



**New McKendree UMC**

**Daily Advent Devotions 2018**

**Written by: Pastor Bryan Wendling**

## Thursday, December 13 — The Second Week of Advent

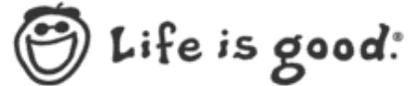
### Life is Good!

*Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances;  
for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.*

(1 Thessalonians 5:16-18; NRSV)

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Have you ever heard of the Life is Good Company? Founded in 1994 by the Jacobs brothers, Bert and John, the Life is Good Company is a New England-based apparel and accessories retailer that's best known for its optimistic T-shirts and hats, many of which feature a smiling stick figure named Jake. Lord knows I've never been accused of being a fashionista, but the cool hats and T-shirts this company puts out have got me hooked. What won me over wasn't the fabric they use or the way their stuff fits, but rather what the company stands for and the message their products convey. The Life is Good Company's mission statement is simply this: "to spread the power of optimism." I love their hats and T-shirts because they simply celebrate life.



Are the Jacobs brothers church-going Christians? I have no idea. But I do know that their company's mission and products capture the essence of what Paul wrote long ago in his letter to the parishioners of the First Christian Church of Thessalonica; that being, life is good and worth celebrating. What's more, if there was ever a time that we needed to be reminded of that simple truth, that time is now. This pessimistic world of ours is in serious need of a healthy dose of optimism. Why? Because in spite of the many real problems that face us, life really is good and being alive is, in and of itself, worth celebrating!

Could it be that we're so inundated with pessimism on a daily basis that we've forgotten what celebrating life is all about and/or how to go about it? Celebrating life means affirming the present by remembering the best things from our past and hoping for good things in the future. It means intentionally focusing on all that's good; a focus that's seldom found in our modern day media. More often than not the present is denied, the past becomes the source of our complaints, and the future is looked upon with fatalistic despair and apathy.

But God sent his Son to us on that first Christmas to, among other things, remind us that life is good, our lives are worth living and therefore worth celebrating. Jesus came to redeem our tainted pasts, pessimistic presents, and hopeless futures. Our Savior's birth, life, death, and resurrection was and is God's way telling us in no uncertain terms that whatever our present circumstance may be, our past doesn't have to be denied but can be remembered and forgiven, and our futures are filled with the hope of Christ's return. What's not to celebrate?

So go ahead and follow the lead of Paul and the T-shirt company guys; life is good...celebrate it!

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A good "start your day" prayer: *Dear Lord, thank you for the grace of being alive this morning. Thank you for the sleep that has refreshed me. Thank you for the new beginning that this day brings. Thank you for all the new beginnings that you have in store for me. AMEN.*

## Wednesday, December 12 — The Second Week of Advent

### Angels Among Us

*“Don’t be afraid!” Elisha told him. “For there are more on our side than on theirs!” Then Elisha prayed, “O Lord, open his eyes and let him see!” The Lord opened the young man’s eyes, and when he looked up, he saw that the hillside around Elisha was filled with horses and chariots of fire. (2 Kings 6:16-17; NLT)*

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God’s angels must’ve logged some serious overtime in the months leading up to Christ’s birth in Bethlehem. In the first couple chapters of Matthew and Luke’s Gospels, you can hardly make it through a verse without an angel popping onto the scene. They’re everywhere. Every time one of the first Christmas’ human supporting cast members turned around, one of God’s heavenly messengers appeared out of nowhere to tell them what to do, where to go, what to think, and to not be afraid. Think about it. God sent his lead angel, Gabriel, to inform ole Zachariah that he and his “too old to have a baby” wife, Elizabeth, were soon to be the proud parents of John the Baptist. The same angel visited Mary with the news that she was to be the virgin mother of the Christ-child. Joseph didn’t have just one angelic visit, but three; one prior Jesus’ birth and two more visits before baby Jesus was out of diapers. And how about the flock of lowly shepherds hanging out with their sheep in the fields surrounding Bethlehem? The angel that visited them brought with him the whole angelic staff...“a vast host . . . the armies of heaven” (Luke 2:13).

Have you ever been visited by an angel? I haven’t...at least not that I know of anyway. That got me to wondering. Were all these angels merely “seasonal help” whom God put on the heavenly payroll just to handle that “first Christmas rush,” or are angels still as busy today as they seem to have been back then? How great would it be if angels helped us out the way that they seemed to help out the original Christmas’ supporting cast members? Wouldn’t it be great if angels could let us know everything that was going to happen to us, and what we ought to do in every situation? Why does there seem to be less angels in the 21<sup>st</sup> century than there were in the 1<sup>st</sup> century?

Maybe, just maybe, the problem is not that God’s heavenly angel department is woefully short staffed. Maybe it’s not an on high staffing problem, but rather a down here seeing problem. Could it be that our eyes simply aren’t used to seeing angels? If that’s the case, our angelic blind spot is nothing new. Long before Jesus was born, Elisha’s servant got all worried when he looked and saw the city where they were staying surrounded by an army of enemy chariots. When Elisha asked God to open his servant’s eyes, he could suddenly see the hills full of soldiers, horses, and chariots of fire surrounding and making ready to pounce the enemy soldiers that only moments before had him in a tizzy. As it turned out, God’s angelic protectors had been there all along, but to see them the servant had to get past his angelic blind spot. (To get the full story, check out 2 Kings 6:11-18.)

Is there any reason why you and I can’t do the same? During this Advent season, let’s make a concerted effort to keep an out eye for angels in our midst. Whether we’re at work, travelling, shopping, celebrating, or making ready for a Christmas celebration, God’s angels are at work among us. Just as Elisha did for his servant, ask God to grant you the eyes to see, and ears to hear his heavenly messengers at work in your midst. After all, `tis the season!

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*Loving Father, thank you for keeping your angels working overtime for me. AMEN.*

## Tuesday, December 11 — The Second Week of Advent

### See Ahead by Looking Back

*“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God, the Almighty—the one who always was, who is, and who is still to come.”*

*(Revelations 4:8; NLT)*

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Have you ever noticed that the more in touch you are with what’s happened in the past, the more in touch you are with what’s yet to come? I think this is one of those truisms that doesn’t really make sense until you’ve circled the block enough times to call yourself middle-aged. At least that was the case for me. But now as a card-carrying member of the “not all that old, but certainly not young” club, I’m coming to realize that this “see ahead by looking back” truism applies to every aspect of my life. While it certainly applies to the more mundane aspects of my everyday life, it’s becoming abundantly clear in my spiritual life.

For instance, the Gospel not only reminds me of what took place but also what will take place. Or, in the spirit of the season—that being Advent—by contemplating Christ’s first coming, I can discover the signs of his second coming. By looking back in meditation, I can look forward in expectation. Through reflection, I can project. By observing the memory of Christ’s birth, I can see glimpses of the yet-to-come fulfillment of his kingdom.

This “seeing ahead by looking back” phenomenon has got to be more than just a fortunate side effect or accidental perk that comes with crossing the half-century milestone. As a matter of fact, I think this is the way God intended it from the beginning. I’m struck by the fact that the prophets speaking about the future of Israel always (and usually in the same breath) kept reminding their people of God’s great works in the past. The prophets encouraged them to look forward with confidence by encouraging them to remember the great deeds God had done in their past.

I pray that during this Advent season each of us will seize the opportunity to refresh and deepen our memory of God’s great deeds in our individual and collective pasts as we look forward with courage and confidence to what God has yet in store for us, his Advent people.

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Pray the Gloria Patri: *Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit. As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. AMEN.*

## Monday, December 10 — The Second Week of Advent

### Who is this child? Why is this child?

*They hurried to the village and found Mary and Joseph. And there was the baby, lying in the manger. Luke 2:16 (NLT)*

Who among us doesn't love Christmas tunes? Whether they're songs about Rudolph, Santa, the Little Drummer Boy (who, by the way, the Gospel writers forgot to mention in their telling of our Savior's birth!), or the cherished Christian hymns we sing on Sundays; the songs of the season are as integral to our preparation and celebration as our living room's lit trees, the North Pole's elves, or our mantel's cherished nativities. There's just something magical about Christmas music. They're timeless, immune to political correctness, and somehow possess the power to soften the hearts of even the most skeptical scrooges among us.

I'm sure we all have our favorite seasonal songs. I have many, but if pressed to pick my personal chart-topper I'd have to say it's that old familiar hymn that first hit charts in 1865. That's the year that William Dix—a "one-hit-wonder" insurance company manager from Bristol, England—decided to express his Christmas spirit by penning the enduring classic *What Child Is This?* For me, his timeless lyrics, set to the tune of Greensleeves, captures the joyous yet mysterious magic of Christmas like no other. Have you ever taken the time to ponder Mr. Dix's beautiful lyrics? If you haven't, in the spirit of the season, I highly recommend you do so!

You see, within the song's three short verses, Mr. Dix gets to the heart of what young Mary and Joseph must've pondered as they looked upon the manger where their newborn baby boy lay sleeping: "Who are you? What does life have in store for you?" The young parents surely wondered at the strange events leading up to their boy-child's birth and their wonderment only grew as complete strangers gathered at the manger to share in their intimate moment. And you know what? Our world, 2000+ years later, still ponders the same fundamental question concerning this baby in the manger: "Who are you?"

On second thought, perhaps our 21<sup>st</sup> century fundamental manger-side question isn't so much "*who* are you?" but rather "*why* are you?" You see, unlike Mary, Joseph, and the rest, you and I know how the story ends. Therefore, as we gaze upon the child in the manger, we see the King of kings lying beneath the shadow of the cross. Our fear—meaning awe and reverence—in the presence of the holy child flows from our knowledge that this new life, the Word made flesh, is God's gift to us. We know what his bewildered, yet adoring parents couldn't have known: that even from the manger this fragile baby was already protecting us from sin and death. Knowing what we know, we're all the more struck by the humble, shabby conditions of his birth and the lowly social status of those who first welcomed him. That must be the case because twenty centuries later all of us—the richest and the poorest among us, the wisest and the simplest—still kneel as paupers before the throne of God's grace, for that's what this manger is.

My prayer is that each of us will not let this season pass without peering into the manger and asking, "*Who* are you? *Why* are you?" And then, listen closely for the answer: "I'm *your* Savior and I've come to save *you*."

*Loving Father, grant me the humility to hurry to you this Christmas season so that I too may kneel before your manger-shaped throne of grace. AMEN.*

## Friday, December 7 — The First Week of Advent

### The Original Christmas Song

*And Mary said: "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior. For He has regarded the lowly state of His maidservant; for behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed. For He who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is His name. And His mercy is on those who fear Him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with His arm; He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich He has sent away empty. He has helped His servant Israel, in remembrance of His mercy, as He spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to His seed forever." Luke 1:46-55 (NKJV)*

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Should it ever come up in a heated round of Trivial Pursuit, this canticle, that is, this song from the Bible, is the original Christmas song. To many it's known as the *Magnificat*. You see, Mary composed this exuberant song of praise out of her growing awareness of the importance of Gabriel's message for her and her people. The Lord God was doing a new thing in her life, and yet Mary's song was not new nor was her "magnifying" the Lord a new thing. I'm thinking that Mary, the teenage girl that Gabriel proclaimed to be "highly favored" and "blessed among women," must've rated such high praise from God because she had been singing his praises all her young life!

But the thing is, Mary's original Christmas song isn't just about that long ago and faraway original Christmas. The God of Israel in whom Mary rejoices sustains us still today. He's our Savior. We see his "great reversal," not only in Scripture, but working in our day-to-day, 21<sup>st</sup> century lives as well. He's still bringing down the high and mighty and still lifting up those of "humble estate" who call on his name. He's fulfilled his promise, the covenant made with Abraham...and with us.

Mary rightly proclaims that "all generations will call me blessed," but she also reminds us that the song is not about her. This original Christmas song is about the One who is the giver of this great gift of salvation. What's more, she invites us to join in and sing along, to make it our own, for the Lord "has done (*and is doing!*) great things" for us. God's Spirit—the power of the Most High—overshadowed her. In that glorious instant her life was changed...and so was ours!

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*Today's prayer: Pray the words of Mary's song. Change the words to make it your own...because it is!*

## Thursday, December 6 — The First Week of Advent

Remember what Christ taught, and let his words enrich your lives and make you wise; teach them to each other and sing them out in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing to the Lord with thankful hearts.

Colossians 3:16 (The Living Bible)

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As anybody who's ever tried it knows, reading the Bible is nothing like reading a novel or slugging your way through that dusty old history book your high school social studies teacher forced you to endure. Bible reading is spiritual reading and the purpose of spiritual reading is not to master knowledge, but to let God's Spirit master us. As strange as that sounds, *spiritual reading means letting ourselves be read by God!*

For instance, we can read the story of Jesus' birth with intellectual curiosity and ask ourselves, "Did this really happen? Who put this story together and how?" That's one way to go about it. But we can also read the same story with spiritual attentiveness and wonder: "How is God speaking to me through this story? What is this story telling me about who God is, who I am, and what God desires for me and from me?"

If we opt for the latter approach we may just find that it changes the way we read everything else. Rather than reading the daily news simply so that we'll be up to speed on current events and have something to talk about at work, we just may find ourselves reading the day's current events with a renewed sense of spiritual awareness. Meaning, not merely informed of world events, but all the more aware of the reality that our world needs the wisdom of God's Word, the hope of God's Good News, and the grace of God's love.

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Lord and Counselor, may your holy Word dwell richly within me during the Advent season and always. AMEN.

## Wednesday, December 5 — The First Week of Advent

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God ... And the Word became flesh and lived among us. (John 1:1-2, 14; NRSV)*

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Among the many new industries that have come into being by way of the internet is the “genealogy industry.” Although unimaginable only a generation ago, anyone with a PC and access to the internet can login to Ancestry.com, for instance, and track down their family history with relative ease. As far as I’m concerned, that’s a good thing. Who among us doesn’t feel compelled to reach back into our past in order to better understand our present, and perhaps get a glimpse into our future?

In the same way that gym memberships peak during the New Year’s resolution season, I’m guessing that December is a pretty good sales month for the genealogy industry. There’s just something about Christmas that causes even the most unsentimental among us to reminisce on holiday family histories and traditions. But the thing is, as Christians we don’t need a PC or internet access to understand our past, our present, or our future destination. The One whose birth we celebrate at Christmas is the author of our family history; a family history that’s contained in the pages of God’s Word.

The Gospel writer, John, must’ve been all about genealogies because he takes it way, way back. His Gospel, right from the beginning, reminds us that our family tree didn’t begin in Bethlehem with the birth of the Christ-child. While Matthew and Luke’s Gospels give us glimpses into the birth of the human baby who is also God, John reminds that the one whose birth we celebrate actually existed before time began. He was present at the creation of the world, is present with us now through his Word and Spirit, and reigns eternally at the right hand of the Father. That little baby we celebrate at Christmas is Jesus; “the Alpha and the Omega, who is, who was, and who is to come, the Almighty” (Revelation 1:8). He is without beginning or end. Therefore, our stories—our genealogies—find their source, their present reality, and their future destiny in his story. By looking back, all the way back, we’re able to look forward...to eternity.

That promised future, announced with the birth of the babe in Bethlehem, was promised to us by way of our baptism. Therefore, we don’t just sing *of* Christmas. We sing *because of* Christmas. We sing of Jesus, the source of our eternal past, the source of our present reality, and the promise of our eternal destiny.

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*Heavenly Father, you made that first Christmas night shine with the brightness of your true Light. Grant that in our here and now earthly journey we might remain in the light of Jesus’ presence among us and in the last day wake to the eternal brightness of his glory. AMEN.*

## Tuesday, December 4 — The First Week of Advent

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse,  
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.

Isaiah 11:1

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You've heard it said, "Don't sweat the small stuff." It's a good thing to keep in mind as we launch headlong into the decorating, baking, shopping, and wrapping season; all those Christmas season "small stuff" activities that start out festive, but soon turn into Christmas joy-zapping busy-ness, stress, and exhaustion.

But on the other hand, there is perhaps some Christmas small stuff that's worth hanging on to. At least the Prophet Isaiah seemed to think so. According to Isaiah, our very salvation comes from something small, tender, and vulnerable; something so small it's hardly noticeable and therefore easily missed. You see, on that faraway and long ago night in Bethlehem, God—the Creator of all creation—came to us in smallness, weakness, and hiddenness.

For me, Isaiah's words serve as the perfect Christmas reality check. Somehow, I keep expecting loud and overwhelmingly impressive events to convince me and others of God's saving power. Not so, according to the Prophet. Glitz, glamour, and big events seem to be the world's Christmas recipe. But not only is it a recipe for exhaustion, it's a recipe that blinds us to the small "shoot that shall sprout from the stump."

When we're too busy with our holiday bigness and busy-ness to see the small signs of God's presence—the joy of celebrating with friends, the carefree play of children, and gestures of love that seem to flow more freely this time of year—then inevitably our Christmas joy will be overcome by holiday stress and exhaustion.

Written some 700 years before the first Christmas, Isaiah reminds us that it's the small stuff of God—the child of Bethlehem, the unknown man of Nazareth, the rejected preacher, the Savior on the cross—that seeks our full attention during this joyous Christmas season. The work of our salvation takes place in the midst of a world that demands bigness and busy-ness. But beneath all that, God's promise is hidden in the small shoot that sprouts from the stump...a small shoot that promises the love and joy of Christmas.

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*Gentle God and loving Father, open my eyes to the joy of your hidden presence in my life. AMEN.*

## Monday, December 3 — The First Week of Advent

### Waiting with Joy

When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear!" (Luke 1:41-42)

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Advent is the season of joyous anticipation. It's a time of waiting and preparing that's best summed up in that old, familiar hymn *O Come, O Come Emmanuel*. In that Emmanuel is a Hebrew word meaning "God with us," Advent is a time we set aside to prepare and wait for the arrival of God in our midst.

But, as any kid knows, waiting is hard and waiting for Christmas is the hardest kind of waiting. That's why I find the meeting of these two women so incredibly moving. Elizabeth and Mary came together and enabled each other to endure the waiting. Mary's visit made Elizabeth aware of what she was waiting for. The child leapt for joy in her. Mary affirmed Elizabeth's waiting. In turn, Elizabeth affirmed Mary's overwhelming anticipation saying, "Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her" (Luke 1:45). And Mary responded, "My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior" (Luke 1:46-47). By being together these two blessed women affirmed for each other that something was happening—that God was doing something—that was worth waiting for.

*Lord, fill me with your Spirit as I await the celebration of Emmanuel. AMEN.*