


Home for the **Holidays**



NOVEMBER 26 – DECEMBER 29

GLENKIRK CHURCH CHRISTMAS DEVOTIONALS 2018

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The gift of Christmas: Immanuel, God with us. This year as we prepare for Christmas, we will be reflecting on this great gift!

What happens when the family returns home to celebrate together? For many of us, we share stories, we laugh, we cry, we enjoy being family. For some of us, however, Christmas may not be quite so wonderful. This year as we return "Home for the Holidays," we want to celebrate the ways God has worked in our Glenkirk family during the past year, teaching us and revealing Himself to us. We want to share our hopes for the coming year.

Home. It is ideally that place of love, acceptance, restoration, peace, joy, safety, provision, and belonging. It is a place where we can be our true selves. It is that place where we are always welcome. It is that place of new beginnings. Whether or not that describes your family gathering, it is that place where Father God always calls YOU to come in and enjoy just being with Him and receiving from Him.

May these readings from members of our Glenkirk Family encourage you and give you hope. May they inspire you to be refreshed in coming home into the warmth of God's love and pleasure.

Pastor Betsy Straeter

THE PARABLE OF THE LOST SON

Luke 15:11–32 (NIV)

¹¹ Jesus continued: “There was a man who had two sons. ¹² The younger one said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the estate.’ So he divided his property between them. ¹³ “Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. ¹⁴ After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶ He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything. ¹⁷ “When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! ¹⁸ I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.’ ²⁰ So he got up and went to his father. “But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. ²¹ “The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ ²² “But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³ Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. ²⁴ For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate. ²⁵ “Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶ So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. ²⁷ ‘Your brother has come,’ he replied, ‘and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.’ ²⁸ “The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. ²⁹ But he answered his father, ‘Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. ³⁰ But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!’ ³¹ “ ‘My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. ³² But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ ”



Home does not always conjure up warm memories. Some homes are simply dysfunctional. There is the child who demands attention—always in trouble, always causing problems, always wanting his/her way. Then there is the child who seems to be perfect, the compliant one—always seeking approval, and yet often with deep insecurities. Some parents are abusive or absent. Jesus seeks to restore all of those in these situations.

For those who have gone off on their own and made a shamble of their lives—bearing scars, defeat, failure—He is watching, waiting, running to make it all right, to cover up the scars, to restore that which was lost, to invite you back into the warmth of love and full acceptance.

For those who are working so hard for approval and recognition, Jesus invites you to just “be,” to receive His approval, His friendship, His love. Stop trying so hard to be accepted and live in the acknowledgment of what is yours in Jesus.

For those whose parents were anything but what we dream a parent should be, God steps into the gap and asks you to make Him your Father, and then He challenges you to be loving, accepting, forgiving, and receiving.

God’s gifts at Christmas are different for each one of us, because we are all different. His gift is unique to each of us, as we are uniquely created by Him and for Him. We are invited to receive Him and become His beloved children. We are invited to come home, to let Him make His home in us, and to invite others into a relationship with Him.

This Christmas we are invited to be part of a Family, God’s Family. This is a profound mystery. We are all joined together into the Family of God, part of God’s body, sharing His glory and letting His light shine through us into the darkness.

Where do you find yourself in this story? Who are you? Are you receiving the love of the Father? Are you giving the love of the Father to His “sons” and “daughters” in your life? How might you receive Jesus’ gift to you this Christmas (name the gift)? How might you give the gift of Christmas to someone else?



What did God show you, teach you, reveal to you, do for you this last year?

I never thought I would write what I am about to write. As a leader at Women's Bible Study, I often told the ladies in my group that God could transform us, renew us, and change us—if we wanted Him to. However, I came to realize that I didn't believe that about myself. I believed that somehow I was outside of the transforming power of God and stuck with the person who I was, whether I liked it or not. I figured the best I could do was to accept it and learn how to live in light of it.

As long as I can remember, I have struggled with feeling insecure and inferior. In fact, I looked back in a journal I had from this past year and found a list of all the things I didn't like about myself. I felt just plain not good enough. Although I could bestow grace upon others, I could offer none for myself. My feelings of insecurity often made me feel like I was always on the defensive, trying to prove myself. I desperately wanted friends but felt unable to make them.

BUT GOD. That's all I can say as I sit here today realizing those feelings have all faded and almost vanished. The feelings that have defined me for what seemed like forever will define me no longer. I am who God says I am—His child, forgiven, beautiful, chosen, and deeply loved. I sit here today reflecting on how many friends I have made this past year and how incredibly grateful I am for them. I look back today and realize how much God has healed my heart and helped me lay down my defenses and lean into Him instead.

How do you hope to respond to God this coming year?

With the transforming power of God in mind, I look forward to this next year with hopeful anticipation for what God will do in me. The prayer of my heart is that He will now release me from the fear I often find creeping up inside my soul. I have come to see how fear has caused me to be unable to fully appreciate His many blessings because I am always looking over my shoulder, afraid of losing them.

Many times I have thought fear is something that just prepares me for the inevitable, but now I realize how instead it cripples me. This year, as I look back upon how God has changed me, I look forward to how He will work again, releasing me from any fear that holds me down. I want to live fully enjoying His blessings, characterized by joy.

Isaiah 9:2-3, 6-7 (NIV)

²The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned. ³You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy; ... they rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest, ⁶For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. ⁷Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this.



What did God show you, teach you, reveal to you, do for you this last year?

As I reflect on last year, I am reminded of the numerous “little” miracles that God provided. I say “little” miracles because in the day-to-day busyness of our lives, we often miss the incredible things that God is doing in our midst. It’s easy to dismiss these events as coincidence or strokes of luck, but to me it is a clear sign of God’s love, grace and provision.

Worries and stresses of work, family health, and relationships have been significant points of prayer for me this last year. I’m reminded of when God came to the prophet Jeremiah and said, “*I am the LORD, the God of all mankind. Is anything too hard for me?*” (Jeremiah 32:27). There have been events over the past year that have created anxiety and doubt; it’s discouraging when I fall into that mindset. As Christians, we never like to feel that way because ultimately we know God is in charge. However, as I put those worries at the feet of our Lord and trust in Him, over and over again, God has revealed that He is faithful.

As I go through life, it is so easy to get caught up in the negative and be discouraged by things I cannot change: What is wrong? What needs to be fixed? More than ever, God is teaching me to focus on the goodness that He provides. His continued faithfulness and grace, even though I fall short so often, are reminders of His goodness and love. Focusing on the incredible blessings, the little miracles that He provides daily, only draws me closer to Him. Looking back on the year, it is clear to see how the Lord has provided for our family; we are so grateful for His faithfulness.

How do you hope to respond to God this coming year?

One of my favorite verses in the Bible is Ephesians 3:20, which says, “*Now unto Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to His power that is at work within us ...*” As we look forward with the mindset that God is able to do exceedingly abundantly more than we ask or think, I am expectant and excited about what is ahead in the coming year. Knowing that God has plans for us that far exceed what is fathomed by our own mind is a tremendous source of optimism and hope.

I pray that I will have the courage and faith to respond to God’s voice as He speaks into my life. I hope and pray that I will have the humility and fortitude to put my own desires aside and walk through the doors that Christ opens, and graciously walk away from the ones that He closes.



What did God show you, teach you, reveal to you, do for you this last year?

This past year God has taught me to “consider it pure joy” when I face trials in life. It is through these times that He refines me, draws me near to Him, teaches me to trust Him to have everything under control, and by doing so, He gives me peace that transcends all understanding.

It sounds counterintuitive to “*consider it pure joy when we face trials of many kinds*”; but when we believe that “*the testing of our faith develops perseverance and perseverance must finish its work so that we can be mature and complete, not lacking anything*,” it makes sense. Don’t we all want lives of substance, with depth, and refined in a way that transforms us to become more like Jesus? Trials transform you.

Physical training is difficult, but the results are strength, endurance and fitness. Disciplining ourselves to read our Bibles daily, praying, being involved in Bible Study, being in community with other Christians, and serving in Jesus’ name fortifies us. Investing in our faith fills our well, so when we have a rough season, we have a deep well to draw from to sustain us.

When we realize that it is trials of many kinds that build our faith muscles, cause us to have grit, make us rely on God for strength and grace, trusting the One who created the heavens and the earth, we grow spiritually like no other time. I have also come to realize that when we worship, singing songs about God’s faithfulness, goodness, power and compassion, it is not just because God is worthy of our praises. But those words are echoed in our hearts during those storms of life, reminding us that God is in control and never will He leave our side. Ever.

It is through the fire that our character becomes refined. We gain compassion and our eyes are opened to those going through similar situations. God will always use our experience to help others and bring blessings out of difficult situations. Jesus taught us that in this life we will have trouble. Can you imagine not having a spiritual well to draw from or Jesus by your side?

How do you hope to respond to God this coming year?

The way I hope to respond to the lessons God has taught me this coming year is by believing life is an adventure. With Jesus leading me, I will be brave and strong. I know that I am a daughter of the King. I have a hope and a future that God has prepared in advance for me. God has been abundantly faithful in my life, with many different stories throughout the years. I will follow His nudging that I have felt for so long of writing, speaking and sharing about the goodness, grace and love of my Savior.

Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

James 1:2-4



What did God show you, teach you, reveal to you, do for you this last year?

Late 2017 and throughout 2018 have been abundant times in my life with God. Numerous adventures, spiritually and physically, with stresses and challenges aplenty! I reflect back to having car trouble in El Tomale, Baja California Sur; no town, no pavement, no AAA, just a beach full of surfers and a couple of local ranchers. I embarked on an adventure and asked God to go with me.

During some of the more challenging times of my adventure, I thought I could manage on my own, relying on my past experience and my “be prepared” spirit. That all caught up with me when I *thought* I was on the home stretch of my trip. Having already overcome several close calls and self-imposed hardships, my car finally broke down. It was only when I went to God in prayer that awesome results came to fruition. Phones began to ring, help appeared, spare parts were discovered, and an adventure continued. God’s message for me: you’re not alone.

God’s message continued to solidify for me throughout 2018, with God repeatedly reminding me to come to Him with all my needs. Through increased Bible study opportunities, by actively pursuing my spiritual family at Glenkirk, and through the lessons taught by Glenkirk staff, God showed me that the more I engage Him, the more He reciprocates. God’s message to me is simple. It doesn’t require translation or special interpretation to comprehend, just action on my part. God is near, He’s listening always, and it’s my responsibility to come to Him for all things.

How do you hope to respond to God this coming year?

In the coming year, I intend to respond to Him not only by coming to Him more often, but also by increasing my understanding of Jesus’ story. I plan to support others in their journey to know and understand God’s love for them. I’ve also asked God for help to increase the size and depth of my spiritual family in and out of Glenkirk, and I look forward to what He has in store for the future.

Isaiah 11:1–10 (NIV)

A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit. ²The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him—the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of might, the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the LORD— ³and he will delight in the fear of the LORD. He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes, or decide by what he hears with his ears; ⁴but with righteousness he will judge the needy, with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth. He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth; with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked. ⁵Righteousness will be his belt and faithfulness the sash around his waist. ⁶The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them. ⁷The cow will feed with the bear, their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox. ⁸The infant will play near the cobra’s den, the young child will put its hand into the viper’s nest. ⁹They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea. ¹⁰In that day the Root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples; the nations will rally to him, and his resting place will be glorious.



What did God show you, teach you, reveal to you, do for you this last year?

On the afternoon of May 4th, while 2-year-old William and I were napping, I was startled awake by my smoke alarms going off. Confused and still half asleep, I thought I had left something on the stove. But when I checked, everything was turned off. Then I noticed the ceiling was filling up with smoke and it smelled funny, like turning on the heater for the first time at the beginning of winter. It was one of those 100-degree-plus days, but I checked it anyway. Now ALL the rooms were filling with smoke!

I grabbed William and ran out of the house. Our neighbors called the fire department, but we ended up losing our house that day.

The firemen grabbed all of our pictures off the walls and anything they thought looked valuable or sentimental. So even though these things were water damaged and full of ash, we still had some items salvaged. What a gift that was!

The blessings of God that day, and the days after, were overwhelming!! Neighbors poured out of their homes to help us sort and clean the dirt, soot, and water-damaged stuff the firemen had pulled out and tried to save. That night I started a *Blessings of the Day* journal and filled three pages entitled “The Faithfulness of God.”

On the previous Sunday, Pastor Tim Fearer preached about praying that the Lord would interrupt our days and our plans and replace them with HIS plans! I had been praying that all week! This was certainly an unexpected interruption! What does it say about God? Is He sovereign over all things? Absolutely! Yes! Did He cause the fire? No. Did He allow it? Yes. Why? I have no idea! And it doesn't really matter, because it really wouldn't change anything.

How do you hope to respond to God this coming year?

We really have no natural resources of our own. It all belongs to God. And in the stress, craziness, and chaos of the day, I can choose to focus on the mess, the loss, and the ugliness; or I can focus on the good with which God has blessed me—and I can find joy in it! Nehemiah tells us that the joy of the **Lord** is our strength!

It was amazing how the Body of Christ immediately reached out with love, prayers, offers of meals, clothes, furniture, places to stay, gift cards, toys and books for the kids, hotel extras to make six weeks in two rooms more comfortable. Help came to us in so many different ways of love and kindness; I can't even name them all!! I see all of this as God's provision for us.

This disaster brought overwhelming JOY and PEACE and the feeling of being LOVED! I can't completely describe it because it doesn't make sense in any worldly way.



COMFORT FOR GOD'S PEOPLE

Isaiah 40:1–11 (NIV)

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. ²Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins. ³A voice of one calling: "In the wilderness prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. ⁴Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. ⁵And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all people will see it together. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken." ⁶A voice says, "Cry out." And I said, "What shall I cry?" "All people are like grass, and all their faithfulness is like the flowers of the field. ⁷The grass withers and the flowers fall, because the breath of the LORD blows on them. Surely the people are grass. ⁸The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God endures forever." ⁹You who bring good news to Zion, go up on a high mountain. You who bring good news to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with a shout, lift it up, do not be afraid; say to the towns of Judah, "Here is your God!" ¹⁰See, the Sovereign LORD comes with power, and he rules with a mighty arm. See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him. ¹¹He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young.

What did God show you, teach you, reveal to you, do for you this last year?

I do some of my best thinking while I'm watering the lawn in the summer. There's something so relaxing about spraying the grass and plants with slow, steady sweeps. I alternate between letting the water run freely out of the hose in one stream, or holding my thumb over the end to create a spray. I sprinkle the water on my bare feet occasionally to cool them off and remove any dirt or grass I've picked up in my trek across the lawn. While I'm watering, I let my mind wander. I ruminate. Very often this is when I "hear" the voice of God.

There are many conduits to God and they can be found in many places. Some people find Him in the Bible or devotionals; others find Him through music or a sermon. Still others find Him through prayer or in the words of a friend. Certainly, I feel His presence during worship, but where I "hear" Him best is in nature.

Driving East across Sierra Madre Boulevard on my way to work, I see Him in our beautiful San Gabriel mountains, and driving West on my way home, I see Him in the sunset behind downtown Los Angeles. Romans 1:20 says, "*For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse.*"

How do you hope to respond to God this coming year?

God can be found in ordinary as well as the extraordinary places. All we have to do is open our eyes to look, open our ears to hear, and open our hearts to receive.



What did God show you, teach you, reveal to you, do for you this last year?

This past year I believe that God showed me the immense love and compassion that He has for everyone. In late July I went on my very first mission trip to Birmingham, Alabama, with Glenkirk's high school group, where I was privileged to help out in the community of Birmingham. Everyone on the team was placed into different groups, and I was assigned to work with the True Vine Church Daycare.

At the daycare there were children ranging in age from 3-14. Working with those kids was such a life-changing experience for me because some of those kids came from poor or broken families, but they still came every day to the church to have fun and learn more about God. Witnessing their love and happiness every day while I was working at that daycare is something I will never forget. God's love worked through the lives of these young kids and the students on the team.

One of the things that hit me powerfully during the mission trip happened during the last few days that we were in Alabama. There was a big thunderstorm and the power went out. During the power outage, our group had an awesome experience with God's love through late night worship. I saw people during the night worship open their hearts to God in a way that I had never witnessed before. It was amazing to see God's love work as powerfully through them as it worked through me as we spoke about our faith journeys.

After worship was over, a group of people decided to pray over each other, praying about all the bad things that they were going through in their lives. It was absolutely amazing to pray for all of my friends from the group, and I even felt

Psalm 89:1-4 (NIV)

I will sing of the LORD's great love forever; with my mouth I will make your faithfulness known through all generations. ²I will declare that your love stands firm forever, that you have established your faithfulness in heaven itself. ³You said, "I have made a covenant with my chosen one, I have sworn to David my servant, ⁴'I will establish your line forever and make your throne firm through all generations.'"

compelled by God to go forward and be prayed over about all the bad things I was going through in my life. I felt that God was really there in that room helping every single one of us that night, and that He will help and guide us the rest of our lives.

How do you hope to respond to God this coming year?

I hope to respond to God this upcoming year by developing my faith in Him more. I am currently a freshman in college at Cal Baptist University, majoring in Communication Disorders. I pray that as I continue my schooling path that God will guide me to do what is good and what is right for me and for my future.

I also hope that God will lead me towards more paths of worship and missions. I would love to go on another mission trip this upcoming year, so I am praying to God to guide me to where I should spread the Gospel and work for Him.



What did God show you, teach you, reveal to you, do for you this last year?

Romans 8:28 and Jeremiah 29:11 are two of God's promises that can cement cornerstones to everything that happens. They are also pretty comforting in tough times to help me believe and trust as deeply as is needed for the current day challenges that Christians face.

This year I went through a brutal season where I wasn't calling on God for His strength and promises. Initially I decided I would solve my problems my way. Well, "my way" created quite the mess—and not the kind of mess where Mary Poppins could snap her fingers and the nursery would be tidy once again. This was ugly!

I found myself as far away from God as someone can be, and I was acting in ways that may have rivaled the prodigal son. I am thankful for that story reconnecting father and son. Without this example told by Jesus, some of us might not really believe God wants us back. I realize now that even though I was far away, God was close. He was looking for me. It is about as deep a realization as someone can have.

God used that overall experience to soften my heart. As a result, I now more readily notice and help others going through hard times. Isn't that one of the best purposes of pain? As our spirits are open to doing God's work, His purposes, plans, and ability to show us things that He is doing grows.

One great gift from God came this year, and pretty specifically, in the form of encouragement to "ask better questions." Most daily thoughts and worries are about questions that we have—even Matthew says we worry about what we should wear or what we should eat (Matthew 6:31).

Those questions are compounded for all of us in the busyness of our lives as we care for friends and family, children and grandchildren, volunteer responsibilities, school or careers. Add to that the potential for health problems, rising costs of everything, and other worries that easily zap any light or joy that someone may have otherwise had, and we really question everything.

How do you hope to respond to God this coming year?

Rather than asking what I should do with the worry of daily tasks, a job, or the events of the day, a better question to ask is: "What can I do today to be pleasing to God?" I will place greater focus on acting on that response. Finding God's purpose in each day gives crisper, clearer, and delightfully easier action steps to carry out not only what we are called to do, but also what we want to do and do well.

Mark 1:1–3 (NIV)

The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God, ² as it is written in Isaiah the prophet:

"I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way" —
³ "a voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'"



What did God show you, teach you, reveal to you, do for you this last year?

This past year God gave me a deepened realization about how important the gifts of love and my parent's commitment to church were to me during my childhood and youth. I was blessed to grow up in church families that had sound Bible teaching in Sunday School, Vacation Bible School, and the after-school program, Released Time Education. I saw in the eyes of my teachers and pastors the joy of the Lord and their love for me and the other children. I memorized Bible verses and got badges and pins for accomplishing that.

I also loved to sing. The songs were often portions of Scripture put to music; therefore, it was easier to memorize Scripture. Some of my favorites: "This little light of mine; I'm gonna let it shine"; "Jesus loves Me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so"; "Deep and wide, deep and wide, there's a fountain flowing deep and wide." In church we would sing hymns of praise and declarations of faith.

My love of music included learning to play the piano, and playing the hymns was a daily practice (along with my scales, of course). I joined every choir that was available throughout youth and adulthood—in school and in my church. I loved the camp songs in my youth and singing anthems with the Sunday morning choir. When I'm studying the Bible, I can't help but think of a hymn, anthem, or chorus based on God's Word. Even in my conversations with others, I just might break out singing. These are all gifts of joy that have lifted my spirit throughout my life.

These stored memories have been a like a well of comfort this past year. How I've drawn upon God's Word and these songs of assurance and encouragement during this last year, which has been a year of many new losses. I believe they allowed me, along with daily prayer and communion with the

Lord, to stand firm when a personal earthquake shook me to the core, and an emotional tsunami set my family's world tumbling with unrelenting and undeserved battering.

God's Word and His Spirit helped all of us even when we didn't know what to ask Him for, or what the truth was in our situation, or what our response should be to false perceptions. We had to trust Him to give us moment-by-moment wisdom and strength. Did I have the strength to get through this? No. Not in myself. I learned I can't know everything about those I love—their motives and their hurts. Also, I could not have every prayer answered with the miracles I asked for and wanted so badly.

How do you hope to respond to God this coming year?

I have so much to learn about listening to others, about how hopelessness or deep hurts affect people to the core. I hope to spend the rest of my life listening to and praying for my family and others. I plan to encourage them to run into the loving "Everlasting Arms" of Jesus, who is "our Rock, our Shield, our Fortress." I will praise Him with my *whole heart*. Jesus is *The Answer* for the world today. Above Him there is no other. *Jesus is The Way*.

I can't wait to graduate to my heavenly home and look into the loving eyes of Jesus, my Lord, and be with those who have gone before me. (Within the last year, my son David (51) and sister Beverly (84) have gone "home.") In the meantime, I'd love to look into your eyes, get to know you a little better, and catch a glimpse of His Spirit in you. Jesus is our Prince of Peace—peace that is found only in Him. Can you hear me sing, "Count your blessings; name them one by one"? You might also hear me break out in song: "This world is not my home; I'm just a passin' through."



What did God show you, teach you, reveal to you, do for you this last year?

God has given me less anxiety with a world I find increasingly disturbing. There are so many concerns, and they flash across my screen of life at an unsettling pace. The issues are too many to list, but at the crux of it is a decreasing reliance on God's Word to lead us Americans as individuals and as a nation. We are closely following the footsteps of the Israelites who abandoned Yahweh, believing in false gods and following the lure of money and power. We are substituting the role of the Good Samaritan by governments that oppresses the poor, the sick, the old, the hungry and the powerless. Our nation is losing its Christian foundation.

I have asked God, "Why is this happening? Why are you not fixing these things that, to me, clearly appear to be non-Biblical? What is happening to our Christian call to live and act like Jesus, showing compassion and acting with justice, righteousness and humility? Where, God, is America going? Why don't you seem to be righting its course and helping a world in great need?"

Recently I believe God has answered my questions and reduced my anxiety via several sermons I've heard while on the PNC. One sermon focused on the truth that God's plans are not my plans. My worldview is far too microscopic and infinitesimal to understand God's eternal cosmic plan for this moment. He remains in control regardless of what goes on around me.

The second truth is that my God will always be with me regardless of what happens. Will I never be anxious? No, but I know that no level of anxiety will change the truth of His eternal grace. He only asks me to keep my faith in Him as my Lord and Savior—and maintain my focus on Him in an incomprehensible world.

How do you hope to respond to God this coming year?

This coming year I will rely on Him and love others, knowing I am loved by Him regardless of what happens. But in spite of these two truths, God does not expect me to give up my concerns to overcome the injustices I see. With the help of the Holy Spirit, He wants me to make a positive difference in people's spiritual and physical lives. I will do that, to the extent I can, by counseling hurting people, by mentoring our youth and students at APU, and by supporting causes that honor Him. I am convinced God will use me in a small but positive way.

Malachi 3:1-6 (NIV)

"I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come," says the LORD Almighty.

²But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap. ³He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver. Then the LORD will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness, ⁴and the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be acceptable to the LORD, as in days gone by, as in former years.

⁵"So I will come to put you on trial. I will be quick to testify against sorcerers, adulterers and perjurers, against those who defraud laborers of their wages, who oppress the widows and the fatherless, and deprive the foreigners among you of justice, but do not fear me," says the LORD Almighty. ⁶"I the LORD do not change. So you, the descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed.



What did God show you, teach you, reveal to you, do for you this last year?

This year looked a lot different than I imagined it would. It was supposed to be **the year**. Work and ministry were going to be the best it had ever been. I was planning an international vacation with my best friend. I would find healing from a medical condition that I battled for years. And I was hopeful about a new relationship. God even assured me of this when He kept bringing Isaiah 43:18-19 to mind. Yes, God was doing a *New Thing*—He would make a way in the wilderness and a river in the desert.

Reading my journal from January and February, I see that I was so hopeful of what was to come because I truly thought the *New Thing* would be God answering prayers that were a decade old at this point. I even had friends praying for this *New Thing* at set times every day, and I remember happily talking with them about what God was up to.

The expectancy I felt in winter and spring was met with disappointment in summer and fall. I experienced one of the most challenging seasons of ministry that I can remember. My sister and her husband moved across the country, taking with them my whole heart—my niece and nephews. My friends packed their bags for a Paris adventure that I was unable to go on, and the relationship that I was hoping for—well, it wasn't a relationship at all. How could I have gotten it so wrong? Where was my *New Thing*? Is God good or kind at all; and if so, does He even see me?

The sting that comes with unmet expectations was so real in those moments, but in the midst of that God showed up. What I realized is that the *New Thing* was never about the things I had been asking God for. The *New Thing* was God Himself. It was a deeper understanding of how wide and long and high and deep His love is for me. It was abiding in Him and letting Him prune all the pieces of me that do not bear fruit. It was the incarnation—Emmanuel, God with us. It was the Word who became flesh. It was the fullness of His presence. The *New Thing* wasn't getting what I thought I wanted. It was understanding the richness of His grace that He lavishes on me daily. *Because in reality, it's all grace.*

How do you hope to respond to God this coming year?

This coming year I am choosing joy, even though that looks a lot different than what I had hoped for. I am saying “yes” to vulnerability and being real with myself, my people, and most importantly God. I am committed to creating true community in all my spaces. And I am praying that God does “*immeasurably more than all I can ask or imagine*” for His glory! (Ephesians 3:20)



THE BIRTH OF JOHN THE BAPTIST FORETOLD

Luke 1:5–25 (NIV)

⁵In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. ⁶Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly. ⁷But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old.

⁸Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, ⁹he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense.

¹⁰And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside.

¹¹Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. ¹²When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. ¹³But the angel said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John.

¹⁴He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, ¹⁵for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. ¹⁶He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. ¹⁷And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

¹⁸Zechariah asked the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years."

¹⁹The angel said to him, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news.

²⁰And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time."

²¹Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple. ²²When he came out, he could not speak to them. They realized he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak. ²³When his time of service was completed, he returned home. ²⁴After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion. ²⁵"The Lord has done this for me," she said. "In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people."



What did God show you, teach you, reveal to you, do for you this last year?

This past June my wife Kristi, our daughters, and I headed down to Ensenada for our annual week of serving as support staff for the Mexico Outreach Camp through APU. Part of our task was to lead our team in developing program ideas for the chapel services. For one particular morning chapel, a team member suggested that, instead of a silly skit or game, we simply read all of Psalm 33 from the stage.

The next morning, while God's Word was being read aloud to the camp of 300 students and adults in the outdoor hillside amphitheater, an incredibly visceral peace and calm engulfed the camp. Voices began crying out "Amen!" "Hallelujah!" and "Praise the Lord!" at various points throughout the passage. Some began to spontaneously sing and worship while others, like myself, began to weep uncontrollably—which is typically my reaction when I find myself in the presence of God. Afterward, our speaker acknowledged what we had all just corporately experienced; the Holy Spirit had made Himself known to us in that moment. It was a powerful real experience and the precursor of other Spirit-filled moments, ultimately leading to several life-changing decisions made by students later in the week.

I recently read and re-read *Forgotten God: Reversing Our Tragic Neglect of the Holy Spirit* by Francis Chan. There were several key points that stuck with me:

- Jesus told his disciples that it was for their advantage that He left them so that He could send the Holy Spirit to them (John 16:7). In other words, it is better for us to live in the presence and power of the Spirit than to walk side-by-side with Jesus in the flesh.

Isaiah 7:10–14 (NIV)

¹⁰ Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz,
¹¹ "Ask the LORD your God for a sign, whether in the deepest depths or in the highest heights." ¹² But Ahaz said, "I will not ask; I will not put the LORD to the test." ¹³ Then Isaiah said, "Hear now, you house of David! Is it not enough to try the patience of humans? Will you try the patience of my God also? ¹⁴ Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.

- The Holy Spirit is a person—not an "it" or some magical power we try to harness or control. Rather than just learning about the Spirit, we are called into relationship with Him.
- Fear often keeps us at a distance from the Holy Spirit—both the fear that He won't come through and the fear that He will.
- We need to examine our motives for wanting to be filled with the Spirit. Are we using our Spirit-apportioned gifts to benefit the community of believers or are we seeking attention, power or control for ourselves?

How do you hope to respond to God this coming year?

This next year I want to develop my own relationship with the Spirit in a deeper way. I want to encounter Him in my everyday life and not just during "camp" experiences. I want the courage to act when He leads and to find myself truly dependent on Him rather than relying on my own strengths or resources. I pray for all of these things for our community of believers as well.



What did God show you, teach you, reveal to you, do for you this last year?

Four years ago we were part of a close community, struggling with the aftermath of the heart-breaking, accidental death of a child. We felt lost and inadequate, but stuck together in our grief.

The year 2015 was also the beginning of some discontentment in my husband's career. Various unfortunate circumstances led to four jobs in four years and some unemployment. Inevitably, we had multiple home appliances break during this time. Figuring out things such as health insurance for our family was a nightmare. I felt I was in a constant state of putting out the "fires" in our lives.

The year 2016 was the first year of my husband's term as an elder at this church. Glenkirk went through significant, upsetting, and stressful changes that year. We were intimately involved and the community of friends that had previously drawn together so tightly suffered greatly. This call to church leadership has brought pain and loss; however, it was the kind of suffering spoken of in Romans 5:2-4: "Suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope."

The "gift" of slow work days and unemployment has provided valuable time to devote to a new interest, which is turning into an exciting potential career change. It has given me the space to take the first steps back into the working world. It has allowed time to assist extended family with a difficult out-of-state move.

We have been provided for beyond our imagination. God's beauty from ashes was apparent in the strength of our community. There was unexpected financial support and there were incredibly timely phone calls with job possibilities.

New mentors showed up in our lives. New communities of supportive friends developed. When there seemed to be no way, God made a new way.

These past few years have broken me. I couldn't fix things on my own, and I didn't know how to heal.

Holy Spirit, please help.

You do the work; I can't.

You do the transformation; it's Your work.

*But I need to let go of my plan, agenda,
Anger, bitterness, hurt, feelings of betrayal.*

You can heal—only You.

I'm not sure how to die to myself, other than trusting You to do it for me.

I am created by You and want to live the life You have for me.

Not "Get me out of this," but "Put Your glory on display."

Give me a greater perspective, one with You at the center.

You will win with justice at the end of the day. That's not my job.

Help me to let go, hold on, and rise above.

How do you hope to respond to God this coming year?

God is teaching me to trust, bear, and wait. "When I am afraid, I will put my trust in You" (Psalm 56:3). I have learned to open my eyes and pay close attention to His presence in my life. To let go and let God. He says, "Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?" (Isaiah 41:18-19).

I aim to look ahead with joy and anticipate what God is creating.



THE BIRTH OF JESUS FORETOLD

Luke 1:26–38 (NIV)

²⁶ In the sixth month of Elizabeth’s pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, ²⁷ to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. ²⁸ The angel went to her and said, “Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.”

²⁹ Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. ³⁰ But the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. ³¹ You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. ³² 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, ³³ and he will reign over Jacob’s descendants forever; his kingdom will never end.”

³⁴ “How will this be,” Mary asked the angel, “since I am a virgin?”

³⁵ 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. ³⁶ 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. ³⁷ For no word from God will ever fail.” ³⁸ “I am the Lord’s servant,” Mary answered. “May your word to me be fulfilled.” Then the angel left her.



What did God show you, teach you, reveal to you, do for you this last year?

This past year was my year of great expectations. As chair of Accounting Ethics at Azusa Pacific University, I spent the last eight months writing a book titled, *Getting Rich Right*. And with a title like that, the last thing I wanted to do was to get rich wrong.

Through the prophet Jeremiah, God tells us, “... *I am the LORD, who exercises kindness, justice, and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight*” (Jeremiah 9:24). Yet, righteousness often seems to be ignored in our present world. We do whatever pleases us. But right matters to God. Simply put, God’s ways are right—both in character and in competence. In Psalm 23, David tells us that the *LORD* leads us in “*paths of righteousness for His name’s sake.*” To the one who delights in His Word, “*Whatever he does prospers*” (Psalm 1:3).

So how do you get rich right? At the end of Jesus’ parable of the shrewd manager, He says, “*I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourself, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings*” (Luke 16:9). When we use our worldly wealth to love others as God loved us, many become His disciples. And we gain friends that last forever.

Jesus follows this up with a simple plan to move from deceitful to trustworthy, from little to much, from worldly wealth to true treasures, and from stewardship to ownership. (Luke 16:10-12).

How do you hope to respond to God this coming year?

Alyssa and I are looking forward to putting Jesus' plan into action: to use worldly wealth to gain friends forever. Jesus knows our deeds. He knows where we live and the troubles we face. Sometimes He tells us to repent—like the church who lost her first love or like the lukewarm church that He wanted to spit out of His mouth.

We want to honor God with all that He has given us and encourage others to do the same. When we do what is right, people see a beautiful bride that reflects God's righteousness, and they see Him for who He is. In Revelation, at the wedding of the Lamb, "*... his bride has made herself ready.... She is dressed in fine linen, which stands for the righteous acts of the saints*" (Revelation 19:7-8).

We must get rich right. At stake is our lives, our family and friends, and ultimately the church. What are the things He wants us to start or stop doing? What does He want us to just hold on to until He comes? That's what I hope to do this coming year.

Repent. Hold on. Repeat.



MARY VISITS ELIZABETH

Luke 1:39–45 (NIV)

³⁹ At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, ⁴⁰ where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹ When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. ⁴² In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear!" ⁴³ But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? ⁴⁴ As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵ Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!"



What did God show you, teach you, reveal to you, do for you this last year?

This past year I hit a milestone birthday, and the big number shook me up. It just made me feel so *old*. Family and friends hinted that now was my time to start taking it easy, get a new hobby, kick back, and quit working so hard. That's what people my age do, right?

After giving this advice some thought and some prayer, I heard a very different message from the Lord. He spoke to me loudly and emphatically through 2 Corinthians 4, the whole chapter, and especially the familiar "jars of clay" passage. The last few verses really stood out:

"Therefore, we do not lose heart. [One translation says, "... do not give up."] Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal."

2 Corinthians 4:16-18

It occurred to me that as my eyes see less and the cracks in my clay jar grow bigger, more of God's light can shine through me. I can't think of a more thrilling prospect! Instead of retiring, I can simply transition, as my health and strength allow, to the new work the Lord has prepared for me to do.

How do you hope to respond to God this coming year?

Yes, I may need to move a little more slowly and deliberately. I may need to make a few more visits to doctors and dentists. I may need to pay closer attention to what I eat and to maintaining my fitness. But in each case, an opportunity awaits. In slowing down, I'll have a chance to observe more details and notice people whom I might otherwise have overlooked. In visiting health care professionals, I'll have an opportunity to share reasons for my hope and joy. In taking walks and exercising, I'll have time to commune with my Savior.

One of the greatest blessings ahead of me as I roll back my work hours this coming year is extra time to devote to my church family and to those around me who have yet to discover their eternal hope, purpose, and destiny. I'm reminded of an interview I saw with Coach John Wooden, then in his 90s. He must have prompted the interviewer to ask what seemed an insensitive question: "Do you see that your best years are behind you, Coach?" "No way!" came the firm and swift reply, followed by a list of what he looked forward to doing.

My 90s are still a long way ahead of me, but when I do get there, I want this attitude to be mine.



What did God show you, teach you, reveal to you, do for you this last year?

Something that people may or may not know about me is that I am “not a fan” of heights. Place me more than a few stories off the ground and I will start to get uncomfortable. While on vacation in St. Louis this past summer, I was asked if I wanted to get a bird’s eye view of the city by riding to the top of the 630-foot Gateway Arch that towers over the city skyline. The answer was a no-brainer—“NO.” The wonderful view simply would not be wonderful for me!

I do, however, enjoy looking back and getting the 630-foot view of what God has done in and through my life. As I look over this past year, it can be overwhelming to rehearse the details of the lessons, challenges, victories, failures, etc., that I have encountered. Seeing the larger themes of the year as a whole, however, reveals to me that through all circumstances God has been working for my good and has continually taught me to lean *on* Him and lean *into* Him with trust.

A while back, I enjoyed meditating on the life and teachings of Jesus by reading through Matthew, Mark, Luke and John again. I could not help but reflect on the person of Jesus and think, “Wow! Imagine what it must have been like to walk on the earth with someone whom you could trust COMPLETELY.” It must have been incredible to walk with someone who *always* spoke the truth, *always* did what was best for others, *always* had the purest motivations, *always* displayed perfect character, and who eventually gave His life so that I might be set free from my helpless bondage to sin.

Then I remembered the obvious and thought, “That’s exactly what I am invited to do every day!” I am invited to walk with a God whom I can trust with all of who I am. I can lean on Him for everything I need as He works both in me and through me.

Perhaps more important than learning to lean on Christ, however, was the growth in learning to lean *into* Christ. I have enjoyed the continued realization that God is not interested in being my impersonal and distant caregiver. He is interested in walking close to me as I lean into all of who He is. After all, it is God who is at work within me to will and to work for His good pleasure (Philippians 2:13).

How do you hope to respond to God this coming year?

Looking back over this year and looking forward to the year ahead, I am encouraged to lean on God and into God as I trust that He will accomplish everything He has in mind for me. This is daunting if I look to my own strength and abilities, but I am reminded to preach to myself that “*The One who calls you is faithful, and He will do it*” (1 Thessalonians 5:24).



MARY'S SONG

Luke 1:46-56 (NIV)

- ⁴⁶ And Mary said:
“My soul glorifies the Lord
⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
⁴⁸ for he has been mindful
of the humble state of his servant.
From now on all generations will call me blessed,
⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me—
holy is his name.
⁵⁰ His mercy extends to those who fear him,
from generation to generation.
⁵¹ He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;
he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.
⁵² He has brought down rulers from their thrones
but has lifted up the humble.
⁵³ He has filled the hungry with good things
but has sent the rich away empty.
⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel,
remembering to be merciful
⁵⁵ to Abraham and his descendants forever,
just as he promised our ancestors.”
⁵⁶ Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months
and then returned home.



THE BIRTH OF JOHN THE BAPTIST

Luke 1:57-66 (NIV)

- ⁵⁷ When it was time for Elizabeth to have her baby, she gave birth to a son. ⁵⁸ Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy, and they shared her joy. ⁵⁹ On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him after his father Zechariah, ⁶⁰ but his mother spoke up and said, “No! He is to be called John.” ⁶¹ They said to her, “There is no one among your relatives who has that name.” ⁶² Then they made signs to his father, to find out what he would like to name the child. ⁶³ He asked for a writing tablet, and to everyone’s astonishment he wrote, “His name is John.” ⁶⁴ Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue set free, and he began to speak, praising God. ⁶⁵ All the neighbors were filled with awe, and throughout the hill country of Judea people were talking about all these things. ⁶⁶ Everyone who heard this wondered about it, asking, “What then is this child going to be?” For the Lord’s hand was with him.



What did God show you, teach you, reveal to you, do for you this last year?

Each year between Christmas Day and New Year's Day, I write a list. The number of items on the list correspond to my age. Examples include everything from "Attempt Mount Whitney again" to "Get accepted to a Ph.D. program" to "Keep up the One Line A Day journal all year." The occasion is "New Year's Resolutions," but I prefer to call my list "New Year's Goals" because that sounds more intentional.

New Year's Day 2019 will mark my tenth cycle of writing these goals. This list serves as my guide for the year. It is a daily reminder of the passions and skills God has given me that I must steward. It is a goal that keeps me accountable when laziness or discouragement set in. At the end of the year, it is a reminder of God's faithfulness.

It would be an understatement to say I am committed to my New Year's Goals. However, it is not all roses. The other day as I sat at my desk at work, head in my hands and feeling overwhelmed, I heard a familiar voice suggest, "Look at your list for the year. It will give you perspective."

I expected to be encouraged. Instead, I felt even more defeated. Of my 33 goals, I had only definitively checked off 16. I was in progress with another five or so, but there was no realistic way I would complete all 33 goals this year. Some goals I had even overtly failed. Another whisper reminded me, "Your best isn't good enough."

In that moment, God brought to mind Hebrews 12:1-2:
"Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and

the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God." You see, Christ had goals, too: the redemption of His people and reclaiming His rightful glory. The cross stood between Him and those goals. He was willing to endure the worst to accomplish the best.

We each have a race marked out for us. God does not provide specific beta for the race, nor does He guarantee success at every stage. What He does provide are examples of victors, the ultimate one being Himself.

How do you hope to respond to God this coming year?

The year 2018 may not have been our best and brightest. Regardless, the Lord understands our struggles. Our best will never be good enough, but Jesus is enough. Let us focus on His example and persevere through another year in light of His sacrifice and His victory.

In the meantime, I already know what Item 34 will be on my 2019 New Year's Goals list: "Read Hebrews 12:1-2 whenever you feel like giving up."



ZECHARIAH'S SONG

Luke 1:67-80 (NIV)

⁶⁷ His father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied:

⁶⁸ “Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel,
because he has come to his people and redeemed them.

⁶⁹ He has raised up a horn of salvation for us
in the house of his servant David

⁷⁰ (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago),

⁷¹ salvation from our enemies
and from the hand of all who hate us—

⁷² to show mercy to our ancestors
and to remember his holy covenant,

⁷³ the oath he swore to our father Abraham:

⁷⁴ to rescue us from the hand of our enemies,
and to enable us to serve him without fear

⁷⁵ in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

⁷⁶ And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High;
for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him,

⁷⁷ to give his people the knowledge of salvation
through the forgiveness of their sins,

⁷⁸ because of the tender mercy of our God,
by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven

⁷⁹ to shine on those living in darkness
and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the path of peace.”

⁸⁰ And the child grew and became strong in spirit; and he lived
in the wilderness until he appeared publicly to Israel.



What did God show you, teach you, reveal to you, do for you this last year?

Change is oftentimes scary. It’s scary because it usually involves an element of the unknown—a new job, a new town, a loss of someone or something that has always been there. I think you get the idea.

For me, that unknown involved moving back to California after serving for five years in the mission field. As the days began getting closer, I began to question what God had in store for me next. As someone who likes to have a plan, it can be frustrating when God asks us to walk by faith and trust Him, especially when it feels like He is leading us off a cliff. Times like these can be quite stressful, and it may be hard to find peace while you are heading off into the unknown.

I found Jesus’ words on peace to be quite comforting during this time. Jesus says in John 14:27, “*Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.*” Isn’t it awesome to know that God wants you to experience peace? That even in the midst of the unknown, God says to not be anxious or afraid because He has given us peace?

My experience with getting in touch with the gift of God’s peace came about a week after I moved back to California. I decided to go for a walk one afternoon; and while I was walking, I started thinking about all the things that I was anxious about. Anxieties about a new job, relationships, finances, and more started to flood my brain and rob me of God’s gift of peace.

Then I remembered that in Ephesians 6, Paul talks about the spiritual armor of God and how the armor can help us



in our times of need. The piece of armor that came to mind was the shoes of the gospel of peace. Paul says that we need to have our “feet fitted” so that we will not stumble. In that moment, God revealed to me that just as I was walking confidently in my tennis shoes, so also could I walk confidently towards all those things causing me worry and stress because I have been given the gift of peace from Jesus.

How do you hope to respond to God this coming year?

This Christmas may you open the gift of peace that Jesus has wrapped just for you. May you equip your feet with the shoes of the gospel of peace and begin walking confidently towards those things that are causing your hearts to be troubled or afraid. May you begin trusting God with the unknown.

Micah 5:2-4 (NIV)

²“But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.”

³Therefore Israel will be abandoned until the time when she who is in labor bears a son, and the rest of his brothers return to join the Israelites.

⁴He will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they will live securely, for then his greatness will reach to the ends of the earth.

What did God show you, teach you, reveal to you, do for you this last year?

God’s favor to both Elizabeth and Mary is a significant theme in Luke’s telling of the Christmas story. We first read of it when Elizabeth was five months pregnant with her son, John, and she states, “The Lord has done this for me. In these days He has shown His favor and taken away my disgrace among the people” (Luke 1:25). Luke next tells us about the angel Gabriel’s greeting to Mary: “Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you” (Luke 1:28), followed by his reassurance to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God” (Luke 1:30). Both Elizabeth and Mary respond to God’s favor with a sense of wonderment and awe, marveling at God’s goodness to them.

During this past year, it has been my privilege to serve on Glenkirk’s Pastor Nominating Committee (PNC), which I consider to be an outpouring of God’s favor in my life. Although my wife, Jenny, and I are relatively new to Glenkirk (we began attending in 2015), I and eight colleagues were entrusted with this awesome responsibility in November of last year. As a PNC, we have experienced God’s favor upon us as a team as we have not only served the church together, but also shared life together.

All of us came to this task humbled by the importance of discerning God’s leading for us as a congregation in the calling of the next senior pastor for Glenkirk. Meeting at least weekly for most of the year, we have prayed together, reviewed applicants together, fellowshiped together, laughed together, and supported one another through significant life and family

challenges. Although as I write this (late August) our task is not yet finished, we have sensed the Lord's favor in our work and are expectant and hopeful for what the future holds for our church.

How do you hope to respond to God this coming year?

In Luke's account of the Christmas story, it was not only the new mothers who experienced the Lord's favor, but also their sons and the community around them. Luke tells us that the neighbors were filled with awe (Luke 1:65) when they finally heard Zechariah's story and that they had great expectations of John, for "*the Lord's hand was with him*" (Luke 1:66). Similarly, the shepherds who visited Baby Jesus glorified God; all who heard their story were amazed (Luke 2:17-20), and as Jesus grew up "*the grace of God was upon him*" (Luke 2:40).

These statements from the Christmas story remind us that as we look ahead to a new chapter in Glenkirk's story under the leadership of a new senior pastor, we should be filled with awe and wonder at God's favor and continued work through us in our community.



JOSEPH ACCEPTS JESUS AS HIS SON

Matthew 1:18-25 (NIV)

¹⁸ This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

²⁰ But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹ She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

²² All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet:

²³ "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" (which means "God with us"). ²⁴ When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. ²⁵ But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.





What did God show you, teach you, reveal to you, do for you this last year?

This year marked the 10th anniversary of my Christian life, and it's quite a milestone to celebrate, both personally and spiritually. I spent the first few months of 2018 anticipating the arrival of my second son, Nathan. The excitement and anticipation were very much mixed with anxiety and worry and uncertainty. In addition to the positive pregnancy test, I also found out that I had a lot of health issues that were going to complicate my pregnancy. Through prayers, devotions, and doctor inputs, over time God showed me that He's capable of keeping my baby safe despite the circumstances.

I had my last working day scheduled for two weeks prior to my due date. To everyone's surprise, my contractions started an hour after I drove home that day, and my baby arrived the same night. God's timing was just remarkable.

During my two-month maternity leave, I encountered a special spiritual experience. When I was struggling with the newborn schedule, my nonbeliever cousin from Hong Kong, who just gave birth to a second child as well, contacted me and we started talking on a regular basis. Somehow we touched on the topic of faith. After a brief conversation with her, I reached out to some Christian and pastor friends in her area who I felt would potentially provide the support I needed to bring her to accept Christ.

Somehow those conversations led to another deep, theological discussion with a close friend who had graduated from seminary not long ago. Our discussion lasted for a total of 3-4 days via text messaging. It was an exhausting but awakening

experience for me because it revealed a lot of my own weaknesses that I didn't realize I had—in areas such as parenting, marriage, career, and decisions I make in my church life.

I reflected on my life regarding the fulfillment of God's expectations of me as a Christian, and I recognized the fact that I am gifted and could make an impact on people around me. I found it quite amusing that God showed His strength to me by keeping my brain running non-stop throughout days and nights (even in my dreams) for those days when I should have been very sleep-deprived and seeking a mental break.

How do you hope to respond to God this coming year?

Resuming my graphic designer role here at Glenkirk and witnessing the growth of some new ministries excite me. I never know what God has planned for me next, but I know He is always there to walk with me through circumstances. I just need to be humble, flexible, and prepared for His challenges.



THE BIRTH OF JESUS

Luke 2:1–35 (NIV)

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. ² (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) ³ And everyone went to their own town to register.

⁴ So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. ⁵ He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. ⁶ While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, ⁷ and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

⁸ And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. ⁹ An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰ But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. ¹¹ Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹² This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”

¹³ Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, ¹⁴ “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.” ¹⁵ When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.”

¹⁶ So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. ¹⁷ When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, ¹⁸ and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. ¹⁹ But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.

²⁰ The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

²¹ On the eighth day, when it was time to circumcise the child, he was named Jesus, the name the angel had given him before he was conceived.

²² When the time came for the purification rites required by the Law of Moses, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord ²³ (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, “Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord”), ²⁴ and to offer a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord: “a pair of doves or two young pigeons.”

²⁵ Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was on him. ²⁶ It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah. ²⁷ Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, ²⁸ Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying:

²⁹ “Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace.

³⁰ For my eyes have seen your salvation,

³¹ which you have prepared in the sight of all nations:

³² a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel.”

³³ The child’s father and mother marveled at what was said about him.

³⁴ Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: “This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, ³⁵ so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too.”





What did God show you, teach you, reveal to you, do for you this last year?

God has taught me over the past year to step outside of my comfort zone. One of the new challenges was to step into leadership roles within my church. I did not think I could do this because of the busyness of my life at this time. Yet, I stepped out in faith with my husband, and we joined our Homebuilders leadership team.

Through this ministry we are able to help families connect with the church and provide messages that are applicable to what they are going through in their daily lives. It is amazing to be part of this leadership team and see how God is helping others navigate through challenges in life.

Since joining this team, there was another opportunity for a Homebuilders leader to sit on the Congregational Life Committee. This committee is involved with planning many different activities throughout the year. Through this opportunity I have met other members of the church who are passionate about our church mission. I have been blessed by being a part of these teams that are focused on furthering God's kingdom.

My challenge for you is to step outside of your comfort zone and see how God will use you to make an impact in the life of others. It may seem overwhelming and impossible, but with God all things are possible. We all have been given many gifts and talents to use, and sometimes in unexpected ways.

How do you hope to respond to God this coming year?

The verse that has been revealed to me comes from Psalm 46:10. It says *“Be still and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations; I will be exalted in the earth.”* This is what I want to put into practice in the coming year. It is hard to take time to *be still* when you are in the midst of raising children who are busy in sports and school, working full-time in a demanding job, and involved in ministry. Yet, I still seem to find downtime to keep up on the newest posts on Facebook and Pinterest.

I have come to realize that this minimal downtime would be better filled with a focus on God. Therefore, this is my challenge for the coming year: take time to stop, listen, and focus on God in those spare moments that I find. I am looking forward to continuing to grow in my faith this coming year.

Zechariah 6:12–13 (NIV)

¹²Tell him this is what the LORD Almighty says: ‘Here is the man whose name is the Branch, and he will branch out from his place and build the temple of the LORD. ¹³It is he who will build the temple of the LORD, and he will be clothed with majesty and will sit and rule on his throne. And he will be a priest on his throne. And there will be harmony between the two.



The Bible tells of two devout, elderly people who were highly anticipating the coming of the Messiah. At the end of Luke 2, we hear about Simeon, who was told by the Holy Spirit that he would not die until he had seen God's Anointed One with his own two eyes. And, indeed, Simeon held the baby Jesus in his arms, looked into His eyes and praised God for "Israel's Consolation."

Like Simeon, Anna had been yearning, studying, pondering, and praying, month after month, year after year, on all things regarding the Messiah's coming. Three things strike me about this passage (Luke 2:37b):

1. She "never left the temple." (*She wanted to be near to God and to be with His people.*)
2. She "worshiped there night and day." (*She worshiped God continuously, serving and honoring the Lord when it wasn't particularly convenient or even on the Sabbath.*)
3. She was "fasting and praying." (*She forsook comfort, security, and pleasure to seek God's face and His favor.*)

When Anna approached the holy family, she "gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem" (Luke 2:38). This text seems to suggest that the essence of her prophetic utterances was not formed at that moment, but it had been percolating deep within her for many years. Anna was fully engaged with God; so when the moment arrived for her to speak, she had a lot to say. She joined the "great cloud of witnesses" (Hebrews 12:1) on that day because she was ready. Praise, prophecy, and testimony simply flowed from her very being.

Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.

1 Peter 3:15

People may think that this admonition from the Apostle Peter means that you should know what you're going to say before you discuss the Gospel with anyone. But I don't believe that he is talking about rhetoric at all. I don't think it means "be prepared to argue" or "be sure you have all the answers," but rather "let your heart be prepared." I think it means that we need to be like Anna; she was all "prayed up."

If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you.

John 15:7

What did God show you, teach you, reveal to you, do for you this last year?

Through this past year, God has been revealing to me that I must abide in Him, rest in Him, and walk with Him—just like Anna did.

*Whether in contentment or achievement,
Thanksgiving or grievance,
Whether in prophetic ministry
Or consolation,
I must abide in Him.*

*Whether in the forbearance to endure
Or the power to overcome,
Whether in the bravery to forge ahead
Or the wisdom to hold back,
I must abide in Him.*

My tendency is to make my plans, think through my activities, move ahead with my ministries and then ask the Lord to bless these things. Instead, I am learning to ask first: "God,

what do You want?” listen for an answer, and then plan. But when neither His Word nor His revelation is breaking through, I start to realize that sometimes He is saying to me, “Bill, I don’t need you to *do* anything for Me; I just want you to *be* with Me.”

That’s really hard for me. But I know that I can’t be an effective worship leader unless I’ve truly worshiped, and I can’t be a nurturer until I’ve been truly nurtured. I must be empowered by the Source of all power and comforted by the Source of all comfort. Then, I won’t be a launching pad but a conduit.

How do you hope to respond to God this coming year?

In the year ahead, I want to be willing and ready to be used by the Lord and for the Lord in whatever way He chooses and, like Mary, be able to say, “*I am the Lord’s servant; may it be unto me according to your word*” (Luke 1:38).



THE MAGI VISIT THE MESSIAH

Matthew 2:1-12 (NIV)

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem ² and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.” ³ When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. ⁴ When he had called together all the people’s chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵ “In Bethlehem in Judea,” they replied, “for this is what the prophet has written:

⁶ “But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.”

⁷ Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. ⁸ He sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.”

⁹ After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. ¹¹ On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

¹² And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.



What did God show you, teach you, reveal to you, do for you this last year?

I've always known that God's plan was better than my plan, but this year I truly believed it. It was around August that I found myself thankful for an unusual "gift." For the first time in two years, I felt thankful for the church split. It sounds like a very weird thing to be thankful for when so much hurt and pain happened from all sides. But I'm coming to an understanding that God's plan was ultimately greater than I expected. It called me out of a place of comfort and routine and challenged my faith and complacency.

Through healing and prayer, I know that God had his loving and gracious hand in the whole process. It has brought deeper and more meaningful relationships, awareness of newcomers, and a stronger bond with all generations at Glenkirk. This year we have seen a surge of new women coming to iMoms on Friday mornings, and there are children from so many new families attending Awana on Wednesday nights (just to name a few). God is here at Glenkirk and He is doing big things through our brokenness.

How do you hope to respond to God this coming year?

The past few years have been explained as "the pruning process" in John 15 with the Vine and the branches. My prayer for this upcoming year is that I will "bear much fruit, showing [myself] to be [His] disciple" (John 15:8).



THE ESCAPE TO EGYPT

Matthew 2:13-18 (NIV)

¹³ When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up," he said, "take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him."

¹⁴ So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, ¹⁵ where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: "Out of Egypt I called my son."

¹⁶ When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi. ¹⁷ Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled:

¹⁸ "A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more."



What did God show you, teach you, reveal to you, do for you this last year?

This last year was an incredible one. There have been so many life changes in me in the past twelve months. There are so many things that God showed me this year, so I will narrow it down to just what God taught me this past summer.

This summer the Lord worked through me and revealed so many things to me. The overwhelming theme was becoming a man of God instead of a boy of God. At the summer camp in Missouri where I was working, I was constantly being encouraged to start practicing being a man of God instead of a boy. The Lord showed me how crucial this truly is—that in the Body of Christ, we have way too many boys and girls of God instead of men and women of God who can truly stand firm and pursue God the way God wants to be pursued.

Another huge thing God revealed is the necessity to read Scripture every single day of my life. Reading God's Word is not optional but essential to receive a source of joy, knowledge, and life-giving principles every single day. I thoroughly enjoy getting into God's Word every day; and when I do not get in the Word, I notice the extreme difference.

How do you hope to respond to God this coming year?

I hope to continue pursuing to be a man of God with everything I have every day. I hope to have a continued love for His Word and a continued heart for seeking the lost. I hope that this whole next year will be a year when every action, decision, and thought truly magnifies who God is and what He has done in my life.



It Is Good

The Dancing Artist—Amy Minick

It is good for me to be in Your Presence

To taste of Your goodness

In my desperate need for satisfaction.

It is good for me to be meditating,

To be thinking of Your loving kindness

To me, depraved and wretched as I am.

It is good for me to remember

How Your stripes healed all my wounds

And I can stand before you whole and pure.

It is good for me to show You gratitude,

To lift high Your Name in thanks and praise

As my own self melts away to give You glory.

It is good for me to be held in Your arms

To relax, peaceful and trusting as Your child,

Knowing You will never leave me by myself.

It is so very, very good that You are my Redeemer,

My Savior, who has removed my sin that encumbers,

Who has bled, died, and risen to show me His Love.

Yes. It is so good to be in Your Presence.





Christmas Away from Home

I have always been home for Christmas except for one time in my life. On that occasion I was serving in the U.S. army and stationed in Korea. On Christmas Day the soldiers would spend the day drinking beer and playing cards. As a Christian I wanted to do something more meaningful for Christmas.

Therefore, I purchased a bag of individually-wrapped pieces of candy, which I took out to the village just outside our military compound. I was hoping to give the candy to some of the children of the village. However, since this was a cold, blistery day, there were no children playing outside.

I did happen to meet one little boy, perhaps five years old, who was outside alone. I offered him a piece of candy. He reached out with his two hands cupped together and received it graciously. Then, much to my surprise, he bowed low, bending forward at the waist, and thanked me. I was shocked to see such a polite little boy. I was used to the rough kids of my childhood blue-collar neighborhood in Los Angeles who might have grabbed the candy and run away or even snatched the whole bag before running away.

My giving a piece of candy to a local boy and his grateful bow helped to make my first Christmas away from home a bit more meaningful. I was able to give something away instead of spending the day carousing in the army barracks. Christmas is for giving because God set the example for us by giving His Son to us. Christ dying on the Cross for our sins was the greatest demonstration of God's love for us.

Matthew 2:19–23 (NIV)

¹⁹ After Herod died, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt ²⁰ and said, “Get up, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who were trying to take the child’s life are dead.”

²¹ So he got up, took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel. ²² But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning in Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. Having been warned in a dream, he withdrew to the district of Galilee, ²³ and he went and lived in a town called Nazareth. So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets, that he would be called a Nazarene.

The last words Jesus said from the Cross were, “It is finished.” His task on earth was completed. However, in a larger sense, His work was unfinished and needed further completion. I John 4:12 tells us that God’s love needs to be completed. God’s love is incomplete until we allow it to move us to love others. Only as we love others is his love completed. Therefore, we are responsible for completing God’s love.

Can you make the following prayer your own? God’s love is incomplete in you unless you are gladly willing to make this prayer your own.

Lord, I want to complete your love in me. I want your love to flow through me to touch others. I want your love to be seen in me in the way I relate with others in my everyday ordinary activities. I want my family, my neighbors, my work colleagues, and strangers to see God’s love flowing through me. Help me to do this. Amen



John 1:1–18 (NIV)

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was with God in the beginning. ³Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. ⁴In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. ⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

⁶There was a man sent from God whose name was John. ⁷He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. ⁸He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.

⁹The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. ¹⁰He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. ¹¹He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. ¹²Yet to all who did receive him, to those who

believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—¹³ children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.

¹⁴The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

¹⁵(John testified concerning him. He cried out, saying, “This is the one I spoke about when I said, ‘He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.’”) ¹⁶Out of his fullness we have all received grace in place of grace already given. ¹⁷For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.



My favorite Advent passage is Matthew 1:21: “*You shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.*” Advent celebrates the coming of Jesus, which is the great fulfillment of the promise (covenant) God made to His people way back in the Old Testament. This Christmas we celebrate the coming of Christ, who will save us from our sins.

A part of this covenant promise is another amazing gift from God: “*I will make with them an everlasting covenant, that I will not turn away from doing good to them ... I will rejoice in doing them good*” (Jeremiah 32:40-41).

Wait a minute! How can it be that God will forgive my sins AND never turn away from doing good to me? If I could believe that was true, my life would be so much better! My attitude toward my work, my relationships, my participation in this broken and hurting world would all be greatly improved! How can it be that God will always do good to me when so many hurtful things happen to me and to this world? Why, if I believed that God would always do good to me, I could be praising God all the time throughout the entire day, not simply when favorable things happen to me.

“God, is what You said in Jeremiah 32:41 really true? Do You always do good toward me?”

“Yes, my child, it is really true! I will rejoice in doing you good, and I will not turn away from doing you good.”

“Lord, is there any way that I can believe this teaching and make it mine?”

“Yes, My child, you may believe it right now. Believe it because I have said it. I am saying it to you at this very moment.”

Yes, my child, because of what Jesus Christ did for you, because He came to save His people from their sins, you may say and believe that your Lord will always do good to you, even when bad things happen to you. But how can this be? By faith in the Word of God.

The angel of the Lord came to Mary and said to her: “You will bear a son, and you shall call His name Jesus.” Mary was astonished and said, “How can this be, for I am a virgin?” The angel told her that with God all things are possible. Mary responded: “In that case I will believe. Let it be to me according to God’s Word” (Paraphrased from Luke 1:31-38).

May you and I respond as Mary did: “*Let it be to me according to God’s Word.*” And God’s Word is: “*I will rejoice in doing you good, and I will not turn away from doing you good.*”



In his final speech before his assassination, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. says, “Strangely enough, I would turn to the Almighty and say, ‘If you allow me to live just a few years in the second half of the 20th century, I will be happy.’ Now that’s a strange statement to make, because the world is all messed up. The nation is sick. Trouble is in the land; confusion all around. That’s a strange statement. But I know, somehow, that only when it is dark enough can you see the stars. And I see God working in this period of the 20th century in a way that men, in some strange way, are responding.” Inextinguishable light in the midst of the darkness.

Darkness and Light. Hope and Fear. I am struck by the intimate relationship between hope and fear. They seem like opposites, and yet, they so often reside in the same space. Relationships, career opportunities, graduations, new babies—these life events filled with all of the hope and joy of new possibilities, and yet coupled with the fear and wondering if and how they will all work out.

Can you imagine what it was like in Bethlehem on the first Christmas? There was this sense of expectation in the air. The hope in the Jewish community that the Messiah would soon come in all of His splendor and rescue them from their current reality. Yet, there were also some very dark days in their current reality. Political unrest and oppression. Tension among the people. “Trouble was in the land,” as MLK would say.

And the Messiah arrives in the form of a little baby who would spend His first night with His young parents in a stable. How would this little baby be the Savior? Hope. Fear.

God had to be doing something new, something different, something bigger than we humans understand ... shining light into the dark places.

In the beginning was the Word
and the Word was with God
and the Word was God.

²The Word was with God in the beginning.

³Everything came into being through the Word,
and without the Word
nothing came into being.

What came into being

⁴through the Word was life,
and the life was the light for all people.

⁵The light shines in the darkness,
and the darkness doesn’t extinguish the light.

John 1:1-5 (CEB)

In Advent, we prepare our hearts in hopeful expectation of Christ’s arrival. We not only reflect back on His coming as a baby in a manger, but we also look forward and anticipate the Light of Christ in our lives right now. We hope.

We celebrate Jesus Christ, the Light of the world, entering into our human experience and offering forgiveness and grace and restoring our relationship with God. We are filled with hope as we, along with the prophets and apostles and plain ol’ ordinary people of times past, trust that darkness does not get the final word.



Have you ever asked, “Why me, Lord?” I found this question creeping into my prayers, sometimes asked in sadness and sometimes in anger, but always in pain.

Why am I facing [insert problem here]? I’ve done everything I am supposed to do in life. I go to work and do my job to the best of my ability, I go to church on Sunday and tithe, I vote, I park my car correctly between the lines and change the oil every 5,000 miles, I eat all my vegetables and I tell the truth about my weight at the doctor’s office (and the DMV). I’m a good person and I love you, Lord. I don’t deserve this. Lord, have mercy! Why me?

Then one summer day I had an epiphany. I was sitting in my backyard, enjoying a quiet cup of coffee just after dawn. I was listening to the birds wake up and rubbing my bare feet in the grass when I distinctly heard (felt) God say, “Why not you? I love you so much I sent my Son to take away your sin (John 3:16) and I’m giving you these trials so that you might come to know Me better” (James 1:2-4).

I don’t like how I feel while I’m going through these trials, but I love how I feel when I’m on the other side of them and can look back and say with joy, “So that’s what God was doing!”

God loves me so much. He gives me problems so that I might know Him better. So that I can grow in faith and understanding. Why not me, indeed!

I Am Not Alone

The Dancing Artist—Amy Minick

To be known
And understood.
To be heard
And listened to.

I can say I have been.

I can say I am.

To be sought
And welcomed in.

To be seen
And never shunned.

I can say I have been.

I can say I am.

Everyone wants to be chosen.

Everyone wants to be known.

You bring me life, and You give me hope.

With You I know I’m not alone.

To be called
And given life.

To be held
And not let go.

I can say I have been.

I can say I am.

To be close
And closer still.

To be loved
And a delight.

I can say I have been.

I can say I am.

Everyone wants to be loved on.

Everyone wants to be close.

You bring me love and give me Your hand.

Only You know the me no one knows,
And with You I know I’m not alone.



What did God show you, teach you, reveal to you, do for you this last year?

Because I work in academics, summer comes with a lighter workload. One of my priorities during these months is to spend as much time as I can with my little girl. This past summer each week was a kaleidoscope of library visits, swimming lessons, playing at the park, VBS, reading stories, and visits to various Los Angeles destinations for the young, such as Travel Town and the Science Center. We engaged in conversations about toys, rhymes, animals, and friends in the rambling, often disjointed manner that 3-year-olds do. I was able to share an abundance of smiles, hugs, snuggles, and hand holding. Of course, these were mingled with healthy doses of screaming, tantrums, fits, and willful obstinateness. Such is a parent's lot in life.

Yet despite her confusing—and at times maddening—emotional responses, I cannot imagine any person whom I love as unabashedly as my little girl. Everything I do (within the constraints of my limited and sinful nature) is intended to bring her the best outcomes in life. When these interactions involve enforcing bedtimes, requiring “polite bites” of the vegetable *du jour*, or brushing teeth, she does not always understand my motives, or indeed see my actions as loving. At times she fights with all her tiny strength against my impositions. But that does not change the fact that each of these requirements is meant to bless and help her.

The parallels to the way God sees us, His beloved children, are becoming more vivid to me as I push further into this adventure of fatherhood. Of course, there is nothing revolutionary about recognizing that God is our loving Father (1 John 3:1), that

He wants to give us good gifts (James 1:17), and that Jesus showed the greatest love of all by laying down His life for us (John 15:13). The passage about the Lord disciplining those He loves (Proverbs 3:12) comes sharply into focus after I have seen myself interact in the same way with my own daughter. I have heard these truths countless times, as have you, I am sure. But for me, it can take quite a long time to absorb these big truths. I can be a quick study, but I forget just as easily. And so for me, these summer days with my daughter were not merely a sweet time of sharing and bonding, but also an object lesson from my patient and loving heavenly Father.

How do you hope to respond to God this coming year?

In the coming year, I am eager to see what new adventures I will have with my daughter. I look forward to the end of the school year so that I can spend those summer days with her, watching her grow and change. I also trust that the Lord will continue to remind me and teach me about who He is and the relationship He desires with me. I pray that I will hold these truths close to my heart and not lose them as soon as the object lesson is over.



My best friend Diane was at the sink washing shriveled grapes. She surrendered to the Lord praying, “God, take this desire for a child from me if it’s not what you want.” She felt God say, “I won’t let this wither on the vine.” Immediately, she felt a tingle only on the left side of her body.

Weeks later, Diane’s doctor confirmed she was pregnant, with the conception date being the day she washed the grapes.

Under massive trees in Canada while camping, Diane received a call letting her know that the baby was a girl and she had Trisomy 13, a life-ending developmental irregularity with no cure. Diane awoke in the middle of the night. God reminded her He created these gigantic trees around her hundreds of years ago and He created this baby. She named her baby Arbor after the Canadian trees and the withered grapes.

I called Diane to cry with her and share the devastation. “This is not a time for prayers of comfort and consolation!” she said. “This is a time for healing and restoration. I can’t wait to see what God is going to do with this!”

This was an illogical hope, but I caught her excitement and boldly prayed for Arbor to be healed, restored and alive.

Diane is a dancer. During this time when she was waiting to see what would happen with Baby Arbor, Diane had a vision of herself dancing on a stage. A person representing Jesus stood to the side while she danced with Arbor in her arms. She moved gracefully to Jesus and then away and back again until finally she placed Arbor into Jesus’ arms and retreated, being surrounded and covered by many other dancers behind her who formed two gigantic wings moving together.

Baby Arbor died in Diane’s womb at 16 weeks. She had labor induced so that she could see and hold Arbor. Out of hundreds of nurses on staff at that hospital, she was given Lani, whose name means “Heaven.” Lani reminded us that the placenta is called “the tree of life.”

Arbor was born on October 4th. She was 4.5 inches long as Diane held Arbor in her right hand. She was beautiful. There were tears of loss and joy at the same time. That’s how I know God was there. I saw in Arbor the handprint of God, not only in her, but in all of us.

Nurse Lani gave Diane a crochet envelope for Arbor made by a ladies group. Attached was Psalm 139:13-14:

For you created my inmost being; you knit me together
in my mother’s womb. I praise you because I am
fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are
wonderful, I know that full well.

Psalm 139:13-14

I’ve learned that sometimes things don’t ever make sense. Sometimes heartbreak is unavoidable, no matter how well we listen to the Lord. But there is hope because of Jesus Christ. I’m grateful for the honor of experiencing Arbor’s birthday. It was extraordinary. Diane said she got her miracle—she got to hold her baby girl for two hours. Our prayer was answered. Arbor has been healed and restored and is alive right now with Jesus.



THE WOMAN AND THE DRAGON

Revelation 12 (NIV)

A great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head. ²She was pregnant and cried out in pain as she was about to give birth. ³Then another sign appeared in heaven: an enormous red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns on its heads. ⁴Its tail swept a third of the stars out of the sky and flung them to the earth. The dragon stood in front of the woman who was about to give birth, so that it might devour her child the moment he was born. ⁵She gave birth to a son, a male child, who “will rule all the nations with an iron scepter.” And her child was snatched up to God and to his throne. ⁶The woman fled into the wilderness to a place prepared for her by God, where she might be taken care of for 1,260 days.

⁷Then war broke out in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought back. ⁸But he was not strong enough, and they lost their place in heaven. ⁹The great dragon was hurled down—that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him.

¹⁰Then I heard a loud voice in heaven say: “Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God, and the authority of his Messiah. For the accuser of our brothers and sisters, who accuses them before our God day and night, has been hurled down.

¹¹They triumphed over him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death.

¹²Therefore rejoice, you heavens and you who dwell in them! But woe to the earth and the sea, because the devil has gone down to you! He is filled with fury, because he knows that his time is short.”

¹³When the dragon saw that he had been hurled to the earth, he pursued the woman who had given birth to the male child. ¹⁴The woman was given the two wings of a great eagle, so that she might fly to the place prepared for her in the wilderness, where she would be taken care of for a time, times and half a time, out of the serpent’s reach. ¹⁵Then from his mouth the serpent spewed water like a river, to overtake the woman and sweep her away with the torrent. ¹⁶But the earth helped the woman by opening its mouth and swallowing the river that the dragon had spewed out of his mouth. ¹⁷Then the dragon was enraged at the woman and went off to wage war against the rest of her offspring—those who keep God’s commands and hold fast their testimony about Jesus.



Preparing Me for Him

The Dancing Artist—Amy Minick

**The withering of the Spirit
Is preparing me for Him.
Turning up the soil in my heart,
Churning up the thoughts in my mind,
Stirring up the eternity in my soul.
Yes. I feel Him move.
I feel His wings flutter under me,
Guiding me in my flight,
His pinions stretched out
To support my own and
Fill in any gaps
Where I am lacking.
He has stirred my nest and
Has asked me to trust Him.
The knowledge of Him
Surrounding me, lifting me,
Guiding me, supporting me,
Leaves me free to fly
To risk
To step out
To trust
In His strength
In His covenant love
In His compassion
In His Fatherly tenderness.
Holy Spirit,
Do Your withering work in me.
Plow me under.
Push up new life.
May my tears only water new growth.
May I receive with joy what You plant.
The withering of the Spirit
Is only preparing me for Him.**

Home for the Holidays. But what do you do when the Holidays are over? The decorations are put away; the gifts are put in closets and drawers. The day-to-day routine again takes over.

We do not know what this New Year will bring. There will be times of new beginnings, great joys, reasons to celebrate. And there will be times of heartbreak and endings. In between there will be new opportunities, new challenges all mixed in with the daily ups and downs of life. What we do know is that the Gift of Christmas is not meant to be stored away. The Gift of Christmas is meant to be taken into the New Year: Jesus behind us, Jesus beside us, Jesus within us, Jesus above us, Jesus before us. No matter what—Jesus wins.

Jesus not only invites us Home to be with Him; He also asks to make His Home inside of us. When Solomon dedicated the temple, the glory of the Lord filled the temple. The presence of God, the weightiness, the power, the fullness of God was present. Paul tells us that God is again building His Temple, but now we are the Temple of God. The Gift of Christmas is the presence of God, the fullness of God, the glory of God within us so that others might see Jesus—His love, His power, His fullness, His forgiveness, His life.

This New Year as you leave home every day, the glory of God goes within you. You are the Temple of God. No matter what comes your way, God's glory is present. God has chosen to dwell in you. What a fabulous Gift! We are the beloved children of God! We have a Home with Him! He has made His Home within us!





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