

‘The Prayer Impact’
4th Advent Sunday of a Covid-
Christmas
December 20th, 2020

Dear Partners In Prayer Team,

*“The people walking in darkness
have seen a great light...For 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.
Of the greatness of His government and peace
there will be no end.” Isaiah 9:3, 6-7 (NIV)*



*“I am the Good Shepherd. The good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep.”
John 10:11 (NIV)*

“Jesus said to her, ‘I am the Resurrection and the Life. The one who believes in Me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in Me will never die. Do you believe this?’” John 11:25-26 (NIV)

“For we walk by faith, not by sight.” 2 Corinthians 5:7 (NKJV)

What is your favorite Christmas song? Christmas is always a special time because so much of our tradition is wrapped around music. Much of it is the carols and Christmas songs, but we also learned many secular Christmas songs. My all-time **least** favorite Christmas song is “The Twelve Days of Christmas,” and next in line is “Little Drummer Boy.”

Favorite Christmas songs? My mind quickly races back to hear the voices of different relatives and folks through times of growing up in my home church. I remember a little girl named Jennifer at my childhood church of Jackson



Baptist singing, “Happy Birthday, Gentle Savior” and “Away in the Manger” standing on a chair at the pulpit. That was over fifty years ago, and the memories are so fresh in my mind. When I sing through the carols, I laugh because some of them got twisted. When I was in my teens, our youth group taught a different spin on the carol, “We Three Kings” with these

lyrics:

“We three kings of orient are, smoking on a rubber cigar. It was loaded and exploded: Pop goes the weasel. We two kings ...” You continue until there are no more “kings.” Don’t teach this to your kids and grandkids, will you?

So what is my favorite Christmas carol? That’s a tough choice, because I’ve never been a man of favorites. But I love this one written by the son of a preacher. Benjamin Hanby wrote:

***“Who is He in yonder stall, at whose feet the shepherds fall?
Who is He in deep distress, Fasting in the wilderness?
Who is He the people bless for His words of gentleness?
Who is He to whom they bring all the sick and sorrowing?
Who is He that stands and weeps at the grave where Lazarus sleeps?
Who is He the gathering throng greet with loud triumphant song?
Lo! at midnight who is He prays in dark Gethsemane?
Who is He on yonder tree dies in grief and agony?
Who is He that from the grave come to heal and help and save?
Who is He that from His throne rules through all the world alone?
Refrain
‘Tis the Lord! O wondrous story! ‘Tis the Lord! The King of glory!
At His feet, we humbly fall, Crown Him! Crown Him, Lord of all!”***

This carol tells the whole story. I love it. I will always remember this song because I can still shut my eyes, and still see and hear my dad and Grandpa Steer bellowing out those words in rich, manly voices! It still brings tears to my eyes. During this Covid-19 Christmas, do we point people to our Savior? Do we use our best opportunities to tell of the Savior?

As we have been sharing John’s seven “I AM” statements through Christmas, I was wondering how we would answer a non-believer if he or she was to ask us, “Who Jesus is to you?” Could you explain all that Jesus practically is? As we review all the “I AMs” found in John’s Gospel, I believe we get a practical and daily reminder of Christ’s nearness. We experience Him as our “Emmanuel – God with us!” And this Christmas I’ve experienced more and more of how our lives move closer personally to who Jesus is. Perhaps no words are more encouraging than these written by Isaiah:

***“The people walking in darkness
have seen a great light...For 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.
Of the greatness of His government and peace***

there will be no end.” Isaiah 9:3, 6-7 (NIV)

From this stirring and encouraging prophecy, we know that this Christmas Child, Jesus, is going to be special. He will be miraculously the “God/ Man!” He will be the divine Son of God, and He will be fully and truly human. I hope and pray we will not be so prone to hearing these Christmas descriptions of who Jesus is because we hear them every year that we miss the core message of God’s words. Isaiah is saying more than that the Messiah who was to come would be wonderful in a variety of ways. The prophet is preaching a truth that is way more profound, faith-stimulating, hope-giving, and life-altering than that. Take a moment right now to carefully examine and reflect on the names that Isaiah attached to the Son to be born and the things he said about Jesus. I love how Eugene Peterson says in John 1:14 of *The Message*: “The Word [Jesus] became flesh and blood, and ‘moved into the neighborhood.’” I love that description. God as human flesh moved into our neighborhood! It was just as real to John in his day as it should be to us. Jesus moving into our neighborhood. And John continued by describing the manger-born as: “We saw the glory with our own eyes, the one-of-a-kind glory, like Father, like Son, generous inside and out, true from start to finish.” So with words carefully chosen, because they were carefully directed by the Holy Spirit, I want to make a few comments from Isaiah’s birth announcement and description.

A. The government would rest on the shoulders of Jesus. What do we sinners need as we are experiencing a horrific chaos of Covid-19 and riots, and political landmines which have made this year so unexpected and interrupted? We need to be freed from the bondage of self-rule and welcomed to the rule of One who is the definition of everything that is good, right, true, and loving. Jesus came to liberate us from the kingdom of darkness and transport us to His kingdom of love and light. Just like the statement: “I am the Light of the world. (John 8:12). This is essential, because our self-rule is our doom. I must quote our missionary Joel Stewart who started his 2020 Advent letter like this: *“Believe it or not, 2020 is finally coming to an end. I have said in jest, if anyone ever tweaks a DeLorean like Dr. Emmett Brown did in ‘Back to the Future’, they’d better put a piece of masking tape over the year 2020 with a big ‘DO NOT TOUCH’ written on it. The events of this year, from a pandemic and social isolation to violent social unrest to polarized political views and a contentious election to an economic restructuring (toss the threat of murder hornets into the mix) — will lead us to be glad to say goodbye to 2020. Isaiah wrote the above verse around 2700 years ago, and it seems no less relevant today. In the past I have often used this verse to point to the Light which came down for us at the Nativity. However, if we think of why the Light was needed we begin to understand better what it means for us today. The theme of Light in darkness is just one of the powerful themes which still accompanies the holiday we celebrate during this Advent season.”*

B. Jesus would be a “Wonderful Counselor” to us! Sin reduces all of us to fools. In our foolishness we see the world inside out and upside down. We look at what is false and see truth. We look at what is foolish and see wisdom. At the epicenter of our foolishness is a street-level denial of God- not philosophical atheism, but a denial of our need for God and a belief that we can live on our own. That is why we need Jesus to be our “Bread of Life” (Jn. 6:35). He is our only satisfaction and nourishment for our souls. As the Wonderful Counselor, Jesus comes to rescue fools from themselves.

C. Jesus would unleash “almighty power” on our behalf. Sin doesn’t just reduce us to fools; it also renders us unable. So Jesus came to us as the power for our lives when He is our Light (John 9:5). So Jesus came to do by divine power what we could not do for ourselves. Sin caused us all to be unable to be what God designed us to be and to do what God created us to do. So Jesus would unleash His power to defeat sin and death and be our “Resurrection and our Life” (John 11:25-26). He then empowers us to desire and do what we would not be able to do without His power working in and through us.

D. Jesus would lavish on us “His Everlasting Fathering” care! Jesus, by His life and death and resurrection welcomes us into His family once again. He is the “Door” by which we have access to God (John 10:7-9). And because He is our great “Shepherd” who lovingly cares for us (John 10:11), He lavishes His fatherly love, and we are blessed with all the rights and privileges of being His children. No longer separated, lost and alienated and alone!

E. Lastly, Jesus’s reign as our “Prince of Peace” will be righteous in every way. In a sin-broken world, where all our lives are touched by the corruption, selfishness, and injustice of those who rule us, (I trust we don’t need to talk about any of the election and racism topics that erupted like land mines this year), it is sweet comfort to know that the One who would establish His peace and shalom over us will someday come soon. He will always be our “Way, Truth, and Life” (John 14:6); and He will also be our “true Vine” (John 15:5) that we need to remain attached to. How sweet it is to know that the blessing of the grace of our King who was to come will never end someday. His grace will never grow weary. Jesus will make sure His promises will happen.

So, as we review the birth announcement from Isaiah 9:6-7, there is no better news than this. So much more than decorations, gifts, and lots of food, this season is about our hope to make all the daily and sometimes “unremarkable” things, become remarkable daily reminders of this near and ever-present Jesus.

I don’t want to close our prayer partners without updating the answers to prayer that are happening. Remember our top ten prayer list? Remember our greatest prayer needs as a church? Here is the list again with one or two amended.

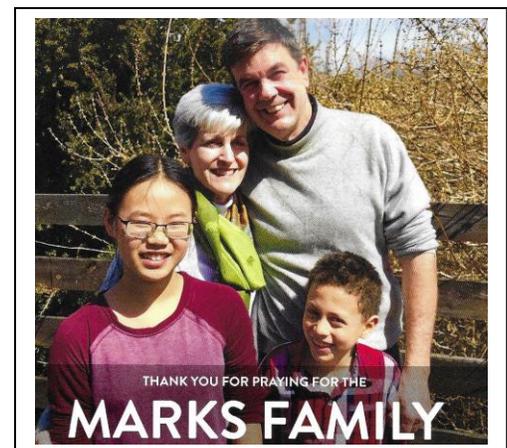
1. *Protection and healing for those who have come in contact with Covid-19; that God will protect our church, people, and keep us open and safe.* We have had people healed and returning to services. If you are fearful to attend services because of the recent exposure of several of our folks, do know that none of those people got Covid-19 from being in church. It was from family and work. This last week, Montgomery County released this statistic: “Chances of coming in contact with a Covid-19 positive individual through public shopping at a Walmart are: ‘One out every 100 individuals.’” Just understand that the possibilities are less if you come to church through Christmas. Just saying, I know that doesn’t alleviate much fear, but do know that those who we’ve been praying for, are healing, and didn’t go to the hospital and were not put on a ventilator. Yes, there are exceptions because of health factors, but do know that Covid-19 is not a death sentence for the majority of people. I believe this world is spreading fear that we are morally sinful and hateful people if somehow we catch or spread this virus. I praise the Lord that God is healing folks, and that life is returning to “normal” for many. Let’s not live in fear, but pray for others to continue to heal.

2. *We need to first pray that we truly live and share our church verse for 2020: “We walk by faith, and not by sight!”* I have daily used this verse to encourage and pray for others. I even use it when I’m talking with others on the phone. Use this verse to put in your Christmas cards this year. Share with others how Christ has personally grown your faith this year. Be that witness light!

3. *We need to pray for a new church verse for 2021.* Actually, I feel extremely blessed that God has settled this for us. I have been teetering on two different verses for 2021, and the Lord just said: “Use them both!” One is easy to learn as our verse from this year. The other is more challenging, but an incredible help as we move into 2021. I will not give away those verses yet. So plan and pray for January’s “State of the Ministry” when I will share with us those verses.

4. *We need to pray that people will return to worship with us.* Again, I am convinced that we can’t experience the presence of the Lord virtually. “Where two or three are gathered” is a physical blessing and promise for God’s presence. Continue to pray that many will return. In fact through this year we have had several new individuals and families start regularly attending. As I have been getting to know several of their stories, some are wanting to join our church. I would never believe that we would have God do this when we have had a year of “shutdowns” and programs stripped away from us. I believe God is working. Pray for others to join. Even some, who have never joined all this time, yet have been coming.

5. *We need to pray for the Marks family that they are able to get the paperwork, visas, flights, and everything needed to return to Thailand before December ends.* Kelly and Steve have shared that the passport for Anna is soon to arrive, and they



will be going to the Embassy in New York. Please keep this visit in prayer. Pray that God will grant their approval for visas as miraculously as Tim and Helen VanSumeren did when they went two weeks ago.

6. *We need to pray for our missionary, Joel Stewart. He is surviving quarantine.* He sent this funny picture of a bearded and scraggly old cowboy with the saying: "This is how I feel surviving quarantine." I don't have that picture to print for you, but keep him in prayer. Remember the Vosters also, who are still cleaning up from floods in the capital.

7. *Pray for hearts in our area to be open and ready for Christmas Eve.* We have rented a tent. We are having an outdoor service. Many of the elderly are worried that it will be too cold! We also have rented heaters. Yes, we can't control the weather, but the service will not be long and drawn out. We also are having a safe spread-out service. It will be a full service "candle-lighting" unlike any service we've done in the past. We also are planning a live nativity. We are planning old-fashioned "caroling" together as a church. We believe that it will be a marvelous experience that is unlike any we've ever had. Please pass the word around.

8. *We've been planning a mailing for our church area, but because of the pullbacks due to the Covid-19 restrictions, we have decided to plan the mailing for after the New Year.* That is going to happen. I have the printed cards currently in my office.

9. *I am starting a church membership class.* I hoped to start it on the 27th of December, but will most likely move it into January. Just keep this in prayer.

10. *We need to pray for Tim and Helen VanSumeren who are our guest missionaries living in the apartment upstairs.* I am including their current prayer letter this week in the bulletin.

Remember the parable of the sower (See Matthew 13)? The sower went out and cast out seed. Not all of it landed on fertile soil, but that didn't really seem to bother the sower, did it? That's because his responsibility was simply to sow seed! Even in situations where we are not allowed to talk about God openly, there are ways to sow seed. Our job is to be open to God's Spirit as He guides us to the place where spiritual seed can be sown. I want to close with this blessing of an illustration for Christmas by Joseph J. Mazzella:

"Clankity Clank, Clankity Clank, Clankity-Clankity-Clankity Clank. It was a cold, December day. I had just pulled up to the department store in my old car. As soon as I got out the Winter wind bit into me. Yet, carried on this bitter wind was the sweet sound of a bell ringing. I looked towards the entrance of the store and saw a Salvation Army bell ringer in front of it. She was an older lady, clearly in her eighties, but she wore a Santa hat and a big smile as well.

I'd always tried to drop a dollar in the kettle when I walked by these bell ringers. The Salvation Army did wonderful work all over the world helping those in the most need. When I glanced in my wallet this time, however, I didn't have anything smaller than a five. I fished around my pockets, pulled out around fifty cents in change and walked up

to the lady. I apologized to her for not giving more. 'That's ok, Sweetie,' she said. 'Every little bit helps.'

When I looked in her eyes at that moment I saw the love of Christ shining in them and when I saw her happy smile I could feel my soul grow lighter. I reached back into my wallet, pulled out the five dollar bill, and dropped it in the kettle. I walked in the store knowing too that the gift she had just given me was worth far more than any amount of money I could ever donate.

As the years have passed since then I have cherished that gift and used it often. It has warmed my heart during the cold times and helped me to warm others as well. That gift was the simple truth: 'Every little bit helps.' Every smile we share, helps. Every caring word we say, helps. Every act of kindness we do, helps. Every bit of love we give, helps.

Robert Fulghum wrote: 'The world as it is needs those who will love it enough to change it, with what they have, where they are.' Be one of those people. Help God to change this world with your love. And always remember 'Every little bit helps!'" (Illustrator Magazine, December 13, 2020).

Where is God directing you to sow spiritual seed this Christmas? And remember to share your favorite Christmas songs with others! And don't give out any "rubber exploding cigars."

Pray with me,

"Our Father and Good Shepherd, how we delight in Your sweetness and nearness. Aliven our delight and help us reach out with who Jesus really is. Help us, Holy Spirit, use 'every little bit' of ourselves for You! As Christmas is almost upon us, may our Wonderful Counselor, our Prince of Peace, and our Mighty God- Jesus touch the hearts and lives around us. We rest from the burdens and heartaches we experience through these times upon His shoulders. We roll them off us, and onto Him now. Thank You for our resurrection life! We pray You will help us pass on that gift of Life this Christmas. Thank You for Jesus moving into our neighborhood. We ask in our One-and-only begotten Christmas Savior's Name, Amen."

Pastor Corvin <><

Quote: "Oh! The million Christmas mornings when You'd [Jesus] lie, a babe again, beneath a million million trees and hear the countless tongues chanting Your name. Ah... will they remember crimson dripping from the iron nails, and will they pray, and will they know a whiter white than snow?" ... Keith Patman