12 DAYS OF CHRISTMAS DEVOTIONS

Devotions compiled
by the
Hospitality Team
of the
Shared Lutheran Ministry of Fayette County
DECEMBER 26

Jesus said, 'I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will.' Matthew 11:25-26

Did you know that Christmas lasts until Jan. 6? Christmas isn’t a day – it’s a season! From our celebration of the birth of Jesus on December 25 until the arrival of the Magi on January 6, it is the Christmas season.

Did you also know that there is a religious song to teach the significance of our faith? It’s called The Twelve Days of Christmas. If you’re like me, you’ve listened to this carol for years and wondered why we bother singing it. It makes no sense. What do swimming swans and leaping lords have to do with Christmas?

It turns out that this song was written as a way to teach the faith when the Catholic church was being persecuted. From 1558 until 1829, Roman Catholics in England were not permitted to practice their faith openly. That’s when the Protestants were in control of England. Tradition says that during this time someone wrote The Twelve Days of Christmas as a catechism song for young Catholics. It has two levels of meaning – the surface meaning and a hidden meaning known only to members of the church. Each element in the carol was a code word for a religious concept which the children could remember. Here’s the meaning:

1. The partridge in the pear tree was Jesus Christ.
2. Two turtle doves were the Old and New Testaments.
3. Three French hens stood for faith, hope and love.
4. The four calling birds were the four gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.
5. The five golden rings recalled the Torah or the Books of Law, the first 5 books of the Bible.
6. The six geese a-laying stood for the six days of creation.
8. The eight maids a-milking were the eight Beatitudes.
9. Nine ladies dancing were the nine fruits of the Spirit – Love, Joy, Peace, Patience, Kindness, Goodness, Faithfulness, Gentleness and Self-Control.
10. The ten lords a-leaping were the Ten Commandments.
11. The eleven pipers piping stood for the eleven faithful disciples.
12. The twelve drummers drumming symbolized the twelve points of belief confessed in the Apostles’ Creed.
December 27

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name. John 20:30-31

Today is the day the church commemorates St. John, Apostle and Evangelist. John was a fisherman in Galilee. John was working, mending nets, when Jesus called him to follow. He and his brother James dropped everything, left their father Zebedee with the nets and the fish, and they followed Jesus. John is credited with being the author of the Gospel of John as well as three letters that bear his name in the New Testament. His life was a witness to Christ that has endured for two millennia.

When we visited the Lutheran Cathedral in Berlin this summer, there were four alcoves devoted to the four evangelists – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Inside each one was a beautiful mosaic of the evangelist. When you visit the Painted Church in High Hill, the evangelist’s symbols are around the pulpit. In some churches, the evangelists are part of the stained glass windows. Why are they so important to the church?

These are the first ones to tell the story – and the stories – of Jesus. They told the stories so that others would believe in him. These gospel stories were the foundation of the Christian faith. They have been told from one Christian to another for 2,000 years and they still bring people to faith in Jesus.

Who can you name as evangelists in your own life? Who has told you the gospel stories and brought you to faith in Jesus? Who has read the Bible with you? As you remember these saints, give thanks to God for them. And then look forward. To whom can you be an evangelist? It is now our task to pass on the torch of faith.
DECEMBER 28

After the wise men were gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up! Flee to Egypt with the child and his mother. Stay there until I tell you to return because Herod is going to search for the child to kill him." Matthew 3:13

How quickly the glow of Christmas can disappear! Only three days after Christmas, the church remembers The Holy Innocents, the Martyrs. These are the children of Bethlehem who were caught in Herod’s murderous web as he sought to destroy the baby Jesus. History tells us nothing of this event and the Bible spares us the details. But it snaps us back into reality. After a glorious holiday filled with food, family and fun we are confronted with the grim reality of life. Jesus came but the violence and inequities of the world remain. People are hungry. Children are abused. Nations war. Mean-spirited bullies are real. There are innocent victims in all kinds of tragedies even today.

Why does the church remind us of this? Especially when we’re trying to live under the umbrella of peace and goodwill?

Here’s the best answer I have: Jesus is a real Savior who came into a real world. He’s not going to stay in the manger forever. He’s not going to live inside a glass bubble. He’s not going to stay in 1st Century Palestine. Jesus is the Savior for all people of all times. No matter how stark the tragedy, Jesus saves. No matter how devastating the illness, Jesus saves. No matter how violent the attack, Jesus saves. From the very beginning, there were corrupt powers that wanted to destroy Jesus. Rather than change their ways, they would destroy the one who brought goodness and light. They would rather live in the darkness. We see this often in Jesus’ life – Herod, the Pharisees, the Romans, even his own townspeople. He was taunted and betrayed. They loved the darkness and tried to kill the light.

But think about this – if you have a room filled with light and a room that is dark, what happens when you open the door between them? The light floods into the darkness. Light always overcomes darkness. This is our hope. This is our peace. When it seems that evil will win the day, we must know that the light of Christ will overcome.
December 29

For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Isaiah 9:6

December 29 was the due date for our oldest son. Funny how you remember such things even 38 years later. We were prepared, all ready to head to the hospital – but the day came and went with no baby activity. In fact, he wasn’t born until 10 days later on January 8. So on Dec. 29 we were thinking that it would be such a special day, but it was actually quite ordinary.

On Dec. 29 we might be having these same feelings. The party’s over. The people have gone home. The presents are opened, the wrappings recycled. Very soon life will settle into its usual rhythm again. Now what?

It’s a good day to remember that life with Christ isn’t always lived on the mountaintop. Christ isn’t always in the special services and hoopla of the holy days. Christ is with us in the ordinariness of everyday life.

God has made this clear from the beginning. People were expecting a mighty King to deliver them. God sent a baby. People were expecting a mighty battle as their victory. But Jesus was simply put to death on a cross. The meal to remember him is simply bread and wine, nothing fancy. And our cost to get into this godly family? Water. Sprinkled, poured or dunked we enter through the waters of baptism.

God makes this easy on us. We don’t have to be abuzz with special activity all the time to entertain Jesus in our lives. He comes to us. And he comes in very ordinary ways. He blesses this ordinary time. He watches over our going out and our coming in, our working and going to school, our cooking and playing sports. Jesus settles himself into our regular lives and blesses us. Ahhhh...Come, Lord Jesus.
DECEMBER 30

There was no place for them in the inn. Luke 2:7

Martin Luther loved to preach about the Nativity of the Lord. One of the many boarders in the home of Martin and Katie Luther wrote that Luther’s demeanor changed as Christmas approached. Luther became much more cheerful. We have many songs and sermons that Luther wrote to help people know the Christmas story – and the responsibilities we have, now that we know this savior. Here is an excerpt from one of his Christmas sermons:

“The inn was full. No one would release a room to this pregnant woman. She had to go to a cow stall and there bring forth the Maker of all creatures because nobody would give way. Shame on you, wretched Bethlehem! The inn ought to have been burned with brimstone, for even though Mary had been a beggar maid or unwed, anybody at such a time would have been glad to give her a hand.

There are many of you in this congregation who think to yourselves: ‘If only I had been there! How quick I would have been to help the baby! I would have washed his linen! How happy I would have been to go with the shepherds to see the Lord lying in the manger!’ Yes you would! You say that because you know how great Christ is, but if you had been there at that time you would have done no better than the people of Bethlehem. Childish and silly thoughts are these! Why don't you do it now? You have Christ in your neighbor. You ought to serve him, for what you do to your neighbor in need you do to the Lord Christ himself.”

Preach it, Brother Luther! Live it, Sisters and Brothers in Christ!
New Year’s Eve is a celebration of the old and the new, the past and the future. It is a turning point, a time of letting go, a time of reflection. Today’s devotion is a way to be purposeful in ending one year and beginning the next. Get a piece of paper and pen. Reflect on the past year and complete these sentences:
One of the many blessings of this past year was...
One of the disappointments of this past year was...
One of the ways I have changed over the year is...

Now think ahead to 2017 and complete these sentences:
One fear I have for this year is...
One hope I have for this year is...

Take a few minutes to pray: “Lord, forgive me...Lord, help me to let go of...Lord, help me do more of...Lord, bless me to be a blessing. Amen.”
He was named Jesus, the name given him by the angel before he was conceived in the womb. Luke 2:21b

Is there an interesting story to tell about your name? Maybe you were named after a relative or a famous person. Maybe your parents were trying to be unique. Maybe your name has a meaning your parents liked. It’s always a good question to ask of parents – tell me about my name.

Today is the church festival called “The Name Day of Jesus”. As was the Jewish custom, Joseph and Mary took Jesus to the Temple to have him circumcised on the 8th day. He was also given his name – Jesus, following the angel’s instructions when he appeared to Mary. Jesus was a rather common name at the time. In Hebrew it would have been Yeshua or Joshua. It means “Yahweh Saves” or “God Saves”. Jesus’ name expresses both his identity and his mission. It is through Jesus that God will save people from their sins.

When I was little, I thought “Christ” was Jesus’ last name. But, in fact, Christ is the Greek word for Messiah. And “Christ” means that Jesus is the “anointed one”, the one who is set apart for the mission of saving us from our sins.

When we were baptized, we were baptized into Christ. We took on a new name – “Christian”. This name identifies us as those who believe in Jesus, those who are forgiven through his blood. This name gives us a mission. We are to share the love of Christ wherever we go. We are to be examples of goodness and mercy. We are to love our neighbors and pray for our enemies.

I’d like to propose a new year’s resolution: You have been given the name Christian. Live up to your name.
January 2

For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. Jeremiah 29:11

Blessed New Year!
Have you heard about the mouse who crossed the bridge on the back of an elephant?

The bridge creaked and groaned under their weight. When they got to the other side the mouse said, “Wow! We really made that bridge shake!”

The Bible tells us that we can do all things through Christ who strengthens us. And yet we find it so hard to trust in the ultimate power of Christ. We want to keep pulling the reins back into our own hands. We think we’re the ones shaking up the world, not realizing that we are truly just riding on the coattails of Jesus.

Maybe the power of Jesus scares us. Maybe we’re afraid that he’ll shake things up that we want to keep the same. Maybe we want control. It is so much easier to keep thinking of Jesus as that baby in the manger, nice and sweet and small and powerless.

But that is just the beginning of our image of Christ. In fact, he was powerful enough to shake up the whole Roman Empire. He was powerful enough to change the course of history. He was powerful enough to change the faith of millions of people. He was powerful enough to heal and to forgive. He was even powerful enough to overcome death!

Does Jesus shake things up? Yes, he does! And maybe that’s exactly what is needed in this new year. Jesus will not do anything to harm you. He works only for your good. So start the new year in strength and hope. Climb aboard!

Whatever the new year brings, know that Jesus has promised to be with you and together you can do all things!
January 3

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Galatians 5:22-23

I loved the Little House on the Prairie books when I was a girl. I read them all. I was fascinated by life in those days of early America. One thing in particular stands out to me today – how excited the girls were when their neighbor brought them oranges for Christmas. Oranges!! My mother always put an orange and an apple in the toe of our Christmas stocking and I usually never bothered to take them out!

It wasn’t until I was older that I came to understand how precious fresh fruit is when you can’t get it. It’s seasonal. Until very recently you couldn’t get fruit out of season. Now we ship it in from all over the world and we grow it in greenhouses. We can have fresh fruit all year long.

But back in the days of Laura Ingalls Wilder, fresh fruit was a treat. Fruit trees had to be planted and they had to grow to produce fruit. For early settlers, this was just a luxury they didn’t have. Fruit was a treat.

In his letter to the Galatians, St. Paul entreats Christians to bear the Fruit of the Spirit. It is his guideline for Christian living.

Maybe today would be a good day to make a fruit salad and reflect on the Fruit of the Spirit. You get apples from an apple tree and oranges from an orange tree. What kind of fruit grows on a Christian?
'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.’ Luke 4:18-19

Are you hanging in there? Have you resisted the temptation to pack up all your Christmas decorations? Or have you ‘put Christmas away’?

Maybe this should be the year that we celebrate Christmas all year long. 365 days of Christmas. How does that sound? We can do it you know. The peace. The goodwill. The joy. The love. The good news that Jesus is born. We could share that throughout the whole year. In fact, that is exactly what we are called to do. We don’t just come to the manger to see Christ. We Go; We Tell. We make a difference in the lives of others because Jesus has made a difference in our lives. Here’s a poem to remind us:

*When the song of the angels is stilled*
*When the star in the sky is gone*
*When the kings and princes are home*
*When the shepherds are back with their flock*
THEN THE WORK OF CHRISTMAS BEGINS...
*To bring peace among brothers and sisters,*
*To find the lost,*
*To heal the broken,*
*To feed the hungry,*
*To release the prisoner,*
*To rebuild the nations,*
*To make music in the heart.*

Jesus accomplishes all of this in the world by sending us in his name!
**JANUARY 5**

_The wise men entered the house and saw the child with his mother, Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasure chests and gave him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Matthew 3:11_

It’s almost time to bring out the wise men and add them to your manger scene. They have had a long journey, coming from ‘the East’ in their caravan. They were probably astrologers from the area of modern-day Iran/Iraq. In the birth story of Jesus, they represent the universal nature of Jesus’ salvation. He came for all people. The gifts they bring show that they understand exactly who Jesus is and what mission he is to accomplish. _Gold_. It is the gift you give a king and Jesus is Christ the King. _Frankincense_. It is a priestly gift. Incense is purifying and represents our prayers as the smoke ascends toward heaven. Jesus is our Great High Priest, intercessor for us with God. _Myrrh_. This is an ointment used to prepare a body for burial. Even as a young child, this gift foretells his death. Jesus will die on the cross and his mission will be fulfilled. But his resurrection will bring new life to us all. These are costly gifts and fit for the mission of Jesus.

“The Other Wise Man” by Henry van Dyke tells the story of another wise man – Artemis. Artemis was to join the caravan with the others but he stopped to help a wounded traveler. His whole life becomes a journey in search of Jesus so he can give his gifts of precious jewels. But time after time he must use his jewels to help others and he doesn’t get to see Jesus. Even as he hears of the crucifixion, Artemis thinks he can use his remaining jewel to save Jesus’ life. But once again he is diverted. As he thinks of what a waste his life has been, Jesus appears to Artemis to remind him, “As you have done it to the least of these, you have done it to me.” Artemis has served Jesus throughout his life by helping the last, the least, the lost.

“What can I give him?” is a theme in Christmas songs. Jesus’ answer is simple: care for others in my name.
Blessing for a Home on Epiphany

Matthew writes that when the magi saw the shining star stop overhead, they were filled with joy. “On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother” (Matt. 2:10-11). In the home, Christ is met in family and friends, in visitors and strangers. In the home, faith is shared, nurtured, and put into action. In the home, Christ is welcome.

Twelfth Night (January 5), Epiphany of Our Lord (January 6), or another day during the time after Epiphany offers an occasion for gathering with friends and family members for a blessing for the home. Someone may lead the greeting and blessing, while another person may read the scripture passage. Following an eastern European tradition, a visual blessing may be inscribed with white chalk above the main door; for example, 20 + CMB + 17. The numbers change with each new year. The three letters stand for either the ancient Latin blessing Christe mansionem benedicat, which means “Christ, bless this house,” or the legendary names of the magi (Caspar, Melchior, and Balthasar).

Greeting
May peace be to this house and to all who enter here.
By wisdom a house is built
and through understanding it is established;
through knowledge its rooms are filled
with rare and beautiful treasures. *(Proverbs 24:3-4)*

Reading
As we prepare to ask God’s blessing on this household, let us listen to the words of scripture. In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being, and the life was the light of all people. The Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth. From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. *(John 1:1-4, 14, 16)*
Inscription

This inscription may be made with chalk above the entrance or on the main door while someone reads the text:
20 + C M B + 17

The magi of old, known as
C Caspar,
M Melchior, and
B Balthasar,
followed the star of God’s Son who came to dwell among us
20 two thousand
17 and seventeen years ago.
☩ Christ, bless this house,
☩ and remain with us throughout the new year.

Prayer of Blessing

O God, you revealed your Son to all people by the shining light of a star. We pray that you bless this home and all who live here with your gracious presence. May your love be our inspiration, your wisdom our guide, your truth our light, and your peace our benediction; through Christ our Lord.

Amen.

Then everyone may walk from room to room, blessing the house with incense or by sprinkling with water, perhaps using a branch from the Christmas tree.