

ANTICIPATE AND BE PREPARED

So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him.

MATTHEW 24:44 (NIV)

Be dressed ready for service and keep your lamps burning.

LUKE 12:35 (NIV)

As people were reeling from the devastation of three major hurricanes (Harvey in Texas, Irma in Florida, and Maria in the Caribbean Islands and Puerto Rico), it dawned on me that in spite of all of today's technology and instantaneous information, many residents still were not prepared enough. People everywhere were being warned to evacuate and to prepare for the worst — but many didn't (or couldn't).

We are always trying to anticipate and be prepared: for emergencies, for holidays and birthdays, for vacations, and so on. It seems as if we are constantly checking the calendar for future events. But how many of us remember to be prepared for His glorious return? Our hearts and minds should always be ready. Jesus Himself warned us to be prepared.

The Christmas season is the perfect time to reflect and take stock of our hearts and souls. Let us be childlike in our excitement that He will return to us again, and let us be prepared for His Second Coming. It could be any day, any time ... are you ready?

Heavenly Father, thank you for guiding my thoughts and plans to do your will. Help me to always live in anticipation and readiness for Jesus' return. I ask this in the precious name of Jesus. Amen.

KATHY CHANDO
ZION COMMUNITY CHURCH

Love is what's in the room with you at Christmas
if you stop opening presents and listen.

*Author unknown, attributed to
a 7-year-old named Bobby*

THE BEST GIFT MY PARENTS GAVE ME

If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!

MATTHEW 7:11 (NIV)

The best gift ever was not the bride doll or the doll in the red snowsuit or even the blue bike that I was surprised to find parked beside our Christmas tree when I was seven.

The best gift my parents gave me was their example of how to live a Christian life. It wasn't until I grew up that I appreciated so much how their example impacted my life and my choices.

They did not just send me to church; we all went to church together. They did not say be honest; they showed me how. They didn't say respect other people; they were an example of respect.

We were a reserved family — not a lot of hugging and kissing — but we children always knew we were loved. Love was demonstrated with actions. We didn't always have what we wanted, but our parents certainly provided what we needed.

Proverbs 22:6 says to “Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it.”

The Message says it like this: “Point your kids in the right direction; when they're old they won't be lost.”

Father, help us not to get caught up in the gift-giving aspect of Christmas but to remember that the best gift we can give our children is our example of a Christian life. You showed us giving when you gave your Son so we can have eternal life in you.

CAROL MULLEN

EVANGELICAL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

This was originally printed in the *Devotions for Advent 2011* book. It is being reprinted here by the editors in memory of Rose Lyons, Carol's mom, who died in September 2017, at the age of 100. She was a Christian inspiration and encouragement to all who knew her.

STARRY NIGHT IN MAINE

The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.
PSALM 19:1 (NIV)

One evening this past September as we were vacationing in Maine, we realized our house reflected one of only two lights to be seen on our very large lake. Around midnight, I awoke and made my way through the dark house. Approaching the windows overlooking the water, my eyes were drawn upward to the millions of stars! The night sky was spectacular, with the Milky Way directly overhead stretching from one edge of the sky to the other. As I gazed at these incredibly bright stars, I was amazed, awe-struck, even speechless. What a night for stargazing!

Back in bed, I tried to sleep, but I kept thinking of the Wise Men “reading” their night sky. They also saw millions of stars, but one stood out more brilliantly than all the others. What must that have looked like in the huge expanse of stars? Hadn’t they studied ancient Scripture about the coming Messiah? Didn’t they know?

The Bible tells us the Magi traveled about a thousand miles, following that incredible star, to see “the one who has been born King of the Jews.” They didn’t casually brush off this news, but instead brought expensive gifts of gold (for His Kingship), frankincense (a gift for deity), and myrrh (used in burials for embalming) to present to Jesus, this newborn King.

The next time you have an opportunity to be outside on a dark night, look up and stand in silence and awe. Marvel over your Creator and how He hung every star in place. Remember the Magi who followed a star that miraculously appeared and led them. Above all, be thankful that the One who made the universe cares so much about you that He died for you.

Father God, Creator of the universe, let us never forget how small we are, how infinite you are, and how much you care for us. Amen.

JUDY FRETT
TRINITY UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

See page 28 for O.Henry’s story, *The Gift of the Magi*.

REPLACING THE SHADOWS

Now the main point in what has been said is this: we have such a high priest, who has taken His seat at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens, a minister in the sanctuary, and in the true tabernacle, which the Lord pitched, not man.

HEBREWS 8:1–2 (NASB)

The point of the book of Hebrews is that Jesus Christ, God's Son, has not just come to fit into the earthly system of priestly ministry as the best and final human priest, but He has come to fulfill and put an end to that system and to orient all our attention on Himself, ministering for us in heaven. The Old Testament tabernacle and priests and sacrifices were *shadows*. Now the reality has come, and the shadows pass away.

Here's an Advent illustration for kids (and for those of us who used to be kids and remember what it was like):

Suppose you and your mom get separated in the grocery store, and you start to get scared and panic and don't know which way to go. You run to the end of an aisle, and just before you start to cry, you see a shadow on the floor at the end of the aisle that looks just like your mom. It makes you really happy and you feel hope.

But which is better? The happiness of seeing the shadow or having your mom step around the corner and seeing that it's really her?

That's the way it is when Jesus comes to be our High Priest. That's what Christmas is. Christmas is the replacement of shadows with the *real thing*.

Father God, thank you for the reality of your Son with us. Let us live every day fully aware of your incredible Gift. In Jesus' name, Amen.

PASTOR RICHARD WORKMAN
ZION COMMUNITY CHURCH

A Christmas candle is a lovely thing;
It makes no noise at all,
But softly gives itself away.
Eva Logue

INFINITELY LOVED

He counts the number of the stars; he names all of them.

PSALMS 147:4 (NET)

The feeling of taking off in a plane will never get old. Every time I find myself lifted from the ground, it is like I have been detached from the world below, allowing my mind to be opened to think in ways I never previously have.

Often I find myself in awe at the seemingly countless number of people in this world. When I'm flying, it's so much easier to see. Out the window, the number of lights dotting the surface of the earth is as infinite as the stars in the sky. The sky stretches on forever in every direction. This world is just so BIG. Is anyone else on the plane like me, looking down at the twinkling city lights below, wondering about those millions of strangers and the untold memories that reside within them? It's quite fascinating, really, how many of us are on this earth, yet we still seem to make connections wherever we go. In a world so big, how do so many overlaps and intersections bring us together?

As I marvel at the vastness of the world, it also scares me. How can such a big world be so loved? The answer is simple: a BIG God. Bigger than comprehensibly possible. And, in some mysteriously powerful way, He loves us all. And He knows us all. Individually. That, I think, is one of the most amazing things about life. God knows each and every one of us, and He puts us all into His plan. All those crossroads and connections aren't accidents. He made this world for a purpose. Like the stars, He named us all and He knows us all. Though the sky may seem infinite, we are His children, and He loves us all in a way that no one else can understand — infinitely.

God, thank you for knowing each of us by name, and like the stars, may we continue to live our lives allowing your glorious light to shine through us.

RACHAEL KELLEY

TRINITY UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

It is Christmas in the heart that
puts Christmas in the air.

W.T. Ellis

A SAVIOR IS BORN TO US

*For unto us is born this day in the city of David a Savior,
which is Christ the Lord. LUKE 2:11 (KJV)*

*And we have seen and do testify that the Father sent the Son to be
the Savior of the world. 1 JOHN 4:14 (KJV)*

And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Savior. LUKE 1:47 (KJV)

What if there had never been a Savior born to us? What would we be like, living in this world without our Savior to turn to in times of trouble, sorrow, and sickness, and to show us how to become righteous people?

I'm thankful I have this Savior to talk with and to lean on for guidance. He is someone to whom I can offer up my prayers and concerns. In my long life there have been Christian friends, places to live, inspirational church involvement, enough nourishment, the enjoyment of God's beautiful world, and a mind capable of reading the Bible and meeting the challenges of life. I praise God for making it so.

Scripture says, "In everything give thanks for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you." (1 Thessalonians 5:18) Earlier this year I went through a big change in my life, including several stays at the hospital; long, hard, difficult hours of therapy at rehabilitation centers; and getting situated into new living quarters. I continually thank my Lord for getting me through the ordeal, supplying my needs, and answering my prayers. Adapting to living at this new place has come easily in the making of dear friends and a real feeling of belonging. Surely, I've come to know what God can do!

Following are meaningful and touching words to a song I've played at church that says a lot for my Savior:

Life is a symphony
Since the Man of Galilee
Changed my discords into song,
Made life sweet the whole day long.
Life is a symphony,
Praise the Man of Galilee
No more a stranger,
He is the arranger of my symphony.

(Words and music arrangement by Beatrice Bush Bixler)

Dear God, thank you for your Son, Jesus our Savior, who is so needed today. We praise you for always being with us, and let us never forget to "glorify your name" (Psalm 86:9) forever and ever. In your precious Name, Amen.

HELEN DUNK
ZION COMMUNITY CHURCH

EXPECTATIONS

Confused and disturbed, Mary tried to think what the angel could mean. "Don't be afraid, Mary," the angel told her, "for you have found favor with God! You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus."
LUKE 1: 29-31 (NLT)

When Mary woke up that morning, I don't think she was expecting the angel Gabriel to give her the news that she had been chosen to bear the Son of God. I'm sure that news was not on her agenda for that day. But aren't our lives full of expectations? Things like:

- My spouse will always love me.
- My children will never be in trouble.
- I will never get seriously ill.

We all know sometimes the above does not happen, and we turn to God and ask why. With hope, we ask that He will hold us close and give us the strength to come out on the other side of troubling events in our lives.

Or you could subscribe to the philosophy of keeping your expectations low — that way you will never be disappointed. I have held to this philosophy at varying points in my life when I was hurt by others. I remember thinking, "Well, just don't expect them to help, finish what they started, or make the right or best choices."

Perhaps that worked for a while, but in the end, I had to resolve that *my expectations* were perhaps not the life path *they* chose or how *they* made their decisions. I had to give up control. How many times have we heard that we should give up control? We are not in control. God is. And I believe that no matter what we may expect or long for, we must remain open to hear God speaking in our lives.

So, let us give thanks that Mary was open to God's hand in her life. May we all be able to reply as she did in Luke 1:38: "I am the Lord's servant. May everything you have said about me come true."

May you keep your spiritual expectations high this Advent season, may you find joy in celebrating the birth of Jesus, may you be surrounded by the love of family and friends, and may the peace of our dear Lord find you and hold you tight.

Heavenly Father, we thank you for the birth of your Son, Jesus, given to us for the forgiveness of sins and the promise of eternal life for all those who believe in Him. Be with us this Advent season as we celebrate His birth. Amen.

BRENDA FREITAG
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