

Reflections for the Season of Advent

# Preparing through Prayer

*A devotional  
created by and for  
the people of  
Faith Lutheran Church  
Glen Ellyn, Illinois  
2019*

# A Call to Prayer

Each Sunday as we sit in the pews of Faith Lutheran and look around the sanctuary, we see a room full of faces: fellow members of God's family. We hear one another's voices as we sing hymns. We shake hands as we share God's peace. We kneel shoulder to shoulder as we receive communion.

Yet, how much do we really know about our fellow members of God's family ... our Faith family? If we could know the stories—the challenges, the joys, the God sightings—of one another's lives, we would certainly be amazed. For truly, God is at work in the lives of this congregation.

This Advent Devotional is testimony to that.

As you read this devotional, be prepared to experience stories of God's sustaining love in times of need. Stories of God's challenging nudge in times of complacency. Stories of God's unexpected presence bringing surprises big and small.

Let this Advent Devotional draw you into the stories of the people who worship beside you in the pew. As you grow nearer to one another, we pray that you will also be drawn deeper into the intertwining of God's story with your own life.

*Pastor Shelly Satran & Pastor Joe Yucha*



Lord God,  
we need your  
invitation:  
to goodness,  
to honest  
prayer.

Come and  
gather us.

Amen!

## Be Humble, Grace Abounds

*But [God] gives all the more grace; therefore [Scripture] says, "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble." (James 4:6 NRSV)*

Try to think of a truly humbling experience. For me, I think back to a beautiful Sunday morning, February 13, 1972. Driving to church, less than 72 hours after my wife had given birth to our first-born. Suddenly, flashing red lights are reflected in my rear-view mirror. After explaining my distraction, Officer Friendly handed me a warning ticket and instructed me to "... slow down, so your daughter will grow up with a father."

I experienced a cascade of emotions including anger, annoyance, dismay, embarrassment, "oh no, I shouldn't-a-done that," AND humility.

My story reflects one facet of humility—feeling small. But was I feeling humble more because I'd been caught rather than because I'd done something wrong? There must be more to "being humble" when considering the vast abundance of God's grace. James 4:6 is encouraging me to be humble knowing that God's grace abounds. The good in my life (even some of the not-so-good) is by God's grace. Admitting that truth might be a good start for me.

Note to self: Be more observant of the abundance of God's grace, knowing that this grace exists everywhere all the time.

*Lord God, we need your invitation: to goodness,  
to honest prayer. Come and gather us. Amen!*

## FAITH and Faith

*Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. (Hebrews 11:1 NRSV)*

My family and I joined Faith in 1961, and in 1962 I joined the Senior Choir (now called the Sanctuary Choir). I had sung in church and school choirs since I was 12, and I immediately felt comfortable here. There were even a few high school girls in this choir! I loved the music we sang, which was usually based on the scripture lesson of the day.

As my years in choir turned into decades, I found that my faith also increased. The music that we practice every week and sing on Sundays often replays in my mind, reminding me of God's promise to always be with me. In the summer, when the choir is on hiatus, I love being in the pews of the sanctuary, singing the uplifting hymns of faith and sharing the peace with long-time friends and visitors alike as we praise God in word and song.

As our choirmaster Todd often quotes St. Augustine: "Those who sing pray twice."

*Lord God, we need your invitation: to goodness,  
to honest prayer. Come and gather us. Amen!*

## Are You Making Arks?

*Make yourself an ark of cypress wood; make rooms in the ark, and cover it inside and out with pitch. (Genesis 6:14 NRSV)*

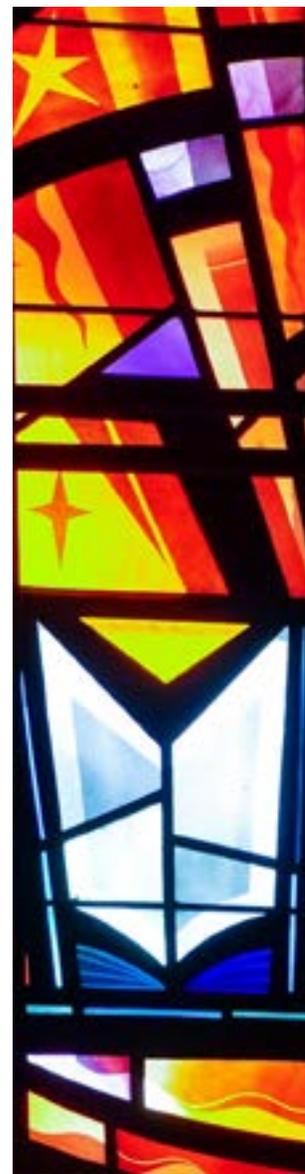
I'm great at making arks. Not the biblically proportioned kind, but arks that are still rather effective at blocking out the world around me. Deactivating my Facebook account is one. Limiting my daily news intake to a quick recap of the morning headlines is another. Or not reaching out to that friend in need because, well, they may need something.

I've constructed these arks to keep me safe and comfortable because I know the world is drowning around me. But sometimes, despite my best efforts, the agonizing cries of the world seep in through the pitch, and I'm reminded that I am not as safe or secure as I might have thought.

Advent is a time to allow the turbulent despair of our world in, to throw open the window long before we believe in the promise of peace. This is not an easy or comfortable practice, but it is necessary.

What are the arks that you construct?

*Lord God, we need your invitation: to goodness, to honest prayer. Come and gather us. Amen!*



Protector God,  
we need your  
way: away  
from sin,  
toward  
salvation.

Come and  
lead us.

Amen!

## Remembering Immanuel

*But God remembered Noah and all the wild animals ... (Genesis 8:1a NIV)*

For several decades a small, framed needlepoint—the gift of a friend—has sat on my desk reminding me through its consistent presence of the truth and power of memory. Reminding me that, in some mysterious way, remembrance is the secret of redemption in our lives.

*“In remembrance is the secret of redemption.” ~ A Jewish Proverb*

The quote is attributed to the 18th-century Jewish mystical rabbi Baal Shem Tov, who said “Forgetfulness leads to exile, while remembrance is the secret of redemption.”

For a follower of Christ, Baal Shem Tov’s admonition holds no less potency. In this season of Advent, we receive once again; but we also remember the God who is with us: Immanuel. In our hearts and minds we receive and give thanks for the incarnation. We remember that through Immanuel grace abounds, that we can receive newness of life, and that we are united with our God. Setting aside our tendency to be forgetful, we enter into Advent with a posture of gratitude and mindfulness that our God has made a way over sin and death.

*Protector God, we need your way: away from sin,  
toward salvation. Come and lead us. Amen!*

## Tough Times for Saints

*The world did not deserve these good people ... (Hebrews 11:38a CEV)*

“Getting old is not for sissies”—an apt aphorism for some of us! The same idea may be true for being faithful saints in these times. The verses around this Hebrews text lay out a gruesome record of what our spiritual ancestors faced for being faithful—being stoned and whipped, escaping hungry lions, being chained in jail, etc. Tough stuff to remember among the gentler themes of Advent.

Nevertheless, they persevered—they were good people. Their times weren’t pretty, and the same was probably true about their faithfulness—wounds and scars still showing.

We claim to be like them, and so we can look our own tough times square in the eye and carry on. Resolute, unwavering, and strong-minded. By God’s grace, we’re good people, too!

Come, Lord Jesus, be our guest, no matter what we look like ...

*Protector God, we need your way: away from sin,  
toward salvation. Come and lead us. Amen!*

## Steadfast Love

*For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but my steadfast love shall not depart from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be removed, says the Lord, who has compassion on you. (Isaiah 54:10 NRSV)*

Steadfast love. These words are rich in meaning to me. The Lutheran Study Bible says: “The concept that most briefly and clearly sums up God’s character is ‘steadfast love’ based on the Hebrew term *chesed*. This term describes the character of one who keeps promises, proves faithful, establishes justice, and defends the vulnerable.”

When we moved to this area, I was pregnant with our first child, and I thought I knew no one. I had turned away from God’s steadfast love, but God had not turned away from me. My new neighbor invited me to a bible study. God’s dependable, reliable, steady, true, steadfast love was calling me. Faith Church was pastored by Ted Youngquist, my college chaplain. God’s faithful, committed, devoted, dedicated, steadfast love was calling me. Two friends each had a two-year-old diagnosed with cancer, and suddenly I faced something I couldn’t handle alone. God’s unchanging, unwavering, unyielding, uncompromising, steadfast love was calling me. Finally, after eight years of turning my back on God, I turned to face that awesome, resolute, relentless, implacable, constant, steadfast love of God.

What joy I have found in that turning!

*Protector God, we need your way: away from sin,  
toward salvation. Come and lead us. Amen!*

## A King Like No Other

*Please help the king to be honest and fair just like you, our God.  
(Psalm 72:1 CEV)*

Lots of king-talk fills Advent thoughts: hopeful, righteous, uplifting descriptions. In today’s reading, qualities that the psalmist saw in King David.

Good kings have seemed hard to find over the centuries. That was true for God’s people after David, true about the state of political affairs in Jesus’ time and true about religious and secular leaders at the time of the Reformation. Probably true today, too.

Today’s reading reminds us what we long for—a God-ordained king: Someone who rescues the homeless and helps everyone in need (verse 12). A leader who has pity on the weak and helpless (verse 13). Someone who cares when people hurt (verse 14).

Christ came as the king that God’s people yearned for. As example and encouragement for our own hopes in these days. As proof that God still reigns as ultimate ruler and protector.

Come, Lord Jesus, to strengthen righteousness everywhere.

*Protector God, we need your way: away from sin,  
toward salvation. Come and lead us. Amen!*

## Hope Is the Way

*And when you turn to the right or when you turn to the left, your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, "This is the way; walk in it." (Isaiah 30:21 NRSV)*

I've always disliked the adages, "God only gives us what we can handle" and "Everything happens for a reason." It feels like a cop-out to think of the hard times in life (and there can be so many!) as punishment, or just at least as consequences of decisions.

Even though those sayings rankle me, it takes so much more work to twist my attitude to one of hope: Tomorrow is a new day!

Some of the people I admire most have a talent for maintaining that positive outlook. This passage suggests to me that we can think of difficult times as setting the scene for great things to come. Tomorrow is not a privilege, but a gift. Through that lens, it's easier to appreciate the warm sun on a finally-its-spring day, or the laughter in the voice of a formerly colicky baby, or the strength and freedom gained after painful physical therapy.

It's hard to listen for that voice behind you saying, "This is the way; walk in it." God will lead you out of adversity. Then you'll see that the light of the moon shines so brightly.

*Protector God, we need your way: away from sin,  
toward salvation. Come and lead us. Amen!*

## The Word

*... surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God stands forever. (Isaiah 40:7b-8 NKJV)*

I wasn't always one to immerse myself in the Bible. Not that I didn't view it as important; I simply figured it was enough to absorb the verses we share on Sunday mornings. Surely that was sufficient to keep me on the right path, to mold me as a respectful, charitable, unwavering follower of Christ.

As I became wiser, I realized I needed more—that reading the Word is a necessary, repeatable process. It's like going back to the gas station to fill that slowly emptying tank. Our spiritual tanks need refilling too. The Word is our fuel, the continuously flowing source of strength when we're weak, direction when we're lost, understanding when we're confused. The Word creates compassionate hearts, giving hands, and open, inviting arms.

My "sporadic" association with the Bible changed—dramatically. I pledged to read the Bible every day. This, the last thing I do before bed, sustains me. It gives me clarity, inspiration, and a sense of duty to do God's will.

As we open our hearts during Advent, let's embrace the Word as an integral, vital part of our lives, so we never forget the real reason for the season.

*Protector God, we need your way: away from sin,  
toward salvation. Come and lead us. Amen!*

# What Is Our Hope?

*We hear songs of praise from the ends of the earth, songs that give glory to the Righteous One! (Isaiah 24: 16a NLT)*



Nurturing God,  
we need your  
care: guidance  
for living,  
perspective  
for peace.

Come and  
nurture us.

Amen!

Our country is drowning in tribal politics. We feel helpless at the news of yet more senseless killings. Our community is facing problems, and no one seems to notice. Our house needs major repairs, and we weren't counting on this just before guests come for Christmas. Our family has received a terminal diagnosis, and there is little hope for a cure. The weather is not helping! My knees are creaking...

The outlook for the near future is dispiriting! What is our hope?

We are at a time of changing cultures. Changing priorities. Changing expectations. We can't grasp our uncertain future.

As we sense Isaiah's awareness of God's presence in the tribulations of Judah, so we must look to our knowledge, our personal experience of understanding that God is with us in—and through—this time of unrest, discouragement, and an unknown future.

We feel helpless, even hopeless, God. Help us to know you are near.

*Nurturing God, we need your care: guidance for living, perspective for peace. Come and nurture us. Amen!*

# Fire Will Consume Them

*... so that all may see and know, all may consider and understand, that the hand of the Lord has done this, the Holy One of Israel has created it. (Isaiah 41:20 NRSV)*



*Nurturing God, we need your care: guidance for living, perspective for peace. Come and nurture us. Amen!*

# God's Covenant with Abram

*"Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your reward shall be very great." (Genesis 15:1b NRSV)*

This word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision. The Lord told Abram that his offspring would be numbered like the stars in Heaven. The Lord brought Abram to take possession of a land, and He made a covenant with Abram saying, "to your descendants I give this land." Abram believed the Lord, and the Lord credited it to him as righteousness. The Lord's promises to Abram were fulfilled.

On three occasions our family was greatly challenged. I prayed constantly for help and answers. I wondered if the Lord was hearing my prayers. I asked our pastor, "Where is God in all of this?" With deep assurance he answered me, "God is walking with you every step of the way. You are never alone, no matter what challenges you may face."

Those reassuring words became my own covenant with the Lord. Our family challenges were met, and I see the covenant between the Lord and Abram as a powerful reminder that we are all seen as righteous by the Lord when we believe that He is always with us, guiding, strengthening, and fulfilling his promises to us, just as He did with Abram.

*Nurturing God, we need your care: guidance for living, perspective for peace. Come and nurture us. Amen!*

## Possibilities

*The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. (2 Peter 3:9 NIV)*

Oh, to have the Lord's patience.

After bearing one child, I wanted another. Instead, I had three miscarriages. The first, at seven weeks, brought shock and sadness. But we did not give up. Then the second came at nine weeks, and the third a few days into the second trimester.

How cruel! As my belly grew—always a bit more than the time before—so did my hope. Then loss would come and replace that hope with angry emptiness.

I quit. No more babies for me.

Years passed. Then, without trying, pregnant. Day by day, what grew with my belly was not hope, but fear. I dreaded yet another loss. This was my attitude at 40 weeks, when I moaned and struggled and cried and pushed and longed to stop the pain. Those laboring hours felt like hopeless days.

But then I heard a baby crying. She was there. Round. Pink. Alive! A miracle squeezed from my insides out, and absolutely worth the wait.

I have only so many minutes in each day, only so many years to live. My time and patience are short—and so is my view of what's possible.

*Nurturing God, we need your care: guidance for living, perspective for peace. Come and nurture us. Amen!*

## Peace Amid Chaos

*And so dear friends, while you are waiting for these things to happen, make every effort to be found living peaceful lives that are pure and blameless in his sight. (2 Peter 3:14 NLT)*

Late in the night, I snap awake. I feel surrounded: today's worries; relentless news reports; concerns for my family and friends; the stresses of work and more. So much chaos swirls in my brain.

I shake my head. A word enters my mind: PEACE.

My first vision of peace is a place of calm. A place I strive to reach. A place where I sigh, breathe deeply, wipe my hands together and say, "There, I made it."

But is that really peace? Merely an absence of conflict? A passive state? The scriptures tell us to strive for peace and work to maintain it. Finding and maintaining peace is hard work. It's an effort!

This season, where will we look for peace? Within ourselves? Is our internal peace a by-product of our commitment to the Maker? If we make the effort to lift our lives up to God, what peace may come?

We know God has forgiven us. We know God will always be with us—not just in the future, but here and now. Today, that is the peace we really need.

May God's peace be with you!

*Nurturing God, we need your care: guidance for living, perspective for peace. Come and nurture us. Amen!*

## Better to Give?

*He raises up the poor from the dust; he lifts the needy from the ash heap, to make them sit with princes and inherit a seat of honor.  
(1 Samuel 2:8a NRSV)*

We all know someone who needs help through a bad time. Or at least we think they do.

We want to be angels who swoop in and save. It feels good to help. It makes us feel better about ourselves.

What if part of healing is in doing the deed itself; not having it done for you?

Years ago, a friend was in a life crisis. As I tried to coax her from behind the walls she was building, I could see her shutting down.

One day I mentioned my long to-do list for an upcoming event. I needed more chairs. It was insignificant, but she practically came to life before my eyes. She offered to deliver her chairs to me. I objected. She persisted. I could see that giving her a chance to help ME was lifting her up more than any prayer or baked goods could have done.

It was an eye opener. She was tired of being the victim, and having people feel sorry for her. She wanted to be the angel, and that day she was mine.

Sometimes it is better to receive.

*Nurturing God, we need your care: guidance for living, perspective for peace. Come and nurture us. Amen!*



Transforming  
God, we need  
your grace:  
faithful  
forgiveness,  
kindness and  
strength.

Come and  
change us.

Amen!

## I Saw the Sign!

*My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and behold the face of God? (Psalm 42:2 NRSV)*

My devotion to church and God was something that grew over time. First, church was something I attended on Sundays because my family did. Then, with the start of Confirmation, church started including Wednesdays. Around this time, I reached a crossroads. If not for family, would I go to church on my own?

As I started to question my faith, I wanted a sign to see that God was real.

Then I realized I didn't need a sign. God is always with us and surrounding us. God may not physically come down from Heaven, but God is present in other ways. God is there when a member from Faith calls you in a time of need, when you are greeted before worship, or when the kids go bounding up to the altar for the children's sermon.

In this Advent season, let's consider the ways we see God. Sometimes the simplest things are the signs we need to know that God is with us.

*Transforming God, we need your grace: faithful forgiveness, kindness and strength. Come and change us. Amen!*

## The Longing of Advent

*As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and behold the face of God? (Psalm 42:1-2 NRSV)*

As a deer longs for streams of living water ... As my soul longs for you, O God ...

These images of longing from Psalm 42, the thirsty deer and the thirsty soul, take me deeper, below the surface during this Advent season. We often speak of Advent as a time of waiting expectation, but longing seems a more fitting word. Longing that is thirst. A feeling that is real, slightly uncomfortable, and tinged with hope. That sounds like Advent.

So, what does your soul thirst for this Advent season?

Where are you seeking hope the most?

Sit with that longing.

Sit with that hoping.

Ask the psalmists' question: "When shall I come and behold the face of God?" And then trust in the God who meets our longing in unexpected ways.

Wait for the Surprise.

*Transforming God, we need your grace: faithful forgiveness, kindness and strength. Come and change us. Amen!*

## Children Playing in the Street

*And the streets of the city shall be full of boys and girls playing in its streets. (Zechariah 8:5 NRSV)*

Back in my day, (says the 25-year-old) I remember running through the neighborhood with my sister on summer days, simply being kids. Christmastime would bring a new wave of playtime activities: presents, snow, and time off from school. This verse and the season of Advent stir up all those feelings and memories, and I long for those childhood days.

It's a beautiful image: when the Lord comes to dwell in the midst of Jerusalem, the streets will be filled with children playing. It would be easy to just leave this verse at what was (myself playing as a child) and what will be (the day when Jesus returns and the streets will again be full of children playing).

But what does this mean for the here and now?

For me, the season of preparing for Jesus' coming as a baby to live among us, gives me the freedom of a child; to be relieved of the stresses and pressures we face and to simply be. My prayer is that through God, I can be more like the children playing in the streets.

Transforming God, come and change us.

*Transforming God, we need your grace: faithful forgiveness, kindness and strength. Come and change us. Amen!*

## The Second-Best Gift

*There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. (Galatians 3:28 NIV)*

Reading this verse, I believe it means I'm not better than others, like someone who is homeless. But ... sometimes I don't feel that way.

When my son was about 10 years old, we volunteered at PADS, a homeless shelter, on Christmas Eve. I explained the situation the guests were in. I added some guests would bring stuff in bags and suitcases—everything they had—as they had no home.

We served the meals and then sat down at a table with the guests to eat. One guest offered up his only bag of potato chips. My son looked distressed, but I gave the nod of approval. Later I learned he didn't want to accept the only thing this person had.

That was the second-best gift my son got that year. It was a gift to me too, as it reminded me what Paul wrote in his letter to the Galatians.

What was the best gift my son received? As my father-in-law said, it was the same one we all got about 2,000 years ago: Jesus.

*Transforming God, we need your grace: faithful forgiveness, kindness and strength. Come and change us. Amen!*

## Restore Us

*Restore us, O Lord God of hosts! Let your face shine, that we may be saved! (Psalm 80:19 ESV)*

I don't like to watch the nightly news and continually see the leaders of our country so polarized, unable to compromise, or engage in civil discourse.

What are we to do?

In Psalm 80 the psalmist prays that the tribes may become united again and restored to God. The phrase, "restore us to God" is repeated three different times throughout the psalm, expressing trust and dependence upon God and confidence that His favor was all that was needed.

For too long the people had turned from God and become self-reliant; now they desperately wanted to be saved. Only the Lord could "revive" the people by forgiveness of their sins and renewal of the covenant. Both for Israel and the Church then and today, this prayer has been answered in Christ. In Him we may be restored to God. In Him, the face of God is shining down upon us in grace.

Isn't the plea, "restore us to God" most relevant today?

*Transforming God, we need your grace: faithful forgiveness, kindness and strength. Come and change us. Amen!*

## Life's Winter Solstice

*Stir up your might, and come to save us. Restore us, O Lord God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved. (Psalm 80:2b,19 ESV)*

As a gardener, I feel most alive in nature, especially during the growing season. My least favorite time of year is late fall as plants die or settle in for the winter, as days get darker and temperatures colder, culminating with the winter solstice. I look forward to December 22, when the days start to lengthen and lighten, offering hope for Spring's new growth.

Advent is often described as a time of waiting, of expectations, of hope for the Savior's birth—the beginning of a new life.

As our family navigates my husband's terminal illness, we are experiencing a different kind of Advent. Our days are often filled with sadness and uncertainty. As our time together shortens, the darkness grows. Though it's hard to experience such pain, we try to maximize the time we have with him now, focusing on his spirit and celebrating his life and legacy: the children, colleagues, friends, and family he has touched so significantly. Our time is quieter, spent in our home, on the phone or Facetime.

The solstice is a fitting metaphor for our Advent. A time of reflection, letting go, preparing for the future, and looking for the light to increase again.

*Transforming God, we need your grace: faithful forgiveness, kindness and strength. Come and change us. Amen!*

## Always There

*There is no one holy like the Lord; there is no one besides you; there is no Rock like our God. (1 Samuel 2:2 NIV)*



Mighty God,  
we need your  
promises:  
astonishing  
love, infinite  
mercy.

Come and  
surprise us.

Amen!

At my core, I am a planner. I like calendars, I like lists, I like checkboxes. I have learned to be flexible with my days and can switch direction with very little disruption. But what happens when life doesn't just twist and turn but instead takes a hard right or stops you completely in your tracks?

What happens when you are given a new unbelievable direction, like Abraham? Do you fall down and laugh in amazement?

What happens when death steals someone away from you? Can you no longer feel or hear God in your grief?

What happens when you cannot figure out God's plan in the middle of injustice? Do you trust that God is there?

We long for God's presence in the routine of our lives, in the astounding moments, in the devastating pain. Through Christ, God promises to always be there.

*Mighty God, we need your promises: astonishing love,  
infinite mercy. Come and surprise us. Amen!*

# Carol Advent/Carol Christmas

Isaiah 9:2-7

Luke 2:1-14

Words and music by Philip Spencer 2019

♩ = 72, with serenity

Gm7 C7 F

1. Car - ol Ad - vent: Ev - 'ry - where  
2. Car - ol Ad - vent: Ma - ry's "yes"

1. Car - ol Christ - mas: Calm and bright,  
2. Car - ol Christ - mas: Star and song,

Bb C Am7 F

3 hearts pre - pare. Car - ol  
God will bless. Car - ol

Ho - ly night. Car - ol  
An - gel thron. Car - ol

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2 5 Cm7 F7 Bb

Ad - vent: Ev - 'ry - one  
Ad - vent: Je - sus' birth

Christ - mas: Hope and joy,  
Christ - mas: Love and mirth,

7 Gm7 C F

greet God's Son.  
blessed the earth.

Won - drous boy.  
Peace on earth.

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# So Thankful

Many thanks to the Faith members who summoned the courage and found the time to contribute to this devotional booklet:

Kent Annan	Tom Pfaff
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Above all, we give thanks to the Holy Spirit for nudging us to take on this project and inspiring our reflections and prayers.

## AMEN!

*We have referenced the following scripture versions:*

*CEV - Contemporary English Version*

*ESV - English Standard Version*

*NIV - New International Version*

*NKJV - New King James Version*

*NLT - New Living Translation*

*NRSV - New Revised Standard Version*