

Sunday, 11/27/16

HOPE AMIDST SIN IN THE GARDEN OF EDEN

READING: Genesis 3:13-15

When God created the world and placed man (male and female), who was created in God's image, in the Garden of Eden, man was to rule over all that God had made. Man had the ability to communicate, reason, feel, and understand. He had intelligence and could think. He was like God; good and sinless. God directed man "to be fruitful and multiply, to fill the earth and subdue it, and rule over everything" (Genesis 1:28). God had given man the ability and power to act for Him.

Unfortunately, man also had the ability to be persuaded. He had been instructed by God that he could eat of the fruit of every tree except one—the tree of knowledge of good and evil. To do so, God said, man would surely die. When Satan, disguised in the body of the serpent, encouraged Eve, Adam's wife, to eat of the fruit of the tree of knowledge, she was persuaded when the serpent said the fruit of that tree was good, that it would open their eyes, and they would be like God and know good and evil. That one bite cursed all creation and opened the floodgates for sin to enter the world.

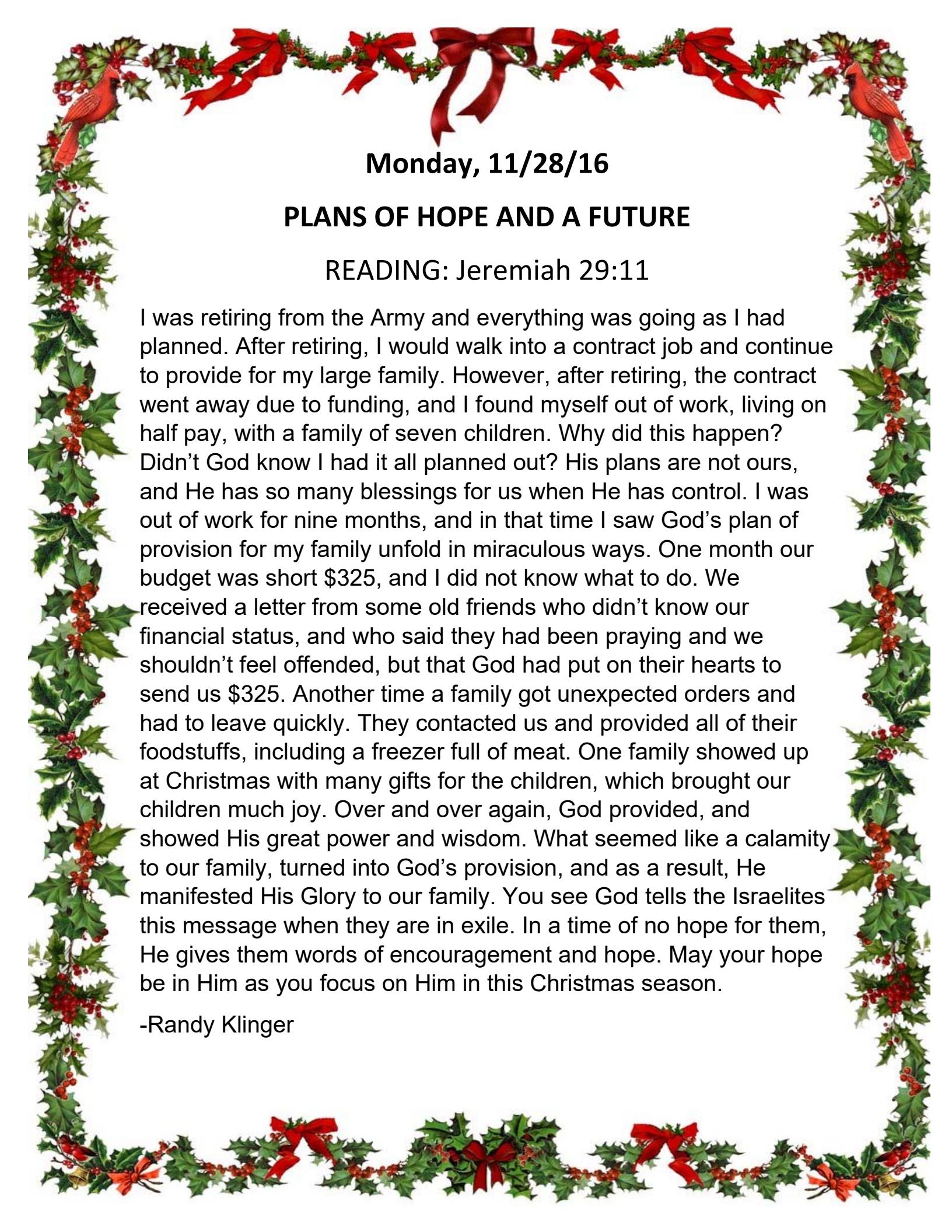
But it opened the gate to the event we celebrate every December 25th; the birth of Jesus. God cursed the serpent and said Satan's seed (sinners) could only make believers of God suffer while Eve's seed would eventually produce Jesus who would destroy Satan and rescue believers from sin.

Satan attempted to cause Jesus, the man, to sin, but Jesus, the Son of God, refused Satan.

Satan caused Jesus, the man, to suffer on the cross, but Jesus, the Son of God, accepted that suffering as it was God's plan and defeated death by rising from the dead. Through that action, believers will spend eternity with God.

For this, we believers rejoice when we celebrate the birth of Jesus.

-Sam Young



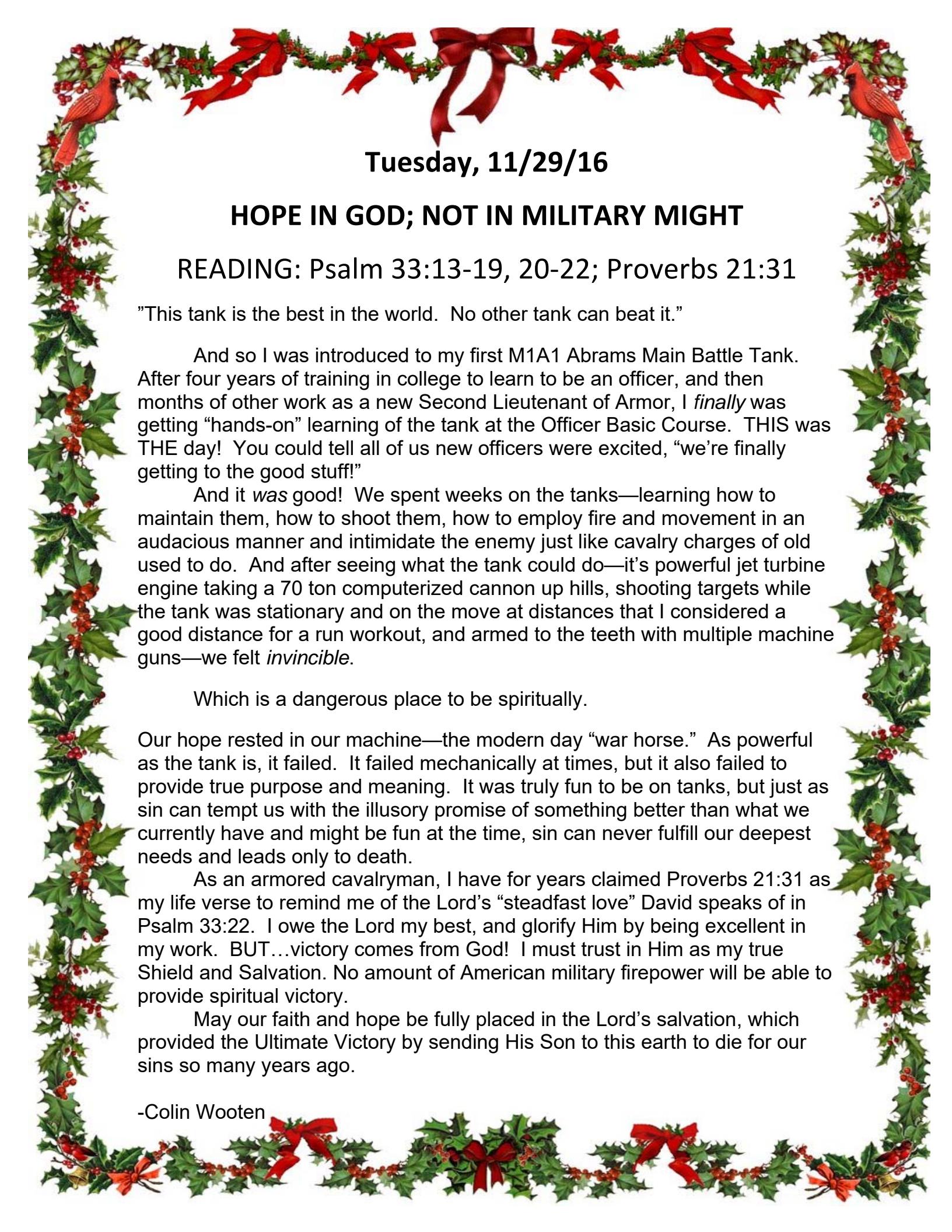
Monday, 11/28/16

PLANS OF HOPE AND A FUTURE

READING: Jeremiah 29:11

I was retiring from the Army and everything was going as I had planned. After retiring, I would walk into a contract job and continue to provide for my large family. However, after retiring, the contract went away due to funding, and I found myself out of work, living on half pay, with a family of seven children. Why did this happen? Didn't God know I had it all planned out? His plans are not ours, and He has so many blessings for us when He has control. I was out of work for nine months, and in that time I saw God's plan of provision for my family unfold in miraculous ways. One month our budget was short \$325, and I did not know what to do. We received a letter from some old friends who didn't know our financial status, and who said they had been praying and we shouldn't feel offended, but that God had put on their hearts to send us \$325. Another time a family got unexpected orders and had to leave quickly. They contacted us and provided all of their foodstuffs, including a freezer full of meat. One family showed up at Christmas with many gifts for the children, which brought our children much joy. Over and over again, God provided, and showed His great power and wisdom. What seemed like a calamity to our family, turned into God's provision, and as a result, He manifested His Glory to our family. You see God tells the Israelites this message when they are in exile. In a time of no hope for them, He gives them words of encouragement and hope. May your hope be in Him as you focus on Him in this Christmas season.

-Randy Klinger



Tuesday, 11/29/16

HOPE IN GOD; NOT IN MILITARY MIGHT

READING: Psalm 33:13-19, 20-22; Proverbs 21:31

"This tank is the best in the world. No other tank can beat it."

And so I was introduced to my first M1A1 Abrams Main Battle Tank. After four years of training in college to learn to be an officer, and then months of other work as a new Second Lieutenant of Armor, I *finally* was getting "hands-on" learning of the tank at the Officer Basic Course. THIS was THE day! You could tell all of us new officers were excited, "we're finally getting to the good stuff!"

And it *was* good! We spent weeks on the tanks—learning how to maintain them, how to shoot them, how to employ fire and movement in an audacious manner and intimidate the enemy just like cavalry charges of old used to do. And after seeing what the tank could do—it's powerful jet turbine engine taking a 70 ton computerized cannon up hills, shooting targets while the tank was stationary and on the move at distances that I considered a good distance for a run workout, and armed to the teeth with multiple machine guns—we felt *invincible*.

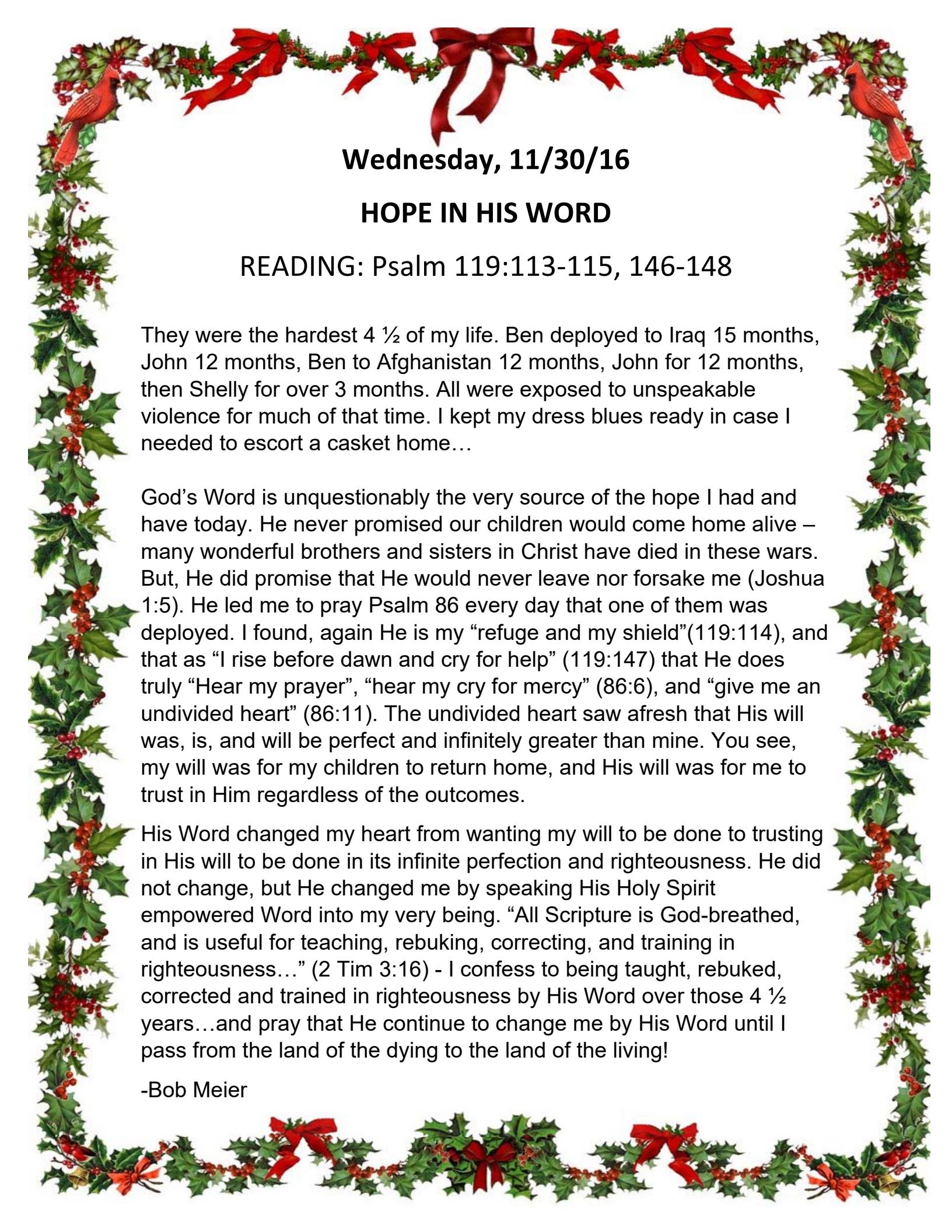
Which is a dangerous place to be spiritually.

Our hope rested in our machine—the modern day "war horse." As powerful as the tank is, it failed. It failed mechanically at times, but it also failed to provide true purpose and meaning. It was truly fun to be on tanks, but just as sin can tempt us with the illusory promise of something better than what we currently have and might be fun at the time, sin can never fulfill our deepest needs and leads only to death.

As an armored cavalryman, I have for years claimed Proverbs 21:31 as my life verse to remind me of the Lord's "steadfast love" David speaks of in Psalm 33:22. I owe the Lord my best, and glorify Him by being excellent in my work. BUT...victory comes from God! I must trust in Him as my true Shield and Salvation. No amount of American military firepower will be able to provide spiritual victory.

May our faith and hope be fully placed in the Lord's salvation, which provided the Ultimate Victory by sending His Son to this earth to die for our sins so many years ago.

-Colin Wooten



Wednesday, 11/30/16

HOPE IN HIS WORD

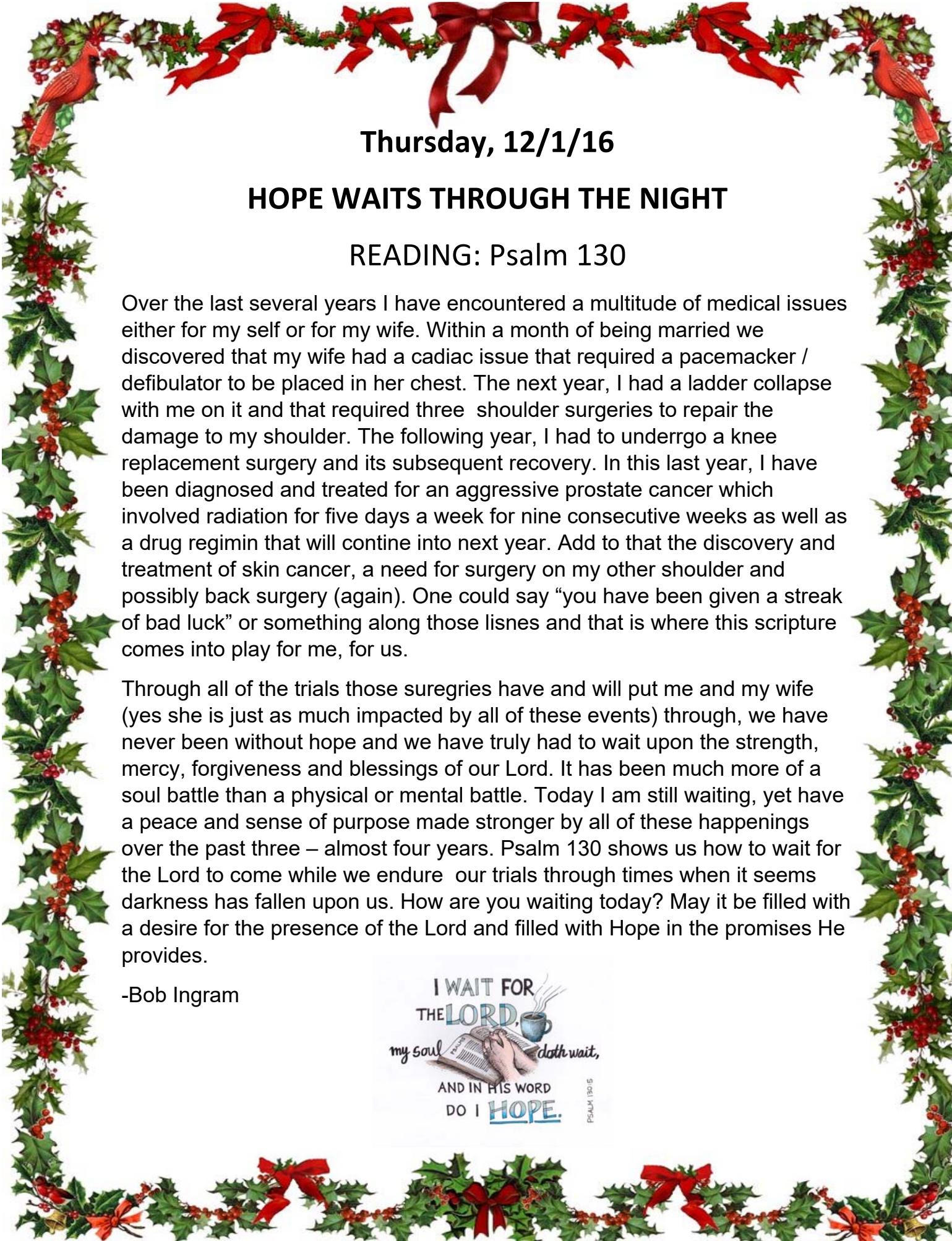
READING: Psalm 119:113-115, 146-148

They were the hardest 4 ½ of my life. Ben deployed to Iraq 15 months, John 12 months, Ben to Afghanistan 12 months, John for 12 months, then Shelly for over 3 months. All were exposed to unspeakable violence for much of that time. I kept my dress blues ready in case I needed to escort a casket home...

God's Word is unquestionably the very source of the hope I had and have today. He never promised our children would come home alive – many wonderful brothers and sisters in Christ have died in these wars. But, He did promise that He would never leave nor forsake me (Joshua 1:5). He led me to pray Psalm 86 every day that one of them was deployed. I found, again He is my “refuge and my shield”(119:114), and that as “I rise before dawn and cry for help” (119:147) that He does truly “Hear my prayer”, “hear my cry for mercy” (86:6), and “give me an undivided heart” (86:11). The undivided heart saw afresh that His will was, is, and will be perfect and infinitely greater than mine. You see, my will was for my children to return home, and His will was for me to trust in Him regardless of the outcomes.

His Word changed my heart from wanting my will to be done to trusting in His will to be done in its infinite perfection and righteousness. He did not change, but He changed me by speaking His Holy Spirit empowered Word into my very being. “All Scripture is God-breathed, and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness...” (2 Tim 3:16) - I confess to being taught, rebuked, corrected and trained in righteousness by His Word over those 4 ½ years...and pray that He continue to change me by His Word until I pass from the land of the dying to the land of the living!

-Bob Meier



Thursday, 12/1/16

HOPE WAITS THROUGH THE NIGHT

READING: Psalm 130

Over the last several years I have encountered a multitude of medical issues either for my self or for my wife. Within a month of being married we discovered that my wife had a cadiac issue that required a pacemacker / defibulator to be placed in her chest. The next year, I had a ladder collapse with me on it and that required three shoulder surgeries to repair the damage to my shoulder. The following year, I had to underrgo a knee replacement surgery and its subsequent recovery. In this last year, I have been diagnosed and treated for an aggressive prostate cancer which involved radiation for five days a week for nine consecutive weeks as well as a drug regimin that will contine into next year. Add to that the discovery and treatment of skin cancer, a need for surgery on my other shoulder and possibly back surgery (again). One could say "you have been given a streak of bad luck" or something along those lisnes and that is where this scripture comes into play for me, for us.

Through all of the trials those suregries have and will put me and my wife (yes she is just as much impacted by all of these events) through, we have never been without hope and we have truly had to wait upon the strength, mercy, forgiveness and blessings of our Lord. It has been much more of a soul battle than a physical or mental battle. Today I am still waiting, yet have a peace and sense of purpose made stronger by all of these happenings over the past three – almost four years. Psalm 130 shows us how to wait for the Lord to come while we endure our trials through times when it seems darkness has fallen upon us. How are you waiting today? May it be filled with a desire for the presence of the Lord and filled with Hope in the promises He provides.

-Bob Ingram





Friday, 12/2/16

HOPE IN SALVATION

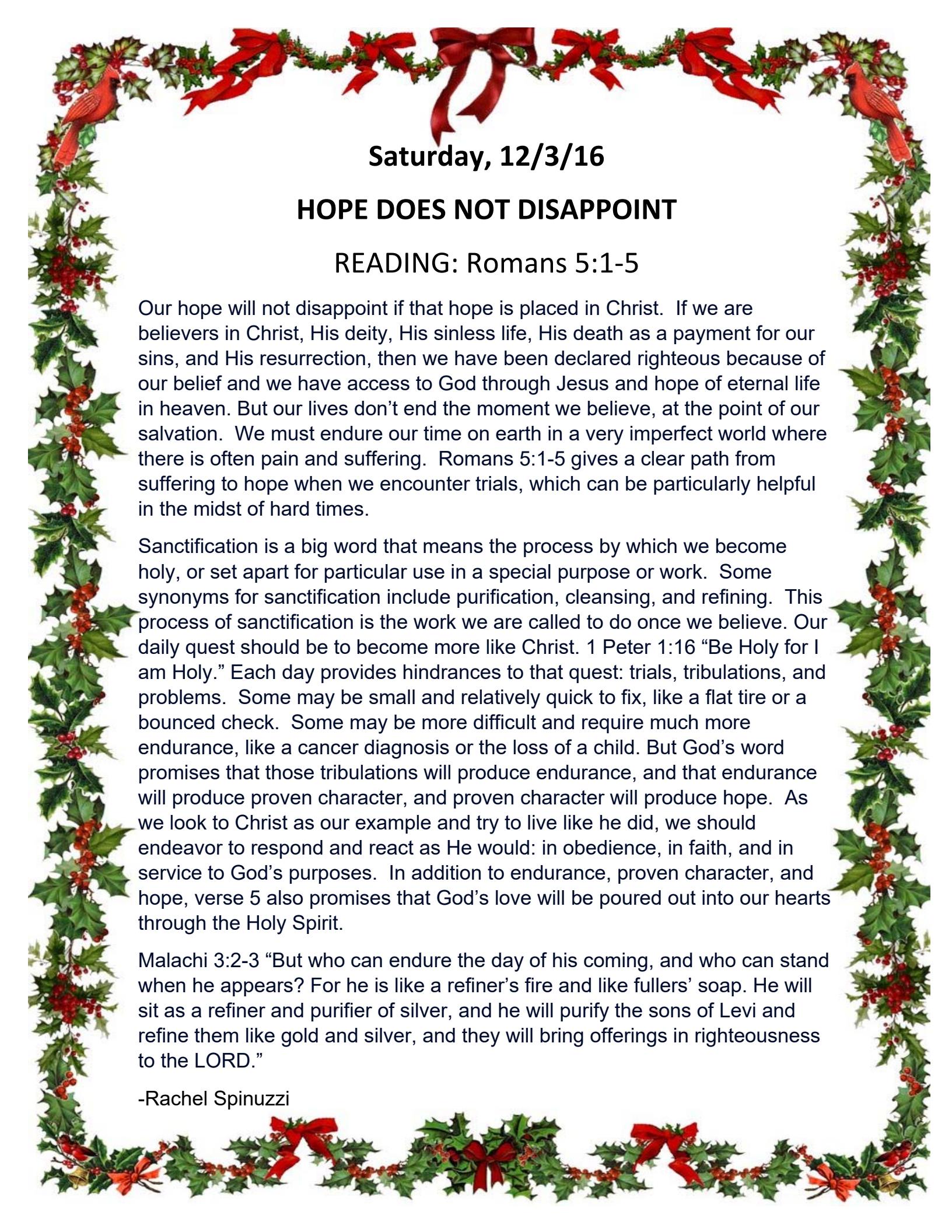
READING: Romans 8:22-25

How can something we can't see and hope for be the one thing that all Christians want? Salvation has such a profound meaning as it often concerns an eternal or spiritual deliverance from evil and sin that constantly surrounds us on Earth and keeps us away from getting closer to God.

Salvation is the gracious and undeserved gift from God and is only available through faith in Jesus Christ. In my view, we have an awesome God that not only loved us so much that he gave us his one and only Son, but only through his Son are we able get on the path to Salvation. God gave us the way and the means to reach eternal Salvation. Salvation is what we as believers excitedly and patiently look forward to by being eventually freed from some sin and the continual challenges in our everyday lives. As the verse says, "...hope that is seen is no hope at all.." (Romans 8:24), hope is something that we must have faith in, faith in Jesus and in our walk with Him, to continue to follow and believe in.

Through our continuous love and hope through Jesus, we will ultimately receive the greatest gift of all, everlasting Salvation, a gift that we have so patiently waited for.

-Brandon Chase



Saturday, 12/3/16

HOPE DOES NOT DISAPPOINT

READING: Romans 5:1-5

Our hope will not disappoint if that hope is placed in Christ. If we are believers in Christ, His deity, His sinless life, His death as a payment for our sins, and His resurrection, then we have been declared righteous because of our belief and we have access to God through Jesus and hope of eternal life in heaven. But our lives don't end the moment we believe, at the point of our salvation. We must endure our time on earth in a very imperfect world where there is often pain and suffering. Romans 5:1-5 gives a clear path from suffering to hope when we encounter trials, which can be particularly helpful in the midst of hard times.

Sanctification is a big word that means the process by which we become holy, or set apart for particular use in a special purpose or work. Some synonyms for sanctification include purification, cleansing, and refining. This process of sanctification is the work we are called to do once we believe. Our daily quest should be to become more like Christ. 1 Peter 1:16 "Be Holy for I am Holy." Each day provides hindrances to that quest: trials, tribulations, and problems. Some may be small and relatively quick to fix, like a flat tire or a bounced check. Some may be more difficult and require much more endurance, like a cancer diagnosis or the loss of a child. But God's word promises that those tribulations will produce endurance, and that endurance will produce proven character, and proven character will produce hope. As we look to Christ as our example and try to live like he did, we should endeavor to respond and react as He would: in obedience, in faith, and in service to God's purposes. In addition to endurance, proven character, and hope, verse 5 also promises that God's love will be poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit.

Malachi 3:2-3 "But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, and they will bring offerings in righteousness to the LORD."

-Rachel Spinuzzi



Sunday, 12/4/16

THE PRINCE OF PEACE

READING: Isaiah 9:6-7

This passage is one of the most-quoted prophecies concerning the birth of Christ. The arrival of the Prince of Peace sounds joyful indeed. Why, then, did Jesus later say “Do you suppose that I have come to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division” (Luke 12:51)?

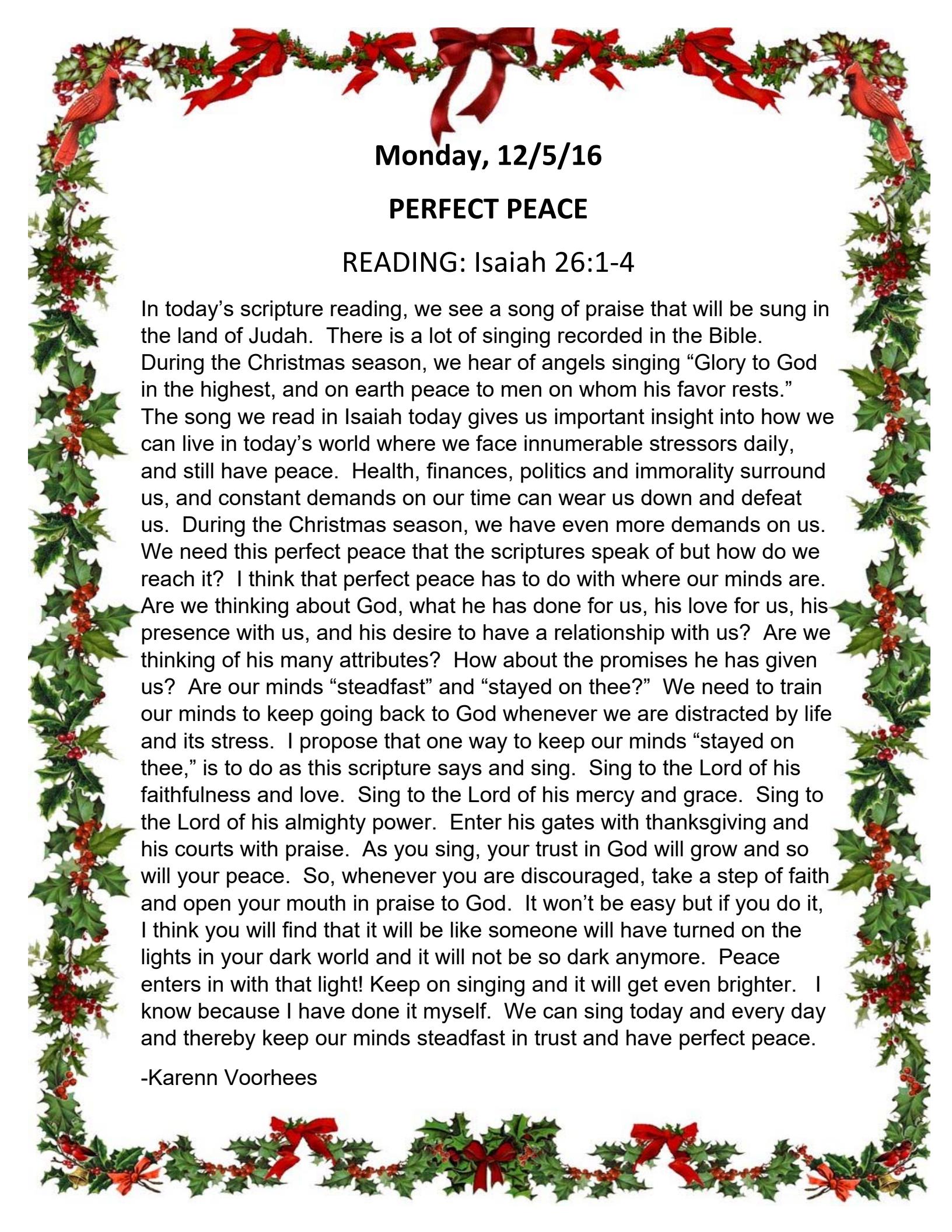
The wars and rumors of wars continue to disquiet us today, especially as a military community, with so many among us who have witnessed unspeakable violence. The very land upon which Jesus walked during his earthly ministry is now under constant tumult of violence, with internecine wars that have killed hundreds of thousands of people.

What is more, while we are fortunate not to be experiencing the same kind of war within our national borders, many of us have seen family conflict—“father against son and son against father”—over our decision to obey Christ. Our brothers and sisters overseas sometimes risk their very lives to make such a decision. Where, then, is our peace? Where is our Wonderful Counselor, upon whose shoulders rests the government?

The ancient Israelites to whom Isaiah originally preached this passage knew the pain of violence all too well. They were a “people who walked in darkness,” under constant threat of foreign oppression and violence. More oppression and violence would be in store for them in the future, just like more oppression and violence are in store for God’s people today. The good news of this passage is that Jesus also tells us “fear not! I have overcome the world.” The same burden of oppression that has lain on our shoulders, the Father has laid upon our King’s, and he is able to carry it.

What do you think? How should we understand the promises of Isaiah 9:6-7 today? How should they affect our lives?

-Jon Romaneski



Monday, 12/5/16

PERFECT PEACE

READING: Isaiah 26:1-4

In today's scripture reading, we see a song of praise that will be sung in the land of Judah. There is a lot of singing recorded in the Bible. During the Christmas season, we hear of angels singing "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests." The song we read in Isaiah today gives us important insight into how we can live in today's world where we face innumerable stressors daily, and still have peace. Health, finances, politics and immorality surround us, and constant demands on our time can wear us down and defeat us. During the Christmas season, we have even more demands on us. We need this perfect peace that the scriptures speak of but how do we reach it? I think that perfect peace has to do with where our minds are. Are we thinking about God, what he has done for us, his love for us, his presence with us, and his desire to have a relationship with us? Are we thinking of his many attributes? How about the promises he has given us? Are our minds "steadfast" and "stayed on thee?" We need to train our minds to keep going back to God whenever we are distracted by life and its stress. I propose that one way to keep our minds "stayed on thee," is to do as this scripture says and sing. Sing to the Lord of his faithfulness and love. Sing to the Lord of his mercy and grace. Sing to the Lord of his almighty power. Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise. As you sing, your trust in God will grow and so will your peace. So, whenever you are discouraged, take a step of faith and open your mouth in praise to God. It won't be easy but if you do it, I think you will find that it will be like someone will have turned on the lights in your dark world and it will not be so dark anymore. Peace enters in with that light! Keep on singing and it will get even brighter. I know because I have done it myself. We can sing today and every day and thereby keep our minds steadfast in trust and have perfect peace.

-Karenn Voorhees



Tuesday, 12/6/16

I WILL LAY DOWN IN PEACE

READING: Psalm 4: 3-8

I have pondered lately what it means to be at peace. I am reminded of Psalm 23, the image of the shepherd leading the flock to still waters.

Still waters.

Psalm 4 ends with, "In peace I will both lie down and sleep; for you alone, O Lord, make me dwell in safety." The psalm does not begin that way. In fact, it looks like there is much conflict for the psalmist, for David. I see words like: relief, shame, anger, sacrifice, trust. Words that describe trials. There is emotion in the middle of the psalm, yes, even anger.

And yet the psalmist concludes with both joy and peace. How is this possible?

I am reminded again of The Shepherd.

There is One who leads. There is One who answers when we call. There is One whom you and I put our trust in, in the midst of life, challenges, trials, in the midst of the unknown. He draws us near to Himself. He reminds us that He knows this road, he has walked it, he has been here. He holds us and journeys with us through what life brings. He knows, He sees the beginning and the end. He has good in mind for us.

He is trustworthy.

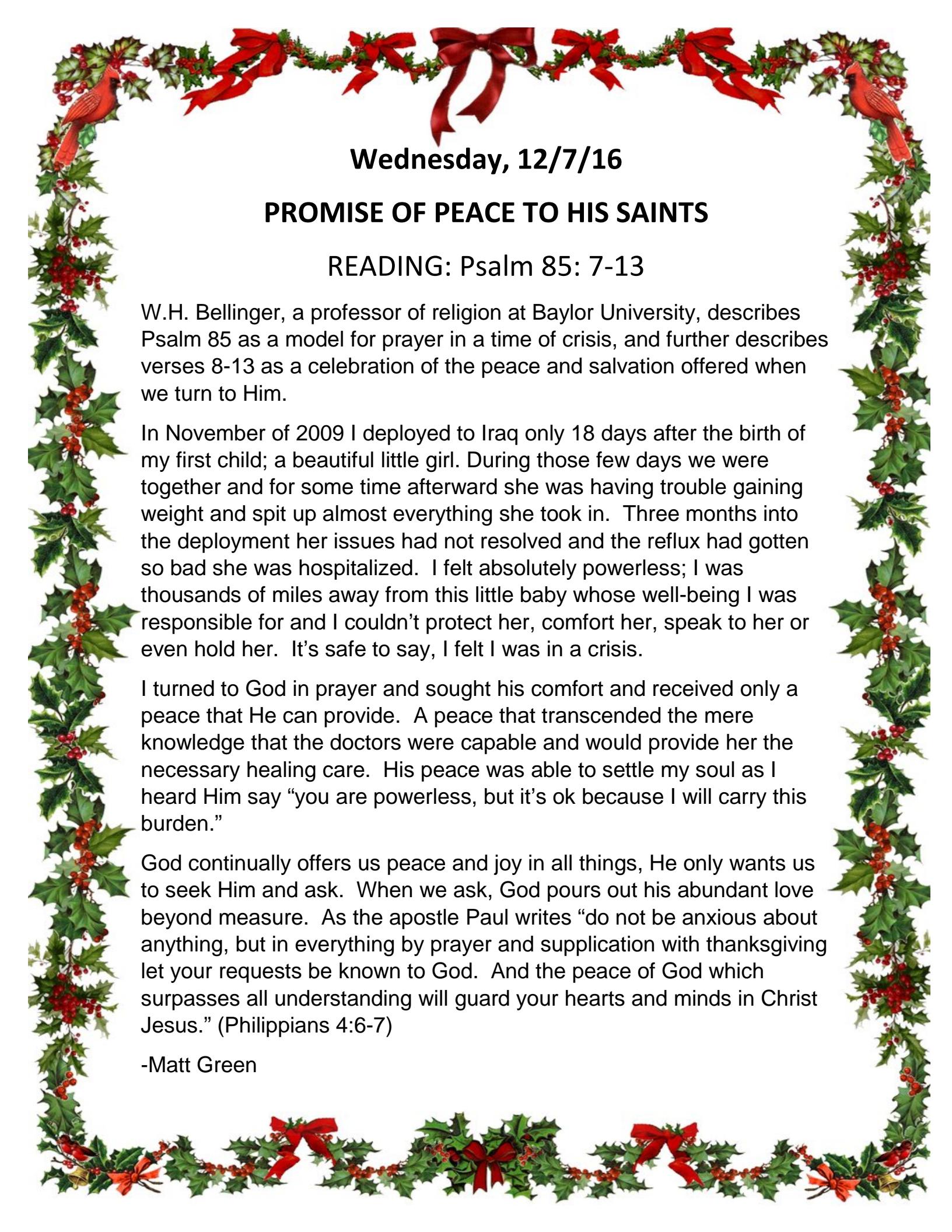
When I understand this, and I mean really understand it, in the midst of all those other things, there is a peace that settles in my heart. It does not take away the trial, but it lifts my eyes from it, in hope, to greater things that lay in store for me.

Deep breaths come, lowering shoulders, calming of the soul. And slowly, peace.

Christmas reminds me there is One who has walked our road so that He may bring to us what we do not have alone, peace.

-CH (MAJ) Jeff McKinney





Wednesday, 12/7/16

PROMISE OF PEACE TO HIS SAINTS

READING: Psalm 85: 7-13

W.H. Bellinger, a professor of religion at Baylor University, describes Psalm 85 as a model for prayer in a time of crisis, and further describes verses 8-13 as a celebration of the peace and salvation offered when we turn to Him.

In November of 2009 I deployed to Iraq only 18 days after the birth of my first child; a beautiful little girl. During those few days we were together and for some time afterward she was having trouble gaining weight and spit up almost everything she took in. Three months into the deployment her issues had not resolved and the reflux had gotten so bad she was hospitalized. I felt absolutely powerless; I was thousands of miles away from this little baby whose well-being I was responsible for and I couldn't protect her, comfort her, speak to her or even hold her. It's safe to say, I felt I was in a crisis.

I turned to God in prayer and sought his comfort and received only a peace that He can provide. A peace that transcended the mere knowledge that the doctors were capable and would provide her the necessary healing care. His peace was able to settle my soul as I heard Him say "you are powerless, but it's ok because I will carry this burden."

God continually offers us peace and joy in all things, He only wants us to seek Him and ask. When we ask, God pours out his abundant love beyond measure. As the apostle Paul writes "do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be known to God. And the peace of God which surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus." (Philippians 4:6-7)

-Matt Green



Thursday, 12/8/16

COVENANT OF PEACE AND SHOWERS OF BLESSING

READING: Ezekial 34:22-26

The Rescuer is coming, God Almighty has said it, and He always keeps His promises. This I tell to my children, but honestly, I tell it to comfort myself too. Sometimes it's so very hard to understand God's ways; I imagine it's probably how sheep feel about their shepherd. But the beautiful, awesome and wonderful thing about our Shepherd is that He created us, He loves us, He knows us and He has unlimited bounty for those who answer His call.

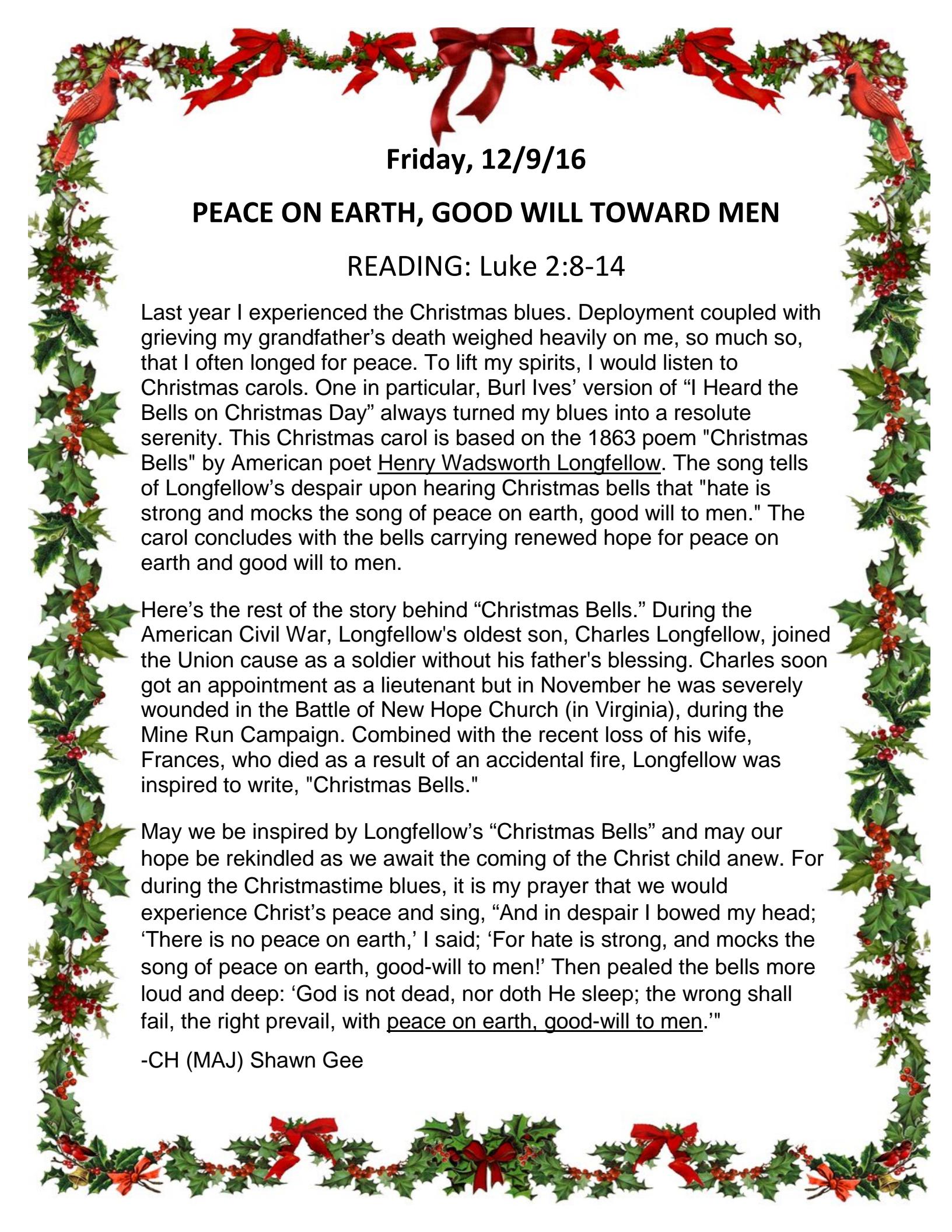
We don't have to run around bleating with worry because God has said that he will protect us and bless us, forever. The Living God has promised to make a covenant of peace with us, and make blessings of the places he will bring us to. He keeps his solemn vows, even to us lost and stumbling sheep.

I love that God, our protective Father, has promised to banish wild beasts from the land so that we, His sheep, may dwell securely in the wilderness and sleep in the woods. God, my Protector, gets me! He knows that I'm scared: afraid of the dark woods and of the dangers that prowl about; He knows how precious that rest is for me.

So take heart, little sheep, so bruised and weary; our Redeemer is coming and He will care for us. How happy are we, who are called to be in his pasture, under the shelter of His wings. When I'm feeling hopeless, helpless and lost, I bring to mind that He has called me to dwell securely around His hill: huddle close to the Body of Christ. Just wait, He will send down showers of blessing, in their season.

-Sarah Schwennesen





Friday, 12/9/16

PEACE ON EARTH, GOOD WILL TOWARD MEN

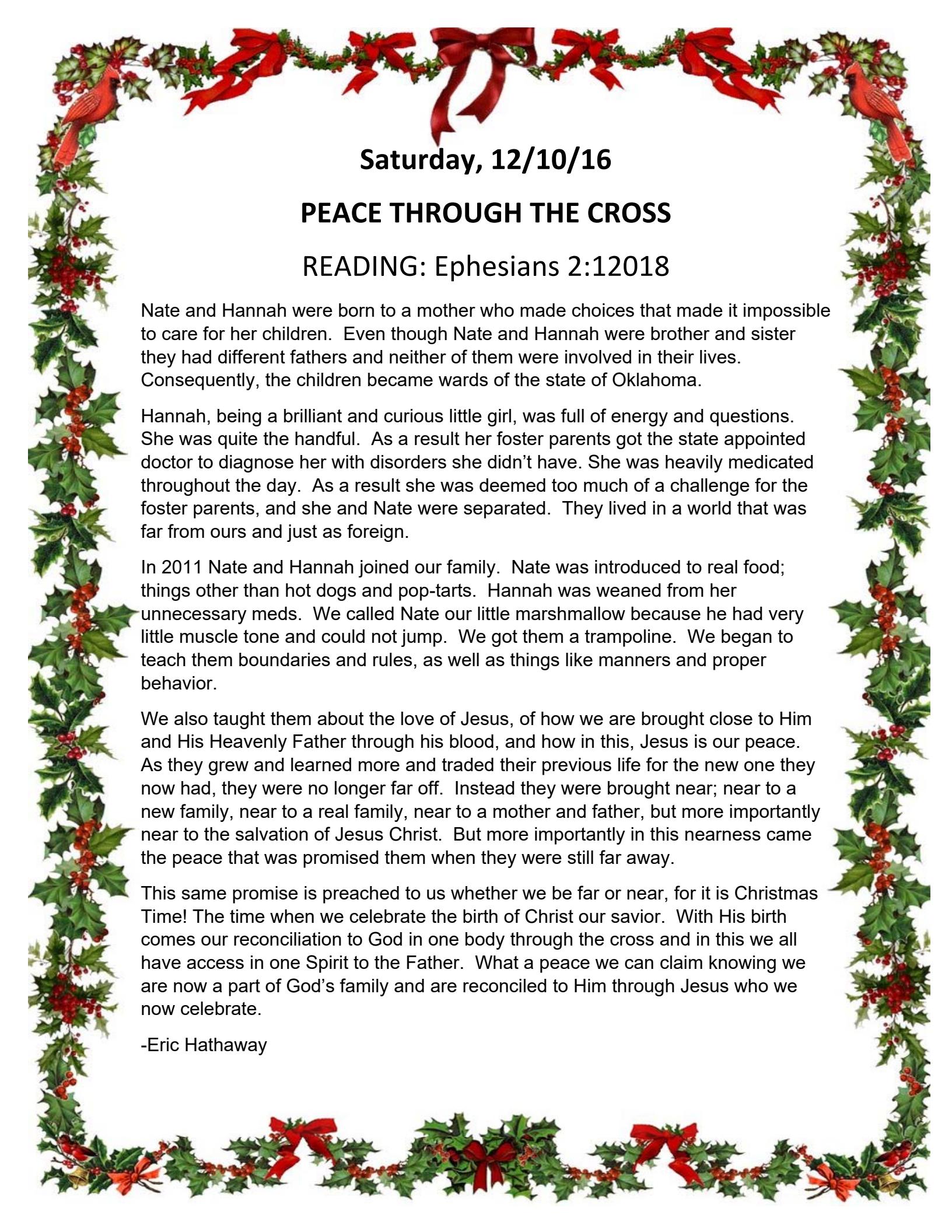
READING: Luke 2:8-14

Last year I experienced the Christmas blues. Deployment coupled with grieving my grandfather's death weighed heavily on me, so much so, that I often longed for peace. To lift my spirits, I would listen to Christmas carols. One in particular, Burl Ives' version of "I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day" always turned my blues into a resolute serenity. This Christmas carol is based on the 1863 poem "Christmas Bells" by American poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. The song tells of Longfellow's despair upon hearing Christmas bells that "hate is strong and mocks the song of peace on earth, good will to men." The carol concludes with the bells carrying renewed hope for peace on earth and good will to men.

Here's the rest of the story behind "Christmas Bells." During the American Civil War, Longfellow's oldest son, Charles Longfellow, joined the Union cause as a soldier without his father's blessing. Charles soon got an appointment as a lieutenant but in November he was severely wounded in the Battle of New Hope Church (in Virginia), during the Mine Run Campaign. Combined with the recent loss of his wife, Frances, who died as a result of an accidental fire, Longfellow was inspired to write, "Christmas Bells."

May we be inspired by Longfellow's "Christmas Bells" and may our hope be rekindled as we await the coming of the Christ child anew. For during the Christmastime blues, it is my prayer that we would experience Christ's peace and sing, "And in despair I bowed my head; 'There is no peace on earth,' I said; 'For hate is strong, and mocks the song of peace on earth, good-will to men!' Then pealed the bells more loud and deep: 'God is not dead, nor doth He sleep; the wrong shall fail, the right prevail, with peace on earth, good-will to men.'"

-CH (MAJ) Shawn Gee



Saturday, 12/10/16

PEACE THROUGH THE CROSS

READING: Ephesians 2:12018

Nate and Hannah were born to a mother who made choices that made it impossible to care for her children. Even though Nate and Hannah were brother and sister they had different fathers and neither of them were involved in their lives. Consequently, the children became wards of the state of Oklahoma.

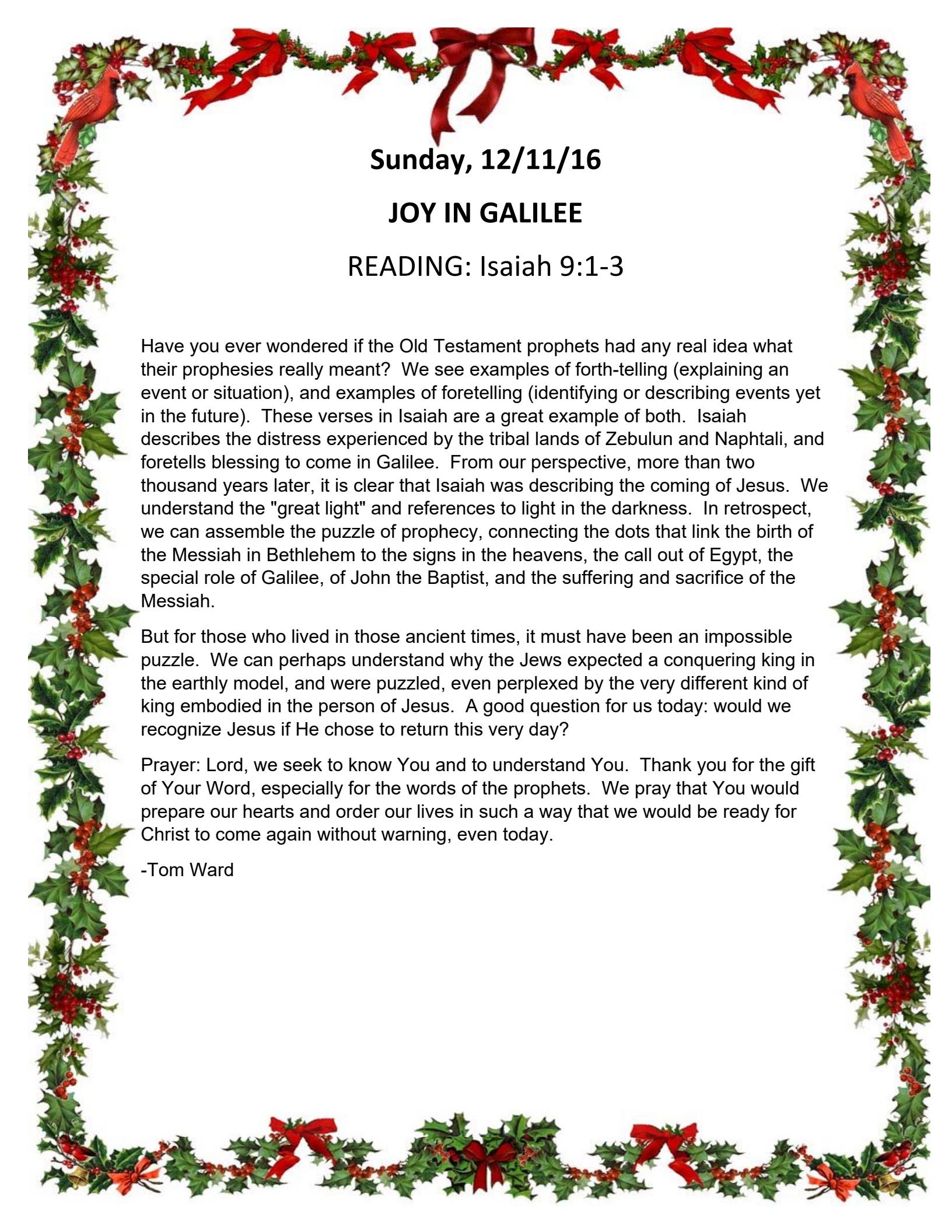
Hannah, being a brilliant and curious little girl, was full of energy and questions. She was quite the handful. As a result her foster parents got the state appointed doctor to diagnose her with disorders she didn't have. She was heavily medicated throughout the day. As a result she was deemed too much of a challenge for the foster parents, and she and Nate were separated. They lived in a world that was far from ours and just as foreign.

In 2011 Nate and Hannah joined our family. Nate was introduced to real food; things other than hot dogs and pop-tarts. Hannah was weaned from her unnecessary meds. We called Nate our little marshmallow because he had very little muscle tone and could not jump. We got them a trampoline. We began to teach them boundaries and rules, as well as things like manners and proper behavior.

We also taught them about the love of Jesus, of how we are brought close to Him and His Heavenly Father through his blood, and how in this, Jesus is our peace. As they grew and learned more and traded their previous life for the new one they now had, they were no longer far off. Instead they were brought near; near to a new family, near to a real family, near to a mother and father, but more importantly near to the salvation of Jesus Christ. But more importantly in this nearness came the peace that was promised them when they were still far away.

This same promise is preached to us whether we be far or near, for it is Christmas Time! The time when we celebrate the birth of Christ our savior. With His birth comes our reconciliation to God in one body through the cross and in this we all have access in one Spirit to the Father. What a peace we can claim knowing we are now a part of God's family and are reconciled to Him through Jesus who we now celebrate.

-Eric Hathaway



Sunday, 12/11/16

JOY IN GALILEE

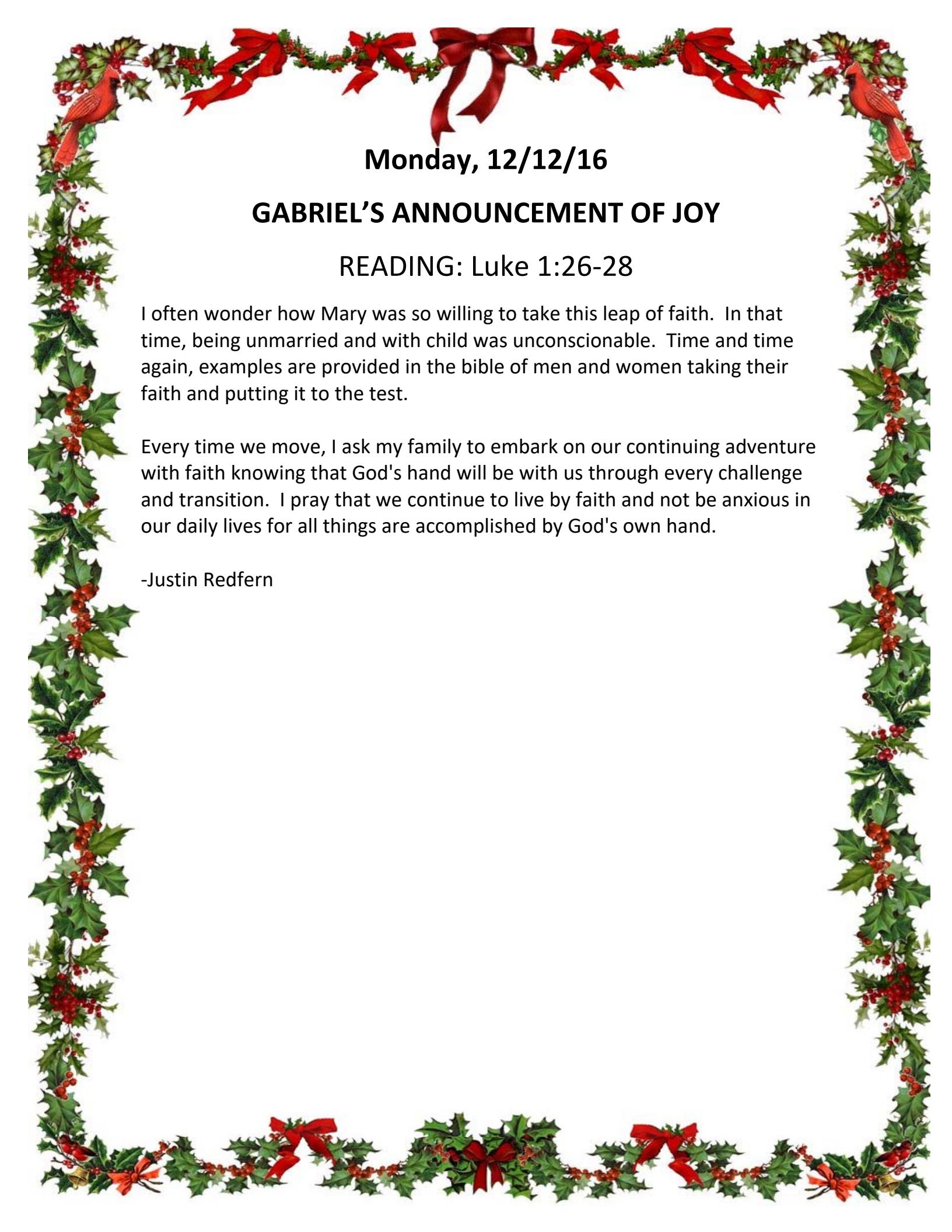
READING: Isaiah 9:1-3

Have you ever wondered if the Old Testament prophets had any real idea what their prophesies really meant? We see examples of forth-telling (explaining an event or situation), and examples of foretelling (identifying or describing events yet in the future). These verses in Isaiah are a great example of both. Isaiah describes the distress experienced by the tribal lands of Zebulun and Naphtali, and foretells blessing to come in Galilee. From our perspective, more than two thousand years later, it is clear that Isaiah was describing the coming of Jesus. We understand the "great light" and references to light in the darkness. In retrospect, we can assemble the puzzle of prophecy, connecting the dots that link the birth of the Messiah in Bethlehem to the signs in the heavens, the call out of Egypt, the special role of Galilee, of John the Baptist, and the suffering and sacrifice of the Messiah.

But for those who lived in those ancient times, it must have been an impossible puzzle. We can perhaps understand why the Jews expected a conquering king in the earthly model, and were puzzled, even perplexed by the very different kind of king embodied in the person of Jesus. A good question for us today: would we recognize Jesus if He chose to return this very day?

Prayer: Lord, we seek to know You and to understand You. Thank you for the gift of Your Word, especially for the words of the prophets. We pray that You would prepare our hearts and order our lives in such a way that we would be ready for Christ to come again without warning, even today.

-Tom Ward



Monday, 12/12/16

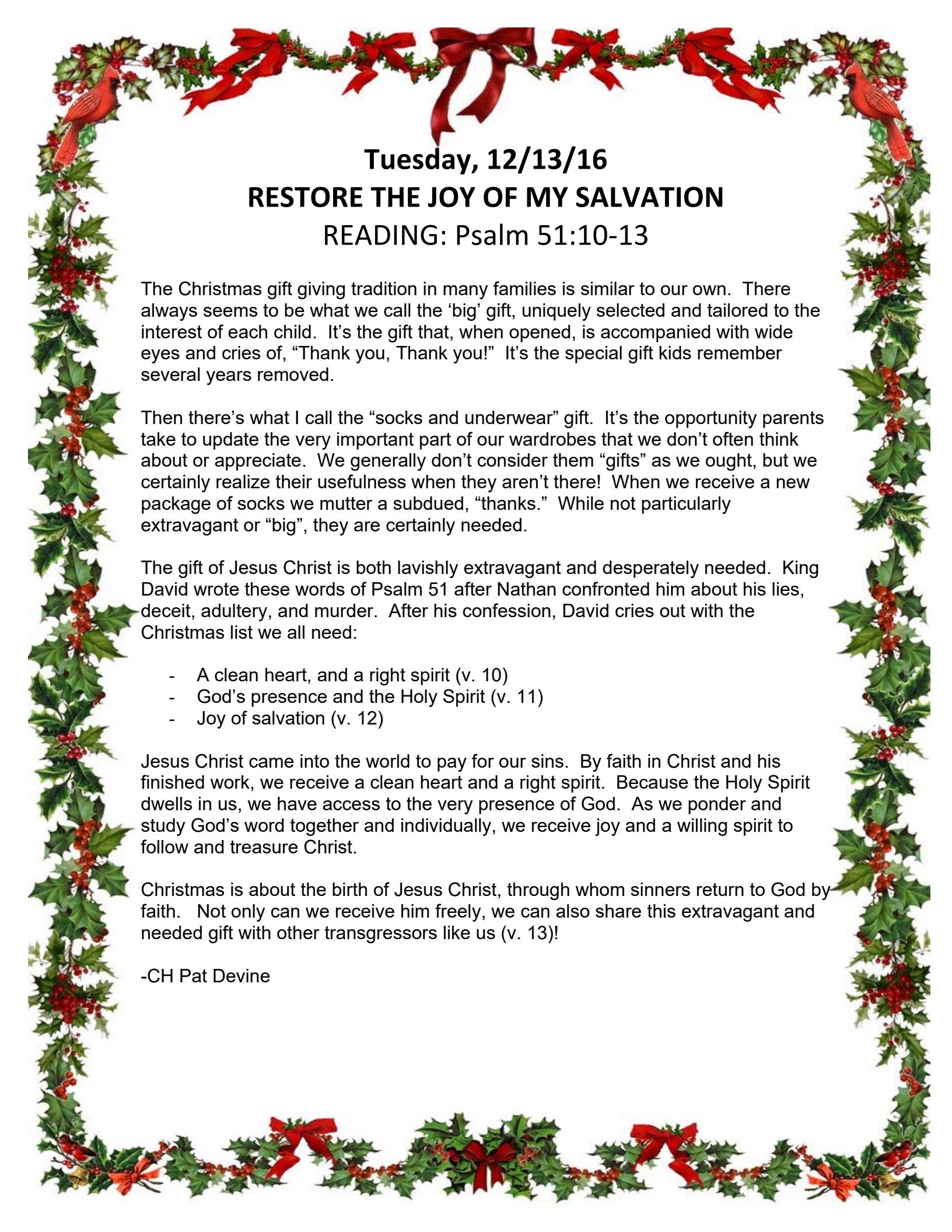
GABRIEL'S ANNOUNCEMENT OF JOY

READING: Luke 1:26-28

I often wonder how Mary was so willing to take this leap of faith. In that time, being unmarried and with child was unconscionable. Time and time again, examples are provided in the bible of men and women taking their faith and putting it to the test.

Every time we move, I ask my family to embark on our continuing adventure with faith knowing that God's hand will be with us through every challenge and transition. I pray that we continue to live by faith and not be anxious in our daily lives for all things are accomplished by God's own hand.

-Justin Redfern



Tuesday, 12/13/16

RESTORE THE JOY OF MY SALVATION

READING: Psalm 51:10-13

The Christmas gift giving tradition in many families is similar to our own. There always seems to be what we call the ‘big’ gift, uniquely selected and tailored to the interest of each child. It’s the gift that, when opened, is accompanied with wide eyes and cries of, “Thank you, Thank you!” It’s the special gift kids remember several years removed.

Then there’s what I call the “socks and underwear” gift. It’s the opportunity parents take to update the very important part of our wardrobes that we don’t often think about or appreciate. We generally don’t consider them “gifts” as we ought, but we certainly realize their usefulness when they aren’t there! When we receive a new package of socks we mutter a subdued, “thanks.” While not particularly extravagant or “big”, they are certainly needed.

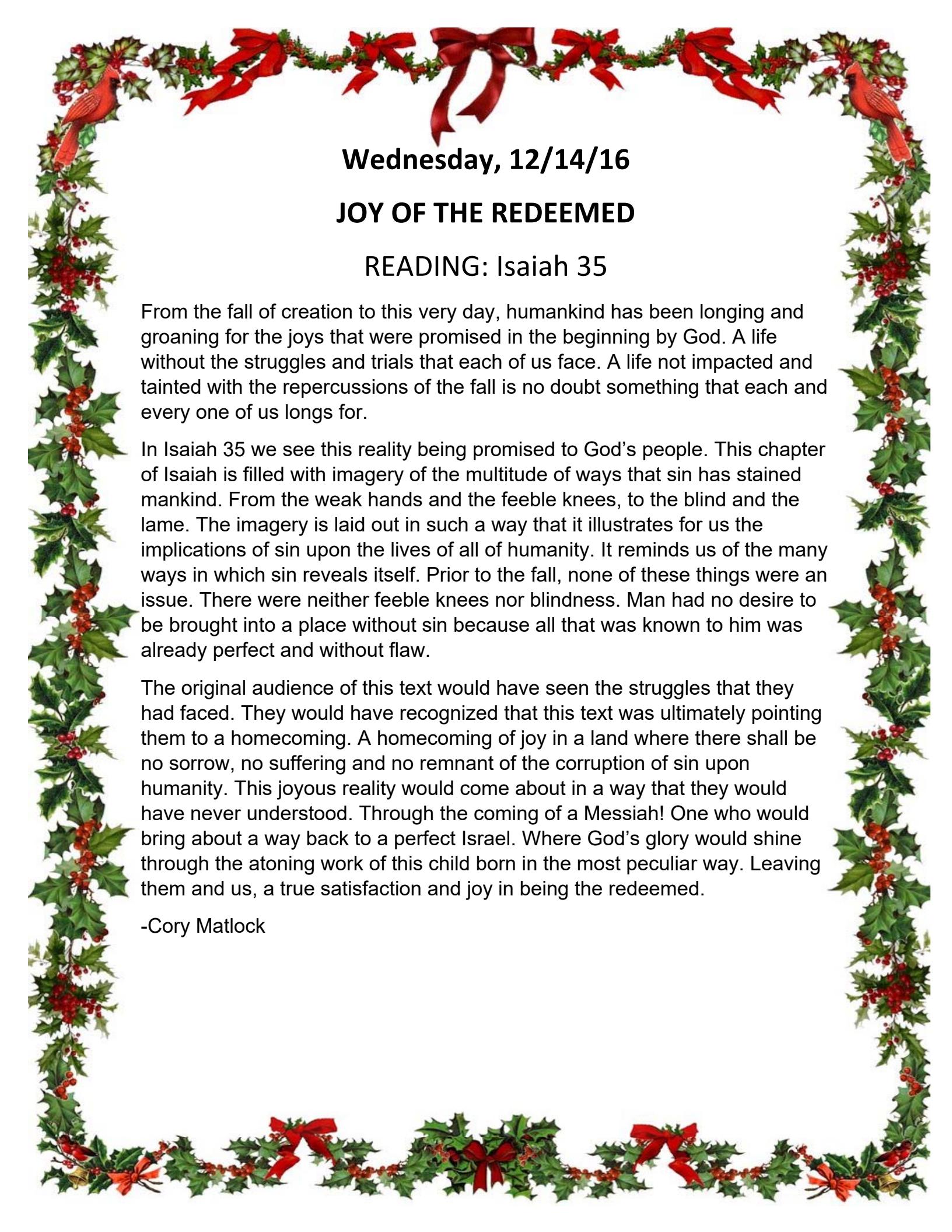
The gift of Jesus Christ is both lavishly extravagant and desperately needed. King David wrote these words of Psalm 51 after Nathan confronted him about his lies, deceit, adultery, and murder. After his confession, David cries out with the Christmas list we all need:

- A clean heart, and a right spirit (v. 10)
- God’s presence and the Holy Spirit (v. 11)
- Joy of salvation (v. 12)

Jesus Christ came into the world to pay for our sins. By faith in Christ and his finished work, we receive a clean heart and a right spirit. Because the Holy Spirit dwells in us, we have access to the very presence of God. As we ponder and study God’s word together and individually, we receive joy and a willing spirit to follow and treasure Christ.

Christmas is about the birth of Jesus Christ, through whom sinners return to God by faith. Not only can we receive him freely, we can also share this extravagant and needed gift with other transgressors like us (v. 13)!

-CH Pat Devine



Wednesday, 12/14/16

JOY OF THE REDEEMED

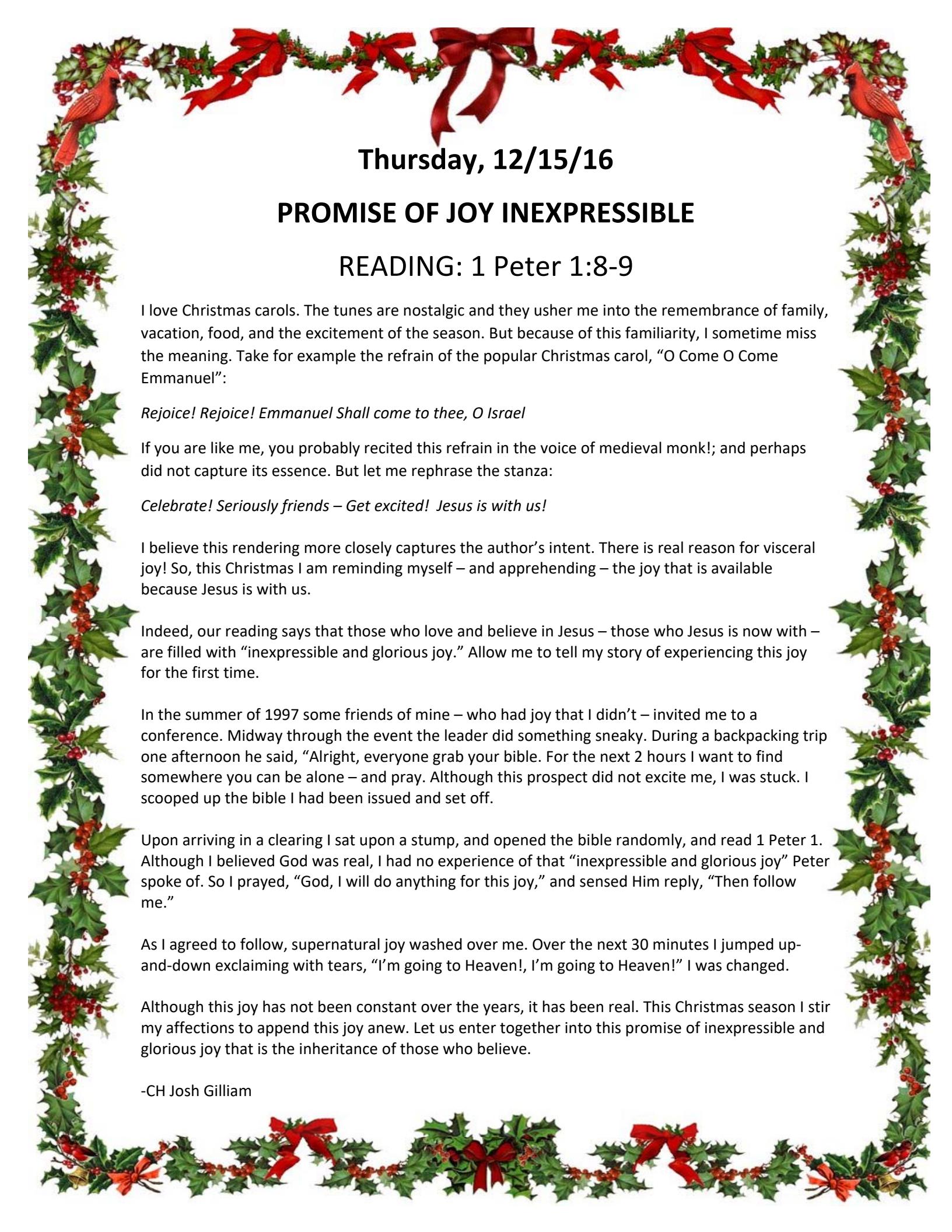
READING: Isaiah 35

From the fall of creation to this very day, humankind has been longing and groaning for the joys that were promised in the beginning by God. A life without the struggles and trials that each of us face. A life not impacted and tainted with the repercussions of the fall is no doubt something that each and every one of us longs for.

In Isaiah 35 we see this reality being promised to God's people. This chapter of Isaiah is filled with imagery of the multitude of ways that sin has stained mankind. From the weak hands and the feeble knees, to the blind and the lame. The imagery is laid out in such a way that it illustrates for us the implications of sin upon the lives of all of humanity. It reminds us of the many ways in which sin reveals itself. Prior to the fall, none of these things were an issue. There were neither feeble knees nor blindness. Man had no desire to be brought into a place without sin because all that was known to him was already perfect and without flaw.

The original audience of this text would have seen the struggles that they had faced. They would have recognized that this text was ultimately pointing them to a homecoming. A homecoming of joy in a land where there shall be no sorrow, no suffering and no remnant of the corruption of sin upon humanity. This joyous reality would come about in a way that they would have never understood. Through the coming of a Messiah! One who would bring about a way back to a perfect Israel. Where God's glory would shine through the atoning work of this child born in the most peculiar way. Leaving them and us, a true satisfaction and joy in being the redeemed.

-Cory Matlock



Thursday, 12/15/16

PROMISE OF JOY INEXPRESSIBLE

READING: 1 Peter 1:8-9

I love Christmas carols. The tunes are nostalgic and they usher me into the remembrance of family, vacation, food, and the excitement of the season. But because of this familiarity, I sometimes miss the meaning. Take for example the refrain of the popular Christmas carol, “O Come O Come Emmanuel”:

Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel Shall come to thee, O Israel

If you are like me, you probably recited this refrain in the voice of medieval monk!; and perhaps did not capture its essence. But let me rephrase the stanza:

Celebrate! Seriously friends – Get excited! Jesus is with us!

I believe this rendering more closely captures the author’s intent. There is real reason for visceral joy! So, this Christmas I am reminding myself – and apprehending – the joy that is available because Jesus is with us.

Indeed, our reading says that those who love and believe in Jesus – those who Jesus is now with – are filled with “inexpressible and glorious joy.” Allow me to tell my story of experiencing this joy for the first time.

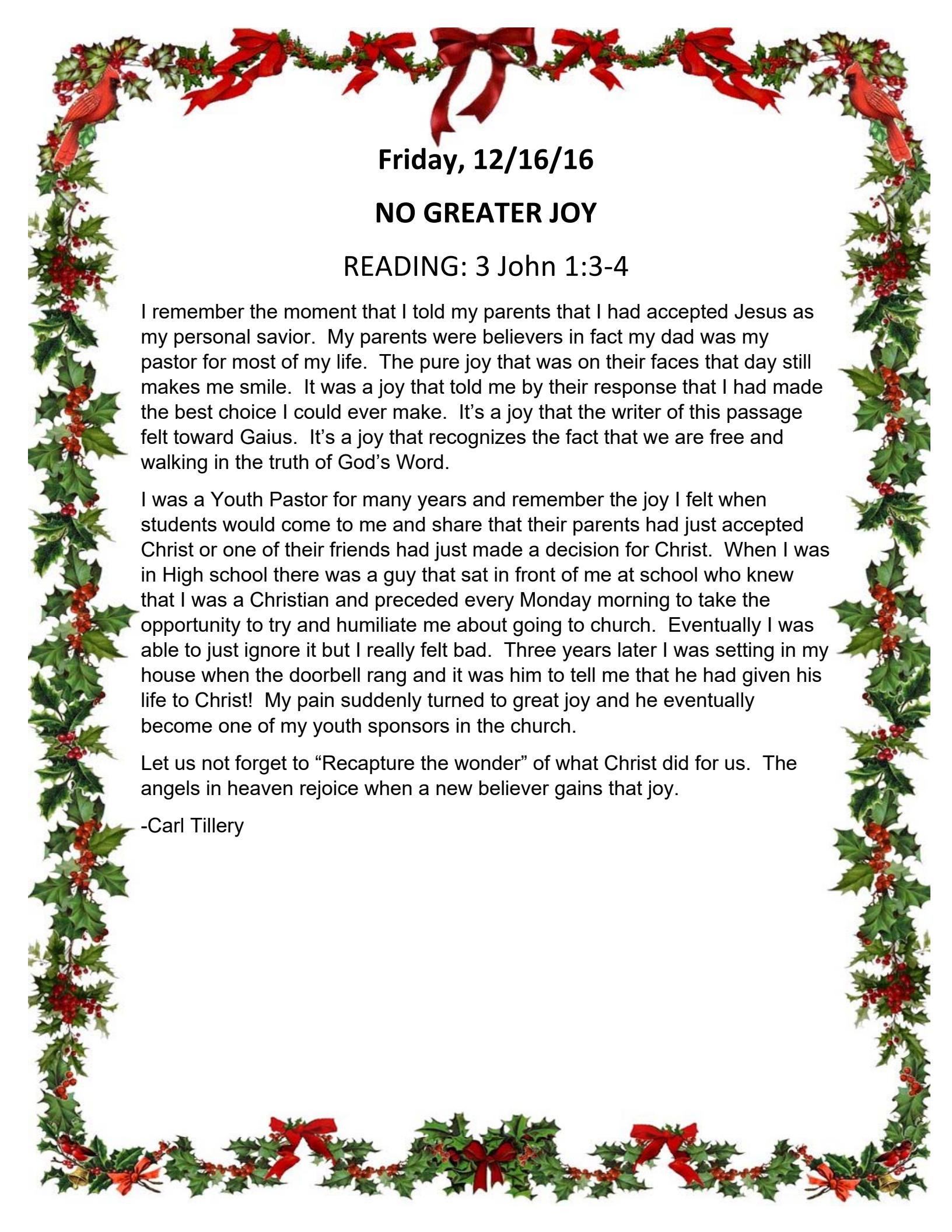
In the summer of 1997 some friends of mine – who had joy that I didn’t – invited me to a conference. Midway through the event the leader did something sneaky. During a backpacking trip one afternoon he said, “Alright, everyone grab your bible. For the next 2 hours I want to find somewhere you can be alone – and pray. Although this prospect did not excite me, I was stuck. I scooped up the bible I had been issued and set off.

Upon arriving in a clearing I sat upon a stump, and opened the bible randomly, and read 1 Peter 1. Although I believed God was real, I had no experience of that “inexpressible and glorious joy” Peter spoke of. So I prayed, “God, I will do anything for this joy,” and sensed Him reply, “Then follow me.”

As I agreed to follow, supernatural joy washed over me. Over the next 30 minutes I jumped up-and-down exclaiming with tears, “I’m going to Heaven!, I’m going to Heaven!” I was changed.

Although this joy has not been constant over the years, it has been real. This Christmas season I stir my affections to append this joy anew. Let us enter together into this promise of inexpressible and glorious joy that is the inheritance of those who believe.

-CH Josh Gilliam



Friday, 12/16/16

NO GREATER JOY

READING: 3 John 1:3-4

I remember the moment that I told my parents that I had accepted Jesus as my personal savior. My parents were believers in fact my dad was my pastor for most of my life. The pure joy that was on their faces that day still makes me smile. It was a joy that told me by their response that I had made the best choice I could ever make. It's a joy that the writer of this passage felt toward Gaius. It's a joy that recognizes the fact that we are free and walking in the truth of God's Word.

I was a Youth Pastor for many years and remember the joy I felt when students would come to me and share that their parents had just accepted Christ or one of their friends had just made a decision for Christ. When I was in High school there was a guy that sat in front of me at school who knew that I was a Christian and preceded every Monday morning to take the opportunity to try and humiliate me about going to church. Eventually I was able to just ignore it but I really felt bad. Three years later I was setting in my house when the doorbell rang and it was him to tell me that he had given his life to Christ! My pain suddenly turned to great joy and he eventually become one of my youth sponsors in the church.

Let us not forget to "Recapture the wonder" of what Christ did for us. The angels in heaven rejoice when a new believer gains that joy.

-Carl Tillery



Saturday, 12/17/16

JOY IN ALL SITUATIONS

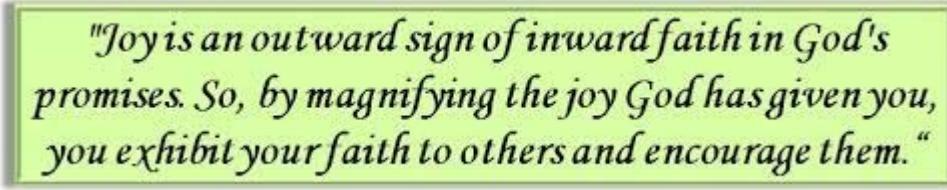
READING: Matthew 1:18-23

What gifts have you given this Christmas? Sometimes the best gifts to give your loved ones & friends are gifts such as the gift of a listening ear or the gift of affection or the gift of laughter, or the gift of a grateful heart. Maybe a little card telling them you love them is all they need, especially if you also show them you love them by the kind things you say and do. Another wonderful gift you and I can give to others, if we are Christians, is to introduce others to the greatest gift of all – the Lord Jesus. Let us be ready to tell others of the God who became a man, the One who came to be our Savior.

This is what God has done in Jesus. God became a man so that we would not be afraid to draw near to Him. The infinite, unlimited God allowed Himself to become a Man who was limited by time and space. He entered our world to communicate with us. Jesus was called “**Emmanuel, which means ‘God with us’**”.

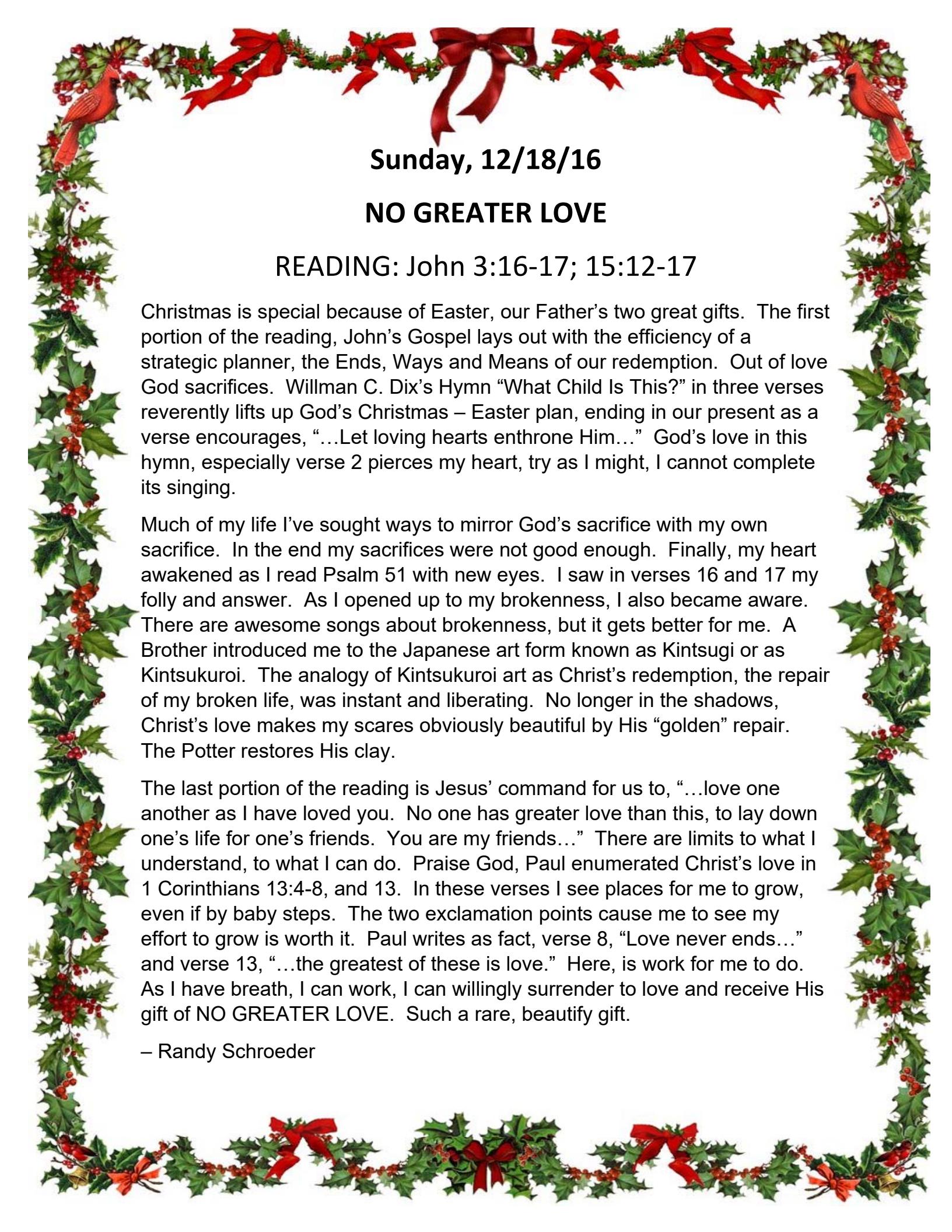
And the name “**Jesus**” speaks of the purpose for which He came. The name “Jesus” means “*the Lord saves*”. Jesus came to earth to save us because we cannot save ourselves. A person who is drowning cannot save themselves. They need to surrender to the person trying to rescue them. Only when they stop struggling and start trusting themselves to the life-saver can they be brought to safety. No matter how good we may think we are, we are not good enough. And no matter how *bad* we think we are – the love and grace of Jesus is greater. He is able to set us free from the penalty and the power of sin. This is the greatest gift of Christmas, God’s gift of love, the gift of the Lord Jesus Christ, our Savior.

And if you have not yet opened your heart to receive God’s gift of love, why not do so today? Why not humbly confess your need? Tell God you are sorry for your sin and ask Him to forgive you and give you the gift of eternal life. Why not accept the gift God is offering you? Reach out in faith and receive the greatest gift of all, the Lord Jesus!



"Joy is an outward sign of inward faith in God's promises. So, by magnifying the joy God has given you, you exhibit your faith to others and encourage them."

-Fiona Ingram



Sunday, 12/18/16

NO GREATER LOVE

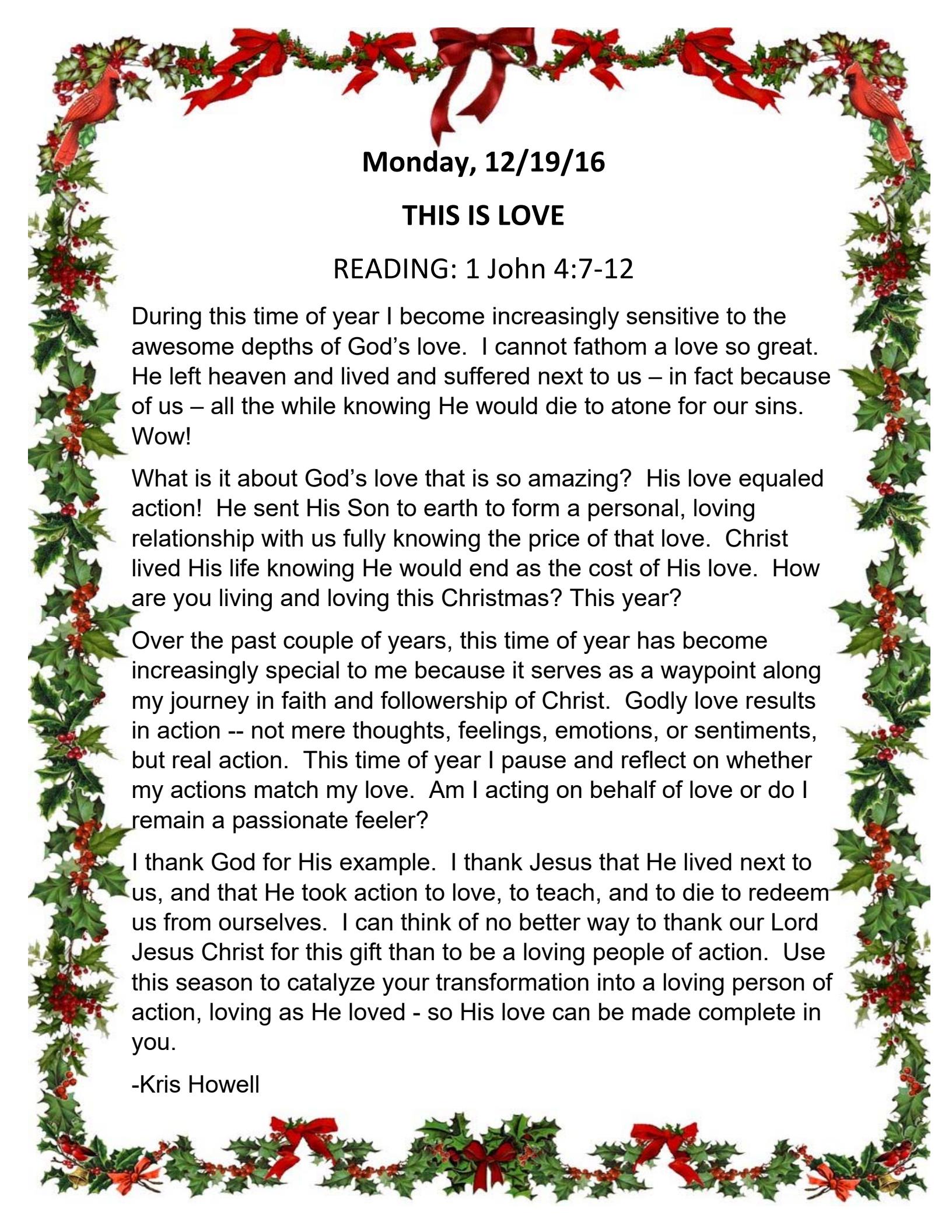
READING: John 3:16-17; 15:12-17

Christmas is special because of Easter, our Father's two great gifts. The first portion of the reading, John's Gospel lays out with the efficiency of a strategic planner, the Ends, Ways and Means of our redemption. Out of love God sacrifices. Willman C. Dix's Hymn "What Child Is This?" in three verses reverently lifts up God's Christmas – Easter plan, ending in our present as a verse encourages, "...Let loving hearts enthrone Him..." God's love in this hymn, especially verse 2 pierces my heart, try as I might, I cannot complete its singing.

Much of my life I've sought ways to mirror God's sacrifice with my own sacrifice. In the end my sacrifices were not good enough. Finally, my heart awakened as I read Psalm 51 with new eyes. I saw in verses 16 and 17 my folly and answer. As I opened up to my brokenness, I also became aware. There are awesome songs about brokenness, but it gets better for me. A Brother introduced me to the Japanese art form known as Kintsugi or as Kintsukuroi. The analogy of Kintsukuroi art as Christ's redemption, the repair of my broken life, was instant and liberating. No longer in the shadows, Christ's love makes my scars obviously beautiful by His "golden" repair. The Potter restores His clay.

The last portion of the reading is Jesus' command for us to, "...love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends..." There are limits to what I understand, to what I can do. Praise God, Paul enumerated Christ's love in 1 Corinthians 13:4-8, and 13. In these verses I see places for me to grow, even if by baby steps. The two exclamation points cause me to see my effort to grow is worth it. Paul writes as fact, verse 8, "Love never ends..." and verse 13, "...the greatest of these is love." Here, is work for me to do. As I have breath, I can work, I can willingly surrender to love and receive His gift of NO GREATER LOVE. Such a rare, beautify gift.

– Randy Schroeder



Monday, 12/19/16

THIS IS LOVE

READING: 1 John 4:7-12

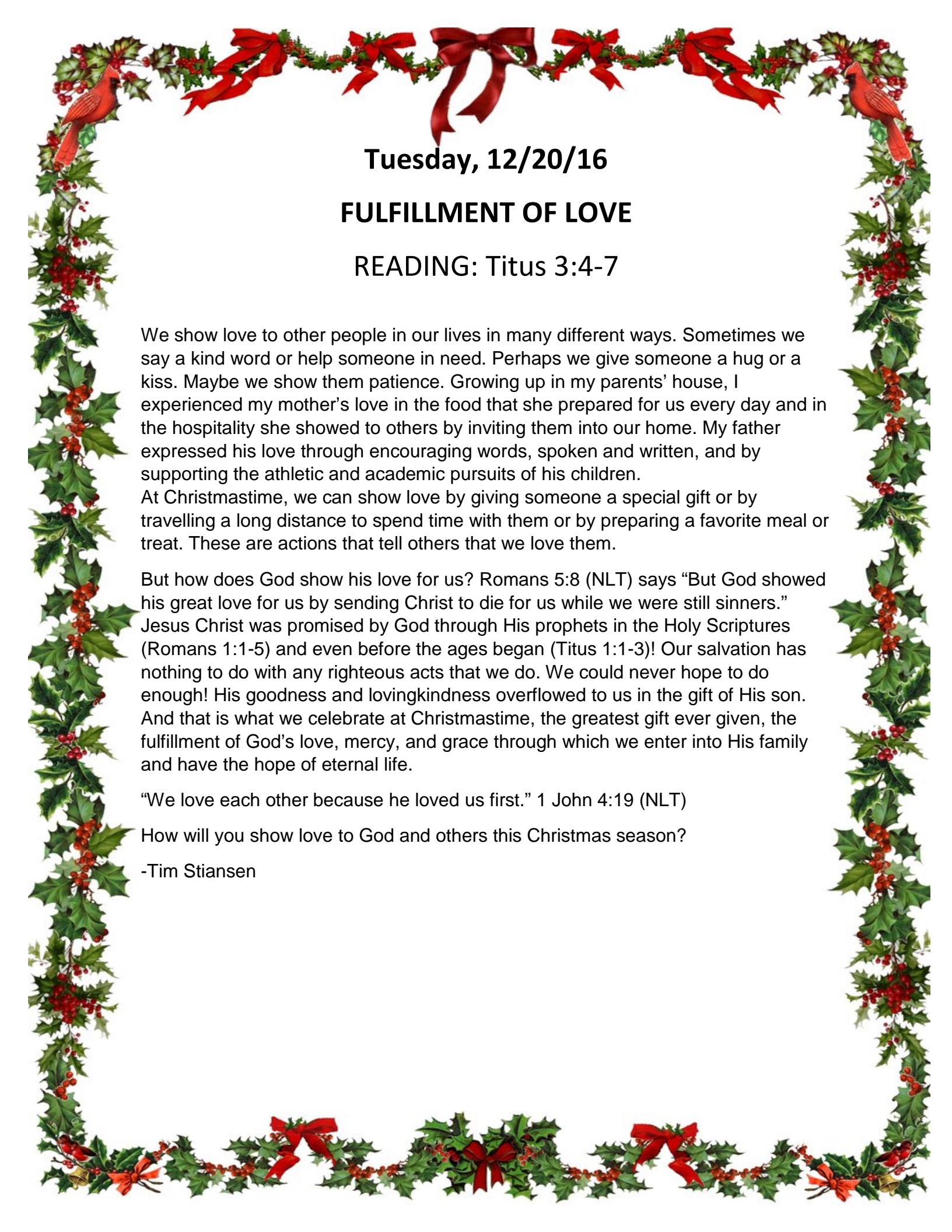
During this time of year I become increasingly sensitive to the awesome depths of God's love. I cannot fathom a love so great. He left heaven and lived and suffered next to us – in fact because of us – all the while knowing He would die to atone for our sins. Wow!

What is it about God's love that is so amazing? His love equaled action! He sent His Son to earth to form a personal, loving relationship with us fully knowing the price of that love. Christ lived His life knowing He would end as the cost of His love. How are you living and loving this Christmas? This year?

Over the past couple of years, this time of year has become increasingly special to me because it serves as a waypoint along my journey in faith and followership of Christ. Godly love results in action -- not mere thoughts, feelings, emotions, or sentiments, but real action. This time of year I pause and reflect on whether my actions match my love. Am I acting on behalf of love or do I remain a passionate feeler?

I thank God for His example. I thank Jesus that He lived next to us, and that He took action to love, to teach, and to die to redeem us from ourselves. I can think of no better way to thank our Lord Jesus Christ for this gift than to be a loving people of action. Use this season to catalyze your transformation into a loving person of action, loving as He loved - so His love can be made complete in you.

-Kris Howell



Tuesday, 12/20/16

FULFILLMENT OF LOVE

READING: Titus 3:4-7

We show love to other people in our lives in many different ways. Sometimes we say a kind word or help someone in need. Perhaps we give someone a hug or a kiss. Maybe we show them patience. Growing up in my parents' house, I experienced my mother's love in the food that she prepared for us every day and in the hospitality she showed to others by inviting them into our home. My father expressed his love through encouraging words, spoken and written, and by supporting the athletic and academic pursuits of his children.

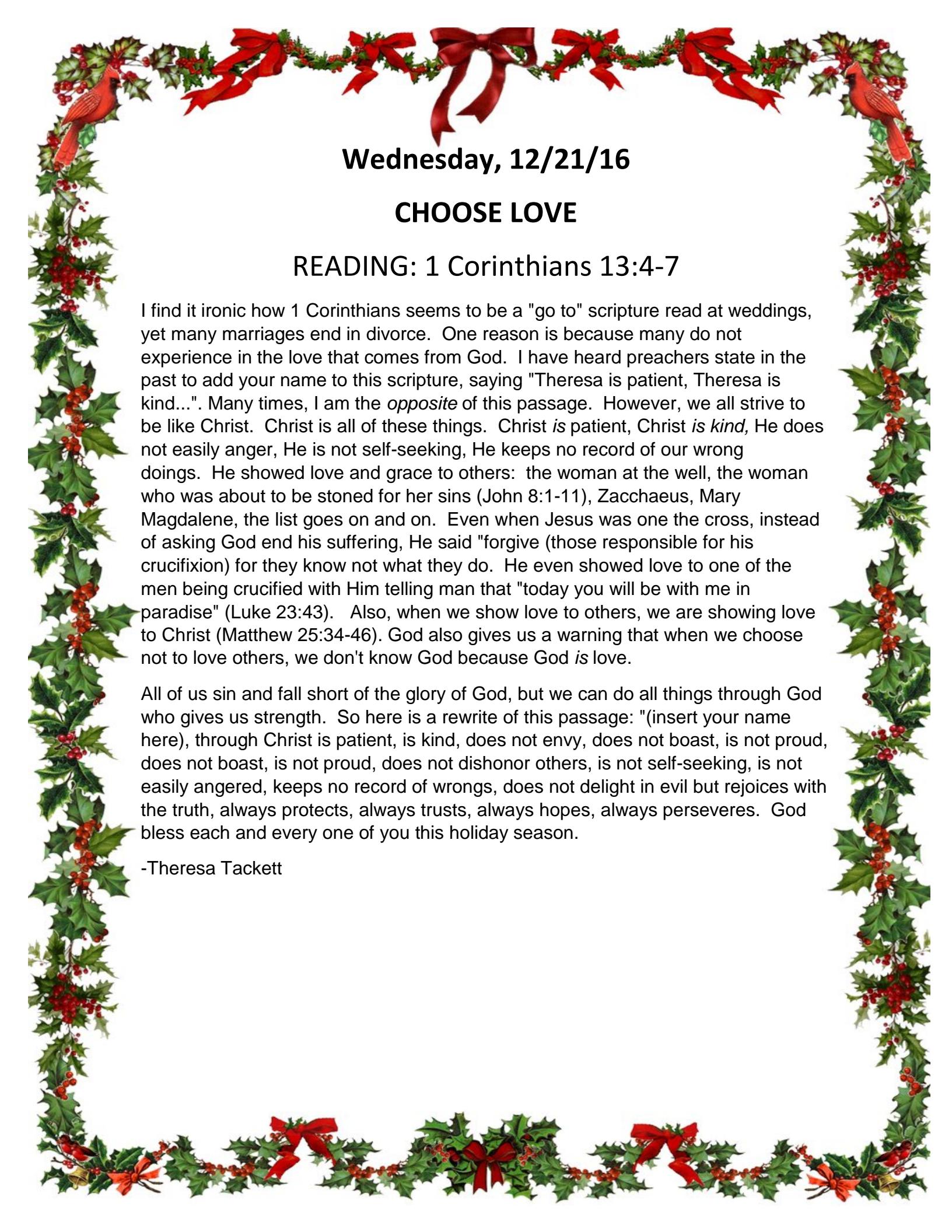
At Christmastime, we can show love by giving someone a special gift or by travelling a long distance to spend time with them or by preparing a favorite meal or treat. These are actions that tell others that we love them.

But how does God show his love for us? Romans 5:8 (NLT) says "But God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners." Jesus Christ was promised by God through His prophets in the Holy Scriptures (Romans 1:1-5) and even before the ages began (Titus 1:1-3)! Our salvation has nothing to do with any righteous acts that we do. We could never hope to do enough! His goodness and lovingkindness overflowed to us in the gift of His son. And that is what we celebrate at Christmastime, the greatest gift ever given, the fulfillment of God's love, mercy, and grace through which we enter into His family and have the hope of eternal life.

"We love each other because he loved us first." 1 John 4:19 (NLT)

How will you show love to God and others this Christmas season?

-Tim Stiansen



Wednesday, 12/21/16

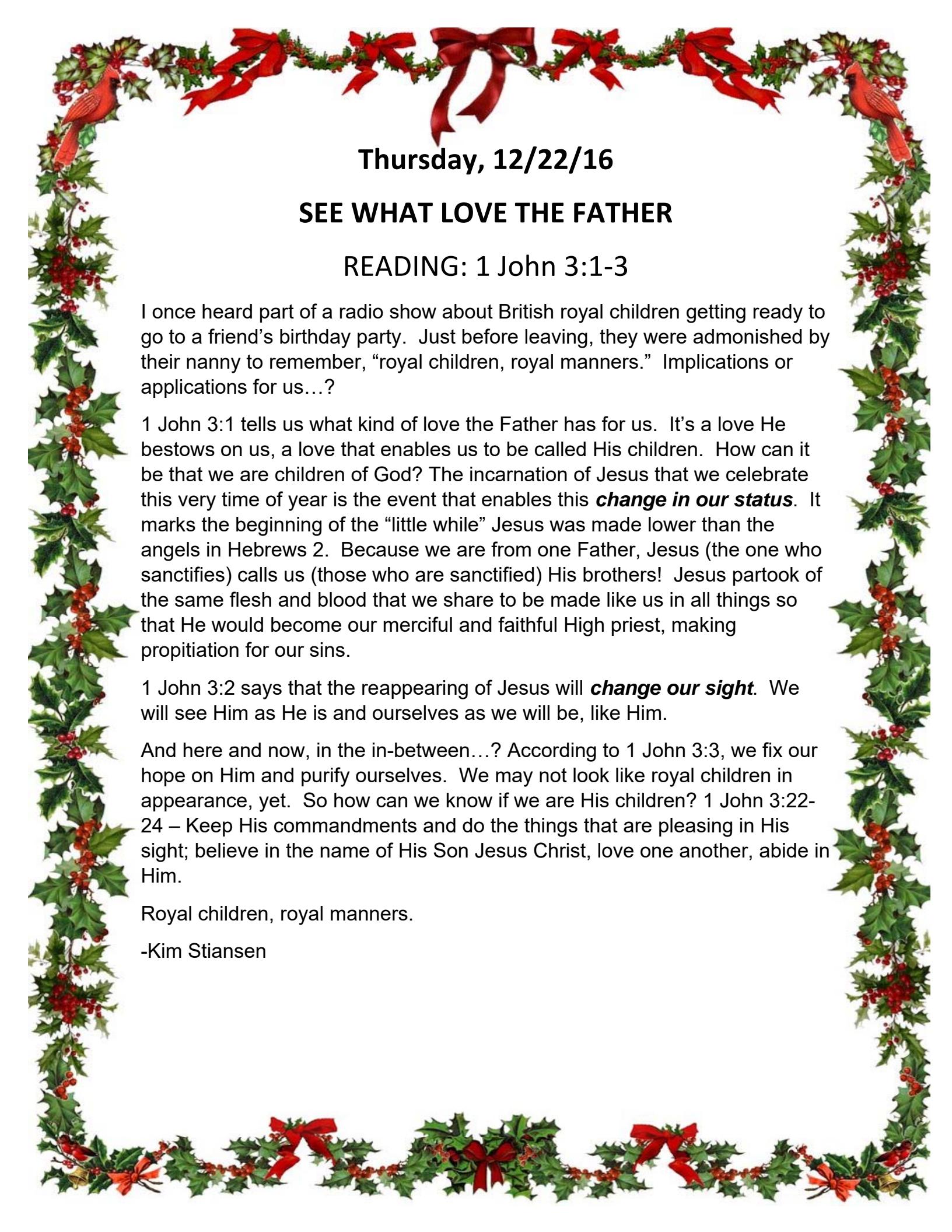
CHOOSE LOVE

READING: 1 Corinthians 13:4-7

I find it ironic how 1 Corinthians seems to be a "go to" scripture read at weddings, yet many marriages end in divorce. One reason is because many do not experience in the love that comes from God. I have heard preachers state in the past to add your name to this scripture, saying "Theresa is patient, Theresa is kind...". Many times, I am the *opposite* of this passage. However, we all strive to be like Christ. Christ is all of these things. Christ *is* patient, Christ *is kind*, He does not easily anger, He is not self-seeking, He keeps no record of our wrong doings. He showed love and grace to others: the woman at the well, the woman who was about to be stoned for her sins (John 8:1-11), Zacchaeus, Mary Magdalene, the list goes on and on. Even when Jesus was one the cross, instead of asking God end his suffering, He said "forgive (those responsible for his crucifixion) for they know not what they do. He even showed love to one of the men being crucified with Him telling man that "today you will be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43). Also, when we show love to others, we are showing love to Christ (Matthew 25:34-46). God also gives us a warning that when we choose not to love others, we don't know God because God *is* love.

All of us sin and fall short of the glory of God, but we can do all things through God who gives us strength. So here is a rewrite of this passage: "(insert your name here), through Christ is patient, is kind, does not envy, does not boast, is not proud, does not boast, is not proud, does not dishonor others, is not self-seeking, is not easily angered, keeps no record of wrongs, does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth, always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. God bless each and every one of you this holiday season.

-Theresa Tackett



Thursday, 12/22/16

SEE WHAT LOVE THE FATHER

READING: 1 John 3:1-3

I once heard part of a radio show about British royal children getting ready to go to a friend's birthday party. Just before leaving, they were admonished by their nanny to remember, "royal children, royal manners." Implications or applications for us...?

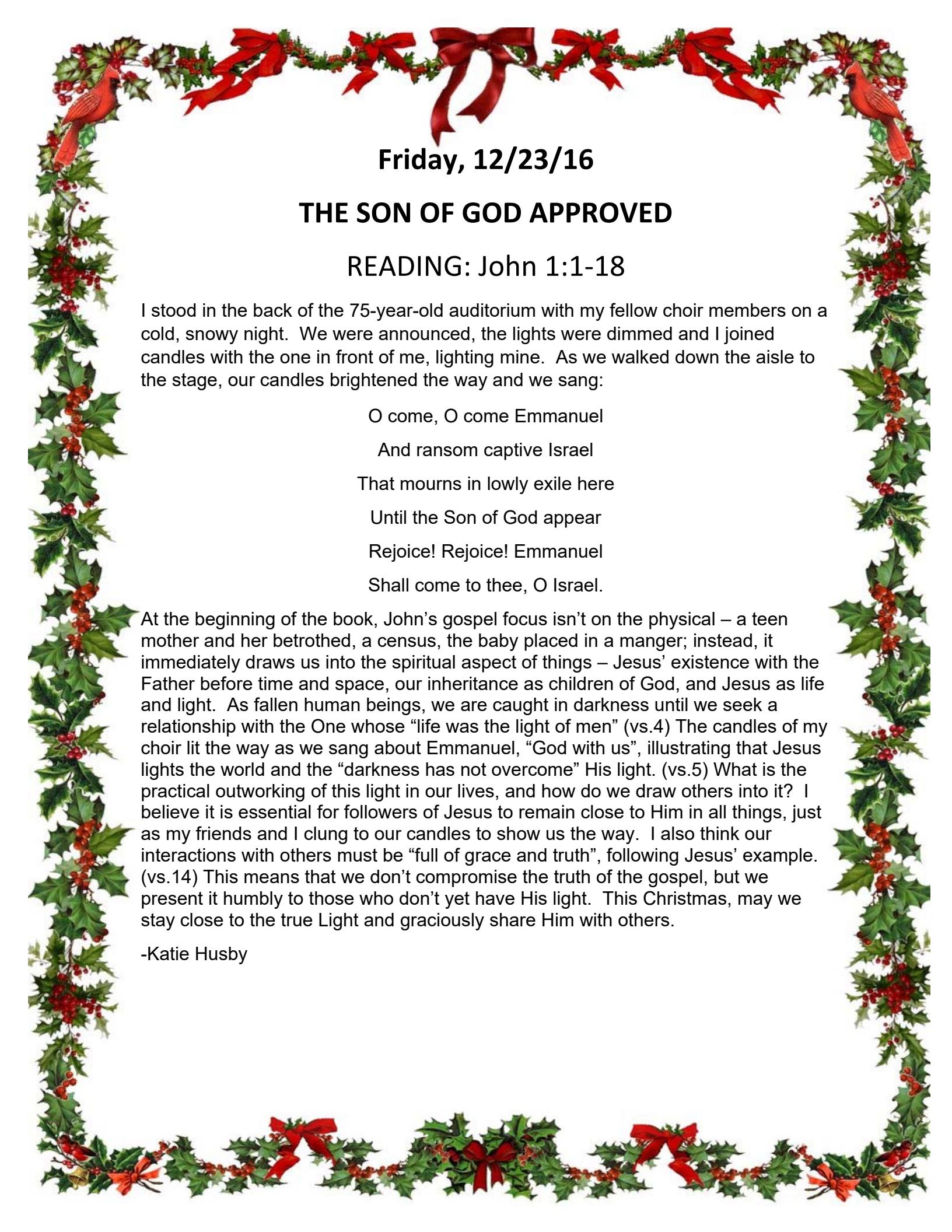
1 John 3:1 tells us what kind of love the Father has for us. It's a love He bestows on us, a love that enables us to be called His children. How can it be that we are children of God? The incarnation of Jesus that we celebrate this very time of year is the event that enables this ***change in our status***. It marks the beginning of the "little while" Jesus was made lower than the angels in Hebrews 2. Because we are from one Father, Jesus (the one who sanctifies) calls us (those who are sanctified) His brothers! Jesus partook of the same flesh and blood that we share to be made like us in all things so that He would become our merciful and faithful High priest, making propitiation for our sins.

1 John 3:2 says that the reappearing of Jesus will ***change our sight***. We will see Him as He is and ourselves as we will be, like Him.

And here and now, in the in-between...? According to 1 John 3:3, we fix our hope on Him and purify ourselves. We may not look like royal children in appearance, yet. So how can we know if we are His children? 1 John 3:22-24 – Keep His commandments and do the things that are pleasing in His sight; believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ, love one another, abide in Him.

Royal children, royal manners.

-Kim Stiansen



Friday, 12/23/16

THE SON OF GOD APPROVED

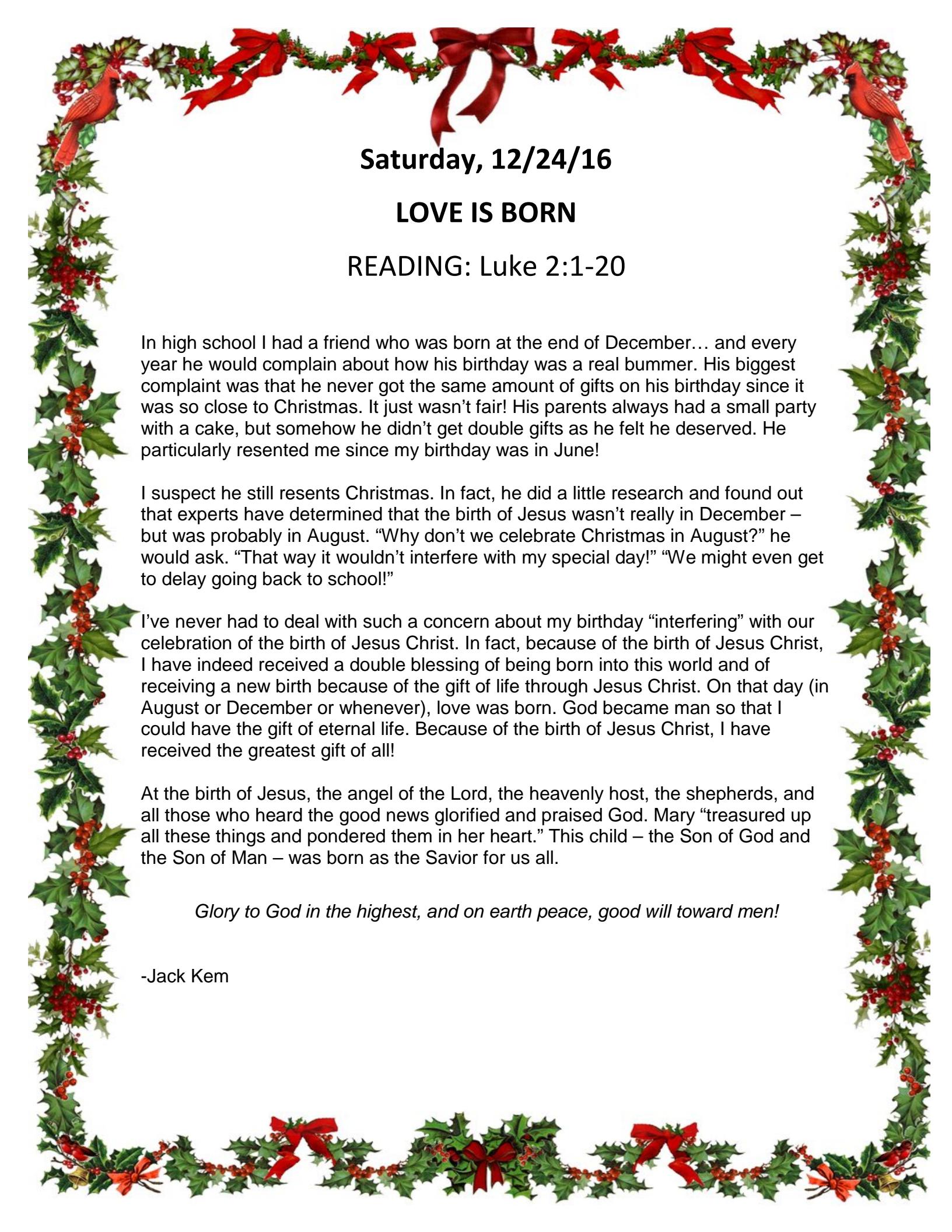
READING: John 1:1-18

I stood in the back of the 75-year-old auditorium with my fellow choir members on a cold, snowy night. We were announced, the lights were dimmed and I joined candles with the one in front of me, lighting mine. As we walked down the aisle to the stage, our candles brightened the way and we sang:

O come, O come Emmanuel
And ransom captive Israel
That mourns in lowly exile here
Until the Son of God appear
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel.

At the beginning of the book, John's gospel focus isn't on the physical – a teen mother and her betrothed, a census, the baby placed in a manger; instead, it immediately draws us into the spiritual aspect of things – Jesus' existence with the Father before time and space, our inheritance as children of God, and Jesus as life and light. As fallen human beings, we are caught in darkness until we seek a relationship with the One whose "life was the light of men" (vs.4) The candles of my choir lit the way as we sang about Emmanuel, "God with us", illustrating that Jesus lights the world and the "darkness has not overcome" His light. (vs.5) What is the practical outworking of this light in our lives, and how do we draw others into it? I believe it is essential for followers of Jesus to remain close to Him in all things, just as my friends and I clung to our candles to show us the way. I also think our interactions with others must be "full of grace and truth", following Jesus' example. (vs.14) This means that we don't compromise the truth of the gospel, but we present it humbly to those who don't yet have His light. This Christmas, may we stay close to the true Light and graciously share Him with others.

-Katie Husby



Saturday, 12/24/16

LOVE IS BORN

READING: Luke 2:1-20

In high school I had a friend who was born at the end of December... and every year he would complain about how his birthday was a real bummer. His biggest complaint was that he never got the same amount of gifts on his birthday since it was so close to Christmas. It just wasn't fair! His parents always had a small party with a cake, but somehow he didn't get double gifts as he felt he deserved. He particularly resented me since my birthday was in June!

I suspect he still resents Christmas. In fact, he did a little research and found out that experts have determined that the birth of Jesus wasn't really in December – but was probably in August. "Why don't we celebrate Christmas in August?" he would ask. "That way it wouldn't interfere with my special day!" "We might even get to delay going back to school!"

I've never had to deal with such a concern about my birthday "interfering" with our celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ. In fact, because of the birth of Jesus Christ, I have indeed received a double blessing of being born into this world and of receiving a new birth because of the gift of life through Jesus Christ. On that day (in August or December or whenever), love was born. God became man so that I could have the gift of eternal life. Because of the birth of Jesus Christ, I have received the greatest gift of all!

At the birth of Jesus, the angel of the Lord, the heavenly host, the shepherds, and all those who heard the good news glorified and praised God. Mary "treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart." This child – the Son of God and the Son of Man – was born as the Savior for us all.

Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men!

-Jack Kem