

**A Fresh Start**  
**Meditations on the Meaning of Christmas**

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John's description of the Incarnation has for us an incredible implication. When the Word becomes flesh, with the coming of Christ into our lives, we are all recipients of the fullness of God. Through Jesus Christ, all the fullness of God, everything that God is, is ours all the time. In all the times of life, in every experience of life, God is there--all of God that understands, all of God that is powerful, all of God that heals, all of God that inspires love and community is there for us to receive.

Texts: Isaiah 40:1-11; Luke 1:5-25

## A Fresh Start: Hope in a Time of Endings

*"The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever." Isaiah 40:8*

Here's the watershed question for us to consider this Christmas season: "Do you believe that your best days are behind you, or do you believe that your best days are yet to come?"

Advent is a time for a fresh start. No matter what your age, no matter what your circumstance, the coming of Jesus Christ into the world and the coming of Jesus Christ into our lives means that the future can be embraced, that life is filled with possibilities for love, relevance and productive work. After all the disruption caused by COVID-19 and a divisive election, now is time for a fresh start.

The beginning of every fresh start is hope. Hope is the ability to imagine a positive future. We need hope because fresh starts always begin with an ending, and endings can make the future seem hopeless.

- A close friend, a loved one dies, a relationship breaks down. It's an ending. Grieving, we wonder about making it on our own and feel that life will never be as good without their love. We need hope.
- We lose a well-paying job. It's an ending. We worry about supporting our family and wonder if we'll ever be as financially secure as we once were. We need hope.
- We move away from friends and familiar surroundings. It's an ending. We're lonely and long for the way things were. We need hope.
- The doctor tells us that we have a terrible disease. It's an ending. Suddenly life changes. Suddenly our normal routine is interrupted. We're anxious about the future. We need hope.
- We grow older and find we can't run as fast, we can't remember as well, our friends are dying, falling like leaves in the autumn. It's an ending. We think that our best days are now behind us. We need hope.

Endings like these make things seem hopeless. But every beginning starts with an ending. Every fresh start begins with an uncomfortable past or a difficult present. To make a fresh start, we need the God-given hope that helps us imagine and work for a new future.

Hope in a time of endings. Here are the ingredients. Here's what you need to find the hope that leads to a fresh start.

**1. First you need a good plan.** You need a good plan because hope is responsible and realistic. Hope is not wishful thinking. Hope is the ability to envision a positive future that moves you beyond the challenges of your current situation. Hope depends on the ability to make good

decisions, to learn and muster the resources to achieve this future vision, and the determination to take action to seize it. Hope requires a plan.

A single, middle aged man decided to take a Caribbean cruise. On the first day, he noticed an attractive woman about his age who smiled at him in a very friendly way as he passed by her on the deck. And so that night at dinner he worked it out so that he could be seated next to her at the same table. A conversation developed and he mentioned that he had seen her on deck and appreciated her friendly smile. When she heard this, she smiled again and said this, "Well, the reason I smiled was that when I saw you, I was immediately struck by your strong resemblance to my third husband." "Third husband?" the man thought. So, he asked her, "And just how many times have you been married?" The woman looked down at her plate, smiled demurely and answered, "Twice."

Here's a woman with a plan (or at least with a good opening line!).

Hope in a time of endings requires a good plan. Psychologist William Marston conducted a study in which he asked three thousand people this question, "What do you have to live for?" He was shocked to discover that 94% of those questioned were simply enduring the present, waiting for something to happen: waiting for "next year," waiting for "a better time," waiting for "someone to die," waiting for "tomorrow." Christian hope may include waiting, but it requires more. Hope requires realistic thinking and responsible planning so that we can act assertively to achieve what we envision.

A good plan is a responsible plan. It's a plan that looks honestly to the past to see what went wrong and what went right. It's a plan that looks inward to determine our present resources and strengths. A good plan is also a realistic plan. It's a plan that looks honestly to the world right now to determine how best our strengths can be put to use to achieve what we imagine.

Hope is not wishful thinking. Hope requires that we test our imagination with serious questions. Hope is not fool hardy or stupid. Hope is not the call to march blindly off a cliff; but hope is the call to use our resources wisely to build a bridge to the other side.

For a fresh start, we need hope and hope requires a good plan.

**2. Now second, if we want to discover the hope that leads to a fresh start, not only do we need a good plan, we also need a good friend.** We need a good friend to make a fresh start because hope demands courage.

Early in the last century, the treatment for mental illness was often severe. In one institution outside Boston, those thought to be severely insane, those "hopeless cases," were kept in small cages in a dark basement known as the "dungeon." Little Annie" was one girl deemed incurable. She had been in the dungeon for several years, consigned to a living hell. Caged, she acted like a frightened animal, either violently attacking anyone who came near her or completely ignoring them.

One day an elderly nurse who was nearing retirement started taking her lunch down to the dungeon and eating beside Annie's cage. She hoped she could communicate love to the little girl. Annie consistently ignored her, and the nurse's colleagues thought that the nurse was wasting her time; but the woman believed there was hope for Annie. So, day after day, week after week, despite Annie's indifference, she visited her. One day the nurse thought to leave some brownies. Annie gave no hint the brownies were there, but when the nurse returned, they were gone. Soon the doctors started to notice a change in Annie. In a short time, they decided to move her upstairs. And finally, the day came when they told this "hopeless case" that she could return home. Annie decided to stay. As she had been given hope by the elderly nurse, she too now wanted to help others. Annie's full name was Anne Sullivan and it was she who cared for, taught and nurtured Helen Keller, a girl who became the first deaf-blind person to graduate from college, who became a world-famous speaker and author, and a champion for the rights of many people.

Hope in a time of endings requires a good friend--someone who will help us be courageous; someone who sees in us our own potential and helps us realize it, someone we can trust. It may be a spouse, a parent, a coach, a pastor, a teacher, a counselor, a classmate, or a neighbor. Certainly, we can find these friends in the church. Here we can make friends who will help and encourage us through our difficult times—soulmates with whom we can make fresh starts and live out our lives. Hope requires a good friend.

**3. There's one final foundational element to the hope that inspires and motivates a fresh start. We need a good plan, we need a good friend, but mostly we need a good God.** In our lesson, we read about Zechariah and Elizabeth. They're old and childless. Life for them is at an end. Their best days are behind. Then, suddenly, an angel appears with this message: "Do not be afraid, I was sent to bring you this good news, you will bear a son, and you shall call him John." Good news from a good God brings hope in a time of endings. It's a fresh start for Zechariah and Elizabeth and ultimately, it's a fresh start for the world.

Rev. James Hewett, a Presbyterian pastor in Saratoga, California, related a true story about a teacher who was assigned to work with sick children in a large city hospital. One day, she received a call from a young boy's teacher. She was given the boy's name and room number and told, "We're studying nouns and adverbs in his class now, I'd be grateful if you could help him with his homework so he doesn't fall too far behind the others." It wasn't until the teacher got outside the boy's room that she realized he was in the hospital's burn unit. No one had prepared her to find him so horribly burned and in such great pain. She thought she couldn't just turn and walk away, so she stammered, "I'm the hospital teacher and your teacher sent me to help you with nouns and adverbs."

The next morning the head nurse on the burn unit asked her, "What in the world did you do to that boy?" Before the teacher could finish a profusion of apologies, the nurse interrupted her. "You don't understand," she said. "We've been very worried about this little boy, but ever since you were here yesterday, his whole attitude has changed. He's fighting back, responding to treatment."

It's as though he's decided to live."

The boy later explained that he had completely given up hope until he saw that teacher. He expressed it this way: "They wouldn't send a teacher to work on nouns and adverbs with a dying boy, would they?" For him everything changed when he came to that simple realization.

Likewise, for us, mired in the past, living without hope, everything changes with the realization that God comes to us in the form of Jesus Christ. Everything changes when we understand the Christmas message: that in Jesus Christ, God is with us, God loves us, God believes in us, and God desires to lead us courageously and compassionately into a newness of life.

If God is with you, as one who is created in God's image, as the human face of God to your spouse, to your children, to your friends, in your community, there is the possibility of perpetual relevance until the day you die. No matter where you are in your life, something you do today, a simple act of kindness may have unintended consequences. It may make a huge difference in someone's life, and then, through that person, in the lives of many others.

Hope is not wishful thinking. To hope that our best days are yet ahead is not the same as thinking that life will get progressively better and better. Rather, to have the hope that inspires a fresh start means that, fully aware of the risks, aware of the pain, the suffering and the tragedy that may lie before us, when we are broken by the loss of love, discouraged by the loss of vitality, disheartened by the loss of purpose, in a time of endings, still we know that God can continue to use us to make all things new. Your life can be a blessing.

Hope for a fresh start begins with the belief that the God who sent us Jesus Christ is good: that grace is stronger than sin; that love is stronger than bitterness; that reconciliation is stronger than hatred; that light is stronger than darkness; that life is stronger than death; so that for us in a time of endings, hope can be stronger than despair.

This Christmas season, it may be that some of you are living in a time of endings, thinking that your best days are now behind you.

Have hope: develop a good plan; find a good friend; trust in a good God.

It's time for a fresh start.

Texts: Psalm 85; Luke 1:26-38

### **A Fresh Start: Faith in a Time of Doubt**

*"Then Mary said, 'Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.'" Luke 1:38*

"Do you believe that your best days are behind you, or do you believe that your best days are yet to come?"

During this Christmas season we're talking about making a fresh start. Whatever your age, whatever your circumstance, the coming of Jesus Christ into the world and the coming of Jesus Christ into our lives means that each moment of life can be embraced, that each day is filled with possibilities for love, relevance, and productive work.

Last time I wrote about hope in a time of endings: a good plan, a good friend and trust in a good God can help us discover hope when things seem hopeless.

Today, we go a step farther. To make a fresh start we need "faith in a time of doubt." Self-doubt is the great enemy of fresh starts.

The tradition of the church has identified "pride" as one of the deadly sins, but doubt can be just as deadly. Doubt is a sickness of the imagination that locks us into the past, that convinces us that we will never have what we need to move confidently into the future. If pride is the failure to recognize the limits of the self, doubt is pride's opposite; doubt is the sin of self-negation, the timid and obsequious refusal to dare to be fully human.

Self-doubt is generated out of the experience of a hurtful past or a traumatic present.

#### **1. There is first the doubt that comes from a hurtful past.**

There was this Texan who was trying to impress another man with the size of his ranch. The man asked him, "What's the name of your ranch?" The rancher answered, "The Rocking R, ABC, Flying W, Circle C, Bar U, Staple Four, Box D, Rolling M, Rainbow's End, Silver Spur Ranch." "Wow!" the man answered. "That's some name, and just how many head of cattle do you run?" "Just a few," the rancher said. "Not many of 'em survive the branding!"

Like that rancher's cattle, sometimes we have trouble surviving the branding we've experienced. Maybe it's the brand of some teacher who once said, "You're not smart enough." Maybe it's the brand of our culture that says, "You're too old." Maybe it's the brand of an abusive parent who said, "You'll never amount to anything." Sometime, somewhere, someone in the past branded into your soul, seared into your heart center a powerful identification that now stifles your imagination and keeps you from believing that tomorrow might be any different from today. This is doubt generated by a hurtful past.

**1. There is also self-doubt generated by a traumatic present.** Sometimes we doubt ourselves because in a time of endings, in a time of grief, we lose a positive identification that once counted for us, that gave us a purpose for living.

A young professor at a small college lost his job. For a while he looked for another position, but when no jobs were available, he started to flounder in depression. One day, his little daughter came home from the first grade and asked him a question: "Daddy, what are you?" He asked her what she meant. "In school," she said, "we're talking about what our daddies do, and I wondered what I should say." The man had difficulty answering her. Her question triggered in him the realization that he had lost his identification. He said, "A year before, I could have answered her immediately and confidently, 'I am a professor!' but now I have no answer." In his heart he had lost what defined him, what gave him energy and confidence to face the future and without that identification he was lost. He needed to discover again who he was before he could move on.

For some people, for some of us, the loss of a positive identification causes us to doubt ourselves. The children are grown, now the nest is empty. Who am I? Once married, once Bill's wife or Karen's husband, now divorced or widowed. Who am I? Once employed, now out of work. Who am I? Because of present difficulty we feel lost and doubt our ability to do anything as well, to be at all as happy as we were before.

Whether doubt about ourselves comes from a difficult past or from the realities of the present, self-doubt blocks our way toward a fresh start.

Consider Mary in our New Testament lesson. The angel Gabriel comes and tells her that she's about to be a part of an incredible future. She's to be the mother of a child who will reign over the house of Jacob forever.

At first Mary doubts Gabriel's words, and who could blame her. She has a present circumstance that gives her good reason to doubt. "How can this be," she wonders, "since I have no husband?"

Like Mary, when imagining the possibility of a fresh start, we might express similar doubts:

- How can this be, since I don't have a college education?
- How can this be, since I don't have enough money?
- How can this be, since I'm so old?
- How can this be, since I have this terrible disease?

We take a past disappointment or present reality, our age, our financial situation, our family, our education, our health and conclude that because of it, what we want in the future is probably impossible. So, we stay where we are.

But in our lesson Mary finds a way to move out of her doubt toward the future God



intends for her. What Mary discovers is faith. Faith is the cure for self-doubt. Faith is the cure for this sickness of the imagination that convinces us that the way toward the future is blocked.

In our lesson, the conversation between Mary and Gabriel shows us the two experiences necessary for us to discover the faith that is stronger than doubt--the faith that leads us to a fresh start. Here they are:

**1. First, faith comes through the experience of hearing the good news.** When Mary doubts, Gabriel answers with words about God's love, a message that offers her a new identity. Her identity was defined by doubt, "How can this be," she says, "I have no husband?" But now, from the angel she hears an offer of a new identity, a new possibility, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the child born to you will be called the Son of God." Mary hears good news: the promise of everything out of nothing--the promise of a future, where before there was doubt.

This Christmas season listen for God's offer of a new identity. Hear God's annunciation, God's call to you, "Your identity might have been 'too old,' or 'too sick' or 'too poor' or 'too uneducated' or 'too lonely,' but now," God says, "I offer you a new identity, a new brand seared into the center of your heart. Here's who you are: 'You are my favored one, you are my beloved, I am with you and with me nothing is impossible.'"

To hear this message, you'll have to listen carefully. Today there are loud and ubiquitous messages in our world that are foreign to the message God wants you to hear. We live in a day, where, wherever we turn, messages that play to our doubts and fears constantly command our attention.

Here are the words: socialism, corruption, pandemic, election fraud, death statistics, isolate, social distance, unemployment, defund the police, China, Hunter Biden, Antifa, Trump, Biden, DeBlasio, Seattle, packing the Court, problems with the vaccine, overvalued stocks, data breaches, rising murder rates, rising suicide rates. Of course, we need to manage our risks, personally, socially and politically, but this constant, distorted barrage of negative news is intended to hook you, to occupy a central place in your thoughts and conversations. The purveyors of these messages want to make you so anxious that you'll keep listening, more and more, particularly to that which supports your prejudices, because that's the way the networks, papers and social media make money. Commercial algorithms (software programs whose sole purpose is to maximize revenue), not honest attempts to describe the reality of the world, drive the content of the news you hear.

News has always been about wars, murders, earthquakes, and fires; today it's just much worse. It's not the whole truth. We hear nothing or very little about the incredible things that continue to happen outside the view of the media, the stories of millions of men and women who rise up every day to do what is right, compassionate, ingenious, and healing. All around us are indicators that God is still powerfully at work in our world and indicators that we who are securely loved by God can continue to thrive and make a positive difference through our words and deeds.

A friend of mine recently sent me a Wall Street Journal article that laid out the advances of our world over the last decade: worldwide, poverty fell by more than half (from 18.2% to 8.6%); global life expectancy increased by over three years; the global mortality rate for children declined significantly (South Korea reduced it by 98%, Chad, the worst performing country in the world, cut their rate by 56%); because of efforts to provide clean water and sanitation, malaria has dropped by 60% and AIDS deaths were cut in half; there were tremendous advances in cancer treatment; the environment is getting cleaner (death rates from air pollution down 20%; consumption of natural resources is down in 66 of the 72 countries that are tracked. Certainly, there's much more to do; but the point is that we don't regularly hear about these stories.

Now back in Nazareth, two thousand years ago, comes the biggest announcement of all time. God is about to act decisively for the whole world and how does God announce it? Quietly and simply, unnoticed and unheralded, in an ordinary place, to an ordinary teenage girl? Even when Jesus is born, the shepherds in the field outside Bethlehem get an angel, a choir, and an announcement. The wise men see a star. But generally, it's not big news.

Amid all the noise, faith begins when we hear in the quiet depths of our being the good news of God's love. In this noisy world, with everything else that commands our attention, we need to be intentional about listening. During this season, come to yourself, take time away from the demands of the preparations to hear God's words of love. Notice God speaking through the ordinary and simple things of life, in the smile of a child, in quiet acts of kindness, in the beauty of music, in the love of family and friends. Faith begins by listening carefully for the ever-present call of God's love.

But faith requires something more than just listening.

**2. Faith also requires that we believe what we are hearing.** Not only do we need to hear that we have a new identity in the love of God, faith requires that we believe that message, that we own that identity enough to act on it. Mary listens to Gabriel's good news; then she believes it. First, she owns her new identity. Before her identity was, "I have no husband." Now it's new: "Behold I am the handmaid of the Lord!" she says. Then Mary commits herself to act toward the future her new identity promises. Before there was doubt, "How can this be?" Now there's determination, "Let it be with me according to your word," she says.

If self-doubt is the timid, obsequious refusal to be fully human, if self-doubt is a sickness of the imagination that locks us into the past; then faith is the self-affirming trust in the benevolence of God that gives us the courage to make a fresh start and move confidently into the future.

In his autobiography titled My Confession, the great Russian author Leo Tolstoy wrote about a crisis in his life that plunged him into a period of self-doubt. "I felt," he wrote, "that something had broken within me on which my life had always rested and that I had nothing left to hold on to." Tolstoy contemplated suicide, the ultimate form of self-negation, even giving up hunting, for fear that he would turn the gun on himself. He writes: "I could give no reasonable meaning to

any actions of my life. I asked myself, 'What will be the outcome of anything I do today? Of what I shall do tomorrow? Of all my life?'"

In the end, what saved Tolstoy and gave him back his future was faith. He writes this: "Then faith came to me; I believed in Jesus, and my whole life underwent a sudden transformation. What I had once wished for I wished for no longer; and I began to desire what I had never desired before."

During this Christmas season I ask you to discover and renew the faith that overcomes doubt. Listen carefully for the quiet and common ways that God will say to you, "Hail, oh favored one. I, the Lord, love you. I, your God, will go with you." Own this new identity, trust it; and use it to move confidently into the future God offers you in Jesus Christ.

It's time for a fresh start.

Texts: Isaiah 11:1-9; Luke 1:46-55

## **A Fresh Start: Love in a Time of Need**

*"He has lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things." Luke 1:52-53*

The Magnificat, Mary's canticle of praise, is a song about love in a time of need. Because God is powerful, because God is holy, because God is gracious, people in need can expect a reversal; people with no future can realize one. With the coming of Jesus Christ into the world, Mary sings, "God lifts up the lowly; God fills the hungry with good things."

If the Christmas message is about anything, it's about the love of God that seeks to reverse the circumstances of those who need comfort, of those who need companionship, of those who need a reason to live, of those who need a fresh start.

As followers of Jesus Christ, as hearers of the Christmas message, we are called to love God's love in this world. As people both who need love and are capable of loving, we are called to form relationships that inspire in ourselves and in others the hope and courage necessary to learn from the past, to enjoy the present, and to move confidently toward the future. As Albert Schweitzer (who epitomized this truth as much as any human being could) said: "I don't know what your destiny will be, but one thing I do know is that your heart will never be happy until you learn how to serve."

For all of us, love, both the love that we give and the love we receive, is at the center of the feeling that our life is relevant, that we have purpose and that we matter in the world.

Here are three practical suggestions for showing love in a time of need--three ways your love can inspire hope and courage, both in you and in those you love.

1. First, this Christmas, as you think about gifts for your family and friends, **give with your heart.**

If someone you love were to ask you, "What do you want for Christmas this year?", what would you say? "A pair of socks," or "something to organize the photos on my phone," or "a new coat" or "a basketball?" If we were to answer the question honestly, what we really want and need from our loved ones is their love. We need someone we can trust, someone who supports us, who believes in us, a partner and friend with whom we can share our most intimate thoughts, someone with whom we can plan for tomorrow.

A gift given in love represents more than itself. Our gifts symbolize our gratitude for the past, our commitment to one another in the present and our shared hope for the future. When we love someone, whatever material gifts we give, no matter how perfect they are for the person we're giving to, there's always that feeling that the gift does not adequately convey what that person means to us or how much we want all good things to come to them.

Last Christmas, friend of mine mentioned that he had been at Walgreens, trying to pick out a Christmas card for his adult daughter, but he couldn't find one that adequately expressed what she meant to him. So, he picked out a card at random, and wrote her a note, trying as best he could to tell her how proud he was of her and how much he admired the woman she had become. When she got the card, she laughed and called to tell him how pathetic it was, but, as for the note, it meant everything to her. They talked for over an hour, an intimate exchange between a father and his adult daughter, redefining and enhancing the bond that had always been there, and now animating it in a new way.

Several years ago, the author Charles Purtle published a true, autobiographical Christmas story under the unusual title, "The Secret of Snootbaum." Charles recalled a time when he was ten years old and was standing with his eight-year-old brother John in front of a large display shelf filled with ugly plaster-of-Paris poodle dogs. The younger boy John decided that one of these dogs, a blue one, would be the perfect gift for Mom. But Charles disagreed. "She'll hate it," he said flatly. "What in the world will she do with such an ugly, stupid thing?" Well, John wasn't about to be dissuaded. "She'll put it out where everyone can see it," he answered. "She'll love it. I know she will. She'll love it because I do." So, he bought it.

Christmas came, and sure enough, when Mom opened John's present, a broad smile of delight came across her face. She told John that it was exactly what she wanted. And then Dad said, "John sure has a knack for picking Christmas gifts." They named the dog "Snootbaum" and for years kept it in a place of honor on the hearth of their fireplace.

Now the older brother Charles could never quite figure out how that ugly plaster dog could be so valued by his Mom. Never, that is, until twenty-five years later, when he opened a Christmas gift from his own seven-year-old daughter, Laura. What she had picked out for him was a six-inch statue of two pigs hugging each other. A slogan on the base of the statue read, "Ain't love grand?" At the end of the story Charles writes this: "When I look at that small statue now, I don't see two silly pigs. I see a little girl who went shopping with her heart. The pig statue becomes more precious to me as the years go by because when I look at it, I remember the girl who gave from her heart a gift that was her."

Walt Whitman once said, "When I give, I give myself." Gifts given in this spirit are far more significant than when we give for lavish display, or to impress, or because we need to match the worth of a gift we anticipate getting. A gift given from the heart symbolizes our on-going commitment to those we love—the commitment that keeps our relationships fresh and ever-renewing. So, first, to show your love this Christmas, give your gifts from your heart.

2. Now secondly, here's another practical way that you can show love in a time of need. This Christmas, **give an unexpected blessing to someone for whom you have no obligation.**

Nine-year-old Wally was big for his years. He was a clumsy boy and a slow learner; he was in the second grade when most children his age were in the fourth. Wally was well-liked by his classmates. He had a wonderful smile, he was hopeful and happy, and a natural defender of the underdog.

One year his parents encouraged him to audition for the annual church Christmas play. Wally wanted to be a shepherd. Instead, he was given the role of the innkeeper. The director reasoned

that Wally's size would lend extra force to the innkeeper's refusal of lodging to Joseph and Mary. During rehearsals Wally was encouraged to be firm with Joseph. And so, when the play opened no one was more caught up in the action than Wally. When Joseph knocked on the door, Wally was ready. He flung open the door and asked menacingly, "What do you want?" Joseph answered, "We seek lodging." "Then seek it elsewhere," Wally answered firmly, "There's no room in the inn." Then Joseph pleaded, "Please, good innkeeper. This is my wife Mary. She is with child and is very tired. She needs a place to rest." There was a long pause as Wally looked down at Mary. He was supposed to say, "No! Be gone." But even after the prompter whispered his line, Wally remained silent. The forlorn couple turned and began slowly to move away.

Seeing this, Wally's brow creased with concern. Tears welled up in his eyes. Suddenly he called out, "Don't go! You can have my room!"

The Christmas message is about loving those who stand before us, those who come into our experience in obvious need, whether we know them or not. Christmas is a call for us to share Wally's concern for the underdog—to give a blessing, when a blessing is not expected.

This Christmas, can you with your imagination conjure up in your minds someone for whom you feel no obligation upon whom you might confer a private blessing? It might be someone who's poverty-stricken or ill; someone who's lonely or under a lot of pressure.

One example of such a private unexpected blessing is described by Howard Thurman, in his book, Deep Is the Hunger. He writes: "Pick up the telephone and call someone whose life is not directly tied to yours, but someone about whom you know something, and with this knowledge as a background, say a word of reassurance, of comfort, of delight, of satisfaction, so that you will feel that out of the fullness of your own heart, you have conferred upon some unsuspecting human being, a gentle grace that makes the season a good and whole and hale and happy time."

It might be a comment or a gift, a note or a phone call. Unexpected blessings given in love to those in need can inspire hope and courage for a fresh start.

3. Now finally, here's a third practical way that you can show love in a time of need: this Christmas, **seek reconciliation for a broken or unhappy relationship.**

During this year that is rapidly drawing to a close, I imagine that you've had many experiences with many different kinds of people, those with whom you live and work and play. Now during the course of these relationships there might have been a time when emotions flared, when things were thrown out of joint and a wall developed between you. Perhaps you were so busy with your own responsibilities or so preoccupied with your feelings about how the other person offended you, there was no time to give the relationship the grace of reconciliation. This Christmas season will you think about such a person and find a way to restore a lost harmony? The love and the peace that ensues may be the gift both of you need to put the past behind and direct your energies toward the future.

Kathryn, a friend of ours, is a United Airlines flight attendant. About seven years ago, she was using her free time to make visits for her church at a local nursing home. While there she formed a relationship with one particular lonely woman. At first the relationship went well, but after a few months, without explanation, the woman grew cold and bitter toward Kathryn. No

one had loved her for a long time, she had resolved to die alone, and was now afraid of a new friendship. She pushed Kathryn away.

For over a year, from time to time, Kathryn tried to make contact, attempting to initiate a conversation, a meal together, perhaps a board game or a walk. But each time, her efforts were rebuffed. At the point of giving up, Kathryn came to church one Advent Sunday morning and with the congregation sang the hymn, "Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming." She thought about the words of the carol, about the image of God's love in the birth of Christ, blooming like a rose amid the cold of winter, when half spent was the night. Kathryn got an idea.

Later that day, which happened to be the elderly woman's birthday, Kathryn sent a single long-stemmed red rose, with the words of the hymn printed on the card. A few days later Kathryn received a telephone call. There was to be a special Christmas dinner at the nursing home. Could she come? From that time, their relationship grew. Among the activities of their friendship, Kathryn often stopped by in the evening to read her friend to sleep. Several months before her old friend die, as Kathryn finished reading to her, the woman quietly reached for Kathryn's hand and whispered these words: "Isn't it odd that this late in life I should fall in love." The love that engenders reconciliation in a broken relationship can lead to a fresh start.

This morning I ask you to consider making a part of your Christmas, three practical suggestions for showing love in a time of need:

1. Give from your heart.
2. Be an unexpected blessing to someone in need.
3. Seek reconciliation for an injured relationship.

Love in a time of need. It's time for a fresh start.

Texts: Isaiah 9:2-7; Luke 1:67-79; 2:8-14

## **A Fresh Start: Peace in a Time of Change**

*"By the tender mercy of our Lord, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to guide our feet into the way of peace." Luke 1:78-79*

Before I moved to Fredericksburg, I belonged to church where there is a little sign that hangs in church nursery. Its location is important. It hangs above a tall stack of diapers. The sign sums up this business of change pretty well, by quoting a verse from the Apostle Paul. It says, 'We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed!'

The Christmas story is a message of change. In the coming of Jesus Christ into the world, in the coming of Jesus Christ into our lives, God is bringing about something new. We are asked to see ourselves in a new way. We are called to live in the world with others in a new way. In Luke's Gospel, the song of Zechariah, the Benedictus, promises freedom from fear, the forgiveness of sins, the resolution of conflict with our enemies, light for those who sit in darkness. Every promise implies for us a positive change.

It's not Christmas alone, but the Christian message itself is entirely about change. Centered on Jesus' resurrection, it promises new beginnings and fresh starts. What's unique about this message, however, is that God gives us a way to experience change not as a disruption or threat, producing stress, anger and depression, but in a state of peace, a feeling of well-being and wholeness, resolute to manage the transitions in our lives with a profound sense of power, relevance and purpose.

This message comes both from Zechariah to those who sit in darkness and from the angel to the shepherds who sit below the midnight field: in a time of great change, God has come to guide our feet into the way of peace. The word here is "shalom." Nothing about "shalom," this biblical "peace," implies the absence of or escape from trouble. What Jesus did and said was completely disruptive to the religious and political authorities of his day—so disruptive that they had to kill him to eliminate the threat, so they thought. God's peace involves the ability to stand in the middle of the storm, confronting change with a sense of well-being, confident in God's love, so that we might live and act with power and the completeness of life God intends for us. Living with power and the completeness of life that God intends for us, even in the middle of life's transitions and disruptions, is peace.

The words of Ralph Waldo Emerson are right on target: "We were not made for rest. In action is our power. Not in our goals, but in our transitions are we great." Biblical peace is not about the absence of trouble, disruption or change. It's about peace-making, bringing about what is just, loving and true, in our own lives, our families, in the workplace, in our community and in our world, and doing this with a sense of well-being and purpose inspired and motivated by God's Spirit in us. That's peace!



Change is an inevitable and often predictable part of our lives.

If you were born 30 years ago, you have already experienced many changes. You were born in a time when the USSR was crumbling, Germany was reuniting, the US debt was roughly equivalent to the amount we distributed this year for COVID relief. You have experienced 9/11 and the changes it brought about, the banks crumbling and the changes that brought about.

You have been through many advances on how we listen to and store music and watch movies (remember Blockbuster); you have experienced many developments and advances in computers, laptops and cell phones. The advances in medicine and healthcare have been tremendous. There's now an "app" for everything. How we buy anything, how we communicate with friends, date, work, go to school, have all changed. Changes in electronic power generation are everywhere present. In the last five years, the computational power of computers has increased over 400,000%, and advances in artificial intelligence linked with robotics has and will continue to impact how we live and work.

If you were born 75 years ago, you have experienced more change during your lifetime than occurred during the period from your birth back to the time of Julius Caesar. Almost as much technological change has happened since you were born as happened before. If you were born after 1945, in addition to the changes summarized above, you were born before television, penicillin, polio shots, frozen foods, copiers, plastic, contact lenses, frisbees and the pill. You were before suburbs, the interstate highway system, radar detectors, credit cards, laser beams and ball point pens; before, pantyhose, dishwashers, clothes dryers, electric blankets, air conditioners, and before a man walked on the moon. You were before house husbands, computer dating, dual careers and commuter marriages; before daycare centers, group therapy and nursing homes, FM radio, tape decks, electric typewriters, artificial hearts, word processors, yogurt and guys wearing earrings. A "chip" meant a piece of wood. "Hardware" meant hardware and "software" was not even a word. "Grass" was mowed, "coke" was a cold drink, and "pot" was something you cooked in.

Aside from the political, social, economic and technological changes that impact us, the changes that are most disruptive and often disconcerting are those that impact us personally: getting married, having children, having teenagers, having children go off to school, losing job, changing jobs, changing careers, moving, facing a serious illness, getting divorced, retirement, aging, losing a loved one, and facing death.

THAT'S A LOT OF CHANGE.

Many of us are finding it increasingly painful to keep up with the incessant demand for change that characterizes our time. As we face the challenges of COVID, look forward to or dread a new political administration, deal with the explosion of new technologies, as new ideas are encouraged, as information proliferates, as what is old is regularly replaced by what is new, we feel more and more anxiety. Each day, more must pass through our restricted, finite capacity for paying attention. We try to keep up, doing more, learning more, grasping the steering wheel with

one hand, the cellular phone with the other, our eyes darting from the traffic to the 10" screen on the dash, as we fall further behind on our stream of obligations. We feel confused, stressed out, left out, and anxious--angry about change. And so, we resist.

The famous entertainer, W.C. Fields, was a lifelong agnostic. During his last illness, a friend visited his bedside and saw that Fields was reading the Bible. "Bill," he said, "it's so good to see that you've changed." Fields replied, "Changed? I haven't changed. I'm just looking for a loophole!"

Sometimes we respond to change the same way--faced with something new, we look for a loophole, searching for a way to avoid it. We feel like the former Duke of Cambridge, who once said, "Any change, at any time, for any reason is to be deplored." Or as the old saying goes, "Come weal or come woe, my status is quo!"

The problem with all this, of course, is that as hard as it is to change, resistance to change can hurt us--emotionally, physically, relationally, socially or spiritually. Sometimes we need to change. In order to learn, to mature, to love, to grow, to overcome an illness or an addiction, to serve one another effectively, to become what God wants us to be, to be more relevant, we need to be open to change.

**What is this way of peace, this peace process that can turn our experience of change from a cause for stress into an opportunity for wholeness and growth--an opportunity for a fresh start?**

The way of peace in a time of change involves four important steps.

1. First, to know peace in a time of change, **we must prepare ourselves for change. The way we prepare ourselves for change is to cultivate the ability to focus our attention.** Our attention is a limited resource. We may not have the power to control how many changes come our way, how many new technologies beg for our attention, how many external demands try to change our plans; but we do control how many of these changes we will choose to notice and respond to. When we choose to direct our limited attention to too many of these demands, our lives become fragmented and stressful. We may lack the energy to change where change could help us.

In his book, The Evolving Self, Dr. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, a professor of psychology at the University of Chicago, writes about how focusing attention prepares us to know peace in a time of change. He writes: "We must learn to control the stream of information that passes through our consciousness--to set up genuine goals, to figure out what is essential and what isn't, to let go of projects and habits that are neither strictly necessary nor enjoyable. This requires reflection, some inner discipline that is difficult to acquire as long as we are afraid to take some time for it. The effort is worthwhile, however, because the world becomes much more simple and friendly once priorities are clear."

If we would know peace in a time of change, we need to cultivate the ability to focus our

attention.

2. Second, to know peace in a time of change, **we need to take time to learn about the changes that threatens us.** Once we learn about something new, once we understand and experience it, we may find it far less threatening.

Mary Brown is a writer from Lansing, Michigan. She tells a story about a time when she and her husband Alex went to a symphony concert. As they took their seats, Mary glanced down at her program and noticed that the main portion of the concert was a Mahler symphony. She groaned and knew that she wouldn't enjoy it. From the snatches of Mahler she'd heard, she'd labeled it as too modern and dissonant for her taste. Then the concert began. Here's what she writes:

'What a surprise! The beauty of the music swept through me. Images stirred in my mind—I strolled through a woodland, frolicked in a meadow and watched a tumbling waterfall. I whispered to Alex, 'I can't believe this is Mahler.' He answered, 'You didn't really know Mahler's music, did you?'" Then she continues, "After the concert I felt invigorated. I resolved to be more open: to innovations at work, to changes at church, and to that family with 'loud' teenagers who had moved in across the street. I want to stop evaluating according to hearsay and stereotypes."

She's got it right. When we stop making prejudgments about change, we begin to learn. After we focus our attention, we need to take the time to learn about new people or things that at first seem to threaten us. Learning is a crucial step in the process of finding peace in a time of change.

3. Now third, not only do we need to focus our attention and learn, if we want peace in a time of change, we need **to act, to accept and integrate the needed change into the total fabric of our life and work.** Back in the day when I was in graduate school, computers/word processors were just being introduced as a tool for academic research. Back then, the three-ring binder and typewriter were my friends. I felt overwhelmed, not only did I have to conduct, analyze my research, develop a thesis, and produce the dissertation, but now, in addition, I had to develop the ability to do all that on a computer. Let me tell you, the Kaypro computer I bought was incredibly primitive compared to today's marvels. It took a lot for me to learn how to use it and, emotionally, it just seemed to be such a complicated task, especially given all the other things I needed to do. But I focused my attention on it, I learned how to use it and, you know, now, I can't imagine writing anything without it. The change, the new thing, was integrated into the total fabric of my life and work, and I have benefited from it ever since.

There's nothing wrong with keeping busy, with taking on new and different challenges. Otherwise, life would be incredibly boring. But multiplying experiences without tying them together leads to anxiety, to the chronic feeling that life is fragmented, that we're pulled in too many different directions.

Whether it's a new skill, a new friend, or a new idea, to know peace in a time of change, we need to act to integrate the change, to bring the new thing into the total fabric of our lives.

4. Now there's one more step in this process of discovering peace in a time of change. **To find peace, we need to yearn for peace.** We need to cultivate the regular, constant desire to walk in the way of peace, to become a peace-maker—so that our trained response when confronted with change, with something or someone new and different, might not be resistance or anxiety, but might be that confident curiosity, that loving openness that leads to a fuller experience of life.

This yearning for peace, this ability to walk in the way of peace has to do directly with our faith. Hear these words written by the poet, writer and story-teller Maya Angelou, "I know," she says, "that there is no place that God is not. And by knowing that, I can dare things. I can dare to succeed because I can dare to fail."

The Christmas story is about the God who comes to earth to be Emmanuel, "God with us." Because we know this God loving us, by keeping ourselves in this love, we can, as a way of life amid countless changes, dare to make peace with what is new.

This Christmas I challenge to know God "with you," to keep yourself in God's love, so that you might have the courage to walk in the way of peace.

Here's the process:

1. **Prepare** for peace in a time of change by cultivating the ability to focus your attention on changes that are important and necessary.
2. **Learn** about a proposed change, about ideas or projects that are new, about new people coming into your life, in order to defuse anxiety about change.
3. **Act** to integrate desired changes into the total fabric of your life and work.
4. **Yearn** to make peacemaking a way of life, a defining characteristic of your personality, by knowing and keeping yourself in the love of God.

**Prepare, Learn, Act, Yearn (P.L.A.Y.).** Peace in a time of change.

It's time for a fresh start.

Texts: Isaiah 65:17-25; Luke 2:1-20

## **A Fresh Start: Joy in a Time of Uncertainty**

*Text: "Do not be afraid, I am bringing you news of a great joy for all people." Luke 2:10*

The first announcement of Jesus' birth comes from an angel to the shepherds in the fields outside Bethlehem. It's midnight, a time of deep darkness and risk for the shepherds, a time when they and their sheep are most vulnerable. At that moment, the angel says to them and to us, in our times of uncertainty, "Do not be afraid, I bring you good news of great joy."

To understand this experience joy that can be ours in times of uncertainty, let's start with a contrast. Here are the Ten Commandments for Gloominess, Despair, and Depression:

1. Make little things bother you: don't just let them bother you, make them bother you!
2. Learn to awfulize the challenges you face and then become a fortune teller; always confidently predicting that the worst is going to happen.
3. If things are going well, find something to worry about--something about which you can do nothing but worry, and magnify it way out of proportion.
4. Be a perfectionist. Always condemn yourself and others for not achieving perfection.
5. Be right, always right, perfectly right all the time. Be the only one who is right and be rigid in your rightness.
6. Don't trust or believe people, don't accept them at anything but their worst and weakest.
7. Always be suspicious of people and always impute ulterior motives to them.
8. Always compare yourself unfavorably to others.
9. Take personally, with a chip on your shoulder, everything that happens to you that you don't like.
10. Don't give yourself wholeheartedly or enthusiastically to anything or anyone.

At one time or another we've all known the sadness that comes from obeying one or more of these commandments of gloom and doom. This Christmas, it's not necessary to remind one another of our own sufferings or shortcomings. Not one of us is exempt from the uncertainty and frailty of human life. We also don't need to remind one another of the massive social problems we face in our time. Of these we are all aware.

We have a choice. Before life's complexities, threats and challenges, we can worry or we can believe the Christmas message and know the presence of "God with us." If we choose faith and keep ourselves in the love of God, we can know joy in a time of uncertainty.

At Christmas and each day of our lives, we are called to remember, that, as God has come to us in the weakness and frailty of a baby, so we, who are weak and frail, are not to withdraw from our problems or retreat from realities of our world. Rather we are called to enter into them and to see there that God is alive, God is with us, God is working--healing, forgiving, influencing, loving.

No matter where we go in the world, no matter what circumstances we face, God is there, acting to redeem and to make all things new. This experienced history, this present reality, and this promised future is the ground of all joy.

In the Christmas story, in this scene in Bethlehem, we find the three great essentials for joy in this life. To know joy, we need someone to love, we need something to do, and we need something to hope for. Each of these essentials for joy is given to us as a gift from God through the Christmas story.

### **1. First, to know joy, we need someone to love.**

A few years ago, the Journal of the American Medical Association published an article by Dr. Paul Ruskin. Dr. Ruskin described a case study he presented to a class on the "Psychological Aspects of Growing Old." The case is about a female patient. "The patient neither speaks or comprehends the spoken word. Sometimes she babbles incoherently for hours on end. She is disoriented about person, place, and time. She does, however, respond to her name." Dr. Ruskin says, "I have worked with her for the past six months, but she still shows complete disregard for her physical appearance and she makes no effort to assist in her own care. She must be fed, bathed and cared for by others. Because she has no teeth, her food must be pureed. Her shirt is usually soiled from almost incessant drooling. She does not walk. Her sleep pattern is erratic. Most of the time she is friendly and happy, but several times a day she gets quite agitated without apparent cause. Then she wails until someone comes to comfort her."

After presenting this case to his class, Dr. Ruskin asked if anyone would like to volunteer to take care of this person. No one offered. Then he said that he himself had derived much pleasure from taking care of her. The class was puzzled until he passed around a photo of the patient. It was his six-month-old daughter!

The central theme of the Christmas story is that this is the birth of a baby. God comes to us not as some self-sufficient potentate, but as a drooling, babbling baby who must be loved in order to survive. Both God's preparation of Mary and Joseph for Jesus' birth and the message of the angels to the shepherds makes the helplessness of this baby clear. The child is swaddled, he must be clothed. The child is lying in a manger, he needs a place. A father protects him; a mother treasures the scene in her heart. There's joy in the Christmas scene because this child who is fragile and vulnerable is loved. The nurturing love of a father and mother for their newborn child is the quintessential expression of the love that ensures the survival of one in need, and of the profound pleasure such love generates in us. The thought of Jesus as a baby calls us into the joy of loving—into the deep-abiding pleasure of bestowing well-being and dignity on those coming into our lives who are vulnerable and in need.

Having someone to love is the first great essential of joy.

## **2. Now second, to have joy, we need something to do.**

Years ago, when I was a young father, I was sitting in a chair, reading a serious book, preparing for something important, which I now can't remember. My little boy Jonathan, who was then three or four years old, came up, leaned against my knees and said, "I love you Daddy." I gave him a little pat on the head, said absently and hurriedly, "I love you, too," and nudged him away so I could keep on reading. But this didn't satisfy Jonathan. He walked a few steps back, started to run and took a flying leap into my lap. He gave me a big hug, smiled this huge smile, took my face into his little hands, looked me in the eye and said, "I love you, Daddy, and I just needed to do something about it." Then he laughed. Doing something about what he believed to be true, gave him joy. To this day, Jonathan gets joy from the things he does for others.

The shepherds in the Christmas story witness the scene of Jesus' birth and there find a mission. They leave praising God and telling all who will listen about what they have seen and heard; all who hear are astonished. The experience of light above the midnight sky; the experience of God with them, the promise of a Savior, the promise of a future in the love of this one who will change the world, gives them something to do. And what they do has a positive effect.

We know joy when we do something about what we know and believe--when we pursue a life of love and service; when we fill our lives with activity that springs from our faith, from our own sense of well-being and security, when we see how our love helps those in need. The love of God gives us something to do. There's joy in purposeful work.

**3. Someone to love, something to do, finally, joy springs from the Christmas story because there we find something on which to base our hope.** To see God come into the world as a baby, is to be given the promise that God is involved in a process, a process not yet fully realized. Now Jesus is a baby, but later he will be the risen Lord. Now Jesus is naked and vulnerable, but one day, he will be invincible. In this story, we are given the promise that while the present may seem dark and distressing, still God is working to bring light and life. While the present may seem barren and lifeless, with God, there is hope for the future, there remains the possibility for something new.

In Thomas Wolfe's book, Look Homeward Angel, there's a scene in which Eliza Grant is saying goodbye to her son, who's heading off to college. Mother and son have had a tortured love/hate relationship. The boy says "Goodbye," but as he walks away, he experiences this intense feeling of unfinished business with his mother. He turns and comes back and they embrace. His thoughts take him back to the years of his childhood, but he cannot communicate what he feels. Instead, he cries out, "Goodbye, goodbye, goodbye." The cry that crosses his lips is a cry of anguish. His mother understands, partly. She's feeling much of what he feels, but from a parent's side. All she can say is, "My child, my child, my child." Both are crying now. Finally, she's able to say, "My son, we must try to love one another." The author, Thomas

Wolfe, describes this as "a terrible and a beautiful sentence." Terrible, for it originates out of deep pain. Beautiful, for in it is the potential, the hope, for something new.

When we look into the manger, we see a baby who will become a man. We see a life that moves from birth to a cross to an empty tomb. Here is the clash between who we are and what we are to become. Here is the mercy and love that holds out for us the hope for peace of mind and soul. The birth of Jesus is only the beginning of the story of God's providential care. Where there is lasting, on-going love, there's hope.

And where there's hope there is joy.

Mark Twain had the habit of spicing his conversation with profanity. His wife, however, was a delicate, refined woman, and often became very upset by his rough language. She tried in many ways to cure him of the habit, but always to no avail. On one occasion she tried reverse psychology. When Twain arrived home from a trip, he was greeted at the door with a string of cuss words. From the lips of his delicate wife, he heard every obscene expletive he had ever said and more. Twain stood by quietly and listened until she was finished. Then he said, "My dear, you have the words, but not the music." She was able to say the words, but she lacked the feeling, the enthusiasm, that for Twain gave those words their punch.

This Christmas, most of us know the words, but some of us lack the music. The words are easy, "Merry Christmas, Happy New Year, God bless you, Peace on earth, Good will to all, Joy to the world." We say these words casually, almost automatically, but the joy, the enthusiasm, the music that gives these words their punch, their life-giving power is missing.

Discover the joy of Christmas. Know joy's essentials. In the love of God, find someone to love, something to do, and something on which to base your hope.

It's Christmas. It's time for a fresh start.



Christmas Day, 2020

Texts: Isaiah 61:10-62:4; Psalm 23; John 1:1-18

## **A Fresh Start: Christ in the Times of Our Lives**

*And the Word became flesh and dwelled among us; from his fullness we have all received." John 1:14-16*

One day, long ago, a man lost his way in a deep wilderness. Frantically, he tried to find his way out, but no matter which way he turned, he remained hopelessly lost. Every time he went in one direction, he would panic, thinking that he should have gone the other way. As darkness approached, he became more and more terror-stricken. Then, in the distance he saw what seemed to be a wild beast coming toward him. Frozen with fear, he could not run. He thought his life was over.

But as the beast came closer, the man began to experience some relief. The nearer it came, the more it looked like a domesticated animal. Finally, the man realized that it was a horse with a man riding on it. Summoning all his courage he ran toward the horseman. When he reached the steed, he raised his trembling hand toward the figure still hidden in the darkness. Only then did he realize that he was looking into the loving eyes of his own brother.

In the Gospel of John, we hear the Christmas story through a poem. There's no manger, no shepherds, no Mary or Joseph, no angels or wise men. Rather, in what are perhaps the most beautiful, the most profound words in the Bible, John tells us all we need to know about what has happened in the coming of Jesus to this world. "The Word became flesh and lived among us, full of grace and truth. Of his fullness we have all received."

We are those who have wandered lost in the wilderness. Each of us, in our own way, face a dark, frightening reality, wondering which way to turn, fearing God's wrathful worst "coming at us from the distance like a wild beast," believing that for us a fullness of life may be over. But the Word has become flesh. We need no longer see God from a distance. In Jesus Christ, in the most personal, vulnerable way possible, we see for ourselves that God is for us, not against us. We reach out our trembling hand to God in faith, only then to see Jesus, our own brother there, reaching down to us, having come into our darkness to lead us out in love.

John's description of the Incarnation has for us an incredible implication. When the Word becomes flesh, with the coming of Christ into our lives, we are all recipients of the fullness of God. Through Jesus Christ, all the fullness of God, everything that God is, is ours all the time. In all the times of life, in every experience of life, God is there--all of God that understands, all of God that is powerful, all of God that heals, all of God that inspires love and community is there for us to receive.

In our meditations this Christmas season, together we've seen how Christ comes to us in all the times of our lives to lead us out of the wilderness to what is fresh and new.

1. In a time of endings, when we grieve, when relationships or livelihoods breakdown, when we lose what is familiar and energizing, Christ is there to lead us in **hope**.
2. In a time of self-doubt, when we lose our center, when a sickness of our own imagination convinces us that the way toward the future is blocked, Christ is there to lead us in **faith**.
3. In a time of need, when we or those we know need material or emotional comfort, when we or they need companionship and a reason to live, Christ is there to lead us through **love**.
4. In a time of change, when the incessant demand for change that characterizes our time leaves us confused, stressed out, left out, and anxious, Christ is there to lead us to **peace**.
5. In a time of despair, when our sufferings or shortcomings, when the massive social problems we face in our time, create in us an unshakable pessimism, Christ is there to lead us to **joy**.

In Christ, we are all recipients of God's fullness, of all that God is. In every experience of life, in all times of life, whether we're young or old, God is there working to make things new.

Today, as we come to the end of this series of meditations and as I think about how you and I will respond to this prodding of God's Spirit toward life and hope and love, I am aware of how easy it is for us to stay as we are. Sometimes it's easy to get so focused on our problems, so defined by our grief, our doubt, our need, our anxiety, our despair, so settled in our normal routine and habits, that we fail to take advantage of what is already ours. We stay stuck and never do move forward.

In his thought-provoking book, The Great Divorce, C.S. Lewis gives us a picture of Hell. It's a big city, with all the pressures and problems that big cities have. The weather is always cold and wet with a heavy rain. The light is always gray and murky. The people who live in the city of Hell are aware that a great divorce has taken place between them and God, yet they sink deeper and deeper into their dismal surroundings. What makes the scene all the more tragic is that there's a way out, a way out of this terrible condition that is habitually ignored. God has provided a shuttle bus service from the city of Hell to the city of Heaven. The bus runs regularly, many times a day. All you need to do is get on the bus and let the power of God carry you toward the light. But the incredible thing is that very few people ever board the bus, even though it arrives and departs all the time. Instead, people make all sorts of lame excuses for putting off the journey, and so miss the opportunity to be carried from misery and death to new life.

Lewis' story is a metaphor for the way we live; for the times when we find ourselves in hell, trapped there either by a circumstance we've created or by one in which we've been placed. It may be boredom or loneliness, a hell made of our anger or grief, an illness, an intolerable work situation, or a bad marriage. It's hell. Now and then, we hear about a way out, we learn about hope, about peace, but for some reason we give up, we fail to pursue the way out. We see the

bus, but we don't get on, ignoring the prodding of God's Spirit that could take us beautifully into the future.

Today, this Christmas, get on the bus. I want you all to know, really to know personally in your heart-center, the Christ who understands and can make such a difference in your life.

In an article titled, "The Heart of the Priesthood," Walter Eversley, who was a professor at Virginia Theological Seminary tells the story of an Oscar-winning actor who came to the inauguration of a new mayor, who was his boyhood friend. As part of the festivities, a worship service was held where the pastor exhorted the mayor to take the Lord as his guide and to be a good shepherd to all. In order to drive home his point, the pastor invited the actor to recite the Twenty-third Psalm. The actor stood, and with flawless elocution, articulated each word with precision and turned each phrase with elegance. When he finished, the people cheered, some shouted, "Bravo, Bravo."

When the congregation quieted, an old deacon, who was scheduled to close the service with a benediction, slowly rose. With haltering tones and a quavering voice, he began to recite the same Psalm. "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want." The crowd sat stilled. "He makes me lie down in green pastures, He leads me beside still waters, He restores my soul." Mothers held their infants close. Grown men wept. When the old man had finished there was no need for another benediction. Through his own tears, the Oscar-winning actor turned to his manager and asked, "Why could I not move them this way? I preferred that effect?" The manager answered, "You know the Psalm; the old man knows the Shepherd."

I know you know the Psalm. I know you know the words. if you've spent time reading the Bible, listening to sermons, going to church school classes, thinking at all about religious matters, you know about hope, about faith, love, peace and joy. But do you know the Shepherd? Do you know the Christ who makes these words real? The fullness of God is with you always, in all the times of your life.

Today, I ask you to open up your life to the fullness of God in Jesus Christ. I ask you to make your life a walk with Christ, every moment, in every experience, throughout your life's journey. There is nothing more important than this: Keep yourself in the fullness of God's love.

Christ in the times of your

life. It's time for a fresh start.