, we must take on an attitude of selflessness in a selfish world.

RESPOND

1. How can you exhibit humility and serve others during the holiday season?
2. How can you incorporate an attitude of servitude into your normal routine?

“Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men.” (Philippians 2:5-7, kjv)

December 15, 2016

Go Tell It on the Mountain

Continuing in the example set before us by Moses, David, Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Paul, and Jesus, as believers we must dedicate ourselves to sharing God's story. These men are the authors of the autobiography of the Church – the Bible. It's not folklore. It's not some best-selling fictional tale.

The Bible is a collection of memoirs written by men and women who walked with Jesus, experiencing the power and presence of God in many magnificent, awe-inspiring ways. It's a collection of eyewitness accounts of the highs, the lows, and the unexplainable God moments in between. The Church is very much alive and active, as is the Spirit of God. As believers, it's up to us to document as much of that activity as possible so that we may pass it along to the next generation.

God uses our stories to impact, influence, and inspire people, so it's up to us to tell of the amazing things He's doing in our lives each day. By telling our stories we make God bigger. We bring him glory. We shed light in the darkness and offer hope to the hopeless, inviting others to rejoice with us in the God moments of life.

REFLECT

God uses our life stories to impact, influence, and inspire people. It's up to us as believers tell of the amazing things he's doing in our lives each day.

RESPOND

1. We celebrate Christmas because the people who were there told their stories. Telling stories is the only way to keep them alive and it reminds us of God's work through his people. Can you think of any stories that have been passed down through your family? Why are they important?
2. What are some of the great God-stories of your life? Take time to write them out or tell them to someone so they will never be forgotten.

*"One generation shall praise thy works to another, and shall declare thy mighty acts. I will speak of the glorious honor of thy majesty, and of thy wondrous works. And men shall speak of the might of thy terrible acts: and I will declare thy greatness. They shall abundantly utter the memory of thy great goodness, and shall sing of thy righteousness."
(Psalm 145:4-7, kjv)*

December 16, 2016

Joy

Storms come no matter how much we prepare. Jesus wasn't kidding when he said we will have trouble in this world—maybe even at Christmastime (which seems especially wrong). Does anyone have a testimony on this? But before this gets depressing, let's remember that our Savior offers us the most precious gift of redemption and the promise of eternal life in his presence. No sin or mistake is too horrible, and no enemy strong enough to separate us from him. To really accept and know this in our heart is to tap into the true joy of the Holy Spirit dwelling within us—right now.

Joy is a fruit of the Spirit and cannot be taken from us, but still, we have to choose it. We have to choose to look beyond our circumstances. When we do, we're not the only ones to experience joy. "I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth" (3 John 1:4). Zephaniah 3:17 says the Lord your God is in your midst, a victorious warrior. He will exult over you with joy, he will be quiet in his love, he will rejoice over you with shouts of joy. God wants to share all that he is with us. We might be happy receiving trinkets, but he wants so much more for us.

Have you ever wished a person you loved could be there with you to see that beautiful sunset or taste that amazing dish at that cozy restaurant? You want those you love to experience all the good things you experience. God wants the same—to share his joy with us...for no eye has seen, no ear has heard, no human mind has conceived, the things God has prepared for those who love him.

REFLECT

We often limit the joy God has ready for us to experience.

RESPOND

1. Right now, are you focusing on your circumstances? Are you freely giving away the joy that Jesus sacrificed so much to give you?
2. Can you think of a time when you looked beyond your circumstances? Describe your experience.

"And ye now therefore have sorrow: but I will see you again, and your heart shall rejoice, and your joy no man taketh from you." (John 16:22, kjv)

December 17, 2016

Alive and Well

Tunnel vision is real and the daily grind is hard. It's easy to lose sight of the bigger picture amidst the challenges of life. We can easily be consumed by our trials, forgetting to look up and see what God is doing all around us. When the mission becomes too difficult and there's little to show for all of our hard work, it's tempting to throw in the towel. That's when we need a healthy dose of encouragement. We need to be reminded that God is real, he is at work, he is for us, and he is faithful.

The truth is, God is doing amazing things all day, every day! He's changing lives and impacting cities around the world. People are being saved, orphans adopted, marriages restored, communities transformed, addictions broken, finances stabilized, people living on mission...and the list goes on and on. These stories need to be told so that we can be aware of what God's doing all around us. When we hear of the great things God's accomplishing in our church and city, it gives us hope to keep on keepin' on. It encourages us to keep loving, keep serving, keep volunteering, keep giving. Being reminded that God is at work motivates us to keep living out the stories God is writing for us.

REFLECT

The Bible is a collection of God-stories that remind us of the true character of God and all that he's done and continues to do.

RESPOND

1. The word "Gospel" means "good news". As Christians we've been commanded to share this good news so that everyone may know God. Who do you know that needs to hear the Gospel today?

"And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart: And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up." (Deuteronomy 6:6-7, kjv)

December 18, 2016

The Three Dimensions of Relationship

We were created with a deep-seeded longing to belong. We desire to be in relationship with one another, living in community. We don't function well when we're left to ourselves. But sadly, broken relationships are rampant in our culture today. We're a society full of broken marriages, fractured families, and estranged friends. Even with more access to relationship through technology than ever before, loneliness is at epidemic proportions. We're a culture full of disconnected people longing for connections.

It's not good for us to be alone, and God says so. We were created by him to be in relationship with him, so whether or not we know it, we will always crave that relationship. It's in our DNA. Jesus modeled for us how to live a balanced life in community with others. He maintained three primary kinds of relationships: a relationship with his Heavenly Father, with his friends, and with the world around him. Like Jesus, we operate best when we have a solid relationship with our Heavenly Father, a small group of friends we can be real with, and a community we're plugged into.

We all long to belong. Our Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ both placed a priority on life-giving relationships. Let's do the same.

REFLECT

We're at our best when we have a thriving relationship with our Heavenly Father, a small group of friends to do life with, and a community we're plugged into.

RESPOND

1. Take a relational inventory. Do you have the three dimensions of relationship that Jesus modeled for us? (1) A healthy relationship with God; (2) A small group of close friends; (3) A community to actively engage in.

"A new commandment I give unto you, that ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another." (John 13:34-35, kjv)

December 19, 2016

FaithFULL not FearFULL

The buzz word these days is “brave”. It’s such a powerful word to rally around—the idea of being unafraid and conquering all the scary things of life. But being brave puts the responsibility on us, leaving it to us to muster up the courage from some deep reserve. It sounds romantic, but it’s not always possible. Sometimes we just don’t have the bravery we need for certain situations, and our fear ends up crippling us. Rather than trying to live unafraid, what we really need to do is live fearlessly.

Being fearless does not mean living with the absence of fear; it means moving forward in spite of our fear. It means walking in obedience to God, even when we’re terrified of what it could cost us. Just like Mary.

Mary said yes to God, even when it threatened to cost her everything. No doubt she was afraid—she could lose her pending marriage, her reputation as a virgin, which would mean she’d probably never marry, and could even lose her life. Surrendering to God in Mary’s situation required incredible fearlessness. Although she was probably terrified, Mary was not paralyzed. Her faith overrode her fear.

Like Mary, we can acknowledge fear without letting it consume us. We lessen the grip of fear on our lives each time we do the very thing that terrifies us. Mary did this by saying yes to God and stepping into the plans he had for her. While they seemed risky and costly, they were in fact good plans. Mary faced the scary things and moved forward anyway. Because of her fearlessness, Christmas came.

REFLECT

Being fearless means moving forward in spite of our fear. It means walking in obedience to God, even when we’re terrified of what it could cost us.

RESPOND

1. There are 365 Bible verses about not being afraid – one for each day of the year. Let’s remember that God has not given us a spirit of fear, but a spirit of power, love, and a sound mind.
2. Is there an area of life where fear is paralyzing you? What would it look like to face that fear and move forward anyway?
3. Is God calling you to something that sounds risky or costly? Are you afraid of saying yes? What could saying yes lead to?

*“God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved: God shall help her, and that right early.”
(Psalm 46:5, kjv)*

December 20, 2016

The Least Likely

Isn't it funny how God tends to call the least likely people to accomplish his plans? Gideon, David, Mary—even Jesus—they all seemed to be the least capable for succeeding at what God had called them to. Gideon was the least of the least of his people, and yet God chose him to drive out the Midianites with an army of just 300. David was a shepherd boy whom God ordained the King of Israel. Mary was a young girl engaged to a carpenter. She had no status, fame, or fortune, just a heart for God. But God chose her to birth the Savior of all time and history.

And then there's Jesus, God's finest example of using the least likely to accomplish his plans. It would have made much more sense to use King Herod to be God-incarnate, rather than an obscure carpenter's son from No-where-ville. Herod had the ear of the people. He had the platform, the influence, the power, and the authority as king over all the land. But he did not have a heart for God. Jesus, on the other hand, had nothing but the heart of God, and through his humble existence he began a powerful grass roots movement. He didn't draw people to himself because he glittered or shined. People were drawn to Jesus because they were hungry for truth, not position. Jesus kept his ministry as far from the celebrity platform as possible, so there was never any confusion as to what people were drawn to. It was God, plain and simple.

God is still in the business of using the least likely to accomplish his plans. He does so in order to make one thing clear: it is he who is accomplishing the work, and no other.

REFLECT

God's ways are not our ways. He tends to do things the harder, surprising, more seemingly-complicated way. By doing so, He alone gets all the glory.

RESPOND

As you practice the art of silence again today, keep paper nearby to write down the random thoughts demanding your attention. After your time of silence, categorize them:

1. Thanks to social media, comparison is a rampant disease in our culture. Do you struggle with comparing yourself to others? Do you see God working mightily in the lives of others, but question what he could use you for?
2. Is there an area in which you've been comparing yourself to someone else? Take a moment to offer that up to the Lord, releasing it to him. Know and trust that He has GREAT plans for you. Be on the lookout for ways He is using you today.

*"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the LORD."
(Isaiah 55:8, kjv)*

December 21, 2016

A Little Yes

David was the youngest of eight. While several of his brothers were off at war defending Israel from the Philistines, David was in the fields tending sheep. One day his father sent him on a simple errand that changed the course of his life and the trajectory of history. As asked, David took food to his brothers, who were soldiers in the Israelite army. While there, David witnessed the taunting, bullying giant Goliath. Unable to watch him mock God, David stepped forward.

Within days David went from tending sheep in a field to rubbing shoulders with Saul, King of Israel, being cheered on by the entire Israelite army, and slaying the unconquerable Goliath. All because David honored his father by running a simple, seemingly insignificant errand.

David's obedience and faithfulness in the small things led to immeasurably more than anything he could've ever asked or imagined. In the same way, we never know when our small little "yes" could end up changing our lives. What we do know is that when we are faithful in the small things, we will eventually be given the opportunity to be faithful in the big things.

REFLECT

You could be one simple act of obedience away from the immeasurably more God has planned for your life.

RESPOND

As you practice the art of silence again today, keep paper nearby to write down the random thoughts demanding your attention. After your time of silence, categorize them:

1. Do you get frustrated with the trivial, menial tasks throughout your day? How does David's story help you see things differently?
2. It's easy to want the big, assignments, but God tends to use the small moments just as much as the big ones. How can you be faithful in every ordinary moment?

"And Jesse said unto David his son, Take now for thy brethren an ephah of this parched corn, and these ten loaves, and run to the camp to thy brethren; and carry these ten cheeses unto the captain of their thousand, and look how thy brethren fare, and take their pledge." (1 Samuel 17:17-18, kjv)

"And David rose up early in the morning, and left the sheep with a keeper, and took, and went, as Jesse had commanded him; and he came to the trench, as the host was going forth to the fight, and shouted for the battle." (1 Samuel 17:20, kjv)

December 22, 2016

Be Quiet

Some people wake up smiling and talking, while others wake up like a porcupine in need of plenty of space and cautious interaction—and lots of silence. Some people use an average of 20,000 words a day—mostly women—while others use a mere 7,000. (Ahem, men.) A caffeinated, extroverted, female morning person can easily blow through 100,000 words before noon, leaving the rest of us feeling like our own word banks have been robbed. Then there are the exact opposite type of people—those who scrape the bottom of their word barrel with a simple, “Good morning.” They guard their words carefully and bleed with every syllable. Know any of either type? (Don’t point.)

Whether we’re the ones doing the talking or someone else is talking, we live in a world full of noise. It’s the kids, the radio, the Starbucks barista taking our order, or the chatty neighbor talking about their health. The buzz of life is constant. We have to deliberately choose silence.

What’s so great about silence? Silence heals. Like cool water to a parched and depleted soul, we don’t even realize how much we need silence. God tells us to quiet ourselves, to cultivate a gentle and quiet spirit, and to make it our ambition to lead a quiet life. Doing so gives us rest. Then we set ourselves up to successfully tune into the gentle peace-giving, life-offering, truth-speaking voice of God without distraction.

REFLECT

Silence is a discipline we must deliberately choose to practice in this busy, noisy world. Silence heals and refreshes our depleted souls, allowing us to tune into the gentle voice of God.

RESPOND

As you practice the art of silence again today, keep paper nearby to write down the random thoughts demanding your attention. After your time of silence, categorize them:

1. Can you tell when your word bank is depleted and you need some time of silence to refresh your soul?
2. Try carving out some time of intentional silence today to quiet your soul before the Lord, whether in the car on the way to work, on a walk, or on the porch with a cup of coffee.

“Be still, and know that I am God: I will be exalted among the heathen, I will be exalted in the earth.” (Psalm 46:10, kjv)

December 23, 2016

Quieting Your Soul

Have you ever felt like you need a vacation...from your own head? We have to-do lists and check lists and grocery lists and lists of lists rumbling around our heads. There are meal plans and chore lists and things-not-to-forget-lists, appointments on our calendars and Christmas lists for all our people. It gets crowded in that small 6x6 inch space we call "the brain!"

Yesterday we talked about intentionally carving out time to be silent. Your time probably went something like this, "And now I will quiet myself before the Lord. Oh, and I have to remember to send that email today. OK. Deep breath. Back to quieting myself before the... Is the oven on? I think I left the oven on. I should go check. (Ten minutes later) and now I will quiet myself before the... Where is my Bible? I bet I left it at Bible study. I'll text _____ to see if it's there. Wait, where's my phone?"

Quieting ourselves before the Lord can be the exact opposite of peaceful! Sitting down to be quiet seems to be an invitation for all the noisy lists and demanding thoughts stored up in our head to clamor for our attention. Like toddlers, our noisy thoughts can be very bossy and very needy. It takes practice to cultivate a quiet mind, because it goes against culture and the world's unspoken pressure to be a "human doing." But God created us as human BEINGS; his greatest desire is to just be with us. This requires us to take every thought captive and be the boss of each and every one. Our minds are not the boss of us! Just like toddlers, we can't give our minds everything they want when they want it. We say when, where, and how.

REFLECT

Just like all closets need a good cleaning every once in a while, so do our brains. Practicing the art of silence is one way to declutter the mind.

RESPOND

As you practice the art of silence again today, keep paper nearby to write down the random thoughts demanding your attention. After your time of silence, categorize them:

1. The Keep category (requiring further action or maintenance)
2. The Trash category (a lie, a nagging thought, a worry or concern, a negative idea. Anything that you need to get rid of.)
3. The Donate category (any needs, wants, hopes, or desires you need to surrender to God.)

*"Casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ."
(2 Corinthians 10:5, kjv)*

December 24, 2016

Soaking in Silence

When was the last time you soaked in the tub? Hot water healing is nothing new. As early as 2,000 B.C., Egyptians used hot baths to ease pain and invoke relaxation by placing sizzling rocks into water. In Ancient Greece, elaborate structures were built around natural hot springs as early-day hospitals; there, the father of medicine himself—Hippocrates—prescribed soothing soaks as treatment for conditions ranging from jaundice to rheumatism. The word “spa” comes from the Latin term “sanus per aquam” - meaning “health through water.” Battle-weary Roman soldiers routinely used hot wells to recover from their physical and emotional wounds.

While soaking is good for the body, it’s equally good for the soul. Like a bubble bath for the weary heart, soaking in silence is a time of saturating yourself in the presence of God. No words, actions, or thoughts are necessary for soaking. It’s a time of just being, allowing the silence to minister to the busy mind, tired body, and weary soul.

What does soaking in silence look like? It’s hard, but simple. It’s a time of sitting quietly, clearing your mind, and focusing your attention on being silent. It can be for ten minutes or several hours—whatever your schedule and attention span can handle. You can sit, stand, run, walk, drive—whatever enables you to work out your thoughts and relish the quiet. It is a time with few words or noise. Wait and see what God brings to mind during your soak and remember, “Let your words be few.”

REFLECT

Like a bubble bath for the weary heart, soaking in silence is a time of saturating yourself in the presence of God.

RESPOND

1. Remember: Because we’re so used to living in a noisy world, cultivating a quiet mind takes time and practice. Soaking in silence is meant to be a time for resting in the presence of God. No words are necessary
2. As you practice focusing your mind on being quiet, try giving your brain something to do. Try meditating on a specific word, phrase, or verse of Scripture. Repeat it in your mind to keep yourself focused. Consider each word and what it means. As thoughts come to you, don’t forget to write them down and come back to them when you’re done.

*“Be not rash with thy mouth, and let not thine heart be hasty to utter any thing before God: for God is in heaven, and thou upon earth: therefore let thy words be few.”
(Ecclesiastes 5:2, kjv)*

December 25, 2016

The Sound of Silence

For forty days Jesus lived in solitude in the wilderness. He spent his days and nights in total silence—no music playing, no disciples asking questions, no one texting him, FaceTiming him, or Snapchatting. For forty days. Can you imagine?

Jesus' time in the wilderness took him away from the distractions of life so he could focus solely on communing with the Father. Silence is a discipline; it doesn't just happen naturally. But when we choose silence and make room for it in our lives, we enter into communion with God.

Jesus' time in the wilderness wasn't all peace and bliss. Satan hates nothing more than for us to commune with God because he recognizes—probably even more than we do—the power of soaking in God's healing presence. He came loud and proud with distractions and temptations, harassing Jesus with luxuries and power, status and delicacies, like bread. (They didn't have white chocolate mochas back then, so bread must've been the thing.)

Silence can be a time of communing with God, but it can also be empty space for pity parties and negative self-talk. This is exactly why we must take every thought captive, just as we discussed a few days ago, and command the enemy to leave us, just as Jesus did, crying "Away from me, Satan!"

Silence is a precious gift from God. Practicing the discipline of silence ushers us into his presence, where we find the peace and RESToration our souls desperately need.

REFLECT

When we choose silence and make room for it in our lives, we enter into communion with God.

RESPOND

1. What are some things keeping you from practicing the discipline of silence? What can you do to overcome those obstacles?
2. Make time for silence today. It doesn't have to be forty days and forty nights. It doesn't even have to be forty minutes. Just carve out some time in your daily rhythm of life to practice the discipline of silence.

"For thus saith the Lord GOD, the Holy One of Israel; in returning and rest shall ye be saved; in quietness and in confidence shall be your strength: and ye would not." (Isaiah 30:15, kjv)

December 26, 2016

Peace on Earth

Micah lived in one of the darkest times in Israel's history. He witnessed brutal warfare and widespread suffering and quite frankly, it was anything but peaceful. Yet Micah saw the light ahead. He maintained a positive perspective that allowed him to see beyond the darkness and destruction and know that there would be peace—the peace of God. Micah predicted the coming of the Christ, knowing he would bring peace despite the darkness.

Peace is hard to find. Trouble tears apart our lives. Doubt delivers us to our fears. Worry warps our sense of reality. Before we know it we're trapped in the chaos of day to day life and panic takes over. Yet Christ came to be our peace. Everything—our hopes, worries, fears, doubts, dreams—are met by him and found in him. He can put our worries to rest and surround us with an everlasting peace that calms the raging storm in our lives.

Christmas is a busy time of year and it's easy to get caught up in all the chaos. This holiday season, let's make time in our schedules to experience the peace that Christ brings. Let's set aside quiet time with our family and more importantly ourselves to reflect on God's promises and let his peace wash over us. Through the good and bad, through times of laughter and tears, Christ came to be our peace.

REFLECT

In the midst of our busy schedules and broken moments, Christ is our peace.

RESPOND

1. In what areas of your life do you need to feel peace? How can you work to surrender your worries, doubts, and fears to God so that you may experience peace?

“And this man shall be the peace, when the Assyrian shall come into our land: and when he shall tread in our palaces, then shall we raise against him seven shepherds, and eight principal men.” (Micah 5:5, kjv)