

Christmas Devotional 2018



LifePoint Church

CHRISTMAS DEVOTIONAL 2018

INTRODUCTION

Growing up, did you ever have an advent calendar? You know the kind. Every morning, you would open a different compartment revealing the treat for that day. Most of them had a different piece of chocolate each day. There were some made from hand-sewn fabric. Some hung on the wall, perhaps with a Christmas trinket that you would move from pocket to pocket for each day of December leading up to the big day.

While some of these calendars were more impactful than others, they all conjured the same feeling.

ANTICIPATION

Regardless of what each surprise held, it kept us coming back and held our focus, at least momentarily, on what we were moving toward. It gave us pause. It made us think. And it caused us to remember that a celebration was coming.

For kids, it isn't too difficult to get caught up in the gifts and pageantry of it all. Being a bit older, we do the same, but it looks different. The traveling, the gift giving, the meals, the plans, the decorations, all of it...if we aren't careful, the Christmas season becomes solely about the season.

This devotional works like an advent calendar. Each day, you will find a reading titled after a Christmas object. The idea is simple. Each day, you will "open" a reading from that calendar, written by a person amongst you, right here at LifePoint Church. Our sincere hope is that, daily, your thoughts are drawn towards the savior of the world, his coming into it as a baby, and thus the reason we celebrate.

Anticipate his birth.
Rejoice in the wonder of it all.
And have a Merry Christmas.



Day 1

THE NUTCRACKER

December was always so full. It seemed to be bursting at the seams with activity. My mother always made sure the house matched. Out from a few heavily-used boxes in the basement would come the decorations. Wooden figurines, garland on the stair bannister, and various trinkets for all the table tops and mantle.

To my six-year-old self, it was wonderful. It still is thirty years later. But that particular Christmas, I was drawn to one specific piece. It was a wooden nutcracker, complete with a felt hat and a fuzzy beard. I think my parents had bought him in Germany. Hand painted.

I did the only reasonable thing I could do. I went to the kitchen and found a walnut, put it in the nutcracker's mouth and squeezed with all my strength. And snapped the Nutcracker into about five pieces.

I just didn't understand. I mean, it was a nutcracker after all.

Our names don't identify us. Our careers and professions don't either. We are not our past.

Much like a nutcracker that was never intended to be put to that use, we sometimes labor under the weight of identities and labels that are not our own.

Jesus knows us, though. He knows who we are at our core. He knows our gifts and talents, the pain and grief of our shortcomings and failures. He came here to teach us how to live into that.

Who does he say that you are?

For further reading and meditation... 1 Corinthians 12:12-28



Day 2



THE DRUM

The song and story of the little drummer boy has long been etched into our Christmas tradition. But within the biblical narrative of the birth of Jesus, we find neither boy nor drum. Only shepherds, wise men, and their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Not your typical baby shower.

The legend of the little boy tells us that as the great men before him delivered their gifts to Jesus, the boy finds himself in an awkward social situation. It's his turn in the procession of visitors. It's his turn to deliver the goods. But he finds himself empty-handed.

Well, almost empty-handed.

Imagine the fear, anxiety, and shame he must have felt having nothing like the others to give. The story reminds me of the fear, anxiety, and shame I feel when my life doesn't look like someone else's. I don't often raise my hands when we sing in church. Praying aloud doesn't come as naturally to me as others. My Instagram feed isn't a collection of perfectly curated images of my devotional time. I have no gift to bring... pa rum pum pum pum.

The boy has nothing to give. But he has a drum. And he plays his heart out for the baby King.

Wildly.

Loudly.

Freely.

Looking around at the gifts of the wise men, he begins to see he has given Jesus the greatest gift of all: the gift of uninhibited love.

The imagery of the drum reminds me of the beat of my heart. It reminds me that if I have a pulse, I have a gift. None of us come to Jesus empty-handed when we come openhearted. We just have to find our own song to sing. What's yours?

For further reading and meditation... Matthew 2:1-12



Day 3



THE SAILBOAT

There's something magical about sailing. That breath-taking moment when you hoist the sails, watch them catch the wind and cut the engine. The exhilarating feeling of quietly slipping along, water spraying off the bow, knowing the only thing powering you is the wind.

When we lived in Annapolis, one of our favorite pastimes was inviting another family to spend the day with us on our 36-foot sailboat. We'd motor out of our slip and carefully make our way into the river. Sometimes we'd anchor in a cove and the kids would swim while the adults relaxed.

If the weather was good and we were feeling especially adventurous, we'd head out to the middle of the bay. Even with the vast expanse of water around us, we could always see some land in the distance. It was comforting to know that, if our on-board GPS failed, we had a reference point to navigate to safety.

Our boat was called True North. When sailors are in open water, with no land in sight, they must know how to navigate using a compass and the stars. But even a compass can err, as it points to magnetic north, not true north. True north is a fixed point on the globe and doesn't shift with the earth's ever-changing magnetic field.

As we navigate through life, countless things compete for our attention. We may feel tossed about as we try to make good decisions for our families, our vocation and our future.

The Psalmist may have felt the same way. He desires to be steadfast, not wandering around aimlessly. So he determines to fix his eyes on God's truth.

What are you navigating through right now? Let God be your True North. Fix your eye on his goodness, truth and love today.

For further reading and meditation...Psalm 119:15



Day 4



THE FIREPLACE

When I was little we had a fireplace in our home, but we never used it. Except at Christmas. This is when we had a fire and I got to tend it. I was fascinated by the fire, the way the flames danced as they devoured the wood and wrapping paper. I took great care that the logs were placed in just the right way to maximize the warmth and the light. There was something about the fire that made Christmas special. For me, a fireplace always makes me think of Christmas and it takes me back to the light and warmth of my family and my childhood.

Early in my married life, my wife and I lived in an apartment with a gas fireplace. It started by flipping a switch. We used it all the time. But it wasn't special. It was too easy. It didn't require tending. There was no selecting or placing just the right log, no momentary flash of colored flame from wrapping paper. It doesn't live in my memory like my family's fireplace. There was no cost for the warmth, comfort, or light it provided. It was nice to have, but it wasn't special.

I wonder sometimes if I treat Christmas the same way, substituting real warmth, light, and comfort for a fire that burns easily but never captures my heart. The warmth, light, and comfort of Christmas were given with great care and at just the right time. The fire that would be the light of the world was prepared over centuries. It is unique, and it captures our hearts like no other. To know the joy and majesty of this fire, we must tend it with time and care.

For further reading and meditation... John 1:4-5



Day 5



THE WREATH

A Christmas wreath is hung on our door every year. This little tradition reminds me of the circular rhythm to the seasons. It makes each one predictable, typical even. And that brings me a sense of comfort. No matter how hard I try to fight it though, the reality is this:

Each year has something different. Each year is something different.

Sometimes, that means a renewed freshness and excitement for a new year, but it can also leave me with a longing for what once was.

I don't know what this Christmas has in store for you. Maybe this year a loved one is far away, or not with us at all. Or maybe it's a first Christmas with that special someone or a new life completely. Whatever Christmas brings to your mind this year – one thing is for sure -- we can't hold onto last Christmas and be fully present for this one.

What sense of newness are you being moved into this Christmas? What is hurting your heart? What are you longing for? What disappointment is coming your way this season? What joy and excitement are you experiencing?

God wants us to be present and honest with where we are and what we feel. Jesus, who is God, lived among humans as a human himself. He was present. A Savior for all people for all seasons. God with us.

Take a moment to be honest with God about the season you are in. Invite him into it. Seek him through it.

This year, hang a wreath on your door. When you enter your home, think deeply about your Christmas – this moment, this season and also the Christmases that were. Be comforted that Jesus is the part of Christmas that will never change.

For further reading and meditation... Hebrews 13:8



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THE PIANO

One of the biggest regrets in my life is not learning how to play the piano. Oh, I had the opportunity. My mom bought an old upright that was kept in our “greyroom”—the name for a room in our farmhouse that was painted grey. My dad would sit with me as I laboriously practiced,

“C D E, Has a tree, Full of apples as can be”

I just wanted to play Purple People Eater without the hard work. My dad was a wonderful kind man, but he was a terrible teacher. He would get frustrated that I didn’t seem to understand. He was very mathematical and analytical, and I am creative and artistic. In the end “C D E” was the only song I learned to play. I gave up—the path to success was too difficult ...or was it that I wasn’t really encouraged?

How often do we avoid or quit something that takes too much effort? Our tendency is to give up what appears overwhelming. We put off having that tough conversation with our kids or kicking a destructive habit. We give up on diets, exercise, schooling, careers, relationships, forgiveness, marriages.

If we felt we could be successful or we were encouraged to succeed, perhaps we would persevere. God does just that. The scriptures encourage us again and again to press on, persevere, make every effort, work hard and finish the race.

I so wish I had stuck with the piano. How I could have used that skill if only I had persevered because ironically I became a drama teacher and musical director. I did learn to constantly encourage my students and as a result, they flourished, even though my musical skill was lacking. I was, however, always able to find middle C.

For further reading and meditation...Philippians 3:12-14





THE JACK-IN-THE-BOX

I think my least favorite toy as a kid was the Jack-in-the-Box. They sneak up on you and jump out of the box at the most unexpected times. I mean, if you really think about it, who even likes Jack-in-the-Boxes?

I'm a planner, an organizer, and a scheduler—the complete opposite of “unexpected.” I always have multiple to-do lists and calendars going at once. I thrive when I know the details and a plan is in place. It can be a blessing and a curse simultaneously.

Even if you're not like me, no matter which category you fall under, I bet there is at least one area of your life where you want your plans to come through. You want things to go the way you've planned. And that's natural, because you're human. As humans, we crave control. We want things to go exactly like we've mapped out in our minds.

But the truth is, when we fixate on the details and the plans, it's easy to miss opportunities; the opportunities God creates for us to be surprised by Him.

I don't know what your Christmas season looks like this year. It might be the best one you can remember, or it's quickly becoming a season that you want to be over as soon as possible. I've been there.

Just like the Jack-in-the-Box, God wants to surprise you this Christmas season. And He is always looking for ways to use us. All we need to do is be willing, open, and leave room to be surprised and for Him to work in us and through us.

How has God surprised you in the past? And how open are you to a surprise from Him right now?

For further reading and meditation... Isaiah 43:16-21



Day 8

THE ANGEL

Terrifying. Troubling. Disturbing. Not the words we generally associate with angels. I tend to like my angels to be winged, baby-faced harpists. But we never see them pictured that way in the Bible. Generally, those who have met angels react with fear, terror, confusion, and trembling.

Encountering the glorious is not always glamorous.

When Mary, the soon-to-be mother of Jesus, is met by the angel-messenger Gabriel, she is “greatly troubled” by his greeting. I’d be troubled too if I got an email that started with “Greetings, O favored one!” Yeah, someone is trying to scam me.

Gabriel tells her she will give birth to a son. It’s not a scam, but under the circumstances this is bad news. Mary is engaged. Gabriel’s message threatens her marriage, which in turn threatens her social standing. Savior or not, this kid comes with some baggage.

Mary simply follows with a question, “How?” and a response, “I am the Lord’s servant.” She gets the pertinent details and keeps it moving. She doesn’t try to fit God into her agenda, rather she fits her life into God’s agenda.

Following Jesus may threaten our own social standing at times. We’re called to love outcasts. That might preach well, but it’s difficult to live when we become outcasts by association. As students, we may have to say “no” to social events we know won’t be healthy for us. As adults, we may have to not steal office supplies even when it’s the cultural norm. Whatever it is, situations will come when we must choose between fitting God into our agenda or fitting ourselves into His.

Choosing to fit into God’s agenda may never be glamorous, but it can be glorious. The only question is,

“How?”

To which we respond, “I am the Lord’s servant.”

For further reading and meditation...Luke 1:26-38



Day 9



THE SANTA CLAUS

There's not much more iconic than Santa at Christmas. Lines at the mall for pictures with Santa, letters mailed to Santa, Mommy kissing Santa, the family watching Miracle on 34th street.

One thing is certain -- there's much love for old St. Nick in this season. Whether you are a family who kept "the secret of Santa" alive or not, you can't deny that Christmas Eve and the notion of him leaving presents or just the sight of him brings excitement, joy and expectation to the heart of children (and maybe some adults) at Christmas.

As we turn our minds and hearts to the real reason we celebrate, one might hope we find the same excitement when we read the about the birth of Jesus and all that it means for humanity. For a lot of us, the feeling is different.

We want so badly to believe there is more wonder and more magic involved, so we manufacture it. As with a lot things on this earth, we settle for a synthetic replica of the real wonder of the birth of our Savior, Jesus. If it's not Santa, we will replace what's real with another counterfeit. It is our nature.

Let's remain thankful this holiday for the reason we celebrate.

For further reading and meditation... Hebrews 13:8



Day 10



THE ICE SKATER

I had my bout with the chicken pox at exactly the right time. Two days into the 1992 Winter Olympic Games in Lillehammer, Norway, I got itchy and all spotted up. My parents were away on vacation and my grandparents had come to town to watch my sister and I.

And now I was going to be firmly planted in front of the TV instead of school. For like a week. It would be glorious.

And it was. Except the itching.

But what I remember most about that week was my grandmother talking about how much she loved figure skating. On and on she went about Katharina Witt, Sonja Henie, Dorothy Hamil, and Peggy Fleming. The way she talked, a part of me wondered if she had missed a calling.

She did mention grace a lot, though. How graceful their movements and arms were. How graceful the outfits make it.

And most importantly, how much grace it takes to get up when you fall.

We are covered in grace so abundant our minds struggle to make sense of it sometimes, right? The fact that God, in the person of Jesus, came to earth for the hearts of you and me is breathtaking. It's more than enough grace for today and every day. We will stumble. We will fall. But we fall on immeasurable grace.

For further reading and meditation...2 Corinthians 12:8-9



Day 11



THE TRAIN

I remember being outside on the swing set in our yard when I was about three years old. It was the first time I realized that we literally had a railroad track in our backyard. As I swung high, kicking my legs back and forth, I felt the ground start to shake as the train neared, and I watched for it to come racing by. As it rounded the corner, every other sound was drowned out by its deafening horn.

As a kid, the train tracks were dangerous, and I was taught to stay away from them. The train became something that I wanted to avoid altogether. It became something that I feared.

When it comes to the Christmas season, fear isn't really something we think about. We most often associate this season with things like joy and peace. But just like I feared the train as a kid, I think there are lots of things we all fear during the Christmas season.

Maybe you're fearing what Christmas will look like, because you know your family is struggling financially. It could be what that family member is going to say or do this year at the family dinner. Or maybe it's because this season is a constant reminder of loss. The family gatherings, Christmas cards, and traditions sting because they remind you of someone's absence.

Whatever your circumstance, I can bet there's something you're fearing. But the truth is, no matter what we're facing this Christmas season, we can remember that God has given us what we need to overcome it: love. We're reminded that "perfect love casts out all fear" in 1 John, and one of the ways God has demonstrated this perfect love for us was by sending the gift of His Son to us. Because of that, we can remember and celebrate this Christmas season.

Is there anything you're fearing this Christmas season? What's one way you can remind yourself of how God has demonstrated His love for you?

For further reading and meditation...2 Timothy 1:6-7



Day 12



THE HORSE

As a child, dolls didn't interest me. Stuffed animals were good but horses were the best. One Christmas, I received a rocking horse. I lived on him—he was my constant companion. I think that every picture existing of me as a child is in overalls, astride my black and white plastic steed.

But my dream was to own the real thing. You see, we lived on a 32-acre farm equipped with pastures, fences, cows and a barn... but no horse. I saved every allowance dime and tooth fairy quarter towards the purchase of one. "When you are older," my mom would say. "Be patient." Waiting to grow up was agony—not for the typical advantages—but because I longed for horse ownership.

Then one Christmas, years later, I received a small rocking horse ornament and the permission to horse shop in the spring—more wait time. I purchased Little Joe, a black and white pinto horse with a large body and short legs. He wasn't beautiful but, oh, how I loved him! Some of the best moments of my youth were spent with my beloved Little Joe.

It seems we spend so much of our lives expectantly waiting—waiting for our turn, waiting to see, waiting to meet, waiting to heal, waiting to receive. We are instructed numerous times in scripture to be patient. Waiting is hard. But if things come too easily, they seem to have less value. The things we work and wait for are actually the most precious.

I have a rocking horse collection for my Christmas tree and every season when I hang these ornaments I reflect on the precious horses in my life...and the wait.

For further reading and meditation...James 5:7





THE CLOCK

My husband and I have drastically different perspectives on time. I like to know exactly what time it is and get annoyed when our house clocks inevitably end up slightly off from each other. Every so often I go around and make sure they're all accurate and in sync. He, on the other hand, is completely unfazed by the fact that the digital clock in our bedroom randomly gains one minute every few months. This discrepancy probably stems from the fact that I tend to run late, cutting it close as I dash out the door, while he likes to be a few minutes early.

Things came to a head recently when I realized our bedroom clock had gained a full ten minutes, and I decided enough was enough. I changed it to the correct time and my poor husband had to reset his alarm. Fortunately, though, we could laugh about our unique perspectives instead of getting frustrated.

God's perspective on time is radically different than ours. He typically chooses to operate within the laws of nature, but he is not bound by time and space the way we are. This truth can be both a source of frustration and of hope. We get irritated or discouraged when things don't happen on our timeline. But we can put our hope in God's word, knowing that what he promises will always come to pass.

The Jewish people waited hundreds of years for the promised Savior to come. They may have felt that God had forgotten his promises to them. But when we look with the perspective of passing centuries, we can clearly see that his timing was perfect. Christ the Messiah arrived exactly on time, precisely at the right moment in history.

What are you waiting for? How could you possibly look at it with God's perspective? In his timing?

For further reading and meditation...[Ecclesiastes 3:1](#)





THE TEDDY BEAR

My seven-year-old son never had a teddy bear. I mean, he has and he does. But not one he brings with him everywhere like some kids do.

No. My son doesn't go anywhere without his toys. And not just any toys. Weird toys. It's not the large, fun, fluffy toys he gravitates towards. It's the seemingly endless supply of Lego weapons and things he has created out of the smallest pieces. He really can't leave the house without a small sandwich bag full of them.

While I am tempted to evaluate the parenting mistakes I've made to encourage this behavior, I can understand his reasoning on a fundamental level.

Comfort.

He carries on this way because, in his little mind, he can't comprehend when he will return and what might come his way on his daily journey. What will he do if he is forced to sit somewhere with nothing to do? Torture. What his little bag of trinkets promises him is a piece of home and the fun that can be had there.

He is wired to long for home. A place of peace and infinite possibilities in his mind. And we are wired that way too, on a much larger and incomprehensible scale. We were created to long for the eternal, to yearn for something more than what we encounter in this life.

We were created for a home of perfect peace and infinite possibilities. I don't want to settle for a baggie of toys when I have access to eternity.

For further reading and meditation...2 Corinthians 1:3-4



Day 15



THE TREE

We had always had a real tree but this would be our first time cutting our own. Bundling up our two young girls, we explained that we were on the hunt for the perfect Christmas tree. My husband assured me that he found a tree farm with reasonably priced trees. The anticipations and expectations were high in my mind, with visions of sipping hot cocoa while meandering among the sweet aromas of Douglas firs and white pines.

A few miles away, we started seeing homemade signs: \$15 Cut Your Own. Over the river and through the woods we drove, finally ending at a decrepit, neglected, dying tree farm. Staring in dismay at the array of scraggly, misshapen, and vine-covered trees, I uttered two words: "No way." No way was I going to pay any amount of money for any tree on this farm.

The eternal optimist, my husband won out, and we did have the most ugly Christmas tree ever, and I may have reminded my husband of that fact throughout the month of December. Yet contrary to my initial assumptions, the appearance of our tree did not damper our spirits or hamper our celebrations.

Isaiah says Christ had "no beauty or majesty to attract us to him," much like our tree that year. The anticipations and expectations of him were high and hailed from the prophets of old: King, Prince, Savior, Rescuer. Yet instead of riding in with a vast army or establishing a mighty kingdom, Jesus entered the world as a helpless baby, wearing diapers and sleeping among donkeys. Unassuming and plain in outward appearance, Jesus came not to impress, but to sacrifice, not to slay enemies but to die for them.

In God's grand design, assumptions are turned upside down. The least become great, the last become first, and a baby saves the world by dying on a cross. May that ugly tree stand as a reminder of a Savior who laid his life down so we could live.

For further reading and meditation...Isaiah 53:2b





THE CHILDREN

In any conversation about having children, parents always begin by telling me the horror stories: the sleepless nights, the tantrums, the time little Timmy jumped off the couch and put a butt-shaped dent in the drywall. But the epilogue is always the same as well: having children is the best thing they ever did. They wouldn't trade parenting for anything.

While I think the structure of their stories is an ineffective marketing strategy, I do believe the beauty outweighs any of the challenges. If nothing else, our children can teach us about God and about ourselves.

Jesus has a high view of children. He says of children, "the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these." I wonder if he has such a high regard for children, in part, because he remembers being a child himself: a time of complete dependence on another person for his growth and wellbeing. A dependence he never lost, only transferred from his earthly parents to his heavenly Father.

Christians love to talk about having "childlike faith." But, if we're honest, is that what we really want? Don't we instead prefer autonomy over dependence? Don't we prefer structure over freedom? Don't we prefer safety and clarity over adventure and mystery? I don't know about you, but I tend to answer yes to all those questions.

Jesus came into our existence as a child. As an adult, he elevated the status of children. They possess something time and trials may have taken from us. They are guideposts back to dependence, to imagination, to freedom, and to adventure. Jesus doesn't allow the children to be hindered from coming to him. Neither should we hinder ourselves from doing the same.

For further reading and meditation... Mark 10:13-16





THE BELLS

Have you had a time when peace seemed out of reach? Have you ever experienced that dissonance in your heart between what you feel in your life and the peace that God has called you to? It reminds me of a time, barely after dawn, while the streets were still quiet and the morning was still dark. The century-old bells in Florence, Italy, would greet morning with their song. You could hear it all across the city. I couldn't get over the sound as it would pour through the windows in the small flat we rented.

If a sound could surround you in peace and harmony – the call of those bells did. Before we go further, Google “Morning Bells in Florence, Italy”. Close your eyes and listen before reading on. Seriously. Do it.

Outwardly, Christ endured one of the most troubled lives lived. Turmoil and heartbreak, until he was laid in a tomb. Yet we see an inner life of peace, a sea of calm, harmony like the sound of morning bells at dawn. Even as he was preparing to be taken captive, he turned to his followers and offered them: “My peace.” Jesus said: “I am leaving you with a gift—peace of mind and heart. And the peace I give is a gift the world cannot give. So don't be troubled or afraid.” (John 14:27)

Even though your night is dark and long, it's not resolve from your circumstance that will give you rest. As the bells ring in the morning, sure and steadfast even after the night, let the peace that God gives freely surround you. It's a state of calm rising from a heart deeply satisfied in Him.

For further reading and meditation...

“And in despair I bowed my head;
“There is no peace on earth,” I said;
“For hate is strong,
And mocks the song
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!”
Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:
“God is not dead, nor doth He sleep;
The Wrong shall fail,
The Right prevail,
With peace on earth, good-will to men.”

-Henry Wadsworth Longfellow



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THE AIRPLANE

I waited eight years to board this flight. In my family, I wasn't allowed to take this trip until I was at least 18 years old. It was the flight to a country I'd fallen deeply in love with from afar, to meet people I'd heard about for years, and to serve on the ground at a ministry to which I was already deeply connected. That country was Ethiopia and that ministry is Carry 117. And that flight was 13 hours long.

Before this trip, I was more than a bit anxious leading up to takeoff. It was my first time flying across the ocean and going out of the country. It turned out the flight was great. The landing? Not so much.

Slow, almost serene at first. Everything seemed normal. The wheels touched the ground so peacefully. Soon, though, the forces on our bodies made it clear that something was not right. We whipped to the right, then back left quickly. People had fallen out of their seats. It seemed like the plane might roll over.

But as suddenly as everything had gone wrong, it steadied and rolled straight on the runway. It was surreal. The slowest and fastest moment of my life. Every bit as scary as it was quick.

Maybe for you, this Christmas season is a little like my landing in Ethiopia.

Slow. Fast. Chaotic. Alarming. Turbulent. Unpredictable.

The good news? While those things may be experienced, we can also experience a peace that is incomparable to any other through Jesus. It's a peace that's greater than anything we can explain or imagine, and a peace that's greater than any circumstance we might experience this Christmas season.

No matter what you may be experiencing this Christmas season, whether it's chaos and busyness or anxiety and hurt, I pray that God would remind you of the peace he provides.

For further reading and meditation...Philippians 4:4-9



Day 19



THE SNOWMAN

Growing up, I don't remember my dad in the little, mundane aspects of life. I don't remember watching much TV with him, or doing ordinary things like eating dinner. We were a busy family and he worked hard.

What I do remember are the big events. The birthdays, the baseball games, the vacations. Often what's big to a young boy isn't so much to everyone else.

But there was the snowman.

It had snowed 12 inches. Finally enough to get dad to rethink his work commute and call it off. He spent nearly every minute of that snow day with me. The snow was perfect, crunching softly beneath our feet as we walked.

Dad started rolling a snowball. By the time we got home, our ball was over five feet tall. Huge. We rolled another one slightly smaller, and struggled to get it on top of the first. Then the ladder came out and we rolled a small ball for his head. Dad lifted that up on top. Our snowman was almost 10 feet tall.

It's funny what we remember.

It lasted for a couple weeks and finally melted away. While the physical product of our time together was temporary, the emotional product lasts even now. We just never know what our time might mean to someone else.

For further reading and meditation... Proverbs 3:27





THE SLED

Most of my sledding memories involve a whole lot of hollering and laughter and boisterous fun. As a child, the nearby elementary school was the favorite gathering place for all ages to spend an afternoon, and my brother and I could usually convince my mom to drive us there on a snow day. And now as an adult, my own children are the ones begging me to sled with them, and I happily oblige, our screams mingling as we bump and jostle down the hill behind our house. But as I scrolled through my sledding memories, one stood out as different from the rest --- softer, quieter, almost enchanted.

My neighbor friend had asked me to sleep over that night, but after dinner a major snowstorm began threatening my plans. I peeked through the window to watch the fat snowflakes already pouring out of a darkening night sky, hoping my parents would allow me to go. Her house wasn't far, but it still made driving dangerous. My dad suggested we take my kiddie sled, offering to pull me to my friend's house by the white rope attached to the front.

Imagine a night sky like an upturned velvety blanket, cascading fluffy yet delicate snowflakes onto the waiting earth. Imagine streetlights casting a soft yellow hue into an otherwise dark and shadowy road. A soft hush falls; all is silent except for footsteps forging a path through the pure, unadulterated snow. I lay back and breathed deeply, folded my arms behind my head and watched the snowflakes descend in a rhythmic dance, twirling and swirling and finally landing on my upturned nose. It was otherworldly, Narnia-like, a moment forever captured and now stored as a memory with tinges of enchantment. We would have missed it if we had been in a rush.

In a season that hails wonder and magic, it's easy to fall into rhythms of hurry and busy. And in our rush of doing, how many of us miss out on the marvel of being? Resolve to slow your rhythms this Christmas, to break routine. Breathe deeply; notice those around you. Find joy in the simple things, the common things. Carve out some time and space to give thanks to the One we are celebrating - the Creator of all that is beautiful and wonderful.

For further reading and meditation...Luke 5:26



Day 21

THE SOLDIER

Of all the toys I had growing up, G.I. Joes were by far the ones I played with most. As a kid I dreamed of being a soldier. There is something about the soldier that drew me in. Adventure, heroism, bravery...these are the hallmarks of the soldier, and above all these: sacrifice. A soldier intentionally goes towards danger to protect and defend others, sometimes at the cost of his own life. There is nothing greater than a love like this.

I never pursued those childhood dreams. It just wasn't my path. It was my brother's, however. He joined the army, becoming a combat medic and serving in Iraq and Afghanistan. He became a hero, saving the lives of many who would have otherwise perished. The cost for him was terrible. He paid the ultimate price for the rescue of others. My brother's sacrifice showed me the terrible, messy beauty of love.

Sacrifice is noble.
Sacrifice defends others.
Sacrifice is heroic.

But there is always a cost. It is never pretty. Sacrificial love is both beautiful and terrible.

The Christmas Story brings with it both sides of the soldier's story. In Jesus we see the beauty of sacrificial love in a little baby heralded by choirs of angels. In Jesus we also see the terror of sacrificial love in the horror of the cross, when heaven was silent and the one who saved us died, despised and alone. The love that caused God to send his only son for us was expressed through an execution. But the price Jesus paid brought freedom and hope for us. His sacrifice didn't end in tragedy. With His sacrifice came resurrection and beauty that would put an end to all tragedy and terror.

For further reading and meditation...John 15:13



Day 22



THE HOUSE

Most of my childhood memories are tied to a single place – the farmhouse where I grew up. Each room holds a thousand stories. Holding hands around the groaning Thanksgiving table. Helping my mom make raspberry jam and homemade bread. Thawing out by the woodstove in the winter. Reading in bed late at night with a flashlight under the covers. Sitting on the kitchen floor, watching my kids hold a baby goat for the first time. The farmhouse is part of who I am. For many years, it meant home.

As an adult, I've called many places home. We've lived in seven different places over the years, on both coasts and overseas. We've logged over 13,000 miles just in moving travel. For my kids, home has been less about a place and more about making memories wherever we've landed. My parents, on the other hand, lived in their farmhouse for more than 45 years, with roots planted deep. Our concept of home can take different forms.

What does home mean to you? Is it a house? A town? A relationship? A feeling of always being welcome?

God's word tells us that this earth is not our home. We are merely sojourners here, travelers passing through on the way to our eternal home in heaven. We see glimpses of our longing for eternity – the pain of saying farewell to friends or the disappointment when something good comes to an end. Our earthly home is not meant to last. We were created for an eternal one, built by God himself.

For further reading and meditation...2 Corinthians 5:1

Day 23



THE NATIVITY

We are almost too familiar with the nativity story. Gabriel the angel comes to a young girl with a strange message. Curious and confused, still Mary accepts this sacred mission. "I am the Lord's servant." And she believed.

But Joseph was hurt, betrayed, and embarrassed. An angel comes to him also, in a dream. "Do not be afraid, Joseph." And Joseph believed.

The day came; the baby was born. But there was no angel, and no voice from heaven. He didn't look like a king or a God - just a baby. Could this really be the Messiah?

And then noise outside, hurried footsteps, shouts, a knock at the door - and a bunch of dirty, smelly shepherds burst into the tiny stable, speaking of angels and bright light and a Savior in a manger. And they saw too, and they believed.

I can picture Mary, quietly observing the commotion, a proud smile on her pretty face, heart bursting with emotion. A soft grin slowly works itself into a full smile. God brought these shepherds here for her, to confirm to her wondering mind what she already knew in her heart. Yes, this is the Messiah! The angels told us too, a whole army of them in the sky!

They were astonished, but she was not. She had known all along. She'd had nine months to ponder, to pray, to watch the story unfold in her womb, each moment a treasure leading up to this moment - in this stable, with Joseph and the babe and a ragtag bunch of sheep herders. Sometimes the miracle is in the quiet trust of a humble heart...a heart that sets aside agendas and fears and simply believes.

For further reading and meditation...Luke 2:19



THE BABY

There are three days etched in my memory forever: the days my three children were born. Each of them arrived in their own particular idiom. One took his time. The other caused an emergency. The last stirred up trouble before she even arrived. The first time I saw each of them changed me forever; each time I held my children, each first with them, has forever altered me. I am known by many people, but there are only three who call me, "Dad." I will never get over that.

There's something about babies. New life. They smell amazing, except when they don't. They are brand new and full of potential. Their whole lives are literally in front of them, bringing the wonder of the unknown and the anxiety of the uncertain. They can't give anything, produce anything, accomplish anything, and they are completely dependent for all of their needs.

The wonder of the future is wrapped in a present of total vulnerability.

This is how the Son of God entered our world: in total vulnerability and dependence. He was born in to a much harsher, much less forgiving world than our own children, but I imagine the experience was much the same for Joseph and Mary. The awe and wonder at the first sight of their child. The overwhelming sense of love and protectiveness when first holding him. The same wonder, the same anxiety, the same helplessness, the same dependence.

Jesus entered the world and left the world in exactly the same way. Totally dependent. And totally surrendered.

For further reading and meditation...Isaiah 9:6



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