

# I will honor Christmas in my heart and try to keep it all year.

- A Christmas Carol by Charles Dickens

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May knowing JESUS bring you PEACE to bless each day,
HOPE for each tomorrow,
and JOY in every season.

Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men. *Luke 2:14* 

# GOD'S TRANSFORMING POWER

Christmas and Advent are filled with many traditions. The networks pull out the oldies but goodies, everything from "It's a Wonderful Life" to "A Charlie Brown Christmas." There is something oddly comforting in the old familiar stories. Charles Dickens' classic "A Christmas Carol" helps us remember the transformational power of God.

We find an old, stingy, lonely man at the beginning of the story. His only joy appears to be counting his gold coins. Yet his heart is changed during the course of the novel. The juxtaposition of the poverty in Scrooge's community and his abundant wealth cannot be missed.

Scrooge begins to see and feel differently about the people in his community. His guarded, selfish heart is transformed into a kind, generous one.

During this past year all of us have been forced to adapt and change, many times probably saying things like "Bah, Humbug! We find ourselves praying to go back to some kind of "normal." As we journey through Advent and Christmas we realize that 2020 will be different.

One thing, however, will not change: Jesus, the Son of God, was still born in Bethlehem. God's love came down that first Christmas and will come down again to bless us. We will read again and remember the story of how God chose to put on skin and move into our neighborhood. May God give us the eyes and hearts to embrace the wonderful gift of Christ, Emmanuel, God with us.

May God bless you and fill you with light and hope this Advent season.

Peace, Rev. Dr. Cathy Johns



Prayerfully submitted by Dave Colaw

#### 1 JOHN 1:5-9

This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true; but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

Isn't this the crux of most all of our issues...LETTING GO? We may be good at the "I have sinned" part but the next part can really be a bear! I have had far too many nights lying awake, staring at the ceiling, revisiting the real or perceived sins of my day. I drag these thoughts with me down many a long and winding road. Sounds like a song! Just wait, I have one for you. I have some illusion of perfection that won't allow for the letting go. So, I take all those bags with me. I take them to work. I bring them to Church. They are in my daily relationships. I have to have a car top carrier installed just to get out of bed in the morning.

The NOT letting go is the part that keeps us down and keeps us from being the child of God we are called to be. That's the part that makes me feel like I'm not good enough. That's the part that says my voice doesn't matter. That's the part that... (Fill in your own inner voice of which you are tired of hearing).

Advent is a time of preparation for new birth, new life, a new direction in our faith and thinking. God is ever encouraging us to grow and change. How can we take this time of Advent to bring our burdens to God? Verse 9 states "if we confess" I read that also to mean if we share, if we tell others, if we open our hearts. For many the opportunity to share their struggles with someone else can be life altering. I have never gone to confession in a Catholic church but I know the stories of release that come from that time of confession, sharing, and letting go. The counselor and psychologist have long known what God has always known about sharing your burdens. I have always felt God in the love of people in my life. For me, being able to tell the significant relationships in my life what is on my heart is so important to me. These people are God in flesh for me.

Do you have LETTING GO issues too? Sharing our sin or failure is a first step. Talk to a close friend, work with a Stephen Minister at Church, speak with one of our pastors. There are so many options...if we take that first hard step. It is in the sharing that the letting go begins. In the letting go we can walk in the light of God.

Point your phone camera at the QR code below and it will take you to a song by DC Talk that I have been humming for days. They make my point in the first line "I keep trying to find a life on my own, apart from you."



#### **Questions:**

What are the statements that your inner voice is telling you?

To whom can you take these thoughts? Is there someone who can be "God" for you in a time that you need it most?

Are you trying to find a life on your own, apart from God?



Prayerfully submitted by Karen Bruner

#### Mark 1: 1-8

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight" John the baptizer appeared[e] in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with[f] water; but he will baptize you with[g] the Holy Spirit."

As I started to pray about how I might approach "untangling the present", I immediately thought of the phrase in terms of a "present" meaning "a gift." Certainly that is the very fundamental idea of Christmas: Jesus' birth—and John's proclamation of His coming birth—IS the gift, or present to the world.

But the other definition of present hit me: being, existing, occurring at this time or now; current. This year, 2020, we are living in the very intricately tangled present of a pandemic reality: together, yet apart, each of us living in our own tangled circumstance as we make our way in this unknown pandemic wilderness.

We are entering the 4th season of COVID. Winter is a season I have always relished. Most people wouldn't say that winter is a season they enjoy or look forward to, but I love the calm, the quiet, the anticipation of spring. I like looking at the bare trees, relieved of their leaves, stark branches and limbs against a blue sky creating a unique architecture. I notice the hawks waiting patiently for prey. I appreciate what I ordinarily can't see when the trees are leafed out. What has been hidden is revealed. I try to be present in what this season offers to me, different yet beautiful. The hope and certainty that the next season will come, and the season after that.

John chose to live in the wilderness to remove himself from the distractions of the world and to be in a place where the people could give him their undivided attention.

Wilderness conjures an image of starkness and lack of material comforts, not necessarily a place one would choose to go, a "winter" of sorts. Yet it provided the needed backdrop for his message. He delivered words of incredible hope and knowledge that one greater than he would be coming. He baptized the followers in the river Jordan, where they confessed their sins, challenging them to prepare themselves to relate to God in a new way. In reading the notes accompanying the scripture, I discovered the baptism ritual John performed was unique and unprecedented in Jewish custom. The Jews often baptized non-Jews who had converted to Judaism. But this new baptism was different: "to baptize a Jew as a sign of repentance was a radical departure from Jewish custom." Unprecedented, a word we now hear daily.

The days are shortening, there is less sunshine, and temperatures are dropping. The ability to get outside is limited. Winter is here. There is great uncertainty about how our holiday traditions will be realized. They will certainly be different. I would even say unprecedented. But one unchanging, universal truth always remains, God's unyielding love for each of us. We are immersed in His love for us. I pray that His love might be revealed to you in ways which we are unaccustomed to but comforted by. That what might have been previously hidden, is revealed. That we can each lean into God's love and the beauty and simplicity of a child's birth 2000 years ago that continues to change the world.

## **Questions:**

When will I take a moment today to turn down the noise of my life, and the outside world, to fully see God breaking through into the world? What did it reveal?

How will "letting go" and consenting to the presence and action of God lead me to a new spiritual beginning?

What are ways you have experienced God's unyielding love?



Prayerfully submitted by Bob Buechner

#### Isaiah 41: 8-10

But you, Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, the offspring of Abraham, my friend; you whom I took from the ends of the earth, and called from its farthest corners, saying to you, "You are my servant, I have chosen you and not cast you off"; do not fear, for I am with you, do not be afraid, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my victorious right hand.

Congratulations on surviving a year with Covid-19! What have you learned about your faith? All of us have experienced how devastating C-19 can be: isolation, sickness, economic despair, and even death of loved ones. We also know people who are faring very well and those who are not, the story of the have and the have nots that is repeated in so many different ways all through our society. But Isaiah tells us that maybe we should put a different spin on who is faring well and who is not.

Life is not about what happens to us but how we respond to life's challenges, how we are able to draw on our faith to give thanks in all circumstances. By allowing our faith to be strengthened during times of trouble, we are able to fight through the darkness with the knowledge that we will come out better than ever as we welcome the bright life of Christ in our lives. Now is the time to be thankful we have come this far, to expect that we will come out of our C-19 journey singing glory to God in the highest. We welcome our future with positive expectations because we have Christ centered lives that give us the promise that God will be with us. So, we are the ones who fare well with the C-19 crisis and beyond. We are not prisoners of our circumstances but victors in our lives as we welcome the opportunity to grow and prosper during all times because God is with us—and we know that because of Isaiah!

Has your life's journey been enriched by living through C-19? How or how not? What have you missed the most by not being able to regularly attend church? Because you are now better than ever, how will you express your appreciation for God's glorious strengthening of your life? What will you be and do differently in 2021?

All are fortunate who have faith, who know that the Lord will strengthen them, who are willing and able and happy to face the future. The have nots, in a spiritual context, are those who are not open to receiving the blessing of faith, who do not acknowledge the

Christ within them that can help strengthen them and help them live lives meaningful to others.

So during this advent time, as you look back on the past year and look forward to what is ahead of us, remember that regardless what the circumstances are in your life, that you are blessed because of your faith in the Lord. Your faith strengthens you in every season of your life and empowers you to be a blessing to others, regardless of the darkness you, and all of us, must encounter from time to time.

### **Questions:**

How has your faith grown during the past year of C-19?

Are you optimistic from a spiritual standpoint as you look forward to 2021?



Prayerfully submitted by Kate Warren

#### John 3: 1-15

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus[a] by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God." Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You[d] must be born from above.' The wind[f] blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

"Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you[g] do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.[h] And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

After reading this weeks' scripture, I'll admit it took some time (and a little Google research) for me to fully understand its meaning and the lesson it provides. I was beginning to feel a bit like Nicodemus. It seems silly to think of this prominent Jewish leader and teacher saying, "Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born!" Of course not, crazy man, is that really your best guess at the meaning of rebirth?? But the more I try to define "rebirth in Christ" for myself, the more I think Nicodemus isn't that far off. What else could Jesus mean? It is a hard concept to wrap my head around. But after contemplating that phrase I started thinking about what caused us to need to be born again in Christ...

The first thing that came to mind was the beginning. The Garden of Eden definitely wasn't our brightest moment in human history! Those first few decisions that were made are still impacting us today. The separation that was established between us and God because of our

sin is felt all throughout the Old Testament, and is felt by so many today simply because we don't take that courageous leap into the unknown of knowing God.

But this is where Nicodemus can be our example. He is a leader in the Jewish community who feels compelled to run after Jesus in the middle of the night. He comes with a seeker's heart in hopes of gaining a deeper understanding of salvation and the Kingdom of God. To Jesus he is saying help me understand, help me see not the way of the people but Your way, the way of the Holy Spirit. He wants to get it right. I do too.

He isn't just seeking the answer for himself, but for those he teaches. Can you imagine being a well-respected teacher just to find out that you've been teaching all of your students something that doesn't serve them in the end, and may actually harm them? Just as Nicodemus teaches, so do all of us, in our own ways. We are called by Christ to share the good news of His final act of grace and mercy. By truly knowing God and having new sight through him, we can love and teach the right way too.

God has been planning this rebirth, this opportunity for redemption since we were politely escorted out of the Garden of Eden. Can you imagine a plan that spans generations like that? We can hardly plan for the near future because of this pandemic, let alone a few generations! Like Nicodemus, we try to make sense of the teaching of God with our earthly abilities, but that's not how God works. His plans are divine, always.

Christmas gives us each an opportunity for "re-birth". God extends his hand into our earthly lives with the birth of Jesus, and again offers to help us out of the mess we made in the Garden of Eden (and the messes of our current lives). We can accept this gift and choose to be made new through Christ, transformed by the grace and forgiveness of God.

# **Questions:**

What does your spiritual re-birth look like?

In Him, we are given fresh eyes, fresh motivations, a fresh heart, and a fresh start. In what ways will this change the way you celebrate Christ's birth this year?

The conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus planted the seed for Nicodemus' own spiritual transformation. Are there seeds that you can be planting?



It may seem naive, in a world of grief, to choose to live in joy;

It may seem foolish, in a world where solemnity is power, to sing and dance to a different tune;

It may seem cruel, in a world of suffering and injustice, to speak of light and celebration;

But you have come, Jesus,
to bring joy into our grief,
light into our darkness,
singing into our mourning;
and it is an act of healing and proclamation
to believe and embrace the joy you offer.
Joy to the world!
The Lord is come!

Source Unknown

Hallelujah!





