



# “Rejoice With All Your Heart”

Advent 2015

Devotional Guide

Southside Baptist Church



# Rejoice With All Your Heart    Advent 2015

## **Week 1 of Advent**

Sunday, November 29, 2015

1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

In 2007, over one hundred Muslim scholars issued a letter to Christians called the Common Word. It was a document that spoke of the things that Christians and Muslims held in common and which be the basis of dialogue and discussions. They identified the two commands of loving God and loving our neighbor as lying at heart of both faiths.

When Paul wrote to the church in Thessalonica in one the earliest of his letters, he encourages the congregation to grow in their understanding of both their love for God and the expression of their love for one another. Paul talks about increasing and abounding in love for each other.

The prayer is simple, sincere but quite splendid. As we live in a hard, cold, callous and brutal world at this time of Advent we can make a significant contribution in people's lives. Christian love, when it is a mature and deep is a rare commodity. When it is displayed, it speaks volumes to a society that gorges itself in self-interest and selfish ambitions.

Paul's prayer is for love, not sentiment, not liking, not desire but true love. He is thinking of that agape love which means the outgoing of the whole personality in sacrificial service. God's love is like that. It is the supreme mark of discipleship. It is the clinching evidence that our Christian profession is real. It is the benchmark of belonging to the community of Christ.

Paul prays for an enlargement and enrichment of this love in our lives. Perhaps he is thinking of a river, filling up and bursting its banks and flooding the meadows alongside. He longs to see love in our lives which will reach out to others. The example of love is dramatic because Paul holds up his own life as being filled with love for them. Most of us would have felt that safer grounds for an example concerning love would have been that of Christ, but Paul says, 'just as we abound in love for you.'

The fellowship of God's people presents us with both the greatest opportunity to attain spiritual maturity, and also the greatest test of it. Any local fellowship will comprise the same irritating mix of saint and sinner, the zealous and the half-hearted, the radiantly good and the anonymously ordinary. The church is a community consisting of people at different stages of their pilgrimage and as part of the church we are called by Jesus to live our lives within the cruciform pattern of relationships as his disciples. Like the cross itself, reaching into heaven and embracing the world, we live in a vertical and horizontal pattern of relationships, with God and with one another. As those whose lives have been overwhelmed with the love of God we cannot live with indifference to the needs of others, even those who disappoint us and hurt us.

Ken Roxburgh

# Rejoice With All Your Heart Advent 2015

Monday, November 30, 2015

*Luke 21:5-6 When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, he said, "As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down."*

Southside Baptist Church is beautiful. Our church is adorned with beautiful windows, a beautiful sanctuary and so many other attributes that we love. And yet, our church, no matter how much we love it, is just a building. It is just a building made of bricks and stones and glass; just a building made by human hands; just a building subject to decay and destruction. It is just a building.

It is just a building that can't speak; just a building that can't cry; just a building that can't care. Southside Baptist Church is just a building that can't lead people to Christ; just a building that can't feed the hungry; just a building that can't even open its own doors to people who long to know our Lord and Savior.

Southside Baptist Church is just a building; just a building that can do nothing for itself. That is up to us, the members of this church. If our church's doors are going to be opened, we have to open them. If our church is going to lead people to Christ; we have to show the way. If our church is going to feed the hungry, we have to share the meal.

Not only are we the hands and feet of Christ, but we are also the hands and feet of Southside. People look at us to see the church, to see Christ. They look at how we treat each other; how forgiving we are; how loving we are; how caring we are; how we solve problems; how we react in defeat; and how we react in victory. They look to us not only to see if they want to be a part of our church but also to see if they want to be a part of Christ.

Southside Baptist Church is just a building. We are the heart and soul and mind of this building, and we have a song to sing, joy to share and a story to tell. Our building can't do that. It is up to us.

**Dear Lord, Thank you for our church, for allowing us to have this space to worship. But, more importantly, thank you for each person who makes up our church; for their value and worth not only to you, but to each of us. In Christ's Name, Amen.**

Marilyn Shepard

# Rejoice With All Your Heart Advent 2015

Tuesday, December 1, 2015

*Psalm 4:6-8 6 Many, LORD, are asking, "Who will bring us prosperity?" Let the light of your face shine on us. 7 Fill my heart with joy when their grain and new wine abound. 8 In peace I will lie down and sleep, for you alone, LORD, make me dwell in safety.*

Why is everyone hungry for more? "More, more," they say "More, more." I have God's more-than-enough. More joy in one ordinary day than they get in all their shopping sprees. At day's end I'm ready for sound sleep, For you, GOD, have put my life back together. Psalm 4:6-8 (The Message)

The holiday season is a time of joy, love and wonder. But, it may also be a stressful time. We may cook and clean and schedule too many social activities. And even church activities and visiting friends and family can add to the stress. We try to find the perfect gift for everyone on our list. And we may have to shop in multiple stores for whatever is the "must have" toy of the year. Being able to shop on-line may relieve some of the stress, but it is so easy to end up spending more on gifts than we can afford. And that may lead to stress in the new year as well. Often the gifts don't seem to create the level of joy & excitement that we envisioned...for the giver and/or the receiver. The Psalmist reminds us that God can satisfy this hunger for more and more. In fact, he gives us more than enough. An ordinary day can be filled with more joy than the best day of the Christmas season.

When things are broken in our lives, we long to have them put back together. The brokenness is often a broken relationship. It may have resulted from mean-spirited things we have said or done. Or it may be simply a misunderstanding or a lack of communication. The holidays are a wonderful time to make a visit, write a note or call someone you haven't contacted in a long time. Maybe our broken and discouraged spirit is associated with mistakes we have made. Often the hardest person to forgive is oneself. The broken life may be your life, or it may be the life of someone important to you. But the good news of Christmas is that it can be put back together & be made whole again. And as a result we can sleep soundly. If you've ever had difficulty sleeping, you know the joy associated with a refreshing night of sound sleep. Maybe there's a reason "The Night Before Christmas" ends with the phrase "and to all a good night"!

I hope your Christmas is full of joy...that you are able to rejoice with your whole heart. But more importantly I hope all of your ordinary days are full of "God's more than enough" and a good night's sleep as well!

**Dear Lord, All that we have and all that we are is your gift to us. Help us to know that your gift is more than enough. Amen.**

Darlene Green

# Rejoice With All Your Heart Advent 2015

Wednesday, December 2, 2015

*Psalm 11:1a, 3, 4, 7: In the Lord I take refuge....When the foundations are being destroyed, what can the righteous do? ... The Lord is in his holy temple; the Lord is on his heavenly throne. He observes everyone on earth; his eyes examine them.....For the Lord is righteous, the upright will see his face.*

Doubt and fear are emotions or feelings that often go hand in hand when we humans encounter a difficult period in our lives. If we do not come to grips with these feelings, they can cripple our ability to function and cause us to lose hope and heart, and for Christians, our faith and trust in God.

Some 15 or 16 years ago, I found myself at the lowest point emotionally in my life. My mother was in a nursing home with severe dementia, and my brother Tom was battling renal cell cancer which had spread to other parts of his body. To further add to my frustration, situations at school with increased work demands, were especially trying. I had always prided myself in the fact that I could deal or control most any situation or problem that arose in my life. I was able to hide my depression and doubt from friends and colleagues because of daily routine and structure.

Summer of that year arrived, however, and I was forced to confront my problems the entire day long. I began to have doubts about my faith and feared that I would not be able to go on. I wanted to find some avenue of escape. Somehow I managed to defeat these thoughts briefly on some days and pray for help and assurance. One day I became so despondent that I said, "God, "I guess you have no answer for me."

I was at the point of getting in my car and just driving when there was a knock at my door. I opened it to the smiling face of my sister, Cindy, who said that she wondered if she could spend some time with me. Soon to follow in the weeks ahead, my other siblings called or spent quality time with me. I thanked God for the answer that I had not been patient for and doubted would come. I vowed to become involved in a church again and eventually found Southside.

David addresses such a time in his life when he encountered either a real army or unbelievers who wanted to destroy him as a righteous man. He asks those fearful doubters why they would tell him to run away when he David takes refuge in the Lord. He reminds them that when the righteous feel besieged, God is there in heaven watching out for them. This is a promise that I forgot in all my despair. David closes his psalter with the assurance to them and to Christians through the ages that the upright will see his face. Such a promise should make us believers rejoice with all our hearts.

**Heavenly Father, May our hearts always be glad in our faith and remember that you are always on your throne observing us. May we remember that in times of trouble we can take refuge in your love and care.**

**Amen**

Paul Huie

# Rejoice With All Your Heart Advent 2015

Thursday, December 3, 2015

*Matthew 31:28-32 28 "What do you think? There was a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work today in the vineyard.' 29 "I will not," he answered, but later he changed his mind and went. 30 "Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, 'I will, sir,' but he did not go. 31 "Which of the two did what his father wanted?" "The first," they answered. Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. 32 For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him.*

Jesus' parable in Matthew 31, of the two sons; one who says, yes I will, but does not and the other who says, no I won't, then ultimately does; makes a powerful statement and provides a strong lesson for each of us as children of God.

Do you know someone who makes promises and then nearly always breaks them? My brother and I had a friend who developed a strong habit of never keeping his promises. He repeatedly would invite one or both of us to lunch or dinner, and never show up. He would call and say he was on his way to our home and never come. We challenged him over and over, but he seemed oblivious to the fact that he even had a problem. We finally had to drift away from him, as the problem grew worse.

You more than likely also know someone who is much like the other brother, of whom you are sure will keep any promise he or she makes to you, These are the people we cherish and want to spend time with. Remember, especially at this Advent Season, to express your gratitude to those friends and relatives who are reliable forces in your life. Tell someone today, just how much they mean to you and why.

Ask yourself, do you say, yeah, yeah, sure I'll do whatever God wants of me; then do not follow it up with your actions? This can be a real dilemma for most righteous people. Both sons had the same father, just as all of us have the same Heavenly Father; yet there is a vast difference between the characters of the two brothers just as there undoubtedly is between every one of us.

The one brother's refusal was rude, but his repenting nature and later response put him on the correct path; so we can follow his example in our own relationship with God. Celebrate your own divine connection with the Heavenly Father at this beautiful season, as we remember his wonderful gift to us.

**Our Heavenly Father, help each of us to be more like the son who obeyed his father's request. May we be ever mindful that keeping our word to you and others is essential to being a true follower of Christ. Amen**

Jerry Huie

# Rejoice With All Your Heart    Advent 2015

Friday, December 4, 2015

*“You, O Lord, keep my lamp burning; my God turns my darkness into light.” – Psalm 18: 28*

*“In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.” – John 1: 3-5*

With every horrific event through which human life is lost, I am amazed in the sacrificial, compassion that individuals demonstrate. Humanity never ceases to amaze me, yet I wonder how it would be to so readily to forgive when such injustices affect us individually. Is it not easy to let the darkness of fear, hate, and revenge dominate our hearts and minds?

During the Paris attacks, [Antoine Leiris](#)\* lost his wife leaving him to care for their 17-month old son. How do you explain to a child that his mother won't be coming home? How do you explain something that you yourself don't fully understand or want to admit exists around us? More remarkable to me is Mr. Leiris' letter penned to his wife's killers. In it he states...

“Friday night, you took an exceptional life — the love of my life, the mother of my son — but you will not have my hatred. I don't know who you are and I don't want to know, you are dead souls. If this God, for whom you kill blindly, made us in his image, every bullet in the body of my wife would have been one more wound in his heart.

“So, no, I will not grant you the gift of my hatred. You're asking for it, but responding to hatred with anger is falling victim to the same ignorance that has made you what you are. You want me to be scared, to view my countrymen with mistrust, to sacrifice my liberty for my security. You lost.”

“You will not have my hatred...” I am moved. I would want to hate someone who killed Chris, my partner for nearly 20 years. Wouldn't you? Wouldn't it be easy to let dark pain to consume us when it just seems so unfair? To lose something so precious through something so meaningless. Through the pinhole of our pain comes the light. It penetrates slowly pushing back the darkness, warming our hearts to the presence of a living, loving God. Darkness does not understand the light and those that desire to live and create darkness fear the light. The light transforms the world moving us from fear and revenge toward hope. The light shall not be defeated.

**God of light, warm us in the light of your presence. Enlighten our whole being ridding our hearts and minds of the darkness that fertilizes the fear and hate within this world. May your light shine through us offering hope to this darkened world. Amen**

Rusty Bennett

\*[www.inquisitr.com/2581681/antoine-leiris-widower-of-paris-attack-victim-pens-defiant-open-letter-to-isis-i-will-not-grant-you-the-gift-of-my-hatred/#cpy0mojc6cFMpqx99](http://www.inquisitr.com/2581681/antoine-leiris-widower-of-paris-attack-victim-pens-defiant-open-letter-to-isis-i-will-not-grant-you-the-gift-of-my-hatred/#cpy0mojc6cFMpqx99)

# Rejoice With All Your Heart Advent 2015

Saturday, December 5, 2015

*Psalm 16 Preserve me, O God: for in thee do I put my trust. 2 O my soul, thou hast said unto the LORD, Thou art my Lord: my goodness extendeth not to thee; 3 But to the saints that are in the earth, and to the excellent, in whom is all my delight. 4 Their sorrows shall be multiplied that hasten after another god: their drink offerings of blood will I not offer, nor take up their names into my lips. 5 The LORD is the portion of mine inheritance and of my cup: thou maintainest my lot. 6 The lines are fallen unto me in pleasant places; yea, I have a goodly heritage. 7 I will bless the LORD, who hath given me counsel: my reins also instruct me in the night seasons. 8 I have set the LORD always before me: because he is at my right hand, I shall not be moved. 9 Therefore my heart is glad, and my glory rejoiceth: my flesh also shall rest in hope. 10 For thou wilt not leave my soul in hell; neither wilt thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption. 11 Thou wilt shew me the path of life: in thy presence is fulness of joy; at thy right hand there are pleasures for evermore.*

When you read the word ‘rejoice’, what does it mean to you? Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary defines it as: ‘To feel or show that you are very happy about something’. I’d like us to dig a bit further and consider the word’s origin: from the Old French ‘re’ (expressing intensive force) + ‘joir’ (experiencing joy, to be glad)... so, we might say, “an intense feeling of joy”.

Joy is present in the Christmas Season: we find it in the carols we sing, on our greeting cards, and often as part of our holiday décor. The Psalmist in Chapter 16 says, ‘Therefore my heart is glad, and my glory rejoiceth’(v9)...’in thy presence is fullness of joy’(v11). Of course, as Christians, we believe that the cause for our rejoicing and the source of our joy is the birth of our Savior...the Redeemer...the Christ-child. Chapter 17 confirms our certainty of this salvation, ‘As for me, I will behold thy face in righteousness; I shall be satisfied, when I awake, with thy likeness’(v15). Chapter 22 affirms the redemptive transformation, ‘For he hath not despised nor abhorred the affliction of the afflicted; neither hath he hid his face from him; but when he cried unto him he heard’ (v24).

How wonderful to have these assurances, to know that we are saved, that we are redeemed.

This is certainly cause for “an intense feeling of joy”.

Our joy is ‘from HIM’, ‘for HIM’, ‘due HIM’, and only ‘by HIM’.

**Father, “Help us to recall your goodness, to rejoice in our salvation, and to find peace in the knowledge that Christmas is both birth of our hope and fulfillment of your promise. Amen”.**

Steve Dellinger

# Rejoice With All Your Heart    Advent 2015

## Week 2 of Advent

Sunday, December 6, 2015

*Philippians 1: 3-11 I thank my God every time I remember you, 4 constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, 5 because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. 6 I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. 7 It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart,\* for all of you share in God's grace\*with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. 8 For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus. 9 And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight 10 to help you to determine what is best, so that on the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, 11 having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.*

During the Christmas season, it is natural to think of our families and friends. We remember the stories from Christmas' past, even as we anticipate the joy that is to come this year. Paul's words in his letter to the Philippians remind us of the importance of family.

Like Paul, we have those individuals who have touched our lives in a special way, whom we thank God for every time we remember. Like Paul, we long to be with those whom we love. And like Paul, we embrace that sacred bond of Christian fellowship.

But it is interesting that Paul's thoughts drift towards the work of Christ. While he remembers his family, he celebrates their sharing in the gospel. He reminds them that the work that Christ has begun will continue until its completion. And when he prays for his family, Paul prays that the love and knowledge of Christ would continue to flourish in their hearts and minds. After all, it is Christ who has called them together, and it is evident from Paul's rhetoric that the family to whom he is writing is anchored in the Son of God.

At Southside, we have a very special family of faith, and this Christmas we have the opportunity to share in the joy of the season with our family. We are old and young, rich and poor, from different parts of town with different stories and different life experiences. And yet we are a family, not through any efforts of our own, but because Christ continues to call those who love Him into fellowship with one another.

**Dear Jesus, we thank you this Christmas for our family of faith. Like Paul, we remember those whom we call family and long to be in their presence during this season. And as we fellowship with our diverse family of faith, remind us that it is you who brings us together. The unity that we have found in you makes us family, and we pray that you would continue your work in our midst this Christmas season. Amen.**

Kris Roberts

# Rejoice With All Your Heart    Advent 2015

Monday, December 7, 2015

Psalm 114-115 tells us how the Lord is in control. How even the seas and mountain will move at his command. It tells us to trust in the Lord! He is in command of all. A year ago this Thanksgiving, my family's life changed forever. My dad was diagnosed with a brain tumor and our family has been put to the test. How much do we believe we are in control? Can we truly hand our father to the Lord? Can we let God move mountains and trust His judgment. So many of us have had times of pain, sickness, and sadness. Too many of us have tried to take the control from God. This Christmas, I will choose to be grateful for a Savior who takes the power and moves mountains. My dad's illness is still here, but he is a man of God who has shown our family what trust in the Lord truly looks like. Trust in the Lord is going to be happy, kissing your grandchildren, children, wife each and every day, saying "I love you!" knowing that it could be your last and giving all the worry to God.

**Dear Lord, May we use this Advent season to search for your love and truth. May we strive each day to trust in you, to watch you move mountains and seas. May we look for the love and peace that you surround us with in the small daily moments of life. Thank you for our Church, our family, and for loving us through all of the good and bad. May God bless you all this Christmas, Amen.**

Lura Huddleston

# Rejoice With All Your Heart Advent 2015

Tuesday, December 8, 2015

*Psalm 9:1 "I'm thanking you, God, from a full heart, I'm writing the book on your wonders. I'm whistling, laughing, and jumping for joy; I'm singing your song, High God."*

A recent Sunday School lesson talked of the various translations and paraphrases of the Bible over the years, and it got me to wondering, what would The Message tell me about my favorite book of the Bible, Psalms.

When I got the Bible passages to write my devotional on, guess what, I actually had two Psalms. This was going to be easy – but, I found I wanted to share portions of both with you. They sound so unlike what I read and memorized growing up (KJV) and so different from the Bible I normally read now (NIV). They sound so alive and simple to follow.

*Psalm 9:1 "I'm thanking you, God, from a full heart, I'm writing the book on your wonders. I'm whistling, laughing, and jumping for joy; I'm singing your song, High God."*

How joyful. The past year and a half have been stressful for us at Southside and especially for the deacons as we tried to decide how to proceed as a church, if we were even going to. Now we can whistle and laugh and sing. I'm a little too old to jump for joy. We have a plan for going forward as a family of faith. It is a time to REJOICE.

*Psalm 15:1-5 "God, who gets invited to dinner at your place? How do we get on your guest list? Walk straight, act right, tell the truth. Don't hurt your friend, don't blame your neighbor; despise the despicable. Keep your word even when it costs you, make an honest living, never take a bribe. You'll never get blacklisted if you live like this."*

The other Psalm tells me how not to be "blacklisted" – a very modern term that all can understand. It tells me how to be a better Christian. The New Testament isn't the only place that tells us how to behave. Look at Psalms. Walk straight, act right, tell the truth. Very simple ideas but things we need to be reminded of in our everyday walk with the Lord.

**Father, may we be reminded that we need to rejoice in this world that you have created and rejoice with our "family" as we live our lives daily in service to you.**

Brenda Tidwell

# Rejoice With All Your Heart    Advent 2015

Wednesday, December 9, 2015

*Matthew 22:34-36 "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the law?" And he said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it. You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the laws and the Prophets."*

Rejoice, for God has made it so simple for us! The law is to love God and love your neighbors. It's as easy as that! How blessed we are to have a God who only wants us to love him, love one another and follow his commandments.

At this time of year, as we begin to reflect and rejoice in the birth of Jesus Christ, let us think about our fulfillment of these commandments. Is God proud of how well we are following them, or are we falling short? Let us rejoice with all our heart, soul and minds and spread God's love through ourselves to all those around us. May we start the new year trying to follow all the commandments and especially the two that the law and Prophets depend on. And if we fall short, let us rejoice with all our hearts that God forgives and offers an abundance of grace to all that sit at his table.

**God, let us rejoice in your love for us. May you rejoice in our love for you. Help us to follow your laws and open our hearts to our neighbors. Open our eyes to see all sins are equal in your eyes. Be with us and show us the way. Amen**

Cathy Coker

# Rejoice With All Your Heart Advent 2015

Thursday, December 10, 2015

*Rev 2:8-17 8 "To the angel of the church in Smyrna write: These are the words of him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again. 9 I know your afflictions and your poverty—yet you are rich! I know about the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. 10 Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you life as your victor's crown. 11 Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who is victorious will not be hurt at all by the second death. 12 "To the angel of the church in Pergamum write: These are the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword. 13 I know where you live—where Satan has his throne. Yet you remain true to my name. You did not renounce your faith in me, not even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city—where Satan lives. 14 Nevertheless, I have a few things against you: There are some among you who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin so that they ate food sacrificed to idols and committed sexual immorality. 15 Likewise, you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. 16 Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth. 17 Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who is victorious, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give that person a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to the one who receives it.*

As I read this text about suffering, hard times, trials of life, I couldn't help but think about my aunt and uncle. The past two years have been very difficult for them with 2 daughters and a daughter-in-law being diagnosed with cancer. Yet, they have remained faithful.

They continue to trust God with everything. This isn't something that is new to them. They have always had some type of suffering, but yet they do not fear the future because of their faith.

I can only strive to be more like them. As the scripture says, "Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life." God knows what we all go through each and every day and He always provides.

Life can be a struggle for all of us at times, but we need to try and remember, God has this. He keeps His promises, so let us "Rejoice with All of our Hearts."

**Dear God, let us rejoice with all of our hearts each and every day. Let us be glad and thankful for all the things we have and also for the things we don't have. During this Advent season, let us remember that all of this comes from You. Let us remember, the best gift of all was your son, Jesus. Amen**

Cindy Tipton

# Rejoice With All Your Heart Advent 2015

Friday, December 11, 2015

*Matthew 24:12-14* 12 *Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold, 13 but the one who stands firm to the end will be saved. 14 And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.*

I am, from time to time, compelled to ponder on the condition of this world. Christmas trees must now be termed “holiday trees.” Young people whine about something called “micro-aggression.” Some peoples of the Middle East and elsewhere seem bent on the obliteration of the United States, Europe, and other nations. They have worked their evil with destruction of the World Trade Center towers; they have bombed trains in Madrid and London. More recently, they have beheaded Christians; they have claimed destruction of a commercial Russian airliner; they have maliciously killed citizens of Paris; they have publicly threatened New York, Washington, and Atlanta.

I am tempted to feel like the speaker of Psalm 35 as he calls on God to curse his enemies. “Let ruin come on them unawares. / And let the net that they hid ensnare them; / let them fall in it—to their ruin (Ps 35:8).” Then, he says, “I’ll be happy.” “Then my soul shall rejoice in the Lord, / exulting in his deliverance. / All my bones shall say, / ‘O Lord, who is like you?’” (35: 9-10).

How am I, as a practicing Christian, to feel and respond to my musings? I am uncertain, but the Savior tells me.

He tells me that in spite of all that will come about, I must cling to the commands he has given his followers. “...because of the increase of lawlessness, the love of many will grow cold. But the one who endures to the end will be saved. And this good news of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the world, as a testimony to all the nations; and then the end will come” (Matt. 24:12-14). Is that not the promise of the advent season celebrating the birth of salvation? Love and endure in loving. God loves me, gave his son as a measure of his love, and I must endure in loving all others.

**Oh, Creator God, empower me to love more fully than I now love, may I endure through the love of the Savior for me. Amen**

Warren Kinney

# Rejoice With All Your Heart Advent 2015

Saturday, December 12, 2015

*Psalm 42-43 "Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God."*

Psalm 42 is a fairly well-known passage. A popular praise song pulls its lyrics for the first portion. Psalm 43 is probably less known. Both end with the same verse, "*Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God.*" In both passages the writer is conveying a time of hardship in which an unfaithful nation surrounds the writer asking where God is. The writer tries to remember God's presence in times past. In the dialogue of the passage the writer seeks for God to provide light, to vindicate and rescue, that God may be praised.

Recently I was working with some Korean Baptists who are struggling to find hope and direction. My father spoke to them of Moses and the moment when he was, much like the writer of Psalm 42 and 43, trying to see God. (See Exodus 33:12-23) God placed Moses in the cleft of the rock and placed his hand over Moses when he passed. Only after God had passed Moses could He remove His hand and allow Moses to see His character. The writer is down and seeking God, and it is as if they cannot see. This is the moment to rejoice. For soon, God will remove His hand. We will see His character.

It is quite simple to ask someone to rejoice in the dark times, it is quite a different task to do it yourself. I have found that if I can't rejoice, that if I pretend to rejoice, it is a great place to start. That pretending can soon turn to true rejoicing. After all, God's hand is on us, or we are about to see his character. Either way, we are His and He is ours.

Rejoice, whether you are down or happy. Rejoice, whether you are hurting or free. Rejoice, whether you want to or not. Rejoice, because a loving God has you. Celebrate this Advent with rejoicing from the hard cleft of the rock, because that is where God has placed us.

**Father, Thank you for your hand on us to protect us. Help us to take the time this Advent season to rejoice in your character. Help us rejoice when we are stuck in hard places, by reminding us that your hand is upon us. May our rejoicing be contagious and our presence in this world light the community around us. We are yours and are thankful for your love. In all things we seek to give thanks. – Amen.**

Chris Fisher

# Rejoice With All Your Heart    Advent 2015

## **Week 3 of Advent**

Sunday, December 13, 2015

*Zephaniah 3:14-20 Sing, Daughter Zion; shout aloud, Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, Daughter Jerusalem! The Lord has taken away your punishment, he has turned back your enemy. The Lord, the King of Israel, is with you; never again will you fear any harm.*

*Phillipians 4:4-7 4 Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! 5 Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. 6 Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. 7 And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*

A child alone in the dark may be overcome with fear. On the other hand, if a loving parent is present, the child may be oblivious to the darkness that surrounds her. The awareness of a loving, and protecting parent's presence can dispel even most debilitating fear. The emotional and spiritual darkness created by the fear of the unknown, the guilt of wrongs committed, or the dread of impending punishment can also be debilitating; however, we are reminded in the words of the prophet Zephaniah and the Apostle Paul that we have a heavenly parent that hears our cries of fear, guilt or dread and is ready to grant forgiveness and a peace that passes all understanding. Certainly a reason to rejoice with all our heart!

**Loving and Almighty God, you know the inmost thoughts of our mind and heart. Thank you for your loving presence and your promises of peace, wholeness and joy that prompt us to rejoice with all our heart. Amen.**

Tim Kelley

# Rejoice With All Your Heart Advent 2015

Monday, December 14, 2015

*Zechariah 1:7-17 7 On the twenty-fourth day of the eleventh month, the month Shebat, in the second year of Darius, the word of the Lord came to Zechariah, the son of Berechiah, the son of Iddo the prophet, saying, 8 I saw in the night a man on a red horse, between the mountains in the valley, and at his back were horses, red, black, white, and of mixed colours. 9 Then I said, O my lord, what are these? And the angel who was talking to me said to me, I will make clear to you what they are. 10 And the man who was between the mountains, answering me, said, These are those whom the Lord has sent to go up and down through the earth. 11 And the man who was between the mountains, answering, said to the angel of the Lord, We have gone up and down through the earth, and all the earth is quiet and at rest. 12 Then the angel of the Lord, answering, said, O Lord of armies, how long will it be before you have mercy on Jerusalem and on the towns of Judah against which your wrath has been burning for seventy years? 13 And the Lord gave an answer in good and comforting words to the angel who was talking to me. 14 And the angel who was talking to me said to me, Let your voice be loud and say, These are the words of the Lord of armies: I am greatly moved about the fate of Jerusalem and of Zion. 15 And I am very angry with the nations who are living untroubled: for when I was only a little angry, they made the evil worse. 16 So this is what the Lord has said: I have come back to Jerusalem with mercies; my house is to be put up in her, says the Lord of armies, and a line is to be stretched out over Jerusalem. 17 And again let your voice be loud and say, This is what the Lord of armies has said: My towns will again be overflowing with good things, and again the Lord will give comfort to Zion and take Jerusalem for himself.*

No time more than right now are we, globally, in a state of evil and armies and crises. These daily scenarios played out on the international stage are not much different, and certainly not geographically, from those crises many during those Biblical times faced. And what did God say even in those earliest of days? Have Hope! Things will get better; you will be rewarded. He does hear our cries of "Why?" and tells us to wait, to have faith, to have hope. It is that hope that burns Advent candle-like in the heart of Southside Baptist Church, of the Five Points community, of Christians around the world. Keep your Hope flame lit this season.

**Dear Lord, Fill us with Hope as we traverse these earthly days in anticipation of Your return. And help us also to have Faith and Hope in humankind as likewise we traverse this earth. Amen.**

Annah Lauren Kelley

# Rejoice With All Your Heart Advent 2015

Tuesday, December 15, 2015

*Matthew 24:32-35; 42-46* 32 "Now learn this lesson from the fig tree: As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near. 33 Even so, when you see all these things, you know that it is near, right at the door. 34 Truly I tell you, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. 35 Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away. 36 "But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. 42 "Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. 43 But understand this: If the owner of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house be broken into. 44 So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him. 45 "Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom the master has put in charge of the servants in his household to give them their food at the proper time? 46 It will be good for that servant whose master finds him doing so when he returns.

In the parable of the fig-tree, we are instructed to watch for and observe the signs of the time in its budding and blossoming, as a presage of a season and as the trees of the field know their appointed time and, thusly, to compare them, in order to foresee who is coming "at the door."

Hence, when God begins to fulfill a prophecy, God will bring it to completion. There is a sense of time in the works of providence, as there is in the works of nature. We foresee that summer is coming, not immediately, but at some distance; after the branch grows tender, we expect the order of time as the summer comes; however, we remain sure it is coming. "The things revealed must shortly come to pass." They must come in their own order, in the order appointed for them. Know that it is near." God does not say what, but it is that which the hearts of his disciples are upon, and which they are inquisitive after, and long for; "the kingdom of God is near". Likewise, when the trees of righteousness begin to bud and blossom, when God's people promise faithfulness, it is a joyous presage of good times. In them, God begins the work, first prepares their heart, and then, as for God, the work is perfect; and, faithfully, God will revive it in the midst of time. In God's time, which is the best time, and in God's way, which is the best way, it shall certainly be fulfilled.

With a solemn asseveration; "Verily, I say unto you;" it is to say, you may take my word for it, these things are at the door. Christ often speaks of the nearness of time, the more to affect people, and to quicken them to prepare for it. The uncertainty of the time of Christ's coming, is, to those who are watchful, a savior of life unto life, and makes them more watchful. To this end, we must expect these events that we may prepare for them.

It will be a surprising day as was the very first, as the posture of the world looked upon the coming of the Son of Man in his first coming, to save, for his second coming. Watch therefore, it is the great duty and interest of all disciples of Christ to watch, to be awake and keep awake, gracious and active. We must watch for our Lord's coming, the great day, with all humanity. To watch implies not only to believe that our Lord will come, but to desire that our Lord would come, to be often thinking of the coming, and always looking for it as sure and near, with the time of it uncertain. To watch for Christ's coming, is to maintain that gracious temper and disposition of mind which we should be willing that our Lord, when he comes, should find us. To watch is to be aware of the first notices of his approach, as soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, that we may immediately attend the blossoming of meeting him.

**Our God. In the midst of all glory experienced during this blessed season of anticipation of the coming of The Christ, may we proclaim the words "Rejoice With All Your Heart, Rejoice With All Our Heart!" We, indeed, have much to rejoice as we remain ever watchful for the events foretold. Thank You, OUR Christ, for Your faithfulness to fullness in season, for Your preparation of humanity's heart, for Your perfect plan and time. Amen.**

Dawn DuPree Kelley

# Rejoice With All Your Heart Advent 2015

Wednesday, December 16, 2015

## **Matthew 24:45-51**

As I read through the suggested texts in the context of our Advent theme of “Rejoice with All Your Might!” the words of Jesus as recorded in verses 45 & 46 of Matthew 24 jumped out at me – *Who then is the faithful and wise servant whom the master has put in charge of the servants in his household to give them food at the proper time? It will be good for that servant whose master finds him doing so when he returns.* My mind filled with memories of so many Southside Baptist Church members past and present who have fed the hungry both figuratively and literally in the name of Christ. As I have been blessed to be a part of this long and beautiful ministry for nearly two-thirds of its history, their names to me are legion.

It would take a long movie indeed to include even as bit players all of the faithful Ministers, Sunday School Teachers, Deacons, Tithers, Food Bank Workers, Committee Heads and Members, Workers, Greeters, and other Participants who have given their time, talent, prayers and energy on behalf of the ministry of our church. I can't help but think of my Dad who was a Life Deacon and who received a plaque in honor of his forty-five years of service as Sunday School Secretary.

My personal belief is each Christian's walk through life is a journey with the end goal of attaining the model exhibited by the life and teachings of Jesus. The goal is unattainable of course but the journey is life itself. I think it's fair to say that each church likewise is on a corporate journey with the same goal. Having been a witness to much of Southside's movement through history; I'm thankful for all those who've given and those who've received Christ's love in so many forms since our formation over one hundred twenty five years ago. I'm also proud of our progress over time as we've moved from the darkness of prejudice and exclusion into the light of appreciation and inclusion.

Southside has experienced serious challenges through the years of her existence – fires, economic depression, splits both minor and major, demographic upheaval, and financial difficulties. Yet here we are in Advent season of 2015 with a wonderful professional staff and dedicated members, welcoming all who come through our doors and feeding Good News and good food to the hungry.

The journey continues. Now that's something to “Rejoice with All Our Might” about.

**Father feed us with your love and grace as we move to be the church and people you want us to be.  
Amen.**

Phil Watts

# Rejoice With All Your Heart Advent 2015

Thursday, December 17, 2015

*At midnight the cry rang out: "The bridegroom cometh!" ...But while they were on their way to buy the oil, the bridegroom arrived. The virgins who were ready went in with him to the wedding banquet. Matt. 25: 6, 10*

Few events bring as much joy as weddings. The union, vows and hopes for the couple's future make you so happy that you want to cry tears of joy. For me, from the very beginning, when the bridegroom comes in, I get on-guard to hold back the tears. Being the big manly man that I am, I am slightly embarrassed when my cup overflows. Let's face it, few of us are immune from such tears of joy.

The last wedding I attended was that of my niece in Baltimore. Sooo beautiful! Not a dry eye anywhere. Our anticipation melted into joy, as we moved from the wedding to the reception banquet. (Don't tell my fundamentalist friends, but this Baptist deacon danced with joy.)

During the time of Christ, weddings were a big deal - most times lasting for days. When Christ told the parable of the Ten Virgins, his audience understood the necessity of greeting the bridegroom who oftentimes traveled great distances to attend the wedding and the feasts surrounding the occasion. Unpredictable modes of travel made it impossible to predict the time of arrival of the bridegroom, so those whose responsibility it was to greet him had to be wise enough to prepare for delay by bringing extra jars of oil, to light the way for the bridegroom.

Oil not only symbolizes light and warmth, but also happiness and well-being, as in "the oil of joy," (Ps. 61:3) or "the oil that ran down Aaron's beard," (Ps. 133:2) to describe how good and pleasant it was for brethren to dwell together in unity. Fortunately, we no longer have to shake down the olive tree for oil to light the way for the arrival of the Bridegroom; however, we still express our anticipation over the coming of the Bridegroom, Jesus Christ, by celebrating his birth each year with enough lights to make the Griswolds jealous. Our anticipation is at fever pitch. Our joy overflows.

This Christmas, as I light each strand of lights, I will reflect on the necessity of always letting my light shine to light the way for Jesus to come into my heart, my life, my world. I want to be ready when Jesus comes. He comes at such strange times and in such strange ways, that we hardly recognize him. Don't think bad of me if I leave my lights up year-round. After all, I'm lighting my way into the eternal wedding banquet with Christ, while rejoicing always.

**Merciful God, God of Peace,**

**During this time of social, cultural and religious upheaval, grant us wisdom. Prepare us to be instruments of your peace. Light the way for us to light the way for others who are hopeless, helpless and oppressed. But most of all, restore the overflowing joy we feel when we welcome the Prince of Peace, Your son Jesus Christ, into our hearts, not only during this Advent season, but daily. We rejoice and pray, in Christ's name. AMEN**

Henry Penick

# Rejoice With All Your Heart Advent 2015

Friday, December 18, 2015

*Matthew 25:25 So I was afraid and went and hid your talent in the ground. Here have what is yours.*

The Parable of the Talents is one I have heard all my life. It's one of those you hear and think that you know what it means so you stop listening to it. It's pretty simple really. Jesus gives you a talent, and you are supposed to do something with it. One servant got five talents, and one got two. I always compared myself to the servant with two talents and didn't think any more about it.

I read it again, and the reality of this parable jumped in my head. I'm not the first man or the second. I'm the third man. Remember him? Remember the one who was afraid and went and hid his talent in the ground?

How many times have I refused to use any talent God has given me? How many times have I been afraid to offer a kind word, a helping hand, or make a stand? Over and over again in my life, I have missed opportunities to use my talents to serve the Lord because I have been too afraid to try.

Fear is a powerful weapon in Satan's arsenal. He doesn't have to put much effort into using it. He just has to sow a few doubts here and there, and we do the rest by grabbing our own shovels and burying our talent.

But your talent is your particular gift from God, and it's meant to be used; not hidden. So grab your shovel and dig until you find your buried treasure and can put it to use to serve God, to serve your church, to serve your community.

**Father, I am sorry for all the times I have been too afraid to use the talents you have given me. Please forgive me, and grant me the courage to step out in faith and serve you. In Christ's Name, Amen.**

Marilyn Shepard

# Rejoice With All Your Heart    Advent 2015

Saturday, December 19, 2015

*Psalm 138: 6-8 Though the LORD is exalted, he looks kindly on the lowly; though lofty, he sees them from afar. 7 Though I walk in the midst of trouble, you preserve my life. You stretch out your hand against the anger of my foes; with your right hand you save me. 8 The LORD will vindicate me; your love, LORD, endures forever—do not abandon the works of your hands.*

The theme of these two Psalms is that God never leaves us. He is ever faithful. His presence is not dependent on us; what we do or do not do. I can recall times in my life that I felt alone and lost. I was in a dark and depressing place. Yet, the Psalmist tells us, the Lord looks kindly on the lowly. He sees them from afar. He preserves our life. This truth took me to the other side of grace then and now.

God is not only every present, but he knows us intimately. He is not a distant God. Flaws and all, God knows us intimately. He created us in our mother's womb. We are his individual children. This promise is tough to grasp. How can it be that God loves me in spite of me? Yet, he does and shows that love daily.

In this advent season, we can know with confidence God is with us. He loves us and will forever keep us in his loving care. My prayer is that though we struggle and wander, yet God, our Father will and does preserve us.

**Dear Father: Thank you for your continuing, ever present love. Thank you that you love me in spite of me. In Christ's Name, Amen.**

Jeff Prince

# Rejoice With All Your Heart    Advent 2015

## Week 4 of Advent

Sunday, December 20, 2015

The stories that Luke (Luke 1.39-55) uses to tell us about the coming of Christ at Christmas don't focus attention directly upon him, but are rather stories about the people whose lives he changed in remarkable ways – people like Joseph, Elizabeth, Simeon and Mary, the mother of our Lord. Mary is one of the most remarkable of these people. Just a teenager, brought up in a devout Jewish home, waiting in the midst of all the troubles and trials of daily life for the intervention of God, but never thinking for a moment that she might be God's instrument of that deliverance.

Mary came face to face with the God of new possibilities. The angel called Gabriel visited her and brought a message from God '*greetings, you are highly favoured. The Lord is with you*'. Her initial response was one of perplexity. She would soon discover that an unwanted pregnancy, when you're engaged to be married is bad news to a young sixteen year-old. She encountered ridicule, loneliness and pain.

Thirteen years later she would be looking for her son in the middle of Jerusalem during a Jewish festival – mad with worry – eventually, almost shouting at Jesus *son we sought you sorrowing*. She could have said that her whole experience of life had been full of sorrow. Yes, she was greatly troubled. Being blessed by God can turn your life inside out and upside down. Her willingness to face an uncertain future would be the means that God would use to bring his salvation to the world.

As Mary faced the dilemma of doubt, never fully understanding the meaning of the Angel's message at that moment in her life, we read that she submitted her life to God's will, 'let it be with me according to your word.'

When she visits her cousin Elizabeth, she joins with her in an expression of worship and praise. She reflects on the strange ways that God works – counter to the expectations of the world – the proud and the powerful, ignored and the lowly, the humble, the poor and hungry are favored, filled with good things and lifted up to positions of importance in God's kingdom.

Counter to most people's understanding, it is not true that God prefers to help those who help themselves. Such a view of religion, which is far too prevalent fails to understand the most basic message of Christmas: that without the Incarnation of Jesus there is no hope of being forgiven and no hope of eternal life.

God's way up is to go down – to humble oneself – to sense our inadequacy and to cry out to God for his help. For when we come to the absolute end of ourselves – the strange work of God's grace comes in. When we come to that point when we confess our human inability – then and only then – God is able to help us. When we are empty of self, then God comes and fills us with good things. He gives us his love, mercy, kindness, forgiveness and offers us a new start, a fresh beginning.

No wonder Mary rejoiced in God. The message of the angel filled her hearts with thanksgiving. Not only would she discover, in the birth, life and death of her son, her own salvation but she would be forever remembered as one who willingly offered her life in the service of God.

Kenneth Roxburgh

# Rejoice With All Your Heart Advent 2015

Monday, December 21, 2015

*Zephaniah 3:14-20* 14 Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem! 15 The Lord has taken away the judgments against you, he has turned away your enemies. The king of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst; you shall fear disaster no more. 16 On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem: Do not fear, O Zion; do not let your hands grow weak. 17 The Lord, your God, is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory; he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing 18 as on a day of festival. I will remove disaster from you, so that you will not bear reproach for it. 19 I will deal with all your oppressors at that time. And I will save the lame and gather the outcast, and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth. 20 At that time I will bring you home, at the time when I gather you; for I will make you renowned and praised among all the peoples of the earth, when I restore your fortunes before your eyes, says the Lord.

I've been singing since I was just a little boy. In fact, paraphrasing the Quaker hymn, my life has gone on in endless song. Not just because I am a professional musician, but because all of our lives are like a song that we sing, day to day, with many verses, both joyful and sorrowful, but always a part of our daily experience.

When we think of singing actual songs to the God of our faith, there seems seldom any middle ground. That is, I don't know too many faith songs that celebrate the medium, ordinary, or perhaps, average times of our lives. We generally sing songs of lamentation or joyful celebration. Zephaniah 3 celebrates the Lord our God "in your midst." "He will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing."

I take that statement as an affirmation of God's exalting even our mundane times and activities with a joyful song. So also, the lamentation songs of our times of sorrow can be transforming, a release from the pain, moving toward the joy of God's love and care.

Even in the most ordinary events, the assurance of God's grace "sings" through our lives, in the actions of kindness and courage, tolerance and understanding, love for others and service to our brethren.

*"My life goes on in endless song above earth's lamentation;  
I hear the real, though far-off hymn that hails a new creation.  
Through all the tumult and the strife I hear its music ringing,  
It sounds an echo in my soul. How can I keep from singing?"*

**God of our living days, may we sing notes high and low for your glory; may our lives be songs of love, peace, joy, and service in Your Name. In the joys and in the sorrows, may our songs be lifted as examples of your daily grace in our lives. Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, both now and evermore. Amen.**

Timothy Paul Banks

# Rejoice With All Your Heart Advent 2015

Tuesday, December 22, 2015

*2 Peter 2:1-10 Therefore, rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander of every kind. 2 Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, 3 now that you have tasted that the Lord is good. 4 As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him— 5 you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. 6 For in Scripture it says: “See, I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious cornerstone, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame.” 7 Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe, “The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone,”<sup>8</sup> and, “A stone that causes people to stumble and a rock that makes them fall.” They stumble because they disobey the message—which is also what they were destined for. 9 But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. 10 Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.*

As a kid, I was raised to go to Sunday School and Church Services on Sunday. But I remember around the age of eleven, my friends and I waited for our Moms to come to the Sanctuary so we could leave Church and go to the store not too far away to smoke cigarettes. At the time, I didn’t really understand religion or God, but I had made my mind up that I wanted to appear to be cool and was willing to pay any price to seem that way to my peers. For that thought, I just about paid with my life.

Several times during my journey of hope I became involved in the Church. But during any of these did I allow myself to TRUST GOD. How could I trust God when I couldn’t even trust myself?

The first Sunday I attended Southside Baptist Church I was greeted with a welcome so sincere that I felt threatened. In my mind, I thought how could this church could be so loving and trusting. So I decided to hang around to give them time to mess up. It has been somewhere around five years now, and I still feel as I felt that first day I walked into Southside. I now have several areas of service that I perform thru the Church for God to which I do to the best of my ability.

**Thank you, God, for leading me down this road on my journey of hope. Amen.**

Cedric Williams

# Rejoice With All Your Heart Advent 2015

Wednesday, December 23, 2015

*Psalm 111: 2-4 "Great are the works of the Lord, they are pondered by all who delight in them. Glorious and majestic are his deeds, and righteousness endures forever. He has caused his wonder to be remembered, the Lord is gracious and compassionate."*

As I write this devotional, we are coming through weeks of terrorist attacks and continued threats. First the downing of a Russian airliner, then the attacks in Paris, and now concerns of where the next "target" will be? Berlin? Washington, D.C.? Hate and fear have the potential to become the mainstay of our existence, if we allow it.

As a frequent traveler to Washington D.C., I was particularly on edge this week. As I walked to Union Station to catch the Metro, I was surrounded by the scene of speeding police cruisers and scattering security personnel with semi-automatics surrounding the entrances. On edge, attentive to real potential of terror around them. With a knot in my stomach, I made haste through their ranks to the awaiting Metro train an escalator ride down. Anxiously, I waited for the arrival of my train, so I could leave; the sirens from the police cruisers still ringing in my ears. I wanted to be far away from any reminder that my world wasn't calm and safe. Waiting for the train to arrive, I knew I was okay, yet Chris' words of concern for me not to go to Washington, D.C., reminded me to be diligently aware of my surroundings. The edge of fear was present.

Fear of the unknown, real fear where innocent life is lost, and we are left wondering, "who is next?" isn't something I want in my life. I want to feel safe and secure. I wonder if this fear – fear of the unknown – drew the Psalmist to ponder the "great" works of God around him. I wonder if he desired to feel safe. Perhaps as we, like the Psalmist, reflect on "God moments" in our lives, we will we be comforted. We can face real fear that we feel and transform that fear to comfort by focusing on the presence of God in our lives. When did you feel the presence of God? Where was it? How did you know? I think the Psalmist as he penned the passage was seeking his own self-assurance of times that he felt God's presence. Times when God seemed to be present and times where life just seemed right. Reminding ourselves of these moments, helps to sustain us in the bad times, those times when we just wonder where God is.

You know, I do the same "self-talk" as the Psalmist every day. I try to remind myself of where I felt God closest to me. Perhaps a scripture verse, a particularly friendly interaction with a store clerk, or the peak of an early morning sunrise, these are all reminders to me that God is present. On that Metro platform, I reminded myself of these moments. They helped calm my fears, to rest briefly in an assurance I was safe in the loving arms of my Savior. God is indeed present. He is the Emmanuel "God with us" who exists even in the fearful, unsecure times of our lives. This Advent seek those God moments, and I pray, as you do, you will find yourself in the loving embrace of our Savior.

**Lord, we rejoice with all of our heart and being, remembering all of your great works. May these reminders drive away our fears, so we may rest, peacefully in the arms of your loving never-ending embrace Amen**

Rusty Bennett

# Rejoice With All Your Heart Advent 2015

Christmas Eve

Thursday, December 24, 2015

*Luke 2:1-14 In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. 2This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. 3All went to their own towns to be registered. 4Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. 5He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. 6While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. 7And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. 8 In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 10But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: 11to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah,\* the Lord. 12This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.' 13And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, 14 'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!'*

Some years ago my good friend Kate introduced me to a song titled, “[The Rebel Jesus](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PEC7d5jbAbo)” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PEC7d5jbAbo>). The opening verse seems to capture the sentiments that many of us share during the Christmas season. It concludes,

*They'll be gathering around the hearths and tales  
Giving thanks for all God's graces  
And the birth of the rebel Jesus.*

But as the song continues the words take a turn, and what once appeared as a light holiday anthem, becomes an indictment upon the Church. Verse two concludes,

*As they fill his churches with their pride and gold  
And their faith in Him increases  
But they've turned the nature that I worshipped in  
From a temple to a robber's den  
In the words of the rebel Jesus.*

When I first heard this song, I was astounded. “How dare he,” I thought to myself, “Here’s another cranky ole Scrooge trying to rain on my holiday parade!” But maybe I needed a little rain. Maybe I needed to be reminded that the birth of Jesus is about more than good tidings and Christmas Eve services. Maybe we all need to be reminded that the birth of the rebel Jesus was the start of a revolution.

# Rejoice With All Your Heart    Advent 2015

In the Gospel of Luke, we are told the story of Jesus' birth to Mary on the first Christmas. A census has taken Mary and Joseph away from their home in Nazareth, to the small town of Bethlehem where Jesus was to be born. The scene is not what one would expect for the Son of God, but outside the city, on a hillside where shepherds kept watch over their flocks, Luke tells us that choirs of angels were announcing that the King had arrived.

And that is where the work begins. That is where the work began for the shepherds and it is where the work must begin for us as well. As we journey towards the manger scene and gaze at the glory of God in our midst, let us be mindful that this birth changes everything. A rebel has been born; one who will turn the world upside down. The political powers will seek to kill him in his infancy, the religious leaders will seek to kill him in his adulthood, and those who are comfortable with the way things are will have nothing to do with a rebel who has been sent from God to announce a new kingdom – where the poor are made rich, the blind are made to see, the sick are made well, and the sinners are forgiven.

And so the question that we must ask ourselves this Christmas is, “Do we want to follow this rebel?” We can celebrate his birth. That part is easy. But are we willing to respond to that birth, to participate in the revolution that will ensue, and share the Kingdom of God with the world around us? Are we willing to share hope with the hopeless, faith with the faithless, and joy with the joyless? I don't believe that the rebel Jesus came into the world so that we could simply marvel at his birth. We may begin there, but if we are to truly consider ourselves transformed by the events of Christmas, then we must know that there is work to be done, and that following a rebel requires that we take part in the revolution.

*But please forgive me if I seem  
To take the tone of judgment  
For I've no wish to come between  
This day and your enjoyment  
In this life of hardship and of earthly toil  
We have need for anything that frees us  
So I bid you pleasure  
And I bid you cheer  
From a heathen and a pagan  
On the side of the rebel Jesus.*

Kris Roberts

# Rejoice With All Your Heart Advent 2015

Christmas Day

Friday, December 25, 2015

*Luke 2 : 8-15 8 And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. 9 An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 10 But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. 11 Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. 12 This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." 13 Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, 14 "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests." 15 When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about."*

Some of the most deeply spiritual moments occur when we least expect it. The shepherds described in the text above were going about their daily work just as you and I do day in and day out. We may not be living out in the fields as they did, but we do spend many hours on the job. We go about our daily routine performing all the tasks that our job encompasses and all of a sudden God surprises us with a great revelation. Our experiences may not alter human history as did the revelation made to the shepherds, but our experiences do alter our personal life trajectory if we listen and respond to what is being communicated. The shepherds were terrified when the angels appeared and the glory of the Lord shone around them, but their fears were calmed as the good news was shared with them. The appearance of the angels and their praises to God moved the shepherds to respond. They knew this message had come from God to them, and they were compelled to go and see this thing that had happened. On this Christmas Day as we celebrate God's revelation of himself in the person of Jesus, who came into this world in a most humble and vulnerable way, we are called to rejoice with the heavenly hosts, to celebrate the wonder of Immanuel, God With Us, and to go and see this thing that God is doing!

**Father, thank you for the glorious revelation of your love, mercy and grace revealed in infant baby, Jesus. This Christmas Day help me embrace the fullness of this revelation and help me express the wonderful joy I experience as I see you at work in the everyday activities in the world around me. Amen.**

Tim Kelley





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