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NORTH AMERICAN BAPTIST CONFERENCE

DEVOTIONALS FOR
ADVENT – WEEK 1
DECEMBER 3–9, 2023



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NORTH AMERICAN BAPTIST CONFERENCE

December 3

God With Us

By Michael Benson

“All right then, the Lord himself will give you the sign. Look! The virgin will conceive a child! She will give birth to a son and will call him Immanuel (which means ‘God is with us’).” (Isaiah 7:14 NLT)

Julia Child first came to national attention with the publication of her first book, *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*, co-authored with Simone Beck and Louisette Bertholle. Just two years after its publication, Child was given another platform for spreading her love of fine food: her own cooking show, *The French Chef*.

The first episode of *The French Chef* aired in February 1963. Just one year later, Child earned a Peabody Award for her work on the show, followed by a Primetime Emmy in 1966. The same year she earned her Emmy, *Time* magazine noted, “Let Julia Child so much as mention vanilla wafers, and the shelves are empty overnight.” Her influence in the kitchen was unparalleled.

By all appearances, *The French Chef* was a one-woman show. To be sure, there were camera operators and other personnel who assisted in getting each episode to living rooms across the continent, but Child was alone in the kitchen; she had no sous chef or assistant to help her. Yet despite appearances to the contrary, she was not alone. A behind-the-scenes picture from the first year of *The French Chef* shows a side view of Child at the kitchen counter where she worked, with five individuals seated on the floor behind her and off to the side. Due to the low budget of the show, Child would only get one chance to make that week’s dish, and there was no accounting for time to rifle through cabinets, cupboards, or fridge. In the picture, each of the five people on the floor is holding a dish or an ingredient or a utensil that Child will need at some point during the show.

This image of Julia Child in the middle of her element being assisted by a collection of others, allowing her to do what she did so well, is similar to what God does with us. He does not leave us to fend for ourselves; he is right there with us in the midst of our everyday lives, both the mundane and the extraordinary. This is what it means when we talk about Jesus as Immanuel – “God with us.” Through the omnipresence of the Holy Spirit, God is able to be with us, supporting us and helping us be the best version of ourselves.

This concept of God with us is not just theology, it is also our example to follow. If we are striving to be like Jesus, we must work to be with people in the midst of their everyday lives, both mundane and extraordinary. We, too, must practice being *with* our neighbors, friends, family, coworkers, and even strangers.

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Are you willing to be the kind of person who metaphorically, or maybe literally, sits on the floor to be with other people and support them through all their highs and lows and help them be the best version of themselves? If not, invite the Holy Spirit to work with you so that you might reflect Jesus's heart to be with others.

Michael Benson is the communications director for the North American Baptist Conference.

December 4

Fallen Leaves

By David Curtis

All of us have become like something unclean,
and all our righteous acts are like a polluted garment;
all of us wither like a leaf,
and our iniquities carry us away like the wind.

[. . .]

Yet LORD, you are our Father;
we are the clay, and you are our potter;
we all are the work of your hands.
LORD, do not be terribly angry
or remember our iniquity forever.
Please look—all of us are your people! (Isaiah 64:6, 8–9 CSB)

It is early November as I reflect on these words from Isaiah 64. Where I am in western Oregon, we are surrounded by the falling leaves and the inevitable clean up that follows. As I ponder the leaves and Isaiah's words, I am reminded of the annual school project of finding and bringing a leaf into class to be studied and admired. We made impressions of those leaves and found great beauty in their design. Hold that thought with me and read the passage again.

Did you notice that Isaiah compares us to the leaves that wither and fall to the ground? And not only are we fallen leaves, but we are fallen leaves that are blown about by the wind as one who is blown about by their sins.

Part of the annual tradition of the falling leaves is the inevitable gathering of the leaves. In our town, we pile them up on the side of the streets for the city to pick them up and take them away. This is only possible because the leaves behave differently when they are gathered. Like us, in community the leaves once piled up find strength from their fellow leaves, strength enough to stand against the blowing winds.

Verses 8–9 draw our attention to the dynamic of community on us as the people of God. Instead of being blown about by the wind, when we are together we experience the shaping power of God's Holy Spirit. This shaping by our good Father, who is referred to here as the potter, uses community to shape us, strengthen us, and prepare us for the next season of life.

Know that as you feel blown about by the winds of this life that your Heavenly Father desires you to be connected to community, for it is in community that we experience his best for us.

David Curtis is the lead pastor of Salt Creek Baptist Church in Dallas, Oregon.

December 5

Christmas Is Alive

By Sarah Sciarini

Please listen, O Shepherd of Israel,
you who lead Joseph's descendants like a flock.
O God, enthroned above the cherubim,
display your radiant glory
to Ephraim, Benjamin, and Manasseh.
Show us your mighty power.
Come to rescue us!

Turn us again to yourself, O God.
Make your face shine down upon us.
Only then will we be saved.
O LORD God of Heaven's Armies,
how long will you be angry with our prayers?
You have fed us with sorrow
and made us drink tears by the bucketful.
You have made us the scorn of neighboring nations.
Our enemies treat us as a joke.

Turn us again to yourself, O God of Heaven's Armies.
Make your face shine down upon us.
Only then will we be saved. (Psalm 80:1-7 NLT)

I've always loved the Advent season. The sense of eager anticipation of what is to come has always compelled me to excitement. For me, the process of waiting and preparing for something is almost as good as the actual event. Of course, our Advent waiting and anticipation is accompanied by the nostalgic comfort of beloved traditions and festivities. Lights and trees, carefully decorated sugar cookies, fancy wrapping paper, and the smell of scotch tape. Toddlers fumbling around in church Christmas plays while proud parents look on. Sipping hot cocoa from festive mugs. I soak those things in each year and call it the "Christmas Spirit."

In contrast, in our text from Psalm 80, the anticipation of goodness was a desperate hope, and the festivities we enjoy during this particular waiting season are nowhere to be found. The psalmist is asking God for salvation and restoration from the current troubles and challenges faced by the nation of Israel. As our passage begins, we're offered the imagery of God as the "Shepherd of Israel" in a plea for respite from God's displeasure and from their enemies.

If we're being honest and we remove the festivities from our current cultural moment, in this season of Advent, is the despair expressed by the psalmist that far removed from our own reality? The oppressive feeling that all is wrong and the longing for God to come and shepherd us through these difficulties feels familiar and internal.

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The word Advent means “arrival.” It’s sort of a new year or new beginning for people of faith. But there’s a unique tension we live in here as people of God. Author and poet Michelle Blake describes this tension like this: “One of the essential paradoxes of Advent: that while we wait for God, we are with God all along, that while we need to be reassured of God’s arrival, or the arrival of our homecoming, we are already at home. While we wait, we have to trust, to have faith, but it is God’s grace that gives us that faith. As with all spiritual knowledge, two things are true, and equally true, at once. The mind can’t grasp paradox; it is the knowledge of the soul.”

Some of us have become experts in doubt as self-preservation because expecting good things is risky. We’ve just witnessed too much, experienced too much. The privilege we share in the hopeful anticipation of the Christ child is that we know the story from beginning to end.

But even when we’re not sure how our story of wait will end, there is relief when we remember the beauty of the incarnation and the way God offers grace on grace is not contingent on our ability to feel and appreciate it.

In the town of David, a child is born, and he will be called Immanuel—God with us.

He’s the God with us.

He is with us.

It isn’t just a story. It’s real. It’s true – the kingdoms and crowns, the stables and the angels. Christmas is real and living and breathing, and He is here with us. So often, we’re longing for something we already have—an invisible God accessible to humble humans.

Sarah Sciarini is the director of communications for First Baptist Church in Lodi, California, and NorCal NAB. She is also a part of EYELET working to elevate the voices of younger leaders in the NAB.

December 6

Poor Little Critter

By Adam Buyer

So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (2 Corinthians 5:16–21 NIV)

Each December, my wife and I pull out all our Christmas themed children's books. A favourite of mine is Mercer Mayer's *Merry Christmas, Mom and Dad*, part of her Little Critter series. Page after page, Little Critter attempts, but fails, to make Christmas great for his family. He damages the house decorating, eats all the cookies meant to be gifts, covers himself in tape while trying to wrap presents, and breaks all the Christmas ornaments while attempting to decorate the tree. Poor Little Critter!

This cute story highlights Christmas in far greater ways than initially intended. Plagued by his limitations and mistakes, Little Critter required significant help to make Christmas special for him and his family. Yet, despite all his failings, the final page of the story shows Little Critter triumphing in the joys of Christmas morning; his parents had succeeded in accomplishing all he could not.

Are we not all like Little Critter, scrambling through life attempting to make everything "right?" Yet, we too are confronted with our limitations and mistakes; we too need someone to succeed in accomplishing for us what we cannot accomplish on our own.

This is what we celebrate at Christmas: our God who sees our failings and, instead of pushing us away, comes to us in the midst of them and does for us what we could never have accomplished on our own.

This passage – 2 Corinthians 5:16–21 – resounds with this triumph. It testifies to the reconciliation we have to God because of Immanuel, Jesus, God with us. What we celebrate at Christmas is the gift of reconciliation coming to us. As it says in verse 21, "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." Jesus came and did for us what we could never do for ourselves so that we might experience joy. So, like Little Critter, our limitations and failings do not need to end in despair because, in Christ, they can end in triumph.

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As we journey through this Advent season, may we not turn a blind eye to our own insufficiencies; rather, let us allow them to help us see the profound and beautiful gift of God doing for us in Christ what we could never do on our own.

Adam Buyer is an associate pastor at Terwillegar Community Church in Edmonton, Alberta. He will also serve as one of the morning devotional leaders at the 2024 Triennial.

Past, Present, Future

By Michael Benson

“Now learn this lesson from the fig tree: As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near. Even so, when you see these things happening, you know that it is near, right at the door. Truly I tell you, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.

“But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Be on guard! Be alert! You do not know when that time will come. It’s like a man going away: He leaves his house and puts his servants in charge, each with their assigned task, and tells the one at the door to keep watch.

“Therefore keep watch because you do not know when the owner of the house will come back—whether in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or at dawn. If he comes suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping. What I say to you, I say to everyone: ‘Watch!’” (Mark 13:28–37 NIV)

Within the realm of physics, the first dimension is often described as a line (length), the second dimension as a square (length and height), and the third as a cube (length, height, and depth); this is why we often think of our world as three dimensional. However, according to Albert Einstein, we actually live in a four-dimensional world. Not only do we occupy space along the three different axes of length, height, and depth – what math labels as the x , y , and z axes – we also occupy time. This is the fourth dimension.

This is mind-bending stuff that can be difficult to understand. The basic idea is that without the fourth dimension of time, all of history – everything that has come before and everything that ever will come – would happen in a single instance. On one hand, this would make scheduling the seemingly endless parade of holiday events so much easier; they would all happen at the same time, along with everything else. On the other, much bigger, hand, our human minds are not built to understand reality in this way. Thankfully, we are perfectly suited to thinking about our four-dimensional world in terms of past, present, and future.

This season, Advent, is a perfect example of this. Not only is it a celebration of the past (the birth of the Christ-child Jesus in Bethlehem), it is also the anticipation of the future (the Son of Man’s return one day and the ultimate restoration of all things), both of which – celebration and anticipation – happen in the present. Yesterday, today, and tomorrow are entangled together during this season as we join with the first-century Israelites in awaiting the arrival of the Messiah. As they were calling out for Christ to come, so, too, we call out for his return, knowing that only then will everything broken, unjust, and flawed be made right.

Yet, even as we look toward the future and remember the past, God is very much right here with us in the present. Jesus says so himself in Matthew 28:20, “Be sure of this: I am with you

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always, even to the end of the age.” In the midst of us waiting for the return of the second person of the Trinity – Jesus – the third person of the Trinity – the Holy Spirit – is already present and with us.

To put it another way, even as we await the full restoration of all things, God is already giving us glimpses of what this restoration looks like. He is working in and through us, his people, to mend broken hearts, bandage the wounds of injustice, and correct the systemic flaws so prevalent in our world. Therefore, it is our task – though many would describe it instead as a privilege – to have eyes open to what God is doing in our world in order that we might join with him where he is already at work. As Jesus commands in today’s passage, “Keep watch.”

This Advent, practice keeping watch for God at work in our world; then, in addition to praising his name for his redemptive work, ask him where there is space for you to join in that work. Let’s use this season as a chance to announce the Kingdom that has come, is here now, and is still to come in all its fullness.

Michael Benson is the communications director for the North American Baptist Conference.

December 8

The Shepherd's Way

By Karen Wilk

But you, Bethlehem, David's country,
the runt of the litter—
From you will come the leader
who will shepherd-rule Israel.
He'll be no upstart, no pretender.
His family tree is ancient and distinguished.
Meanwhile, Israel will be in foster homes
until the birth pangs are over and the child is born,
And the scattered brothers come back
home to the family of Israel.
He will stand tall in his shepherd-rule by GOD's strength,
centered in the majesty of GOD-Revealed.
And the people will have a good and safe home,
for the whole world will hold him in respect—
Peacemaker of the world! (Micah 5:2–4 MSG)

“And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah,
for from you shall come a ruler
who is to shepherd my people Israel.” (Matthew 2:6 NRSV)

A ruler who shepherds? A shepherd who rules?

Considering the 'rulers' wielding power today, and those in Jesus's day as well, a shepherd-ruler sounds like a contradiction in terms. Yet, according to Old Testament writers (e.g., Psalm 78, 2 Samuel 5:2), a shepherd was the ideal king! And God's rule was described as being that of a shepherd's (e.g., Psalm 23, 80; Genesis 48:15, 49:24; Isaiah 40:10a–11).

Despite these accounts, few folks imagined or longed for a Shepherd Messiah-King. Given the political servitude and economic oppression at the time of Christ's coming, they wanted a powerful warrior ruler who would come in triumph and conquer in might. Perhaps things haven't changed much, yet how ironic. The Sent One lies in a manger, innocent and vulnerable, his arrival more like a shepherd's than an avenging king's.

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The Shepherd's Way

But how does a shepherd rule?

A shepherd does not control like a cowboy in an old Western. Ranchers constrain cattle from behind with prods and pokes. With whips and lassos, they steer their beasts, enforcing their will with fear and intimidation.

In contrast, shepherds assume a different posture amongst their flocks, as Jesus explains in John 10:

- They know their sheep by name (10:3, 4, 14). Jesus knows you and your neighbours by name.
- They lead from among, so the sheep know and trust them.
- Shepherds go ahead to make a way and be the way to green pastures and still waters (Psalm 23), carrying the vulnerable, seeking the lost ones, ensuring the flock is safe and provided for—like Jesus. He takes on our frailties.

Jesus, the Good Shepherd lives among, loves with abandon, and walks alongside like no other.

REFLECT:

The incarnation reminds us (among other things) that God's way among us is the Shepherd's way. How might our way among our neighbours also be the Shepherd's way? How might we hear his voice and deepen our trust in the Good Shepherd, who has gone ahead of us into our neighbourhoods? How might we discover, anew or for the first time, green pastures and the good news of great joy: Immanuel, God with us right where we are?

RESPOND:

- Today, pay attention to your own responses, attitudes, and actions and those of others (on your street, at work, out in public, in the media). Notice whether they are more shepherd-like or cowboy-style. What do you learn as you reflect on your observations?
- Ponder anew what it means for you that Jesus is your Good Shepherd. How might you be more like the Good Shepherd 'leading' with presence, love, humility, and grace in your neighbourhood? Try engaging with a neighbour in the Shepherd's way today.

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Come Lord Jesus, our Shepherd-King
We long for you. To you we bring
Our cowboy instincts, our sheep-like weakness
Forgive us and help us follow the Shepherd's way
That we might hear your voice and discover you in our everyday
For you are in our midst, Lord make us more like you—
Humbly among, holding space, healing grace, heaven's view
*For you are the Lamb at the center, as a shepherd to rule
Every nation, springs of living water, all made new (Rev.7:17).*
Amen.

Karen Wilk is the Neighbourhood Life Lead on the NAB Missional Initiatives Team.

December 9

Mary's Response

By Deb Judas

In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."

"How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"

The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. For no word from God will ever fail."

"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled." Then the angel left her. (Luke 1:26–38 NIV)

Meet Mary, an ordinary person living an ordinary life. Her life had been all mapped out for her. She was anticipating marriage to an average kind of guy who would offer her a simple life in an unremarkable town called Nazareth. Things were stable and as they should be.

Suddenly, an angel of the Lord appeared to Mary making the most incredulous announcement! With this news, the trajectory of Mary's life was completely disrupted and headed in an unprecedented direction – one she did not ask for.

I can't help but wonder if the fact she was highly favoured by God and the assurance he was with her softened the blow at all. I also speculate that she was looking into her future and watching it disintegrate before her eyes. The words "greatly troubled" seem a bit bland, as the literal translation really means Mary was in sheer terror. So much to absorb! An angel? Becoming an unwed mother? To the Messiah? But don't worry, the Lord is with you in this.

I am positive Mary felt completely inadequate for the task at hand. Yet interestingly, even in her terror, Mary does not question whether or not this will happen. Rather, she asks, "How?" She seemed to understand the complexity of her miraculous predicament, as ill-equipped as she might be.

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The angel gives her a pragmatic explanation of the plan, as well as some reassurance that Mary is not alone. Her cousin Elizabeth is also experiencing a miraculous pregnancy. Clearly, the Holy Spirit is all over this. It's happening! No word from God will ever fail!

I might be sounding a bit skeptical about this story, but that's not how I feel. I am actually quite humbled. The last decade of my life has been full of unwanted disruptions: things I did not ask for, certainly did not desire, and situations I felt completely incapable of handling.

Mary's story showed me the best way to respond.

Mary's story is inspiring. Her life was utterly and completely shaped by the sovereignty of God. In the Hebrew world, all life was sacred unto God. Every action was an act of worship. If God says something, it must be so. She implicitly trusted God was with her in this.

Mary gives me hope. She shows me her power and strength came from her response of surrender to God. She offered her life as a sacrifice and instrument to God, allowing him to work through her in bringing his redemption to the world.

Mary's response tells me God was not merely a nice add-on to her life; he was the central focus. Her story demands our acceptance of the truth that God is the hero of the Grand Story, not us. Sometimes this is frightening and inconvenient, but it is always good.

Mary's story opens my eyes to the wonder of God and how his desire to accomplish his redemptive work is through us and, most importantly, WITH us.

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