

EMMANUEL

GOD WITH US

ADVENT GUIDE 2022



NASHVILLE
FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH

Worship Services & Events

Service of Remembrance and Hope

Sunday, November 27 | 5 p.m. | Fellowship Hall

time of worship for all supporting those who have experienced the death of a loved one

Christmas at First

Sunday, December 4 | 10:30 a.m. | Fellowship Hall

combined morning worship featuring our Children's, Youth, and Sanctuary Choirs and the Sanctuary Orchestra

TubaChristmas

Thursday, December 13 | Two sessions: 11 a.m. and 12:30 p.m. | Fellowship Hall

free concert featuring Christmas carols played by a mass choir of over 100 tubas

Carol-Candlelight Celebration

Sunday, December 18 | 5 p.m. | Belmont University McAfee Concert Hall, [Campus & parking map](#)

service of celebration with the Sanctuary Choir, Children's Choir, Orchestra, and the Adonai School of Ballet

Christmas Eve Communion

5 p.m. – Fellowship Hall

7 p.m. – Broadway Chapel

special time of worship featuring carols, candles, and communion

Christmas Day Worship

Sunday, December 25 | 10:30 a.m. | Fellowship Hall

combined worship celebrating the birth of our Savior; no Connect Groups

New Year's Day Worship

Sunday, January 1, 2023 | 10:30 a.m. | Fellowship Hall

combined worship as a church family; no Connect Groups

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Sunday, November 27

Introduction

*"I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God,
"the one who is, who was, and who is to come, the Almighty."*

(Revelation 1:8)

"God's perpetual desire [is] to dwell with his people." God always has been with and always will be with His people. In the beginning, God created a good place to walk and talk with the people He made in His image. Throughout the story of the Old Testament God performed mighty acts and communicated with people in various ways including in visions or dreams or visits from The Angel of the Lord. (On the next page see a few examples of God's being with His people throughout time.)

Then the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. We observed his glory, the glory as the one and only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth (John 1:14). He was born as a baby! Who could have imagined it! The birth of Jesus was the turning point of the whole of history. The name Immanuel, "God with us," describes who He is and what He came to do. He shows us God.

Jesus left us with the Holy Spirit who dwells with us as individuals and corporately as a church. We live in view of the joyous end of this story. In the new heaven and earth, God will dwell with His people.

Each day of this Advent we will read stories from some of our church members about times when they KNOW that God is (or was) with them. Immanuel is, indeed, God with us.

Our church vision statement calls us to be "a diverse community." We have tried to include a bit of biographical information and photos of writers with their stories, hoping to increase our sense of community and maybe help make new friends. As a start, if you read a devotional here that is meaningful to you, please tell that writer.

BIBLE TIMELINE

34th B.C.	• Enoch walked with God	Genesis 5:21-24
22nd-19th B.C.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • God spoke to the Patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob. • He spoke to Hagar, an Egyptian servant 	Genesis 12:1-3; 17:1-8; 26:1-5; 28:10-17 Genesis 16:1-13; 21:12-21
15th-14th B.C.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Exodus; Moses received the Law • Revealed His name "the LORD" • The Tabernacle-God's dwelling place • Joshua led Israelites into Canaan. 	Exodus 3; 13:21-22; 19-20; 40:34-38 Exodus 6:3 Exodus 25:8 Joshua 1:1-9
14th-11th B.C.	• Samson's parents heard from God.	Judges 13
960 B.C.	• Glory filled Solomon's Temple	1 Kings 8
733 B.C.	• Isaiah's vision of the Lord	Isaiah 6:1-7
586 B.C.	• God's people continued to be unfaithful; Jerusalem fell; the Temple was destroyed	2 Kings 24:10-14; 25:8-17
6th B.C.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • He was with His people in captivity in a foreign land. • There were four in the fiery furnace! • Daniel's and Zechariah's end times visions 	Daniel 3 Daniel 7; Zechariah 2:11
6-4 B.C.	• Angels announced Jesus' birth	Matthew 1:18-24; Luke 1:26-38
A.D. 26-30	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jesus "tabernacled" with His people • Jesus cared for all kinds of people, both Jews and Gentiles. • He performed many kinds of miracles. 	John 1:14; Colossians 1:15-20 Luke 2:8-14; Matthew 2:1-12 Mark 3; Matthew 9:9-11 Matthew 8; John 4
A.D. 30	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jesus promised the Holy Spirit would come. • Christ's death unites believers. • We the church are God's dwelling place. Christ is the cornerstone. 	John 15-18,26 Ephesians 2:11-22 1 Corinthians 3:16-17
	• In the New Heaven and New Earth, there will be no temple. God will dwell with man.	Revelation 21:3,22-27

¹ From *The Complete Jewish Study Bible* (p. 7), by David H. Stern, Copyright 2016 by Hendrickson Publishers Marketing, LLC. Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

Monday, November 28

The Mockingbird

It is a common idea among Christians that we see God in nature's beauty. Sometimes God breaks through our ideas and provides for us an unusual, yet natural, communication of Himself.

One afternoon a few years ago, I met my prayer partner in a beautiful park. She and I chose to sit on a bench nestled in a small grove of flowers and trees. It was a beautiful sunny day.

She and I had come with a list of significant prayer concerns. For the next hour she and I took turns voicing a variety of prayers. Many of those prayers were for loved ones to come to Christ. Others were for those needing healing. Some were confessional. We prayed for our nation. We prayed for the health and future of the church.

I remember the prayers of worship. For a few moments we verbalized our love and gratefulness to God. There was praise to God for Who He is. There was recognition that He is Lord. Our response was to submit our spirits and lives to Him in that moment.

As we were concluding, a most amazing thing happened. Only about 10 feet above us, almost close enough to touch, a gorgeous mockingbird alighted on a branch. For almost 20 minutes, this bird sat singing over and over through its beautiful repetition of songs.

Neither my friend nor I had ever been so close to a bird like this and for so many minutes. It was as if God had sent him to us, with his soft feathers fluffing in the breeze, and his songs straight from heaven.

Believers are used to singing to God through hymns in our worship services. This time, God provided songs to us, to show that He is with us.

*The Lord your God is in your midst,
a mighty one who will save;
he will rejoice over you with gladness;
he will quiet you by his love;
he will exult over you with loud singing.*
(Zephaniah 3:17, ESV)



Writer:

Becky Brooks has been at NFBC for 26 years. She sings in the choir, is a member of the Passages connect group, and currently serves as a deacon. A favorite pastime is reading fiction murder mysteries.

Tuesday, November 29

Emmanuel with Us in a Frightening Storm

My brother Paul, who lives in Louisiana, has Alzheimer's. To give my sister-in-law a respite from caregiving, my husband, Bruce, and I took him to see our sister in New Orleans. We attended a big high school graduation party for one of her grandchildren. It was great fun.

On the drive down, our new SUV seemed to have transmission problems, but we could find no help over the weekend. Driving home, we pulled into the dealership in Baton Rouge; they said the transmission had failed. It was a shock to the seasoned mechanics. They sent us to rent a car. The car was a smallish thing that felt like a tin can.

Rain had started to come down hard as we pulled out of the rental place. It was difficult to see too far ahead, yet we were in the city with plenty of lighting. Soon we were out of the dense Baton Rouge traffic.

We were all very quiet in the car. Soon we would be on the 18.2-mile Atchafalaya Basin Bridge, third longest bridge in the U.S., normally with beautiful bayou and marshland scenery, but with no stopping or pull offs. The swamp was pitch black. The rain was pounding. Bruce reduced speed. There was construction on the road. Then our cell phones sounded off: WEATHER ALERT. STOP YOUR CAR. PULL OFF THE ROAD UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE. Pull off where? We were surrounded by the Atchafalaya Basin. We needed a boat!

I said, "Paul, we have to pray." My brother undid his seatbelt and leaned up to make us shoulder to shoulder. He prayed loud and hard, loud enough to fill a small auditorium. He asked God to intervene to bring us through, to get us out of the frightening storm.

When he finished I said, "Let's sing!" My brother and I sang hymns loud and hard. MY HOPE IS BUILT ON NOTHING LESS, MY LORD IS NEAR ME ALL THE TIME, COME THOU FOUNT OF EVERY BLESSING, and on and on. Paul knew all the words. I cried. Bruce pulled our little tin can of a car into the flooded parking lot of a most fabulous restaurant and we all ate shrimp.

When I am afraid, I will trust in you.

(Psalm 56:3)



Writer:

Hattie Bryant is the author of *I'll Have It My Way* and the Bible study *I'll Have It God's Way* based on that book. She sings in the choir, lives in downtown Nashville, and is married to Bruce Camber.

Wednesday, November 30

God's Presence with Parents

In my experience, few situations better demonstrate God's presence in our lives than the birth of a new baby. From the early stages of pregnancy all the way to birth, God's hands are working in unseen ways. And then our job begins—somehow, we have to figure out how to take care of, protect, and raise this new life. Of course, we are not alone in those things because God is fully aware of how hard it is to be a parent.

God's presence has been very clear to me throughout the first few months of my daughter's life. Before she was born, I had been told by multiple people that transitioning from one to two kids was an exciting adventure (read chaotic whirlwind). This has certainly been true for us. There have been a good number of appointments and doctors' visits that have occupied us since her arrival. Balance that with a toddler who is finding his place in all of this, stress has been on the rise, and it seems like hours in the day have been on the decline. But in the midst of new challenges and routines, God has provided the strength and perspective we have needed to press on. He has met us where we needed Him, and as we have come to Him, we have found that He is not far away.

I am truly humbled by the way in which God gives the gift of children. He creates a person, shapes their personality, pours his love into them, and then He entrusts that person's life to the hands of broken sinners. Who am I, that God would choose to give me His creation, to care for, watch over, and love? The task seems so big, and I can't help but be reminded of my inadequacies. But for the parents that trust in Him, He will always remain present.

*"Listen to me, you descendants of Jacob,
all the remnant of the people of Israel,
you whom I have upheld since your birth,
and have carried since you were born.
Even to your old age and gray hairs
I am he, I am he who will sustain you.
I have made you and I will carry you;
I will sustain you and I will rescue you."*

(Isaiah 46:3-4, NIV)



Writer:

Oliver Payne is the husband of Savannah and father of Ivan and Audrey. He is approaching his fifth year as a software engineer for Lifeway. His hobbies include playing and creating video games, making music, and eating spicy foods (with the rest of his family, of course)!

Thursday, December 1

A Peace That Surpasses

Scripture verses we read or memorized when we were young may make lasting impressions but not be understood deeply until years, even decades, later. As an adult, I experienced the peace of God deeply during a period of sadness when a close personal relationship was broken permanently. I felt helpless and alone.

During that time, as I prepared to leave for work one morning, I turned on the ignition, and the car's engine made an unusual sound. Needing to get to work some 13 miles away, yet having no one to call for assistance, I prayed aloud, "Lord God, you promise that you will be with us. Let me get across town without having the engine die." Immediately an overwhelming sense of peace engulfed me. At that moment I comprehended more fully the meaning of this Scripture verse: "And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7, KJV)."

Immanuel is with us and the peace we have in Him surpasses anything that we can imagine!

*Do not be anxious about anything,
but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving
let your requests be made known to God.
And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding,
will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*

(Philippians 4:6-7, ESV)



Writer:

Andrea Lindsey is a member of the Passages Connect Group and helps with the Girls Missions Group (GAs). She retired after a career of 42 years as a high school teacher (of English, theater, and public speaking) and librarian. The Scripture verses she learned in Sunday School, Vacation Bible School, and GAs continue to guide her spiritual walk with God.

Friday, December 2

Great Faithfulness

A woman who used to work in my office was always quick to pray with people and was very outspoken about her faith. As someone who has sometimes felt uncomfortable being bold sharing my faith, I admired and was a little intimidated by her openness. Phrases of hymns would pop into my head frequently as I walked by her office and I started to feel God's nudge that I should share that with her. For a few weeks, I put that off, feeling awkward about initiating a conversation.

One day, there was an overwhelming feeling that I needed to tell her that day. When I went to her office, she wasn't there. But my need to tell her felt urgent. Without another option, I sent her an email telling her that I was thinking of her and wanted to let her know of the connections I felt between her presence in the office and these hymns. I let her know that the one I had been thinking of most recently was "Great Is Thy Faithfulness" and sent her a link to my favorite recording of that song.

Soon after, she replied to say she received that email and listened to the hymn while she was at a doctor's office, receiving very difficult health news. This experience and feeling of being so clearly directed by the Holy Spirit is such a precious moment in my faith and a reminder to be faithful in our obedience.

Pardon for sin and a peace that endureth,
Thine own dear presence to cheer and to guide;
Strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow,
Blessings all mine with 10,000 beside!

Great is Thy faithfulness!
Great is Thy faithfulness!
Morning by morning new mercies I see;
All I have needed, thy hand hath provided;
Great is Thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me!²

*Because of the Lord's faithful love, we do not perish for His mercies never end.
They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness!
(Lamentations 3:22-23)*

²Written by Thomas O. Chisholm



Writer:

Victoria Parker is married to her husband of 12 years, Tripp Parker. They have two children, Caroline and Warren, and a very spoiled retriever puppy. Both from Mississippi originally, Tripp and Victoria moved to Nashville when they graduated from architecture school. They love this city and Nashville First.

Saturday, December 3

Immanuel ... Revealing His Plan for My Life

Growing up as preacher's kids in Nashville, my sisters and brother and I had multiple "church homes" over the span of our lifetime as children. While my parents built a house and grew roots in Goodlettsville, there was a two-year window when we rented out our home and moved to Donelson where my dad served on a church staff. My younger siblings transferred schools, but because it was my senior year, I got a driver's license and began the daily commute to complete my final year.

At this point in my life, a firm foundation in Christ had been laid. It seemed that "Immanuel" was always "with us." No matter which church we happened to be attending, our leaders made learning about Christ a personal and important part of growing up. As a 9-year-old, I had made the decision to follow Christ, be baptized, and then be the best person I could. And for the years that followed, I continued to learn, grow, and further my understanding of discipleship. But when I reached my senior year, the reality of life outside my family unit began to consume my thoughts. I would soon be leaving the nest and having to make important decisions regarding my future. My faith and knowledge would be tested.

True to His promises, God took full advantage of my daily alone time in the car that year to speak intently to my heart. And over the months of listening to Him direct my thoughts and putting people in my life, He revealed that my life should be used in service to Him. As a result of trusting Him, I can see how He guided and opened doors. From working as a summer GA counselor, serving as pianist for children's choirs and small churches, and devoting an editorial career to working for Lifeway, my life's work has always focused on serving Christ.

God desires us to be willing. Whether we serve in large or more simple, quiet ways, He wants our heart. I'm grateful for the Church and the foundation it provides. May we all be open and responsive to God's presence.

*For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works,
which God prepared ahead of time for us to do.*
(Ephesians 2:10)



Writer:

Connie Powell is married to Bill Powell and they have one son, Will. They joined NFBC in 2006. Connie sings in the choir, worked for five years as a music librarian for the choir, and served as a temporary assistant for Pastor Frank.

Sunday, December 4

God Was There

I was a music consultant for Lifeway Christian Resources for 22 years and traveled all over the US. More than 30 years ago I flew into the Washington, D.C., airport, rented a car, and got on the Beltway to travel to Gaithersburg, MD. Darkness was already descending, and I was struggling to read the directions from my contact person. Sure enough I made some wrong turns (some VERY wrong turns) and eventually found myself on a sparsely populated two-lane highway going nowhere. When I came to a sign large enough to read, the words said WEST VIRGINIA.

Fear was taking over ... I truly had no idea where I was. And of course, I was praying for God's help. I turned around and headed back, watching for a place to stop and ask directions. I saw lights in one building on the right side of road. (I think the term "roadhouse" came to mind). I felt a touch on my right shoulder and an audible voice said "Do not stop. Do not leave the car." Even more frightened ... I obeyed the One who was protecting me.

The experience had a good ending. Though late, I finally arrived in Gaithersburg and taught my classes. This is one of many true stories of precious times when God intervened, took over, and kept me safe.

I titled my story "God Was There." But really, I want to say "God is HERE." More dynamic than the DC experience is the *blessing of God's presence in my daily life* ... to the measure of my surrender and obedience. He keeps amazing me with how near—and how often—He makes Himself known. Sometimes as God my Creator and Lord of all. Sometimes as Jesus my Teacher and Friend. Sometimes as Holy Spirit, Comforter and Guide.

"The Lord is near to all who call upon Him ..."
(Psalm 145:18, ESV)



Writer:

Martha Kirkland has been a member of NFBC for 37 years, serving through the Music Ministry and other opportunities. She is a member of the Encouragers class and especially celebrates three generations of Kirklands at Nashville First. She loved her 22 years at Lifeway as a Music Consultant.

Monday, December 5

Singing with Joy

I was never a soloist, but I love being in the choir, practicing the anthems and then singing them in church. (These days I do pantomime high notes.) Hearing the accompaniments and the voice parts working together—sublime.

I also love to sing hymns with the congregation. Sometimes a line hits me because it is pure Scripture. When we sing together, I feel it in a different way from just reading it, and I remember the words better. I expect that I'm not the only one who has to slow down and sing when reading a verse from the Bible such as "For the Lord God Omnipotent reigneth" (Rev. 19:6, from "Hallelujah Chorus" in Handel's *Messiah*). It feels like God with us.

When I was growing up, I loved the congregational voice part singing that I don't hear as much now. But I used to be embarrassed singing hymns next to my dad in the service. He could only carry a tune if he were singing alone. Any accompaniment threw him off. Eventually I realized that he had a deep love of the hymns and of their message. That's why he sang with such enthusiasm.

When I was in grade school, our family sat in church behind Russ Bradley's aunts. They held hymnals but rarely looked down at the words. I thought that was wonderful, so I tried to learn to do that. However, here's a hint: You must think about the words when you sing without looking at them. I have been known to mindlessly switch rhyming words—which can destroy the meaning of the text. (Examples: my/thy or mine/thine or me/thee)

I know that God is with us when we are gathered. But sometimes when we sing together, I am aware of His presence most joyfully. Singing has always done that! God said to Job:

*"Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? ...
when the morning stars sang together
and all the sons of God shouted for joy?"
(Job 38:4,7, ESV)*



Writer:

Helen Owens has attended Nashville First since the Cradle Roll. She sings in the choir, and her husband, Dan, plays trombone in the orchestra. Their two daughters grew up singing in the choir program. They have four grandchildren.

Tuesday, December 6

A Miracle: God Was Powerfully Present

It was 5:00 a.m. on a cold November morning in Plattsburg, NY. Rusty and I loaded our daughters in our Volkswagen Van to drive home after attending the New York Baptist Annual Meeting. We were leaving early to arrive in Rochester for our daughter Clair to attend a dance rehearsal of "The Nutcracker." Twenty minutes outside of town on the interstate our van hit black ice. It ran off the road, going down an embankment, then up a hill, flipped end to end, and landed on the wheels headed in the wrong direction.

Our two girls and I were thrown out of the back window of the van and laid on the ground. Rusty was unconscious and stuck in the car with a fellow pastor. The girls were physically unharmed, Rusty had lower back compression and pain, and I broke my neck at C2, called the hangman's break. I should have been paralyzed or dead.

During the following months our family experienced God's presence in many strong amazing ways. An angel at the site of the wreck gave me instruction that saved my life. A night nurse prayed to God for the first time in her life and asked Him to heal me. Another nurse told me that what she experienced with our family saved her marriage. Many hospital personnel came to visit because they heard you could feel the powerful presence of God in our room.

Our God's presence moves among us in mighty ways every day. The miraculous miracle I experienced was not because of who I am, but to show His power to others and to bring glory to His name. I feel that same mighty presence I felt in that hospital room and on the side of the road each time I choose to create time with individuals with whom God has called me to engage.

*The 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.
(John 1:14, NIV)*



Writer:

Becky Sumrall is married to Rusty, mother to Clair (Ado) and Abbie (Lee), and grandmother to Alana, Kobe, and Corbin. She is a member of the Sanctuary Choir. Becky's passion is serving and ministering to women through First Women's Ministry, Begin Anew, and life, leadership, and spiritual direction mentoring and coaching through Rebekah Sumrall Coaching. She has served as a missionary with the North American Mission Board, Women's Ministry consultant with the Tennessee Baptist Convention, and executive director of Begin Anew.

(See two more of Becky's stories in "Extras" at the end of this devotional guide.)

Wednesday, December 7

A Decision and a Blessing

When the doctor confirmed what I suspected, I was devastated. I had two very young children and odds and chances said that it was next to impossible. I was pregnant. Although my circumstances were much different than Mary's, I'm sure she must have had those thoughts of: "That's impossible." In fact, in her devastation she said, "How can this be?"

In my story, I was ready to end the pregnancy. Consequently, I'm not so quick to judge those who look at that option. I just didn't think I could do it—physically, emotionally, psychologically, and even financially. My wise doctor told me to carry the baby and give it up for adoption—that there were couples that would pay all the medical bills. He gave me several options, one of which was: "Don't do anything yet. Just take some time to pray about it and talk with your husband." And then the doctor prayed with me.

Mary, too, had an angel telling her "The Lord is with you." She had to have had moments of wondering what others would think of her or what might Joseph do. God was with Mary. He had chosen her.

God was with us, too. Our third child is a tremendous blessing in our lives and in the lives of our first two children. God was with me that day even as He is today. I won't deny that it is difficult, even impossible at times, to explain or prove that God was there. The world might say it is impossible. But God says, "You can do this! I will be with you."

*"For I know the plans I have for you"—this is the LORD's declaration—
"plans for your well-being, not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope."
(Jeremiah 29:11)*

Writer:

Anonymous

Thursday, December 8

Our Encouraging Angel

Christmas 1999 was unlike any Christmas our family had ever experienced. Jimmy was assigned to oversee a national youth gathering in Philadelphia, PA, that was one of seven sites across America celebrating the arrival of 2000. Kim's family chose to spend Christmas together at her brother's home in Alexandria, VA. So we planned a trip to New York City the week before Christmas, took the train to Washington for Christmas, and then back to Philadelphia for the youth event January 1.

In the recent months preceding this trip, Kim was diagnosed with breast cancer and had surgery in November followed by the beginning of chemotherapy in early December. Her treatment schedule allowed her to participate in our trip, returning to Nashville the last week in December for her second treatment.

While in Philadelphia, we went across the street from our downtown hotel to have lunch at a café in the Lord & Taylor Department Store. The store was designed in a square, multiple floor configuration surrounding a big open area that housed a very large historic organ on one side. The café was directly across from the organ.

On this occasion, Kim chose to wear her wig for the first time in public. She was beginning to lose her hair and thought this would be a good transition step toward her new look. After all, she wouldn't see anyone she knew. We were sitting there enjoying the view waiting on lunch to be served when a woman came to the table and asked Kim, "Where do you get your hair done? It looks so good. Do you style it yourself?" We were both speechless and we don't remember what Kim said to her in response. We do recall that we didn't say much the rest of the meal.

As we reflected on the encounter in the days that followed, it became clear that we had been in the presence of an angel sent by God to encourage and comfort us during a challenging period. It was an *Emmanuel—God with Us* experience we will never forget.

*Gracious words are like a honeycomb,
sweetness to the soul and health to the body.*
(Proverbs 16:24, ESV)



Writer:

Jimmy and Kim Hester are long-time members serving through various ministries. Kim is church pianist and currently works in the church office. Jimmy teaches a Connect group and is facilitating *Experiencing God*. He is a trustee and a member of the Sanctuary Choir. They have two grown sons and three grandchildren.

Friday, December 9

From Deep Darkness to Great Light

It's been 28 years since I endured dark depression: ongoing feelings of suicide. In the middle of my doctoral program, my family faced bitterness of divorce and betrayal; the once solid sidewalk of my family cracked through and through. Emmanuel—where are You right now when I have no foundation?

For a full year, I could only see the sky through a lens of dark grey clouds that never seemed to lift. I learned my brain enzymes were depleted, and medication would assist. A godly doctor encouraged me to accept the medication, to make every change in my life to connect with friends and engage in social activities, and to call my heart to worship every moment I possibly could. God used the dark reality of depression to teach me that enormous rays of sunshine could be consistently accessed when I battled through twisted feelings with a genuine gratefulness. I learned to praise Him for every tiny speck of a gift I could see. All these years later, that severe depression became the most shocking gift to my soul.

Every day, I countered every ounce of negativity and discouragement with praise to my Savior. I learned to walk a rocky path, with full belief in my Redeemer. No one but God could lift me up and out, and He did, over and over again. I became spiritually tougher during this time. To live, I learned to do the work of climbing out.

Ever heard anyone talk about the gift of painful depression? I can. God was and is with me. I recovered. I learned to keep God in His rightful place: to honor Him with every breath in my lungs. My life will never again be about me: I have been in God's Battle School. Emmanuel showed Himself STRONG in every way. My heart cannot forget!

*The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness,
on them has light shone.
(Isaiah 9:2, ESV)*



Writer:

Fran Hoogestraat is a native South Dakotan who loves the outdoors, coaching throwing events of track & field, and anything that brings people to Christ. She attempts to use her single life to uplift young people and help them learn from her mistakes/lessons. When not coaching, she is playing piano, swimming laps, or enjoying the laughter life offers.

Saturday, December 10

God's Presence in The Pines

In 1990 on Tuesday nights I drove from my home to The Pines, an inner-city apartment complex in Fairport, NY, to serve as a chaplain in the apartment complex. The apartment manager had agreed I could lead activities for children, youth and senior adults during the week and offer Bible Study and Worship one night a week.

I recruited a few volunteers from my church, and my pastor agreed to come and lead worship. I distributed flyers and visited residents, spent time getting acquainted with them and their families, and asked what kinds of programs they would like offered in the apartment complex. Each year the number of children attending the activities increased and we needed more volunteers. During the school year, students attending a Christian seminary in the area would volunteer. And during the summer, mission teams would join us to play and love on these children. During two summers, mission teams of students from our church, Nashville First, came to minister to these children and families with me.

I will never forget one visit I made with a single mom and her two children. I knocked on the door, introduced myself as the Chaplain in the apartment complex, and asked if she had time for me to visit with her. She said yes and invited me into her home. We chitchatted awhile about family, interests and children, and then I asked about her religious background. She shared she was a member of "The Way," which I knew to be a cult. I then invited her to join us for Bible study and worship. She was hesitant to say she would attend, I and left thinking I would not see her anytime soon at worship.

To my surprise, the next week she came to the Bible study. I was really pleased but wondered what had influenced her to attend. I said to her, "I am so happy you joined us tonight." Her response showed me how God shows up and takes our simple acts and uses them to move in people's hearts to show His love, hope, and salvation.

She said, "I do not like living in the Pines. I have always thought it was a God-forsaken place and that God was not living in this place. But you came into my home and sat on my couch and visited with me. No Christian or a church visiting me has ever come in and sat on my couch. And after you sat on my couch, in my home, in this apartment complex, I now know God does live here. I felt His presence as you sat on my couch."

*Where shall I go from your Spirit?
Or where shall I flee from your presence?
If I ascend to heaven, you are there!
If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there!
If I take the wings of the morning
and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,
even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me.*

(Psalm 139:7-10)

Writer: Becky Sumrall

Sunday, December 11

Seeking God with our Whole Heart

Throughout my life, God has been *with* me. His providential hand has guided the way when the waters of life ebbed, flowed, and yes, even when they raged. When I was spiritually regenerated as a young boy, I passed from darkness into light, I was saved. That's when I first felt the presence of the Holy Spirit *with* me.

Since then, there have been those remarkable times, usually seen in retrospect, when the Lord's presence was with me in such an unexplainable way that there was no doubt that His hand had moved mountains. Sometimes it takes decades to see His hand, sometimes just a few hours or days, but it's nearly always a matter of reflection. We can, without a doubt, see Him if we're in Him. Isn't that the way faith works? We can't visually see God or verbally hear Him through this dim mirror, so we pray and trust.

While God continues to be *with* all believers by calling them closer through love and discipline throughout their lives, the most palpable times we sense His presence come when we're seeking Him with our whole heart. The first phrase in James 4:8 says "Draw near to God and He will draw near to you." What an encouraging verse that promises His presence, that God can be *with* us if He sees that we desire Him.

But let's remember the rest of the verse and the following verse that tells us exactly how to draw near to God. James 4:8 continues by saying, in very direct terms, "Cleanse your hands, you sinners and purify your hearts, you double-minded." James 4:9-10 follows with "Lament and mourn and weep! Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up." When we truly become humble before the Father, we'll experience Him being *with* us on an entirely new level. He has been with me mightily when I've gotten myself out of the way. Praise the Lord!

Draw near to God and He will draw near to you.

Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded.

Lament and mourn and weep! Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom.

Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up.

(James 4:8,10 NKJV)



Writer:

Scott Sloan is from, and currently living near, Mt. Juliet, Tennessee. He has four children. Scott loves music and singing in the NFBC choir. He is a Tax Accountant, CPA, and works locally for Delek US Holdings. He is an alumni of the University of Tennessee, Knoxville.

Monday, December 12

Protection from a Rock

Driving home from church one recent Sunday, we had one of those “blink of an eye” moments. I saw a person standing on the bridge over the interstate, arm slung behind his shoulder like a major league pitcher. I knew in an instant that he would throw a rock at us, and he did.

The rock (a small one, I could tell that before he even threw it) hit the hood of the car and bounced off. Shocked, we quickly compared notes and made a plan. “It was a kid, maybe 11 or 12 years old.” “There were two of them.” “He was wearing a blue shirt.” “Should we go look for them?” “Absolutely!”

We took the next exit and doubled back to the overpass, but could not find the boys. Who were they? Why did they throw the rock? Would they do it again? What might have happened if the rock had been bigger, if it had hit the windshield instead of the hood? We had no idea, but we know God protected us from calamity in that moment.

God is certainly with us. He knows what we do not know. He sees what we do not see. He can solve problems without our help. He is our rock, our refuge, our strong tower. He hears our prayers and offers us shelter. He gave us His Son, Jesus.

*God, hear my cry; pay attention to my prayer.
I call to you from the ends of the earth when my heart is without strength.
Lead me to a rock that is high above me,
for you have been a refuge for me, a strong tower in the face of the enemy.
I will dwell in your tent forever and take refuge under the shelter of your wings.
(Psalm 61:1-4)*



Writer:

Joy Fisher has been a Nashville First member for over 40 years. She and David belong to the Open Door Connect Group. Joy teaches Mission Friends and Bible Drill and has served as chair of the Deacon Election committee for the past two years.

Tuesday, December 13

A Special Sense of God's Presence

I've always known the Lord is aware of my needs and my desire to experience His nearness in my life. His Son, Jesus Christ, is our Emmanuel, exhibiting His daily and continual presence with us!

In the midst of my house flooding some months ago, dealing with some temporary health issues as a result, and being misplaced, early last fall the Lord delivered a special blessing in the way of a baby squirrel. "Squirrely" had survived a 30-foot fall from his nest onto the edge of my driveway. I nurtured and cared for him 'til time to release him in my backyard eight weeks later.

Early on while cuddling Squirrely one night on my lap, he could not seem to settle down. As I gradually moved him further up on my chest, he grew very quiet and still. While I was admiring this cute, adorable creation and thanking the Lord for this special diversion in my life, it was as if the Lord spoke audibly to me. The clear message was: "As we get closer to the heartbeat of God, the more content we become, the more relaxed, the more at peace; plus, we have increased awareness of the Lord's protection in our lives!"

This was just such an unexpected way of the Lord pouring out His love on me! Every time I see a little squirrel scamper across my yard, I often call out Squirrely's name. If it is him, he stops, turns toward me, listens, and even chatters. I am reminded that the Lord wants us to call out His name, stop, and listen as He speaks to us.

Thank You, Lord, for your amazing grace in making me more open to the creative ways You express your forever presence with us.

*For everything created by God is good,
nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving ...
(1 Timothy 4:4)*

*Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.
(James 4:8)*



Writer:

Letty Gossett grew up in West Tennessee, one of six siblings including twin sister Betty. She earned BS and MS degrees from UT Knoxville and began a teaching career in the 1960s while her husband, Al, attended Golden Gate Seminary. In 2000 she lost Al at the time they were scheduled to serve in Zambia, Africa. She moved to Nashville where her two children, Letitia and Greg lived. Her granddaughters are Isabella (18) and Sophia (16).

Wednesday, December 14

Immanuel: Come and See

*"Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Nathanael asked him.
"Come and see," Philip answered.
(John 1:46)*

God is surely with us, always. This is a fact. No question. Sometimes though, when we are not paying enough attention, or taking too much for granted, he makes himself more fully known. Sometimes He does this with a question ...

A few years ago, I met a new friend. As new friends do, we often communicated things we liked about the other one.

One day, in a "Reasons You're Awesome" chart that we gifted to one another, in addition to things like "You share your snacks," she added this reason: "You love Jesus more than anything." I paused ...

Did I? What made her think that I did?

What would it look like if I really, really did?

Now, that's a good question!

Here's the thing - I figured no one could help me work out the answer better than Jesus himself ... so I asked him. Day after day, I asked. I asked about a lot. I told him a lot, I looked up stuff about him in his Word. I talked to people about him. I listened to other people talk about him too.

And you know what I've seen?

The more I do these things, the more aware I am of God's *withness*. The more aware I am of how easily I've given it such little notice in my life thus far. The more I need it to be more. The more I see Him working in and through me, the more I want to love Jesus more than anything!

What would it look like to really, really love Jesus more than anything?

This is a question I will spend my whole life working out. Which is awesome.

This is Immanuel - God with us. No question about it.



Writer:

Susan Owens loves Philip, Sara, and Alysa Owens, gets to make Bibles for a living, is graciously allowed to play trombone regularly, enjoys tossing ribbons and using made-up words, and is appreciative of the Advent guide editors for correctly spelling "withness."

Thursday, December 15

Our God of Surprises

Paul quotes Isaiah when he says:

"But as it is written, Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him" (1 Corinthians 2:9, KJV).

That verse has come to mean to me that God is saying, "You do not have the understanding to predict what I am going to do. Because as soon as you think you have me figured out, I am going to be a surprise to you. Your blessings are in my hands. You won't see them coming. And that's why you have to learn to trust, one day at a time. Don't expect what I did yesterday to be what I will do tomorrow. I may do something different."

That's what that verse says to me. He's the God of the surprise. My experience is that the job I am doing is less important than being where God wants me to be. And it's up to my Father in heaven to determine that. Every time I go out looking for what I think I need or want, I do not find it. But when I sit still, it finds me. This year I was between jobs for a few weeks. I didn't see coming the job I have now. All of a sudden, I got an email from a person I used to work for saying, "Hey! This guy I know is looking for truck drivers. Are you up for it?" I said, "I am." I didn't see it coming. Didn't know it was out there. I was just, "Lord, You know my situation. I wait for You to deal with it." The job turned out to be exactly where God wanted me.

That's been my life for the last 15 years. It has gone a long way to teach me fearlessness. We don't learn courage in the absence of fear. We want our lives to be so arranged that we don't have anything to fear. But we learn courage by watching God surprise us with blessings. The eye won't see it coming; the ear won't hear about it; and you won't have a clue that it's coming. But you will know it when it comes. God is with you!

*As for me, I would seek God,
and to God would I commit my cause,
who does great things and unsearchable,
marvelous things without number ..."*
(Job 5:8-9).



Writer:

Tony Hernandez sings tenor in the Sanctuary Choir.

Friday, December 16

Placing Hopes before the Lord

The first time someone asked me, "Do you want children?" I was dumbfounded; it was like being asked, "Do you like breathing?" It was never a decision; I was born knowing I was someone's mother.

I naïvely assumed getting pregnant would be simple: "Let's try ... Oh! The test is positive!"

That wasn't our story.

For six years my heart was in a constant state of mourning, emptiness, resentment, and jealousy. We lost five children, and the adoption process repeatedly failed us. In complete anguish, I began begging God for a healthy child.

Then one Sunday our pastor read a verse that I had heard a million times, but just had always taken for granted. Hearing that specific verse took my breath away. I knew that God was speaking directly to me. The pastor read Psalm 37:4 and said: "Place your hopes before the Lord and He will grant you the desires of your heart."

I grabbed Ben's hand, and we walked down front to kneel at the altar and pray.

Right then I realized God wasn't just sitting on His throne listening to me beg and plead. He wanted to grant the desires of my heart. He wanted fulfillment for me. He wasn't dangling His authority over me, wanting me to beg enough to finally say "Yes." He was right there in this struggle with me.

I stopped begging and changed my prayer to "God, you know we want a child. I am putting this desire before You, and You have promised to grant me the desires of my heart. Moving forward, I will only thank You for the baby that I know You are going to give us, however he or she comes (natural pregnancy, adoption, surrogacy ...)."

For six years I lived with a heaviness in my heart that was almost unbearable, but that day I gave the heaviness to Him. I realized that He was in the middle of this struggle with me, and that realization changed everything.

Sosie Caroline Reed was born on April 14, 2010. Appropriately, her life verse is 1 Samuel 1:27-28, "*I prayed for this child ...*"

Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.
(1 Peter 5:7, NIV)

Take delight in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart.
(Psalm 37:4)



Writer:

Tracey Reed has been married to Ben, God's perfect match for her, for 18 years. They joined Nashville First in 2010, and their 12-year-old daughter, Sosie, made her profession of faith and was baptized in 2018. Tracey has been a flight attendant at Delta Air Lines for 22 years.

Saturday, December 17

He Gives Rest for Your Soul

*"Come to me, all of you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.
Take up my yoke and learn from me, because I am lowly and humble in heart,
and you will find rest for your souls."*

(Matthew 11:28-29)

Doctors and other health care professionals are quick to recommend adequate rest to maintain good health. I occasionally have bouts of insomnia, waking up after only 3-4 hours and not being able to fall back to sleep. In those times, rest from a physiological perspective is simply not possible. At these times I will pray this verse, knowing that if God promises to give me rest, He will not fail to do so. But this verse speaks not only of rest for the "weary and burdened" but also of "rest for your soul."

Meriam Webster gives several definitions of the word "rest," yet many of them are not applicable to the life of a Christian. Listed definitions include "freedom from activity or labor" and "a state of motionlessness or inactivity." Would having freedom from activity and labor draw you closer to God and grow your faith? Probably not, as serving God and the family of faith generally involve a large helping of both.

But there is one definition listed that resonates with me as I meditate on this verse, and that is "to be free from anxiety or disturbance." There is so much in the world today that can lead to an anxious mindset that, over time, wears us down. One thing leads to another, and we soon find ourselves weary and burdened. We have a path through these times though. We call on God and He will not only provide physical rest if we come and ask, but by following Him and learning His ways we can also give "rest to our souls" and find freedom from an anxious mind.



Writer:

Steve Wheeler is husband to Leslie and dad to Sophie, Blair, and Mary Katherine. He has been the customer service trainer for Lifeway for 21 years. He has served on the tech team for video streaming and has played bass in several of our contemporary worship settings, including in the Fellowship on Broadway. Fun fact: Leslie first met Steve while he was playing in the Gathering in the mid-nineties; this year they are celebrating 26 years of marriage.

Sunday, December 18

Immanuel: God with Me

Immanuel—God with us. What undeserved grace, what a gift: the God reigning supreme, Creator of all things, once far off I paid Him no regard yet brought near by His blood ... now, God with me.

I couldn't tell you a time when He was far off. In my wandering and running, He faithfully pursued me. In darkness and waiting, He's near and knows every need, every tear, every longing. When my soul knew Him not, He was calling, drawing me near to Himself. The valleys are certain, the suffering promised. In deep darkness I've known Him, pulled close to His side. He is present; steadily He's been my guide. I'll take up my cross for Thy Righteousness' sake.

Fear not, my soul, for your God never leaves. He comforts, corrects, and directs where He leads. Never forsaking, always surrounding, in joy and in aching, He never lets go. His right hand is mighty, His grip is secure. Sovereign God, my God, You are with me. When I'm crushed, I will praise. When I'm weak, bless Your Name. I'm without reason to question Your nearness or love.

You've laid floors for the ocean, sustain galaxies in motion, yet You stooped down to us all to fix what was broken. Born in utter humility, You walked my cross to Calvary, and hung with nails in Your hands that were pierced due to me. O, what mercy, what grace! You died in my place. You paid what I owe, now my sin is erased. How can it be that Your affection was set in my direction?

In my helpless rebellion, You said, "Worth it to Me." You are King of all kings and Lord of all lords, my comfort and refuge in calm and in storm. I fear nothing but my God alone. With trembling-filled awe I bow at His throne. So great, so holy, so mighty is He—yet He came to restore and reconcile me.

Where shall I go from Your Spirit or flee from Your presence? Wherever I go, You're near and You know. You are Immanuel—You are God with me.

*He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for His name's sake.
Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil,
for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me."*

(Psalm 23:3-4)



Writer:

Meredith Cummings came to know and love the Lord as her Savior when she was 14. She joined Nashville First in 2020, where she serves in the student ministry alongside her husband, Caleb. They have a 2-year-old daughter, Hadley, and are foster parents. Meredith is a registered perioperative nurse at Monroe Carell Jr. Children's Hospital at Vanderbilt and is a singer/musician/songwriter for The Lowly Heirs.

Monday, December 19

An Invitation to Trust

In my senior year of high school, I had to take an advanced placement test for a history class to earn college credit. These tests were notoriously hard to pass and had a lot riding on the outcome. We had to take these tests off campus and ended up in the fellowship hall of a local Baptist church. Nervously, I was seated next to a window.

As the proctor began handing out materials, I looked at the church marquee just outside the window. It had the verse from Psalm 56 saying, "What time I am afraid, I will trust in thee." With that simple verse, my anxiety faded, and I took the test knowing that my trust was in the Lord. God says that He will neither leave nor forsake us. He is omnipresent, always with us; however, we often overlook His presence. Our fears and frustrations haze the fact that the creator who fights for us and goes before us in every facet of our life is always there.

On that day senior year, I focused on the part of the verse that tells us to remember God in our fear, but as I have committed this verse to memory, the latter part of the verse, the "trust" part, is what stands out to me. God doesn't simply remind us that He is always with us, but extends an invitation, as He often does, for us to trust in Him completely. Trust in him with our fear, our frustrations, our hopes, our dreams, our tears, and our celebrations. God calls to remembrance that He is with us, and asks us to trust in Him fully, not just when we're afraid, but in all areas of our life.

What time I am afraid, I will trust in thee.

(Psalm 56:3, KJV)



Writer:

Zach Williams is originally from Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. He is an elementary school teacher and lives in Old Hickory. He has been in Nashville for six years and at Nashville First for five of those years. Zach is a former president of the Sanctuary Choir, part of the Children's Ministry Committee, and works with the children's choirs.

Tuesday December 20

Awareness of God

Several years ago I put together a booklet for my family, relating some of the times when God had been especially real to me. As we know, God's presence is with us always, but only rarely do most of us have an unusually keen sense of his nearness. When it does happen, when an awareness of God is wonderfully powerful, it seems important to write about it and share those memories for posterity. The first of these experiences that really startled and blessed me happened like this:

When I was 17 years old, my mother was suffering from physical and emotional problems and had to be hospitalized for an extended period. At one point, when my father was on a speaking tour in Canada for his insurance company, my 7-year-old brother had measles, and my older sister was in college, so I was left with all the responsibility of running the household. Arrangements had been made for someone to be with my brother while I was at school, but as soon as I came home, I was on my own.

One day I felt completely overwhelmed, and I threw myself on the bed, saying aloud, "I have no one to help me!" Immediately I felt the strong "everlasting arms" of God, lifting and strengthening me, and I "heard" a message on the inside of my brain, saying, "You have Me!"

It was an amazing experience, and I sat up with joy and encouragement, knowing that I was not alone. The God I had worshiped and loved my whole life had made Himself known to me in an unmistakable way. The verse above had been our family Watchword since my younger sister had died a few years earlier; and we quoted it every night at the end of our family devotionals, so it was incredibly comforting to have the "everlasting arms" truly holding me close and becoming the Refuge I needed. Thanks be to God.

The eternal God is thy refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms ...

(Deuteronomy 33:27, KJV)



Writer:

Diane Owen Jordan, with a B.A. from Mercer University and graduate work at Southern Seminary, has been a teacher and a pastor's wife. She has taught Sunday School, in VBS, and Music & Arts Camp; she is a Sanctuary Choir member, and has been a WMU leader and a deacon. Diane has won several hymn writing competitions. She has two children and six grandchildren, three of whom were raised in this church. Her son is a pastor, and her daughter is an author and professor.

Wednesday, December 21

My Demolished Knees

My knees look cool. Various surgical scars adorn both lower legs. However, I did not see the limitations on my activities as cool. Fiercely competitive and extremely athletic, I asked God to heal my knees. Years passed. Surgery after surgery allowed me to continue standing but not run miles on end, burn off massive frustrations, neutralize guys on racquetball courts, eat all I wanted with impunity, etc. I chose to be sad and angry because I absolutely knew God had the power to instantly heal me—and He wasn't.

When a minister at our former church invited those who wanted healing to come forward, I indignantly told my Father, "You can heal me right here, but if You need me to go down there, I will." (Sometimes I understand teenage daughters too well.) As the minister prayed, blessing after blessing immediately flooded my mind overtaking the focus on limitations. When I left the altar, my knees remained impaired, but God had instantly healed my spirit.

It was not what I had asked for. It was not what I had wanted. It was what I had needed. And I recognized His miracle—the gift that had come through my demolished knees. Now I look back over time wasted being sad and angry, and I endeavor to never live there again. Come what may, I choose joy.

God's word tells us - "*Rejoice in the Lord always*" (Phil. 4:4a) and "*in every thing [to] give thanks*" (1 Thess. 5:18a). We do this not as martyrs or deranged disciples but as power-filled victors who trust our Father to know a little more than we about the big picture. And God even showed up for His petulant child, teaching me He meant what He said in those verses above that I knew by heart but was actively choosing to ignore. How grateful am I that the God of the universe not only chose to come to Earth a couple of thousand years ago but wants to work with, in, and through His children still today!

*Trust in the Lord with all your heart
And do not lean on your own understanding.
In all your ways acknowledge Him,
And He will make your paths straight.*
(Proverbs 3:5-6, NASB)



Writer:

Dee Anne Irwin is a former prosecutor and history teacher. Though she maintains her valid law license, she has been a stay-at-home mom for years. She and Brian Overbeck have been married 29 years; they participate in the Open Door Connect Group. Their daughter Kee-Lee is a college sophomore, and their daughter Ah-Gust is a high school junior. Their dogs, Pippin and Merry, and cats, Finney and Canaan, need schooling but are deprived thereof. Their fish have schooling down!

P.S. Dee Anne made this observation to which some can relate: Driving along, I look down and see the crepey skin mentioned in commercials. Thus, I had begun looking for the advantage of getting older. What I realized was my faith had become less "faith" and more "knowing" because over the years I had more and more examples of how God had shown up. That's seriously cool!

Thursday, December 22

His Grace Is Sufficient

My name is Nirmala Devi, and I am from Singapore. I am here in the U.S. on a 1-year visa internship in Nashville. This is my first visit to the United States of America, and I have neither kin nor kindred here. I arrived this summer, solely dependent on God's promises in His Word. I know that His grace will be sufficient unto me (2 Cor. 12:9) and that He will never leave me nor forsake me (Deut. 31:6).

I found work as a pastry chef in Nashville and rented an unfurnished studio apartment in the vicinity of my workplace. But I was wondering how I was going to furnish the apartment after having paid for all the expenses involved in my move (current month's rent, 1-month rental deposit, application fee, insurance coverage, NES deposit, and miscellaneous other fees.)

As per normal, I conveyed all my concerns and needs to my Heavenly Father, knowing that He would provide in His own way and on time. He has never failed me before, and He is not going to fail me now that I am alone in a foreign land.

By God's grace, mercy, love and faithfulness, my needs, and even my wants, have been met by the members of my NFBC Connect Group. Andrea Lindsey contacted Pam Stockett and told her about the things that I needed. Pam had just been contacted by her neighbor Ruth Wharton who had a bed and a sofa to give away as she and her husband were downsizing.

I moved into my apartment on August 31, and the very next day I received the bed, linens, bedsheets, pillows, and a whole host of household items. Subsequent days saw the arrival of the sofa set, a television, and crockeries.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank Pam, Israel Garcia, and Bill Moody for delivering the items to my place. I am also grateful to several others for their gifts of love. Now I am comfortably settled in my apartment and all honor and glory belong to God Almighty.

*Be strong and courageous; don't be terrified or afraid of them.
For the LORD your God is the one who will go with you; he will not leave you or abandon you.
(Deuteronomy 31:6)*



Writer:

From Devi: I was born, raised and educated in Singapore and am an Indian by race. I have been gloriously married for the past 31 years to my wonderful husband, Panneer Selvam. We have two lovely daughters. Esther (26) is currently pursuing her studies in Sydney, Australia; next year, Maria (27) will pursue her postgraduate studies in Auckland, New Zealand. We have a 4-year-old beagle named Jerry (short for Jeremiah). We are all members of the Toa Payoh Methodist Church in Singapore. Since my children have grown up and I had more time in my hands, I decided to embark on a new journey to study pastry making. I am on a one-year internship here.

In Singapore's context, there is no such thing as first name or last name. There is only our own name, and our father's name is the surname. Thus, my whole name is Nirmala Devi. For easier pronunciation by my Chinese friends and acquaintances, I go by the name of Devi.

Friday, December 23

Transcendence and Immanuel

Most people think about God as being exalted and powerful, hidden and mysterious. Indeed, he is. Theologians speak of God as "transcendent," from the Latin *trans scandere*, which literally means to "climb over," implying God is above and beyond. He looks down from heaven from a lofty throne, holy and glorious. He is called *El Elyon* translated "The Most High God" and *El Shaddai* which means "God Almighty." We cannot see the hidden God for He is spirit.

Many of us are familiar with the Lord's words from Isaiah 55:8, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways." Wouldn't we all agree with Job who asked, "Who then can understand the thunder of his power"? (Job 26:14b) So yes, there is a mystery about God. I once saw someone wearing a t-shirt that read, "THERE IS A GOD and YOU AREN'T HIM." Although a bit crass, the phrase does bring home the reality that He is the creator, and we are the creature. We stand in awe of the transcendent God and his glory.

Given our understanding of God as exalted and powerful, hidden and mysterious, isn't the name *Immanuel*, "God with us," all the more wondrous?

With the incarnation, the exalted one humbled himself, taking the nature of a servant being made in human likeness.

With the incarnation, the powerful one submitted to death on the cross.

With the incarnation, the hidden God was revealed as the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.

With the incarnation, the mysterious God became more clearly understood as we heard Christ speak as the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

And God is still with us, not in physical form but through the Holy Spirit. On a deeply personal level, we feel God's presence. We hear his whispers. We find his comfort. The exalted and powerful transcendent God is actively involved in our everyday lives.

*"Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall call his name Immanuel"
(which means, God with us).
(Matthew 1:23)*



Writer:

Gary Eaton retired from Lifeway Christian Resources in 2018 after a 34-year career; he resides in Franklin with his wife Kenna. They enjoy traveling, museums and camping. Gary is an avid amateur astronomer and enjoys cycling, classical music, theology and history.

Saturday, December 24

God Prepares the Way

My name is Lynn and my husband's name was Steve. Steve was a good man and a good Christian.

In his early 60s, Steve developed a very serious illness. While we tried to stay active, during his last few months he was bed-bound at home. He was not able to talk very well at that time. Even smiling took a lot of concentration.

One day I noticed that Steve would hold his hands to the ceiling and smile very big, even though it must have taken a super effort. This went on for a while, so one day I asked him why he held his hands to the ceiling. Very clearly, he said, "Lynn, don't you see them?"

Even though I did not see what he was seeing, I will always believe that a heavenly being was comforting him and letting him know his time was getting close and everything was going to be all right. God was with him. He passed away two days later.

*So do not fear, for I am with you;
do not be dismayed, for I am your God.
I will strengthen you and help you;
I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.*
(Isaiah 41:10, NIV)



Writer:

Lynn Staley lives in North Augusta, SC. She is an active member of First Baptist Church North Augusta. Lynn is the sister the Judith King.

Judith and Don King are members of the Encouragers Connect Group and both sing in the Sanctuary Choir. Don is a deacon and serves as church clerk. Judith is active in women's events, teaches in Music & Arts Camp, and is an invaluable member of the Devotional Service Group.

Sunday, December 25

Born in the Likeness of Man – for Us!

Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who,

- *though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped,*
- *but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.*
- *And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.*

Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name,

- *so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,*
- *and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*

Hallelujah!

(Philippians 2:4-11)



ADDITIONAL ARTICLES

Emmanuel or Immanuel?

From: <https://www.preceptaustin.org/immanuel-emmanuel>

Immanuel with an "I" is a transliteration of the original Hebrew word composed of 'Immanu (with us) and El (God), while Emmanuel with an "E" is a transliteration of the Greek "Emmanouel." ... The Name EMMANUEL emphasizes the nearness of God. Christ's birth brought the infinite, holy God within reach of finite, sinful man. God came to live with us so we could live with Him. The Son of God became the Son of Man that He might change the sons of men into sons of God (1 John 3:1, KJV), sons and daughters who can "now draw near with confidence (boldness) to the Throne of grace" through our Emmanuel (Heb. 4:16; 10:19-22). And so Emmanuel speaks of the incarnation of Christ, God in the flesh.

You will notice that different writers use different spellings of this name. If you look up a single verse in biblegateway.com, you can click on a footnote to see the verse in all English translations." At Isaiah 7:14, you will see that almost every Old Testament translation spells it Immanuel. At Matthew 1:23, you will see that some New Testament translations spell it Emmanuel and some spell it Immanuel. Translations that many of us use (including CSB, ESV, NASB, and NIV) spell it Immanuel in Matthew. We are using the Emmanuel spelling in the title. However, different writers used different spellings of this name. We used whichever spelling a writer used.

To read more about these spellings, look at

<https://www.christianity.com/wiki/holidays/is-it-immanuel-or-emmanuel-biblical-meaning-and-significance.html>

Listen to "Immanuel, God is with us!" - Michael Card

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y-cTyDtqpmU>



Hidden in Plain View

A family places valuables in ordinary containers to avoid detection by thieves. A soldier's presence goes undetected because of camouflage. So this is an Advent devotional because ...? Because God's revelation requires discovery. An elderly, childless priest miraculously fathers a baby who becomes a world-class preacher. A working-class couple gives birth in an obscure Jewish village on the outskirts of an ancient empire. The infant becomes an even greater, miracle-working prophet and teacher. Such humble beginnings hardly rank among the world's most celebrated occasions. But here we are.



If God is so amazing and his Kingdom is indeed universal, as both John the Baptist and Jesus proclaimed, why do so many fail to respond? The adult Jesus becomes a prophet, seen by many as a great spiritual miracle worker, even the Son of God. Others would join today's cancel culture and call Him out as a possessed son of the devil, rejecting him and anyone following him. Jesus condemns those who reject him as Lord, but He blesses His believing disciples, "But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear" (Matt. 13:16, NRSV).

Responses to Jesus include believers, unbelievers, and make-believers. Believers and unbelievers know who they are, but some unwittingly become make-believers. Raised in a Baptist church, baptized as a child, and knowing all the 'Jesus talk,' my search for God includes attending an evangelical Bible College pursuing Christian ministry. A call to Christian ministry, however, is a call to first become a Christian. Thankfully, God opened my blind eyes and led me to faith in Jesus as my Savior and Lord.

People hide precious valuables in ordinary objects in plain view to protect them from thieves. So also God has hidden His holy, invisible presence in the infant Jesus and has revealed Him to infants. "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God" (Matthew 5:8, NRSV). Advent is not a call to attend special worship services, enjoy seasonal music, or even become a church member and be baptized, as good as these things are. Advent is a call to celebrate the coming of Jesus by coming to Jesus. It is a call to believe, to follow Jesus. This Advent, dis-cover hidden things that have been revealed. Discover Jesus as your Savior and Lord.

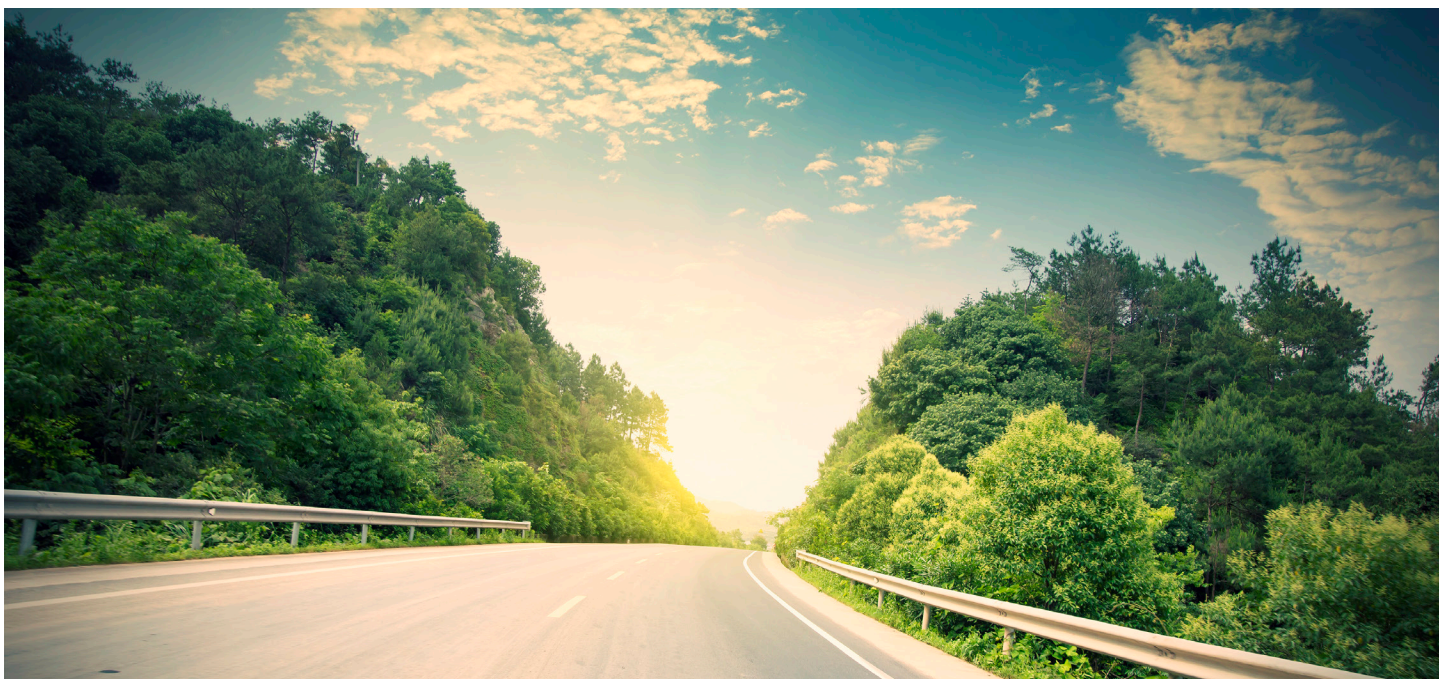
Jesus, full of joy through the Holy Spirit, said, "I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. (Luke 10:21, NIV)

*I love those who love me, and those who seek me find me.
(Proverbs 8:17, NIV)*



Writer:

Alan Lowe is married to Melonye Lowe. They have a son, Jonathan, a daughter-in-law, Elisha, and six grandchildren. Alan is an architect and minister with experience in a variety of building types and has served churches as a Pastor, Church Planter, and Deacon. Alan is working on a chronological study of the gospel stories of Jesus.



A Voice on the Road

I have been a Christ follower for many years, having made my profession of faith as a child. I look back at the “big picture” of my life and recognize God’s hand throughout, in a general sense. However, there have been some special moments when God’s presence was unmistakable.

Many years ago, I was a student living and studying 500 miles and eight hours from my family. While in school, I found myself falling into a deep depression, triggered by a crisis of faith, a struggle with self-esteem, and academic pressure.

After a few difficult semesters, I decided to take a summer break and went home to family. But I realized the necessity of going back to school and finishing what I had started, even if by taking it one day at a time. I began the 500-mile drive back to school with the prospect of still facing all of these difficulties.

My amazing special moment came unexpectedly, just as I was driving up the entrance ramp to a free-way. The best way to explain it was that a Voice spoke to me saying, “Keep on going. You are on the right road. I will be with you.”

After that amazing special moment, I had no doubts that I was on the path God wanted for me. These many years later, I am still so thankful for that treasured special moment with God, God with me.

*Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have,
for he has said, “I will never leave you nor forsake you.”*

(Hebrews 13:5, ESV)

Writer:

Becky Brooks

See also her story on Monday, November 28, about a mockingbird

God's Presence at the Grocery

A woman I mentor at Begin Anew is studying to pass her GED; she works two jobs and attends classes twice a week. One job is as a cashier at Whole Foods on Broadway on Tuesdays and Saturdays, not days I visit to purchase items at Whole Foods. Recently on a Sunday, I needed to pick up some items. As I stepped around a corner, there she was, with open arms for a hug. This was not a chance meeting. This was God, developing our relationship to give me the opportunity to speak His love and hope into her life. I felt His presence so very strongly in Whole Foods that Sunday.

As I checked out my purchases at her counter, she came around and said, "I need another hug before you go. See you soon." As I walked away, I could hear her telling the people in the line behind me, "That is my mentor." The next day she called me with two prayer requests, and the following week asked for prayer for a family member.

God is always moving and working in mighty ways to draw people to Himself. If we as His children want to experience His presence in a mighty way, we just need to step into the lives of people and love them, listen to them, and share God's hope and love.

The miracle of life I was given in the wreck is a powerful work of God, but no more powerful than the moments I feel His presence moving to give a single mother at Whole Foods an abundant life. When we "dwell among people" we will experience His mighty presence.



Writer:

Becky Sumrall. See Becky's Tuesday, December 6, story of a miracle in a wreck.

See also her story on Saturday, December 10, about God's presence in an inner-city apartment complex

Our God Is with Us – Always Has Been – Always Will Be

Have you visited the Parthenon in Centennial Park? The statue of the goddess Athena inside is astounding – huge and covered with gold leaf. Did they really worship that in Paul's day?

Habakkuk 2:18 says:
"What profit is the idol when its maker
has carved it, ...When he fashions
speechless idols."



Not only could those idols not speak, they couldn't think, they couldn't be pleased with anything you did for them, and they couldn't care either! They could not be *with* us.

But our God is not like that. The first Bible verse I remember learning is "God is love" (1 John 4:8 & 16). God created us and He loves us. He isn't an abstraction. He showed Himself in many concrete, sensory ways: He walked and talked with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. He led His people visually in fire and cloud, by demonstrating His complete control of nature (think Red Sea and Jordan River); audibly by speaking to people, through visions, and via The Angel of the Lord. By taste as He fed His people in the desert. And by disciplining them as a father would. Still He loved them.

And He did, indeed, choose to dwell with His people in the tabernacle and in the temple. (Exod. 25:8; 1 Kings 8:6,10-11; 9:1-9) Then most visibly came Jesus, as a real baby: "The Word became a human being and lived with us, and we saw his *glory* the *glory* of the Father's only Son, full of grace and truth." (John 1:14)

Jesus left us with the Holy Spirit: "If you love me, ... I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth" (John 14:15-17) "Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God?" (1 Cor. 6:19)

Speaking to the church in Corinth, Paul appealed to the church as a whole: "Do you not know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in your midst?" (1 Cor. 3:16).

"Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away." (Rev. 21:3-4)

He who testifies to these things says, "Surely I am coming soon." Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!" (Rev. 21:22:20)

He is Immanuel: God with us—with us as individuals and with us as a church. And someday, at the end of this story, we will be with Him.

— Helen Owens, Advent Guide Coordinator & Editor



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**The 2022 Advent Devotional Guide is a Christmas gift to your family from Nashville First Baptist's
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Note: Unless otherwise noted, printed Scripture passages are taken
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For more information about the ongoing services and ministries
of Nashville First Baptist Church, visit NashvilleFirst.org or call 615.664.6000.

*The 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.*

(John 1:14, NIV)