

"Jesus is
Coming...
and I'm
Tired of
Waiting"

Advent Meditation Guide for Students

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Higher Education Ministries Arena

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Introduction

The season of Advent is when the church turns its attention to the coming of Christ. During this Advent season, as you read through these devotions, you are asked to read a passage from First or Second Thessalonians and the first two chapters of Luke. First and Second Thessalonians address the coming of Christ in glory and how believers should live in this waiting time. The first two chapters of Luke tell of Christ's coming as the babe in the manger. If you follow the readings, you will have read both First and Second Thessalonians entirely and some of Luke. If you do this for the next twenty-eight days, then just keep reading in Luke after Advent is finished. Then just keep reading your Bible everyday. It's the book of your faith. Get to know it. Each devotion provides a prayer suggestion to guide you in your prayers.

November 28

PASSAGE: FIRST THESSALONIANS 1:1-10

For the people of those regions report about us what kind of welcome we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead— Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming.

—1 Thessalonians 1:9-10

Lately, I seem to get impatient waiting in just about any line. I'll stop in for some fast food, but the help behind the counter is moving anything but fast. At the grocery store I inevitably choose the line where a price check needs to be made or the person in front of me is writing a check to the grocery store for the first time. I go to the coffee shop to have my mug filled and there are two or three people ahead of me ordering half-caf cappuccino. All I want is my mug filled with coffee. It seems that the guy standing behind the counter, taking forever with that machine that hisses and bubbles, is trying to get more air in the mug than coffee. I just want my mug filled. I try to go to my happy place, but *please* just give me some plain, hot coffee. So I wait and breathe. In and out. In and out.

Advent is upon us. It's the season of the church year when we practice our patience, waiting for the Lord Jesus Christ to come in glory, breaking into history, and renewing all of creation. Waiting for Christ is different than idly waiting in line. Waiting for Christ involves preparation, anticipation, and action. We prepare ourselves through study, prayer, and worship. We live our lives in joyous anticipation, not knowing when Christ will come, but living each day expecting his immediate return. We act by serving the one true and living God by loving those around us. Christ is coming. Actively wait.

Pray, as you wait for Christ's coming, that the love of God would come to you in power and in the Spirit.

November 29

PASSAGE: FIRST THESSALONIANS 2:1-8

You yourselves know, brothers and sisters, that our coming to you was not in vain. —1 Thessalonians 2:1

Not too long ago my wife and I went to San Francisco and Big Sur. While we went through the city, hiked the trails, and went whale watching, we took photographs. After returning home and getting the pictures developed, we saw a flyer in the paper from a drugstore that said you could get photographs enlarged at the “do-it-yourself-kiosk” for the rate of buy one 8x10 and get one free. The offer was about to expire so we wasted no time in getting to the drugstore. We had twelve enlargements to make. We put the first two pictures on the scanner and followed the steps. The pictures started to print, but the colors were all distorted. One of the ink cartridges was empty and there was no replacement cartridge. Our coming to the drugstore was in vain.

When Paul and his companions went to Thessalonica, their coming was not in vain. There were many people who heard the Good News of Jesus Christ and God’s love for them. The Spirit worked faith in them. They believed and a faith community came to life. God has already come to you. God’s coming has not been in vain. Through your community of faith—family, friends, Sunday school teachers, and pastors—God came to you and you were told of God’s love and forgiveness through Jesus Christ. The Spirit worked faith in you and you believed. Now you are a part of a faith community that brings God’s story to all who need to hear about love and forgiveness in Christ. This is the love and forgiveness that never runs out and never leaves us empty.

Pray that God continues to come to you through your faith community and that you continue to bring God’s love and forgiveness to those in need.

November 30

PASSAGE: FIRST THESSALONIANS 2:9-16

We also constantly give thanks to God for this, that when you received the word of God that you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word but as what it really is, God's word, which is also at work in you believers.

—1 Thessalonians 2:13

The gift-giving season will soon be upon us and hopefully you have already begun your Christmas shopping, or at least thought about your gift list. Did you ever think that the gift you might be giving someone would forever change his or her life? I once received a gift that did change my life. I was twelve years old and my family had just moved to Atlanta, Georgia. I made friends with this guy named Johnny. He was fun to be around. When Christmas came around that year, he said that he wanted to exchange Christmas presents. I agreed. I bought an action figure for him. He gave me a puppet. I did not want a hand puppet. They were just for kids. Yes, I liked the Muppets, but everybody did. Johnny told me that he had some puppets and enjoyed making them sing along with records (no CDs in those days). I tried it out at home in front of the bathroom mirror and discovered that I was a good puppeteer. During the after-Christmas sales, I went out and bought a couple more puppets. Not long after that I started doing puppet shows in church. I have been performing ever since. That's twenty-seven years of performing. That silly gift changed my life.

The community of believers in Thessalonica also received a gift that changed their lives forever. Paul tells us that they received God's Word and it was at work in them. You too have received God's Word, and it is at work in you. God's Word has changed your life forever. Through God's Word you know that God loves you unconditionally. Through God's Word you know that you are forgiven. Through God's Word you know that you no longer need to worry about yourself. Through God's Word you know that God is at work in you opening you up to demonstrate acts of love and service to those around you. God's Word is active and living. It is changing your life.

Pray that God's Word continually turns your life outward toward others.

December 1

PASSAGE: FIRST THESSALONIANS 2:17-20

For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? Yes, you are our glory and joy!
—1 Thessalonians 2:19-20

As I write these devotions I am camping on Cape Lookout, N.C. I am utterly alone. I need the solitude so I can focus, pray, and be attentive to the Spirit. I am staying Monday through Friday. It's now Tuesday morning. The solitude is good, but as Friday approaches I will become excited because I am going home. Every time I leave for a trip, I am glad to go, but I am also glad to be home. My wife will be there to share the news of the week. My kids will ask me what I did the whole time. They will share with me, what they did. In the pure joy of the moment, the dogs will jump up and down and slap me with their tails.

Paul tells us that the believers at Thessalonica will be his joy and glory when Christ returns. You would think that Jesus Christ coming in power would be Paul's joy and glory. That is not true for Paul. When Christ returns Paul will celebrate the community of faith gathered to meet Christ because it is the Church that Paul celebrates. When Christ comes all will be made perfect including the Church, but through the Word of God, the sacraments, and the communion of the saints (all believers) our joy and glory is now as well as when Christ comes. Be active in the community of faith. Get to know your sisters and brothers in Christ and come to love them so that when you are together they are your joy and glory.

Pray that Christ would strengthen all churches as we wait for the coming of Christ in glory.

December 2

PASSAGE: FIRST THESSALONIANS 3:1-10

For we now live, if you continue to stand firm in the Lord.

—1 Thessalonians 3:8

Paul tells the Thessalonians to stand firm in the Lord despite the trouble they face. Throughout this exhortation Paul is writing about the community. In order for us to stand firm in the Lord we need the Lord's community around us. I am a campus pastor and I love my faith community. When they are gone at Christmas or in the summer I miss them greatly. During my first Advent as a campus pastor, we worshiped together the first two Sundays in Advent and then everyone left for home. It was weird and sad not to be with them for the whole season, not to see our waiting and preparation through until Christmas. Frankly, I felt abandoned. It was then that I understood the importance of my faith community. Don't worry about me. I have come to grips with Christmas and summer breaks. I miss them when they are gone and always look forward to their return. I need my faith community.

We all need our community of faith for love, support, and friendship. Without our faith community we would find it difficult to stand firm in the Lord. To stand firm in the Lord means to not fall back into selfish ways when we fear there won't be enough for us—whatever the "enough" might be. When we are involved in our community of faith, we learn that we are not alone in our struggles to stand firm in the Lord. We learn that there are others who seek to reach out to neighbors in love. We learn that through the faith community God is present with us.

*Pray for the courage and resolve to stand firm in the Lord
as you become immersed in your faith community.*

December 3

PASSAGE: FIRST THESSALONIANS 3:11-13

And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints. — 1 Thessalonians 3:13

Jesus is coming again and Paul hopes that the Thessalonians will be found blameless before Jesus Christ when he comes with all the saints. Well, this freaked out the Thessalonians. Paul had to write another letter to them. The Thessalonians were worried about just how blameless they had to be. “Hey! Be blameless guys! Jesus is coming!”

Every so often we invite a big group of people over to the house for dinner. We do this because we enjoy being with our friends. One of the benefits of inviting friends over is that we really get motivated to give the house a good cleaning. We go above and beyond the weekly cleaning. We want to be found blameless before our friends when it comes to having our house clean. We wipe up all the dust from the furniture. We give our dining room table a good polish. We sweep the cobwebs out of the corners. We make sure the toilet is free from a ring in the bowl. We want the house to be clean for our guests, but we also don’t want them to think badly of us.

When the Thessalonians heard that they were supposed to be blameless when Christ came, they immediately thought to themselves that they didn’t want to look bad when Christ came. “Omigosh, Jesus is coming and there’s a ring in the toilet bowl.” It’s like when we tell little kids to be good before Christmas because Santa is watching. With Christ’s coming it’s not like that at all. Paul prayed that the Thessalonians be strengthened in holiness so that they would be found blameless. Holiness is not cleanliness. Holiness is not being a “goody two shoes” just for the sake of being good. Holiness is being set apart for God’s purposes, which are loving actions towards others, increasing God’s reign among us, and telling God’s story. Being set apart—being strengthened in God’s purposes—grants us the state of being blameless.

*Pray that God would strengthen you
in being set apart for God’s purposes.*

December 4

PASSAGE: FIRST THESSALONIANS 4:1-7

That no one wrong or exploit a brother or sister in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, just as we have already told you beforehand and solemnly warned you.
—1 Thessalonians 4:6

My wife and I try to be conscientious consumers. There are certain chain retail stores and restaurants that we do not frequent. There are brands of clothes and shoes that we do not purchase. There are certain brand names of food that we try to avoid because of the practices of the parent company. The reasons for our boycott include the treatment of female and minority employees and the other products that are sold by the companies. We also invest our money in mutual funds that do not buy so-called “vice stocks” like weapons of mass destruction, alcohol, tobacco products, or gambling. We have discovered, that despite our efforts, there is no such thing as “clean” money. We just have to do our best to ensure that our money is used in ways that do not exploit other people.

Paul told the Thessalonians that their purpose in life was sanctification, which means being made holy or set apart for God’s purposes. One of God’s purposes is to increase the reign of God among us. Specifically, we are to see to it that those who have no voice or standing in society are not exploited. We are to see to it that justice is done on their behalf. Increasing God’s reign among us means that we do not exploit others, but do for them that which is life giving. We do what we can to increase God’s reign in their lives because God has come to us already through our brothers and sisters in Christ who increased and continue to increase God’s reign in our lives.

*Pray that as God works sanctification in you
God would open your eyes to the exploitation of others
so that you may increase God’s reign among them.*

December 5

PASSAGE: FIRST THESSALONIANS 4:9-12

*So that you may behave properly towards outsiders and
be dependent on no one. —1 Thessalonians 4:12*

It seems that we have created a problem in the Christian community. Outsiders, those who are not part of the Christian community, do not trust us. On warm Thursdays we give away hot dogs for lunch at our campus center. We call them “Hot-Diggity-Dog Days.” We got the idea from a local congregation. There are students who grill the hot dogs and pass them out to people going by the center. If they want any ketchup or something to drink, that stuff is inside the building. Everything is free. We don’t even ask for a donation. The surprising thing is that many people just can’t seem to believe that there is such a thing as a free lunch. Many refuse to even make eye contact as they walk by. It’s not just with the hot dog giveaway either. At our colleges’ activities fairs, we give away free highlighters. Some people won’t even speak to us as we try to ask them if they want one. Others when offered the free highlighter say, “Oh! I’m not a Christian.” Or they might say, “No thank you. I’m an atheist.” It’s just a highlighter, people! We try to assure them that the highlighter will not convert them to Jesus, but they still won’t take it. Outsiders are suspicious of us because they believe that all we want to do is to get them to speak the words: “I believe in Jesus Christ.” Beyond that, they think we really don’t care about their needs, questions, or struggles.

Paul tells the Thessalonians to behave properly toward outsiders. Today, that means that our communities of faith need to see a newcomer not as just a potential increase in membership but as a person with his or her unique set of problems, questions, and gifts. We need to respect outsiders for who they are, what they believe, and where they have been. We need to love them because they are God’s beloved children too.

Pray for a true and deep love of outsiders.

December 6

PASSAGE: FIRST THESSALONIANS 4:13-18

But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope.

—1 Thessalonians 4:13

Throughout my life I have known and loved people who have died: friends, family, and parishioners. I have grieved for each of them. My father died a few years ago and I went where he had lived in Chesapeake, Virginia for the funeral. I spent a good portion of my childhood in Virginia, and my family and I were members of a Southern Baptist church there. I went to see my former pastor, and I shared with him my pain and sorrow surrounding my father's death. He shared with me what I had always considered to be just a platitude: "You will see your father again." This time when I heard it coming from my childhood pastor and so near to my father's death, it did not sound like a platitude at all. It gave me comfort. Those words gave me hope because I believed them.

The Thessalonians were worried because they believed that Christ's coming in glory was very soon, and some members of their faith community had died before Christ's return. They feared that these people would be lost forever, but Paul tells them not to grieve as those who have no hope, because they will see their loved ones again. They will be raised on the last day when Christ comes to make all things new.

Christ lived, died, and rose to new life so that we would know that God is with us in death, in life, and life again. God does not leave us, nor the ones we love. Death cannot separate us, nor the ones we love, from the love of God. God holds them in loving arms even as we are held. Take comfort in that, sisters and brothers.

*Pray for the hope of the resurrection to eternal life
even as you live a love-filled life.*

December 7

PASSAGE: FIRST THESSALONIANS 5:1-10

For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ.

—1 Thessalonians 5:9

My mother lives in the suburbs of Atlanta. While I was visiting there last Christmas, I noticed a billboard that just astounded me. In the center of the billboard there is this huge, stern-looking Jesus. He has that parental look on his face that a mom or dad will shoot across the room to bring an errant child back into line. To the left of Jesus are the words: "Either you are for me or against me." To the right of Jesus are the words: "Against me. There's Hell to pay." I just can't believe that someone would put those words into the mouth of the kind, loving Jesus. Can you imagine Jesus saying that to the woman caught in adultery, Zacchaeus, or blind Bartimeus? Or to you? Whoever sponsored that billboard does not know the Jesus that I know.

Paul tells us that we are not destined for wrath, but for salvation. The Thessalonians were worried that when the end came they might be destroyed along with everyone else. Paul reassures them and us that God loves us and will save us. Now, to be saved by God does not mean that if we are in trouble the solution will fall out of the sky. Being saved by God means that we trust God to wrestle the good out of the situations we struggle with at home, work, or school. There are times when it seems all we get is wrath and there will be no end to it. Paul, however, proclaims to us that is not our fate. God will bring salvation for our minds, bodies, and souls in the here and now. Keep struggling to bring about the good. God is there struggling with you, because you have been destined for salvation.

*Pray that God will be active in your life,
wrestling the good out of suffering and toil,
for the sake of the whole people of God.*

December 8

PASSAGE: FIRST THESSALONIANS 5:12-15

*See that none of you repays evil for evil,
but always seek to do good to one another and to all.*

—1 Thessalonians 5:15

I have revenge fantasies. These thoughts are not Christian, and I would never act on them. However, when another unjustly treats someone I love, I start thinking of ways I could get even. My sister worked for this woman who, we swore, wore a wig. She turned out to be a terrible, petty boss, and she put my sister through all sorts of anguish, until she finally found another job. I was really mad at the wig-wearing boss. So I fantasized about following her to the grocery store and while wearing roller blades and a ski mask, I would skate by her, snatch the wig off of her head, and make my getaway, leaving her embarrassed and screaming in the grocery store.

Of course, I would never do such a thing. It would be cruel and not at all helpful to my sister or the wig-wearing boss. Revenge or repaying evil for evil never solves anything or even stops the evil. Revenge only multiplies the evil. The Palestinian-Israeli conflict is an excellent example of this with the seemingly endless cycle of suicide bombings and counter strikes. The alternative, Paul says, is to do good for one another and encourage others to do good. Revenge never builds community, but putting an end to the cycle of evil by doing good will build community. If you are working on a group project and someone isn't pulling her or his share of the load, don't gossip and backbite. Keep doing your work while encouraging the other to do his or her work. The same is true for any community. Honest talk and encouragement will constructively build the community, while repaying evil for evil will only tear it down.

Pray for the willingness to encourage others to do good.

December 9

PASSAGE: FIRST THESSALONIANS 5:16-22

Pray without ceasing.

—1 Thessalonians 5:17

Let's be realistic here. Pray without ceasing, c'mon. I can't even be irritating without ceasing. More than once I have been in "irritation contests" with my son. Usually they are just arguments such as "Did." "Did not." "Did." "Did not." Or "Why?" "Because." "Why?" "Because." Back and forth it goes. We are both very stubborn and try to be the winner by having the last word. These irritation contests usually only last a few minutes, but it seems I can barely go on anymore until he cracks or gets bored with it. Yes, I know it's immature, but when you are dealing with kids it's the little victories that count (On the other hand, see previous page.). If it's that hard to be irritating without ceasing, which comes naturally, how are we expected to pray without ceasing, which would take some real effort?

Here's how I learned to pray: Bow your heads, close your eyes, fold your hands, and repeat after me... Now doing this without ceasing would be impractical and dangerous, while operating heavy equipment. There must be an expanded understanding of prayer. Prayer is, of course, bowing your head and closing your eyes, while praises and petitions are directed to God, but prayer can also be attentiveness to the presence of the Spirit. When a group of believers gathers for a meeting, and the meeting is opened with prayer, the praying doesn't stop at "Amen" but continues on throughout the meeting. As the agenda of the meeting is followed, the praying continues by being attentive to the Spirit's presence. If you pray in the morning, "Open my eyes, God, to the needs of my sisters and brothers," the prayer doesn't end when you lift your head and open your eyes. The prayer continues throughout your day, as you are attentive to the Spirit's presence in guiding you to the needs of your brothers and sisters. Praying without ceasing simply means keeping an open mind and heart to God's will throughout each day. Simple to write. Harder to do.

Pray. Pray without ceasing.

December 10

PASSAGE: FIRST THESSALONIANS 5:23-28

The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this.

—1 Thessalonians 5:24

My wife calls me at work and asks, “Hey, Scott, can you be home by 6:30? I have an appointment.” “Sure, no problem,” I say. But then I get busy at work and lose track of time, and I don’t get home until 6:35 or 6:40. The kids ask me if I will take them to the store tomorrow and I say, “Sure. No problem.” Tomorrow comes and then I remember that traffic is going to be horrible because of an event down at the shopping mall. We don’t go. I try to be faithful to my promises. I really do. But I’m not perfect. People disappoint us. They make promises that they can’t keep. It’s like at the beginning of the book or movie when the little girl asks her mommy if she will ever leave her. (Dramatic swell in music.) The mommy says, “I promise I will never leave you, my darling.” Oh yeah, something bad is going to happen to mommy. We’re just humans. We can’t keep all of our promises.

Fortunately for us, God is perfect. God can, does, and will keep all of God’s promises. Paul tells us in this passage from Thessalonians that God will sanctify us entirely, keep our whole being sound, and keep us blameless until the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. In other words God promises to be at work in you setting you aside for God’s purposes and using you as a worker with Christ throughout your life. God has called you to be a follower of Christ and God will faithfully make you one. God has made you new and makes you new each day. Don’t worry about the past. God will make you blameless (forgiven of all your sins) when Christ comes. Don’t worry about the future. Live to serve today.

*Pray for the courageous faith to let go of the past,
entrust the future to God, and live for today.*

December 11

PASSAGE: SECOND THESSALONIANS 1:1-4

We must always give thanks to God for you, brothers and sisters, as is right, because your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of every one of you for one another is increasing. —2 Thessalonians 1:3

Each year I go to our local church camp to be a chaplain for the senior high school students. We do the usual camp stuff like hikes, canoeing, swimming, mud whomping, and campfire. At the campfire one of the counselors always gives a grace moment, a story about how God is active in the counselor's life. Throughout the week all the counselors take their turn. I just love to hear their stories of faith about how God led them to camp for that summer, got them through a tough time, or opened their eyes to the gifts of God in their lives. Their sharing encourages some of the students to share their faith stories as well. One year one of the students even gave the grace moment at the campfire.

I can relate to Paul when he says that he gives thanks for the faith of the community in Thessalonica. I love to hear how God is at work in the lives of others. When the community shares how God is active in the lives of the individuals, then the whole community knows that God is active among them. When faith stories are shared, the hearer and the teller are strengthened in their faith. When faith stories are shared, others can hear how their story of God's activity intersects with that of the teller. When faith stories are shared, others can see that perhaps God is active in their lives in that way as well. I give God thanks for all of you who share your stories of faith in your own communities.

Pray that God grants you a community that shares their stories of faith.

December 12

PASSAGE: SECOND THESSALONIANS 1:5-10

And to give relief to the afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.

—2 Thessalonians 1:7-8

Okay. So this is where 2 Thessalonians starts to get a little weird. Jesus Christ is coming and he's going to have these mighty angels in flaming fire beating up on those who were persecuting the Church. Paul is telling the Christians in Thessalonica that it's going to be okay. God is in charge. Let God worry about what will happen to others.

But what is going to happen? They will die. Scott Gustafson, one of my theology professors from seminary, once said that death is having your idols ripped away from you. Those who think that they don't need God will experience that sort of death—having their idols ripped away from them. In the movie *American Splendor*, Toby says to Harvey, "You know, you might try believing in something bigger than yourself. It might cheer you up." So often people want to think that they are in control and in charge. People believe that God isn't necessary. They set themselves, money, work, or heroes as their god. Charles Dickens' character Scrooge is a good example of this. He also is a good example of someone having his idols ripped away from him as the three ghosts visit him. In the end he converts and is given a new life of cheer and charity.

Christ calls each of us to take up our cross and follow Christ. Christ calls each of us to die to self—to have our idols ripped away from us. Don't wait for Christ to come with flaming angels to rip your idols from you. Die to yourself today and each day as you seek to put God and others first.

*Pray that God exposes the idols in your life
and rips them away.*

December 13

PASSAGE: SECOND THESSALONIANS 1:11-12

*So that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you,
and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the
Lord Jesus Christ.*

—2 Thessalonians 1:12

In the group of eight high school girls who shared a cabin, she was the one who was the most different. She didn't really fit in when they socialized. Mary could draw extremely well, and they all marveled at how quickly she could draw a person seeming to capture the character of that person. Mary was different because she had autism. The group of eight high school girls was together for a week and at the end of the week of camp all the cabins had to do something for the talent show. When Mary's cabin's time came to perform, we all wondered what they would do that could include Mary. The whole cabin filed onto the stage, and Mary took charge immediately. She started to sing, but then remembered what we always do at camp. She told everyone to stand up. We all stood. "Repeat after me," Mary said. "Repeat after me," we all said because that's what you do at camp. Holding up her hands like antlers, Mary burst into song, "There was a crazy moose!" We all held up our hands like antlers and sang, "There was a crazy moose!" The song continued as Mary led the whole camp in that silly song with the flair and drama of an experienced counselor. When the song ended, she took a deep bow and marched off the stage. The camp burst into cheers and applause.

The name of Christ was glorified that night because the light of Christ shown brightly, as the one who was different was graciously accepted. The glory of Christ was in those girls from Mary's cabin because they put themselves aside to let Mary have her moment. They each became more Christ-like that night.

*Pray that through your good works you would bring
glory to the name of Christ and become more Christ-like
in the process.*

December 14

PASSAGE: SECOND THESSALONIANS 2:1-12

And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will destroy with the breath of his mouth, annihilating him by the manifestation of his coming.

—2 Thessalonians 2:8

A burglar breaks into a large home in the middle of the night. He's already cased the joint and knows that no one is home. As he slowly makes his way from room to room using only his small flashlight, he keeps hearing a voice say, "Jesus is watching you." He walks through the kitchen. "Jesus is watching you." He continues through the dining room. "Jesus is watching you." He walks into the living room and the voice seems very close. "Jesus is watching you." Now this burglar is not a religious man, but this situation is really starting to freak him out. He slowly shines the light around the room until he is relieved to discover a parrot in a cage. "Jesus is watching you," says the parrot. The burglar chuckles to himself and resolves to go about his business of robbing the house. He swings the flashlight around only to find a snarling German shepherd not more than two feet away from him. The last thing he hears is "Sic him, Jesus."

Our text tells us that the Lord Jesus will annihilate the Lawless One when Jesus comes in glory. No one knows for sure the identity of this Lawless One to whom Paul refers. The Thessalonians must have known because Paul does not explain himself. The burglar in that old joke is certainly lawless and does get annihilated. I don't think however that this was what Paul had in mind. Perhaps the Lawless One could be that part in all of us that Jesus is "out to get." This is the one Paul calls the old Adam. This is the you who is lawless like a thief that wants to steal and grab for selfish gain. Each of us has within us that sinful self. The Good News is Jesus will destroy that burglar within us once and for all. We will be renewed and re-created to be what God intended us to be—loving, giving, and selfless.

Pray that Jesus will "get you real good" increasing in you the "you" that God intends.

December 15

PASSAGE: SECOND THESSALONIANS 2:13-17

But we must always give thanks to God for you, brothers and sisters beloved by the Lord, because God chose you as the first fruits for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and through belief in the truth.

—2 Thessalonians 2:13

Sometimes blueberry picking season happens while my family is away on vacation. Then we don't get to go to our favorite blueberry patch. However, we try to take blueberry season into consideration when planning our summer vacations. We love blueberries especially those you can pick yourself on the local farms. After we've picked about five or six or twelve pounds, we shell out the money and head for home with our treasure. We snack on the berries as we drive home. When we get home, my wife starts to sort them. Some berries will be used for syrup. These are frozen. Some will be used in cobblers or pies. These are also frozen. Then there are those that are huge and juicy and sweet. These are eaten fresh because they are so good. Some of these blueberries are shared with others. These are our first fruits of the blueberries. They are the best. They are set aside for the purpose of being just plain blueberries to be shared and eaten.

In the Bible, first fruits were always the part of the long anticipated harvest that was given to the priests of Israel as an offering to God. The priest would receive the offering and elevate it before the altar at the Temple. Then the priests could keep the food for their own needs because the Levites, the priests, were not given land of their own. The first fruits were set aside and given to God out of thanksgiving for the harvest.

Throughout the books of the prophets in the Hebrew bible and the Christian scriptures the title "first fruits" has been applied to God's people. The scriptures today tell us that we are first fruits chosen by God for salvation—freedom from sin, death, and the devil. This freedom that we are given in Christ allows us then to be used by God for the sake of telling God's Good News to others. We are first fruits chosen by God and shared with the world. Be a big, juicy, sweet blueberry for Jesus!

Pray that God would continually free you from sin, death, and the devil for the sake of being God's first fruits.

December 16

PASSAGE: SECOND THESSALONIANS 3:1-5

Finally, brothers and sisters, pray for us, so that the word of the Lord may spread rapidly and be glorified everywhere, just as it is among you.

—2 Thessalonians 3:1

We woke up earlier than we wanted to. Their dog barked and our dogs barked. They had to go out *now*. I jumped up, got dressed, and took them out into the early morning. They played and chased each other in the yard. Then my brother-in-law and I decided to take them down to the “dog” beach. It was clear, quiet, and calm on the Severn River that morning. The dogs played in the water for a while, then we walked back home. About an hour or two later, we loaded the kids in the boat and went to do some tubing. A breeze had kicked up and boats were now out and about on the river. Choppy seas had replaced the calm. We were beat to death being towed behind the boat on the tube, because of the waves. The breeze and the boats heading out to the Chesapeake Bay had changed the river. The change was rapid.

Paul asks that we pray that the Word of God spread rapidly. Like a little wind and the boats on the quarter-mile-wide Severn River, Paul knows that the Word of God can spread as rapidly as those waves. The waves each start out small and insignificant, but they quickly gather in size and intensity. Paul asks that we pray for the rapid spread of God’s love and forgiveness for all. As we pray for the spread of God’s Word (praying unceasingly by the way), we begin to see opportunities when we might do a little Word o’ God spreading ourselves. We see the need that people have for a word of forgiveness and love in Christ. As we continue to pray and see opportunities, we might even speak the Word of God and see it begin to spread rapidly like waves across a wind-swept, busy river.

*Pray that the Word of God spreads rapidly with you
as an agent of God’s Word.*

December 17

PASSAGE: SECOND THESSALONIANS 3:6-15

*For we hear that some of you are living in idleness,
mere busybodies, not doing any work.*

—2 Thessalonians 3:11

Maybe you've been the busybody. Perhaps you've known the busybody. They can be at work. They can be at school. When I worked in a restaurant, the worst part of the evening was closing. The whole place had to be cleaned: vacuumed, swept, mopped, and wiped down. I usually got stuck doing the pots and pans with all the stuck, baked-on food. Everyone worked hard and quickly because they wanted to get out of there. There was always one guy, though, who did as little as possible. He would push a mop or broom around like he was working, but he wasn't. He would talk and cut-up and distract everyone else from their work. He was a busybody not doing any work. He just waited around until it was time to go.

There were some Thessalonians who had become busybodies. They had stopped doing any work and were just waiting around until Jesus showed up. They were certain that Jesus was coming any day. So they thought, "Why should we do anything? Jesus is coming and we might as well just sit back and relax until the show starts."

Waiting on the Lord—waiting for Jesus Christ to return for the final renewal of all—is not some sort of passive waiting. We don't sign in at the window, have a seat in the comfortable, waiting-room chairs, and flip through a magazine waiting for Jesus' receptionist to call our names. Our waiting is one of work and service. Our waiting is one of encouragement and support of others. Our waiting is one of loving, even as we have been loved.

*Pray for the perseverance to work and serve
during our waiting.*

December 18

PASSAGE: SECOND THESSALONIANS 3:16-18

Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times in all ways. The Lord be with all of you.

—2 Thessalonians 3:16

When I was a teenager, I attended lock-ins with my youth group. At one lock-in we did the usual stuff like eating pizza, going bowling, seeing how many folding chairs we could leap over, and watching a movie. This movie gave me no peace. As a matter of fact it still causes mild anxiety even to this day. The movie was about the second coming of Jesus. The story included instantly abandoned cars careening off the road and into telephone poles, unearthed caskets with empty clothes laying where the corpse had once been, and people wondering what had happened to Aunt Sally, or Jimmy, or whoever had just disappeared. There was no resolution that I can recall. There was no good news. The end just posed the question, “Where will you be when the rapture comes?” (Dramatic music. Fade to end credits.)

No peace for you. Come back next year. This is not what God wants for us. God does not want us scared into heaven—a faith based on fear is not faith. As the letter closes, Paul doesn’t concern himself with who will be left behind. Paul leaves the Thessalonians and us with a blessing: May the Lord of Peace give you peace. Have peace while you wait for Christ to come in God’s good time. Be faithful and diligent in the work and service God has called you to. Do not fret about who is “in” and who is “out,” but seek to increase the reign of God around you. Be at peace. Let God decide when Christ will come. Be at peace knowing that God in Christ holds you and loves you.

Pray for peace in your life so that you might be an instrument of peace for Christ’s work.

December 19

PASSAGE: LUKE 1:1-24

"...He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord." —Luke 1:16-17

Are you ready for Christmas? How many times will that question be asked in the next week? Most people, when they ask this question, are really asking: Have you done all of your preparations for your Christmas celebrations? Are the presents bought? Are they wrapped? Is the Santa Claus stuff sufficiently hidden from the kids? Have you sent all of your Christmas cards? Do you have all of the decorations up? Have you done the shopping for the Christmas meal? Have you made a sufficient sacrifice to the gods of consumerism to resurrect the economy from the cold, dark winter? Are you ready for Christmas?

Are you ready for the miracle that is Christmas? Are you ready to hear again the miraculous Good News that God loves us so much that God came to live among us as one of us? God showed us that love despite the consequences for God. God prepares for the Incarnation—God being fully human—by providing a means to prepare the people. John will be born to a couple too old to have children. John will be raised to be God's prophet to make a people prepared for the Lord—prepared for Immanuel, God with us. Through the power of the Holy Spirit the Word of God will come through John to turn people to God's way, the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous.

Being ready for Christmas is a turning to God to hear again the amazing wonder that God is with us—fully God, fully human—to show God's love for all. Being ready for Christmas is basking in that love and turning to love your neighbor.

Pray that your heart would turn toward God as you prepare to hear the word that God is fully with us.

December 20

PASSAGE: LUKE 1:25-38

And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one!

The Lord is with you."

—Luke 1:28

The days just before Christmas creep along. They seem to last forever. The anticipation builds like a balloon that just keeps getting inflated with more and more air until it is about to burst. My kids really get excited about Christmas coming. They can't wait for the announcement they have been longing to hear: It's time to open presents! Oh the joy that bursts out on their faces. They're getting stuff!

All of creation was longing to hear the announcement the angel Gabriel made to Mary. The separation from God created by humanity in the Garden of Eden was about to be undone. Humanity would soon witness the depth and breadth of God's love for each and every one of us. Humanity would turn from selfish lives to lives of service and love. All of creation would be renewed and redeemed. All of this would begin at this announcement, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." Mary was chosen to bear the Son of God into the world. The Lord was with her. She would have a son who would be God's love, presence, and Word. That announcement is for us as well. The Lord is with us. Nothing can separate us from God's presence now that the announcement has been made.

*Pray for the faith to trust in God's loving presence
in your life.*

December 21

PASSAGE: LUKE 1:39-56

*"...He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants for ever."*

—Luke 1:54-55

Mary hears the announcement from the angel that she is going to be an unwed, teenage mother and she is actually happy about it. Maybe she wasn't at first. Maybe she stepped out in faith, accepting the angel's announcement, becoming more resigned to the call God issued to her. Apparently, it wasn't going too well at home. So Mary left Nazareth and went to stay with Elizabeth. Perhaps she was the only person in Mary's life who seemed to be happy about her pregnancy.

Mary needed that. Mary needed someone else to believe what the angel announced. Mary needed that to strengthen her own faith—strengthen her own faith enough to burst out into song. Mary was actually happy about being an unwed, teenage mother. Oddly enough, that's what God called her to be.

Mary's faith is strengthened and she sings of God's promises first made to Abraham and her ancestors. God keeps promises. God promised to Abraham and to Sarah and to all their descendants that they would be God's people and God would be their God. God promised that they would be a blessing to all nations. Mary sings for joy as God's promises continue to unfold through her.

Each of us is called, as Mary was, to receive God's promises and to participate in their unfolding, as God works through us. Each of us, like Mary, needs an Elizabeth to affirm his or her faith so that we may sing our own song and actually be happy that God has called us.

Pray that God's promises would unfold through you.

December 22

PASSAGE: LUKE 1:57-80

*"...By the tender mercy of our God,
the dawn from on high will break upon us,
to give light to those who sit in darkness
and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace."*

—Luke 1:78-79

"Tender mercy" evokes compassion, understanding, forgiveness, caring, and love. We all need tender mercy. There are times in our lives when we are without hope because of the mess we get ourselves into, or the mess that life might hand us. I have needed tender mercy when plans for adopting children came crashing down on my wife and me. It was emotionally a crushing blow. Our lives seemed out of control and hopeless. Wrapped up in our grief, we held each other. We reassured each other: God has us; God loves us; God gives us tender mercy.

I once visited a woman in the hospital who needed God's tender mercy. She was an addict whose disease had overwhelmed her. Her life was out of control. Her life was destructive to herself and to those she loved. I heard her confession, and she received God's tender mercy. She received God's forgiveness and a fresh start.

God's tender mercy breaks in upon our lives like the morning sun, driving away the darkness of the night. The light exposes the sin, hurt, and pain in our lives. The light shows us where we are destructive to self and others. The light shows us the sin, hurt, and pain in the lives of others so that we might serve them. The light shows us the way to peace. It is the peace that brings hope, so we may stop sitting and move on in life, loving others as we go.

*Pray for God's tender mercy that brings light
and guidance into the way of peace.*

December 23

PASSAGE: LUKE 2:1-7

And 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. —Luke 2:7

Bureaucracy forces Joseph to travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem with a very pregnant betrothed. They had to register so that they could be taxed. There's nothing more to it. It was an ordinary trip that many people had to take. It wasn't special. There was no angel this time saying where to go, what to do, or what was going to happen. It was just the tax collectors. So they journeyed on what must have been an uneventful trip to the crowded City of David. Of course the town was crowded, because David had many children and therefore many descendants. Of course all the inns were full and an animals' cave would have been a likely place to get shelter. They were not the only ones spending time in that cave that night.

Other travelers, in addition to the animals, probably perked up to see what was happening when the labor pains got intense. There's a woman over there having a baby. Did other women come to Mary's side to act as midwives? Probably. There's nothing special or unusual about that. There's nothing more miraculous about the actual birth of Jesus, Savior, God with us, than the birth of any other child. As was the custom he was wrapped in bands of cloth and laid in a decent, substitute crib, a feeding trough. Mary probably did not share her announcement from the angel with the others. The Light of the World is born by an ordinary birth. But God is active in the ordinary. God takes the ordinary and makes it miraculous and extraordinary.

*Pray that your eyes would be opened to the ordinary ways
God works in your life to bring about the extraordinary.*

Christmas Eve

PASSAGE: LUKE 2:8-14

*"Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"
—Luke 2:14*

The extraordinary begins to unfold. Shepherds are watching their flocks at night. It is the same night that Mary gave birth to Jesus. These shepherds are living out in those fields. Shepherds were considered to be ritually unclean, but shepherds provided the sacrificial lambs. Theirs was a necessary job that no one really wanted, much like many low-wage jobs today. They lived out in the fields because no one wanted them living near them in the town. These shepherds see a growing light in the sky, and suddenly an angel is there before them.

Angels appeared to old men past their prime, to young girls, and to these unclean shepherds. The extraordinary unfolds. The shepherds are frightened, but the angel reassures them. The angel comes with an announcement. God chose to announce the birth of God's only son to shepherds. Extraordinary! Perhaps it was because these shepherds would not overanalyze and be skeptical like the religious elite. Perhaps it was because these shepherds would not feel threatened like kings or governors. Perhaps it was because God knew that these shepherds would hear the announcement of the birth of the Lord, the Messiah, the Savior, and they would actually go to see the child. The heavenly choir sings "peace among those whom God favors." God then favors these marginalized workers. God favors them to be the first people, outside of the family, to hear the Good News—a savior is born.

*Pray for peace among those whom God favors:
the poor, the marginalized, and the forgotten ones.*

Christmas Day

PASSAGE: LUKE 2:15-20

The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

—Luke 2:20

Merry Christmas! The shepherds arrived at the stable with their incredible story. The ordinary birth of another child into the world was no ordinary birth. It was extraordinary! Mary and Joseph knew this already, but when the shepherds shared all that they saw and heard, those gathered around the cute infant were amazed. Perhaps Mary sighed in relief, now knowing for certain that she had done the right thing.

The shepherds for their part were not disappointed because they found everything as the angels had said. They returned to their flocks and their lowly status, praising and glorifying God. They believed. They were given hope. They were given acceptance. They saw Immanuel, God with us.

We are not just celebrating Jesus' birthday. We are celebrating God who loves us enough to enter into our lives, our suffering, and our joy. We are celebrating God who loves us enough to be with us and not leave us no matter the consequences. The true meaning of Christmas is that God is with us. The Light of God has come into the world, and it will not be overcome. The Word of God has come into the world, and it will pierce our souls with the gift of faith. The Love of God has come into the world, and it will turn us inside out that we might, in turn, love others.

*Pray that Christmas will penetrate your soul
with light, faith, and love.*

Pastor Scott KuechenmeisterHall was born and raised in the South. In 1990 he and his wife, Judy, moved to the Northeast where he attended seminary at the Lutheran Theological Seminary in Philadelphia and where she practiced veterinary medicine. His first call was in the Lehigh Valley of Pennsylvania. Currently, he is the campus pastor and executive director of Lutheran Campus Ministry in Greater Pittsburgh, serving the campuses of the University of Pittsburgh, Carnegie Mellon University, Chatham College, and Carlow College. Pastor Scott and Judy have two children. Pastor Scott enjoys spreading the Good News of Jesus Christ through a unique blend of preaching and puppetry. He is available for speaking engagements. Contact him at sak2@andrew.cmu.edu

