



# Words of Hope

An Advent Devotional



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Sit for a spell. Sip your cup of tea. Breathe deep. Feel the stillness and quiet around you.

Preparing for Christmas can often be full of busy-ness. There is so much to do - meals to cook, presents to buy and wrap, cards to send, houses to decorate, and holiday concerts to attend. The gift of an advent devotional, such as this one, is that it provides an opportunity for stillness. It is an opportunity to spend some time with God and let your spirit be uplifted.

Our prayer is that this devotional will fill your soul while also connecting you a bit more to the people of Southern Asia. We recommend that you also make use of the Advent Action Calendar as part of your advent celebrations this year.

May God's hope, peace, joy, and love surround you this holiday season.

### About the author: **Rev. Anne Gregory**

Anne was born in Elkhart, IA, and grew up as the child of mission co-workers in Thailand. After receiving her MDiv from Lexington Theological Seminary and serving local churches in Iowa, Anne received an invitation to return to Thailand to serve as a Global Ministries mission co-worker. She supported the ecumenical ministry of the Church of Christ in Thailand. Anne began her service in Thailand in 2014.



In Thailand, Anne also served as Co-Pastor for English-Language Ministries at Wattana (pronounced WHAT-tuh-nah) Church, a historically Presbyterian church in Bangkok, part of the Church of Christ in Thailand. Wattana Church is a large congregation, in a busy business district, in a city of around 20 million people. Her work was to lead the English-language ministries, including an early Sunday-morning worship service, Bible studies, counseling, visitation, and other pastoral duties. Anne shares, "What is different is that every day is a multi-lingual day, every day is a multi-cultural day, and every day is a day of working with people of all different social and economic standings. I am, I believe, walking in the footsteps of Jesus: learning, struggling, tripping and falling, getting up again, experiencing trouble and loss, but also knowing God's healing, strengthening power, grace, and love. I believe I'm called to share all this with those I meet."



## December 1

### Isaiah 7:14

But the Lord will still show you this sign: The young woman is pregnant and will give birth to a son. She will name him Immanuel.

1

Advent is a time of waiting. It is also a time of reflection—a time to consider our lives and the path we are walking. It is a time to wonder what they were feeling. The people in the Christmas story, that is.

Was it the worst time in history? It's hard to know. But for many centuries, followers of Jesus have trusted that it was the right time. It was the time of God's choosing, for the Son to be born into the world as a human being.

I remember, as a child, waiting for mango season and ฝรั่ง (rambutan) season—in April and May. It was also a time when many missionary families would take a couple of vacation weeks on the western shore of the Gulf of Thailand, since all the Thai schools would be on summer break. For me, it was the joy of seeing my mission “family,” and the many kids who were like cousins to me. Those were days of happy waiting.

But, God's people have gone through centuries of painful waiting. I see it today in the anguish of my brothers and sisters who are Christian refugees here in Thailand. Many have been waiting for years, as they see more and more doors closing in countries that used to receive them. They wait here, where they are not legally able to work, and they try to pray away the despair.

So, how do we “wait” in a holy way? The best way is to look to God in the moment. We don't need to live only for the future, for some day when things will be better. We also don't need to live in the past, remembering when life seemed so much simpler. God is with us in the waiting, even the hardest waiting.

Pray that we may live in this moment. Remember that God the Creator also created time. Let these days be days of wonder, hope, and listening for God.

## December 2

### Micah 5:2

But you Bethlehem Ephrathah, are the smallest town in Judah. Your family is almost too small to count, but the “Ruler of Israel” will come from you to rule for me. His beginnings are from ancient times, from long, long ago.

2

The prophet Micah reminds us of a theme that comes to us again and again through Scripture—that God prefers the humble. So many phrases come to mind: “The sacrifice that God wants is a humble spirit.” (Psalm 51:17) “He will not break even a crushed reed. He will not put out even the weakest flame.” (Isaiah 42:3) “The greatest person in God's kingdom is the one who makes himself humble like this child.” (Matthew 18:4)

Why was our Savior, Jesus Christ, born in such a small, forgettable little village? For the very reason that God's ways are ways of humility. It's almost impossible for the proud person to be useful to God, just as it is almost impossible for the rich person to enter God's Future. (Matthew 19:24)

Christians in Thailand appreciate “faith the size of a mustard seed.” At about one percent of the population, they are a very small minority—among the 25 countries in the world with the lowest percentage of Christians. Here, even the power to believe is a gift of God's Spirit. Yet, even a small mustard seed can affect the flavor of a whole dish.

God works in the lives of those who know that they need God.



## December 3

### Matthew 1:18-24

<sup>18</sup> This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah happened. His mother Mary was engaged to marry Joseph. But before they married, he learned that she was expecting a baby. (She was pregnant by the power of the Holy Spirit.) <sup>19</sup> Mary's husband, Joseph, was a good man. He did not want to cause her public disgrace, so he planned to divorce her secretly.

<sup>20</sup> But after Joseph thought about this, an angel from the Lord came to him in a dream. The angel said, "Joseph, son of David, don't be afraid to accept Mary to be your wife. The baby inside her is from the Holy Spirit." <sup>21</sup> She will give birth to a son. You will name him Jesus. Give him that name because he will save his people from their sins."

<sup>22</sup> All this happened to make clear the full meaning of what the Lord said through the prophet: <sup>23</sup> "The virgin will be pregnant and will give birth to a son. They will name him Immanuel." (Immanuel means "God with us.")

<sup>24</sup> When Joseph woke up, he did what the Lord's angel told him to do. He married Mary.



How hard would it have been, I wonder, for Joseph to believe that Mary was both innocent and faithful? What man in history would believe that? Many hearers of the story assume that Jesus was simply an "illegitimate" child, like so many. And I wonder what would have happened to her and the baby if Joseph had divorced her "secretly." Would she and the child even have survived? There wasn't much compassion about such things in the old days. Maybe there still isn't.

Just think about it. There are many parts of Jesus' story in which his life seems to be hanging by a thread. So many dangerous moments, when all could have been lost.

But, "Joseph was a good man." So much faith, hope, and love in such simple words! Some have jokingly called him "the patron saint of stepfathers." Certainly, he is a role model for many. He was a good man. He did everything he could to keep them safe. And that includes trusting in the words God's messenger brought to him.

Here in Thailand, there is a common acceptance of the supernatural—almost no one questions the existence of spirits or ghosts. But very few of these spirits are safe for human beings. Commercials, soap operas, even stand-up routines are full of ghost stories—and they are always creepy, at best. And yet the Bible is full of stories of supernatural beings who come from God. Beings who bring Good News. Angels.

How did Joseph know it was God's messenger (angel) who was speaking to him? Well, one way is to trust and follow advice that contains compassion. Joseph did that.

## December 4

### Luke 1:26-33

<sup>26-27</sup> During Elizabeth's sixth month of pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to a virgin girl who lived in Nazareth, a town in Galilee. She was engaged to marry a man named Joseph from the family of David. Her name was Mary. <sup>28</sup> The angel came to her and said, "Greetings! The Lord is with you; you are very special to him."

<sup>29</sup> But Mary was very confused about what the angel said. She wondered, "What does this mean?"

<sup>30</sup> The angel said to her, "Don't be afraid, Mary, because God is very pleased with you." <sup>31</sup> Listen! You will become pregnant and have a baby boy. You will name him Jesus. <sup>32</sup> He will be great. People will call him the Son of the Most High God, and the Lord God will make him a king like his ancestor David. <sup>33</sup> He will rule over the people of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end."



Did Mary understand what God's messenger was telling her? Did she expect her child to end up in a palace, wearing rich robes and issuing commands to his people? Did she think he was going to drive out the Roman colonizers? Did she really believe this child was going to live forever, as the messenger said?

Too often, Christians in this Eastern part of the world hear much of the "prosperity gospel." That is, if you believe and pray to God and give your money to the right places - you will become wealthy in the things of this world. Such temptation faces Christians in every nation.

It seems the angel left out a lot of explanations. Still, Mary said, "Yes." And if we read on a little in Luke's Gospel, we hear her compose a mighty psalm—one that shows much more understanding of God's ways than many of us ever gain.

Mary knows, so early on, that God scatters the proud, and raises the humble. God fills the hungry with good things, but the rich are sent away with nothing. (Lk. 1:51-53)

It seems that neither Mary nor Joseph were ordinary people. At all. Each was faithful, humble, and open to God. What wonderful



## December 5

### Luke 2:1-7

It was about that same time that Augustus Caesar sent out an order to all people in the countries that were under Roman rule. The order said that everyone's name must be put on a list.<sup>2</sup> This was the first counting of all the people while Quirinius was governor of Syria.<sup>3</sup> Everyone traveled to their own hometowns to have their name put on the list.

<sup>4</sup> So Joseph left Nazareth, a town in Galilee, and went to the town of Bethlehem in Judea. It was known as the town of David. Joseph went there because he was from the family of David.<sup>5</sup> Joseph registered with Mary because she was engaged to marry him. (She was now pregnant.)<sup>6</sup> While Joseph and Mary were in Bethlehem, the time came for her to have the baby.<sup>7</sup> She gave birth to her first son. She wrapped him up well and laid him in a box where cattle are fed. She put him there because the guest room was full.



Mary and Joseph, though they probably looked like ordinary people, were not ordinary people. They were on a mission from God. But look at the way they were treated!

Even though her baby was due any minute, the law forced them to travel close to 150 kilometers to register with the government. It would have taken at least 30 hours to walk that distance! In other words, a full five days for a fit and healthy (non-pregnant) young couple, with the money for food and lodging. We don't know whether there was a donkey, either - even though a donkey shows up frequently in artwork about the birth of Jesus. No wonder the baby was born right at the end of that journey!

Some modern Christians in Southeast Asia might think, "At least they had each other." It is difficult for Christians to find another Christian to marry. Many, especially women, are looking at a lifetime of being single. Odd, isn't it, what thoughts might arise during the Advent Season. What does this baby promise for me?

There has been much debate about the feedbox—the manger, where the baby was laid. Was it a great humiliation to Mary and Joseph, that they had no better crib for him? What amazing parents! They continued to be faithful.

## December 6

### Luke 2:8-14

<sup>8</sup> That night, some shepherds were out in the fields near Bethlehem watching their sheep.<sup>9</sup> An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord was shining around them. The shepherds were very afraid.<sup>10</sup> The angel said to them, "Don't be afraid. I have some very good news for you—news that will make everyone happy.<sup>11</sup> Today your Savior was born in David's town. He is the Messiah, the Lord.<sup>12</sup> This is how you will know him: You will find a baby wrapped in pieces of cloth and lying in a feeding box."

<sup>13</sup> Then a huge army of angels from heaven joined the first angel, and they were all praising God, saying,

<sup>14</sup> "Praise God in heaven, and on earth let there be peace to the people who please him."



Why did God's messengers come to some shepherds? Shepherds were nobody's favorite people—and they smelled like sheep. They lived on the edges of society, and no one accepted them as trustworthy witnesses in court.

But at the same time, the kings of Israel were always compared to shepherds, carefully watching over their flock. And David, the greatest of them all, and the ancestor of this newborn child, had been a shepherd when he was young.

People may have had contradictory attitudes about shepherds, but people also knew that shepherds tend to be patient and gentle—because sheep are the stupidest animals alive.

On the lush, green grounds of the church where I work, right near the front gate, there are seven funny little sheep statues—almost like cartoon characters. They have the silliest smiles. This might be Thai humor - as if they are saying: yes, we make our church buildings lovely when we can. But human absurdity is right here as well—along with us silly little sheep.

No wonder God's messengers came to the shepherds! God raises up the humble, as Mary had sung in Luke's first chapter. And who but patient and gentle people would be the right ones to visit a vulnerable new baby? And no wonder, too, that Jesus is known to us as the Good Shepherd.

## December 7

### Luke 2:15-21

<sup>15</sup> The angels left the shepherds and went back to heaven. The shepherds said to each other, “Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this great event the Lord has told us about.”

<sup>16</sup> So they went running and found Mary and Joseph. And there was the baby, lying in the feeding box.

<sup>17</sup> When they saw the baby, they told what the angels said about this child. <sup>18</sup> Everyone was surprised when they heard what the shepherds told them. <sup>19</sup> Mary continued to think about these things, trying to understand them. <sup>20</sup> The shepherds went back to their sheep, praising God and thanking him for everything they had seen and heard. It was just as the angel had told them.

<sup>21</sup> When the baby was eight days old, he was circumcised, and he was named Jesus. This name was given by the angel before the baby began to grow inside Mary.



God chooses the openhearted and the open-minded to carry out the most important holy work in Salvation History, which is what some call the story of Scripture. Mary and Joseph, those seemingly ordinary people, were both. And the shepherds must have been, too.

So often we hear that God chooses the unexpected person, the person who doesn't seem to have the right qualifications, to do God's work. The ancient prophets were known to argue that they were not worthy - that they were too young, or too old, or too uneducated, or they weren't good public speakers. But they were all open-hearted and open-minded enough to say, “Yes,” finally, to God's invitation.

Thailand means “land of the free.” That means this country's leaders have been savvy enough throughout history to keep out the colonizers. There is an old song, “In the Water There is Fish; in the Fields There is Rice,” attributed to a Thai king of bygone generations. In other words, life is good here. Why would anyone choose change? Yet, for Thai Christians (who know that people suffer, even in a rich and gentle climate), there is great hope in a God who loves us and suffers with us. There is joy in a God who plans the best for us all.

God's messengers invited the shepherds to see the most important baby of all time—and they were willing to take the chance, no matter how strange, no matter how improbable. They went ahead and stepped out in faith. And they ended up praising God.

## December 8

### Matthew 2:1-6

Jesus was born in the town of Bethlehem in Judea during the time when Herod was king. After Jesus was born, some wise men from the east came to Jerusalem.

<sup>2</sup> They asked people, “Where is the child who has been born to be the king of the Jews? We saw the star that shows he was born. We saw it rise in the sky in the east and have come to worship him.”

<sup>3</sup> When King Herod heard about this, it upset him as well as everyone else in Jerusalem. <sup>4</sup> Herod called a meeting of all the leading Jewish priests and teachers of the law. He asked them where the Messiah would be born. <sup>5</sup> They answered, “In the town of Bethlehem in Judea, just as the prophet wrote:

<sup>6</sup> ‘Bethlehem, in the land of Judah you are important among the rulers of Judah. Yes, a ruler will come from you, and that ruler will lead Israel, my people.’”



This story is a gold-plated example of culture clash. How were serious, visiting spiritual scholars supposed to know that they were going to encounter corrupt leaders—especially when the skies were sending a holy, hopeful message?

People in Thailand are no strangers to cultural collisions. Bangkok is a city filled with foreigners. Cultural misunderstandings happen daily. Usually, the consequences are amusing, even if somewhat uncomfortable. For example, many years ago, a friend ordered two fried eggs for breakfast. Because he pronounced it wrong, he was served two fried chickens. How were the servers to know what foreigners eat and don't eat?

Sometimes the consequences can be dangerous indeed. Matthew's Gospel is harking back to the words of Isaiah, which tell of other nations coming to honor the God of Abraham and Sarah. Yet here, the distinguished visitors were met with consternation from a ruler who thought only of his own power—or his own weakness—a king whose cruelty was known to his whole city, Jerusalem.

This explains why, when Herod was upset, everyone else in Jerusalem was upset, too. What new horror was he going to bring down on them?

When God becomes one of us, the world strikes back.

## December 9

### Matthew 2:7-9

<sup>7</sup> Then Herod had a private meeting with the wise men from the east. He learned from them the exact time they first saw the star. <sup>8</sup> Then he sent them to Bethlehem. He said, “Go and look carefully for the child. When you find him, come tell me. Then I can go worship him too.”

<sup>9</sup> After the wise men heard the king, they left. They saw the same star they had seen in the east, and they followed it. The star went before them until it stopped above the place where the child was.



One still wonders why the “wise” men never noticed that there might be something strange in the king’s desire to give honor to some unknown child in some forgotten village, who was born to take his place. Make no mistake. There is satire in this story. There is intrigue, suspense, and danger.

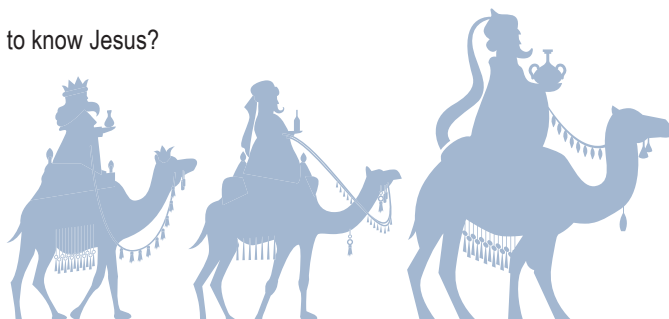
There is also a reference to the Hebrew Scriptures. Matthew’s Gospel does this often, to show that Jesus was, indeed, the one sent by God. Isaiah 60 talks of a future hope for Jerusalem; for Israel: “Jerusalem, get up and shine!... Your Light is coming!.... Then the nations will come to your light.... They will bring gold and incense.” (from Isaiah 60:1-8)

How interesting, that these wise men came from another country and another religion. Scholars tell us that the word used to refer to them, magi, was a word for Zoroastrian priests from Persia. Today, their descendants are known as Parsi. To the children of Israel, they were idolaters and riff-raff. They were not as respected as we might imagine.

I have a friend who became a Christian while studying in a Western country. It gives her pain that she did not first meet Christ here, in Thailand, among her own people—and as a much younger person. I would hope the magi’s story can bring encouragement to those who feel as if they are outsiders to the faith; who came up without hearing any of the ancient scriptural promises.

So, we can see that this baby is born even for scholars from the East. This baby is born for the whole world. And even strange and unknown forms of knowledge can point to him.

Just think. How DO “outsiders” come to know Jesus?



## December 10

### Matthew 2:10-15

<sup>10</sup> They were very happy and excited to see the star.

<sup>11</sup> The wise men came to the house where the child was with his mother Mary. They bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened the boxes of gifts they had brought for him. They gave him treasures of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. <sup>12</sup> But God warned the wise men in a dream not to go back to Herod. So they went home to their own country a different way.

<sup>13</sup> After the wise men left, an angel from the Lord came to Joseph in a dream. The angel said, “Get up! Take the child with his mother and escape to Egypt. Herod wants to kill the child and will soon start looking for him. Stay in Egypt until I tell you to come back.”

<sup>14</sup> So Joseph got ready and left for Egypt with the child and the mother. They left during the night. <sup>15</sup> Joseph stayed in Egypt until Herod died. This gave full meaning to what the Lord said through the prophet: “I called my son to come out of Egypt.”



What is the meaning of the wise men’s gifts? Gold, frankincense, and myrrh? One interpretation reminds us that Jesus came to be a king, a priest, and a prophet. So, gold is a sign of royalty; frankincense is a sign of worship, in which a priest leads the people to God; and myrrh is a sign of burial, pointing to the future when Jesus would be persecuted like the prophets of ancient times.

The Christian writer, Joan Chittister, studied these gifts and concluded that they were not signs of wealth, so much as signs of God’s action: generosity, serenity, and spirit. Gold, of course, is a sign of giving, of being generous. Frankincense is not only a sign of worship; it is a fragrant oil used to bring calm, peace, and serenity. It can also be an antiseptic—a cleansing medicine. Myrrh is a healing oil. It is known to heal and cleanse the mouth. (How important that would be as a sign! Isaiah lamented that he was a man of “unclean lips.” (Is. 6) The Letter of James talks at length about the dangers that can be created by the tongue, when its words are not under control. (Jas. 3)) Myrrh was used to anoint the dead, yes, but it was, and still is, used to heal wounds. It is also a preservative.

People all over the world know about gold, incense, and healing oil from plants. The preferred colors and alloys of gold might be different, the fragrances might be different, and the plant sources different in various places - but every group of people understands experiencing the Holy through more than preaching and teaching.

The eyes look for beauty, and the senses respond to refreshing and bracing smells. Thailand, especially, has a two-thousand-year history of traditional inhaler medicines (called ya dom), made of menthol, eucalyptus, camphor, borneol oils, and sweet spices. They are not only for relieving illness, but also for restorative energy. (This is the birthplace of Red Bull, after all.)

Jesus is born to us as all of these things: King, Priest, Prophet, Generous Giver, Prince of Peace, Healer, and—why not—Giver of Energy.



## December 11

### Galatians 4:4-5

<sup>4</sup> But when the right time came, God sent his Son, who was born from a woman and lived under the law. <sup>5</sup> God did this so that he could buy the freedom of those who were under the law. God's purpose was to make us his children.

11

Generally, Christmas is a happy time. It is a time for celebration, a time for joy, a time for goodwill and good cheer. But Christmas time can be a sad time for many. It is a sad time for those who have lost a loved one, for those who live a great distance from their family and can't make it home for Christmas. It can also be a very stressful time, but yes, "It's the most wonderful time of the Year."

There was a particular moment in the history of the world when all of God's preparations came together - when everything the prophets had foretold fell into place. The year, 4 B.C., was the perfect time religiously, because the Jewish people had forsaken idol worship after their return from Babylonian captivity, and the synagogue system was established. Culturally, Alexander the Great had established the Greek culture and its languages to solidify the world. Politically, Rome ruled and had established an extensive system of roads across the known world. It was a time of economic depression, it was a time of widespread slavery, and it was a difficult time for women and children. It was also a time when the Jewish people were spiritually hungry in their souls for real, genuine faith.

Thailand is known all over the world as the "Land of Smiles." But, as one Thai clergywoman says, "Thai people are very passionate—we feel everything strongly—but our culture teaches us to keep it all hidden." In this "Land of the Free," people are often blessed and relieved to know that Christ came to experience it all with us, and when Christ is born in our hearts, we are loved completely.

No matter what you go through, pray that this Christmas be the perfect time for you to let Christ be born in your heart. One of the beautiful praise choruses we sing is called "In His Time." At this Christmastime of the year, God would have you and me lay hold of this wonderful truth, that the birth of Christ was according to God's perfect timing.

Ajarn Motan Konyak and  
Rev. Anne E. Gregory

## December 12

### Ephesians 2:8-9

<sup>8</sup> I mean that you have been saved by grace because you believed. You did not save yourselves; it was a gift from God. <sup>9</sup> You are not saved by the things you have done, so there is nothing to boast about.

12

Why do people boast? Why does anyone boast? Biblical wisdom tells us that boasters or braggarts are always insecure and uncertain of their own status or position. They seem to need to hear praise from others because they can never convince themselves to be at peace with who they are.

Think about figures from well-known stories. The most confident characters never boast. They simply succeed. For example, does James Bond ever boast? Of course not. (Not to suggest that we should look to James Bond as a good example!) Does Ironman boast? (Um. I'm told he does.) Think about those you know, who are experts in their field. Do they brag about their ability and success? Unless they are politicians, they do not. The confident person does not boast.

In Thailand, boasting is reserved for comedians and outlandish dramatic characters in theatre or the movies. Humility is much respected. But, like all cultures, the insecure person finds ways to show off. One just needs to look for different cues. Which family throws the fanciest weddings? Or funerals? Whose grandchildren have the cutest clothes and toys on Facebook?

So, what is the Letter to the Ephesians telling us? We have seen that God seems to prefer the humble, the lowly, those who know their need of God. We see that Jesus so frequently heals outsiders, foreigners, outcasts.

But, once we entrust our heart, our soul, our life, to Christ Jesus, we are most spiritually healthy if we remain humble. Our boasting is in the deep, deep Grace of God through Christ.

## December 13

### 1 John 4:7-16

<sup>7</sup> Dear friends, we should love each other, because love comes from God. Everyone who loves has become God's child. And so everyone who loves knows God. <sup>8</sup> Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. <sup>9</sup> This is how God showed his love to us: He sent his only Son into the world to give us life through him. <sup>10</sup> True love is God's love for us, not our love for God. He sent his Son as the way to take away our sins.

<sup>11</sup> That is how much God loved us, dear friends! So we also must love each other. <sup>12</sup> No one has ever seen God. But if we love each other, God lives in us. If we love each other, God's love has reached its goal—it is made perfect in us.

<sup>13</sup> We know that we live in God and God lives in us. We know this because he gave us his Spirit. <sup>14</sup> We have seen that the Father sent his Son to be the Savior of the world, and this is what we tell people now. <sup>15</sup> Anyone who says, "I believe that Jesus is the Son of God," is a person who lives in God, and God lives in that person. <sup>16</sup> So we know the love that God has for us, and we trust that love.

God is love. Everyone who lives in love lives in God, and God lives in them.

13



"God is love." What an absurd idea that would have been to the Roman rulers in the time of Jesus! The gods were known to be terrifying and very moody. It was important not to annoy them or offend them. And they could make your life miserable just because they felt like it.

Thai culture is intertwined with Buddhism, and there is no God, per se. There are, however, many spirits—and most of them can be terrifying and very moody. And they can make your life miserable just because they feel like it.

When we realize that, this time of waiting for the Savior's birth becomes more powerful and meaningful. The God we worship loved us long before we were even created. Like an artist with a painting, God has made something that looks lovely and beautiful. That is—this creation and all of us who live in it. The artist loves her work and puts her soul and strength and joy into it. So it is with God.

## December 14

### Ephesians 2:12-22

<sup>12</sup> Remember that in the past you were without Christ. You were not citizens of Israel, and you did not know about the agreements with the promises that God made to his people. You had no hope, and you did not know God.

<sup>13</sup> Yes, at one time you were far away from God, but now in Christ Jesus, you are brought near to him. You are brought near to God through the blood sacrifice of Christ.

<sup>14</sup> Christ is the reason we are now at peace. He made us Jews and you who are not Jews one people. We were separated by a wall of hate that stood between us, but Christ broke down that wall. By giving his own body, <sup>15</sup> Christ ended the law with its many commands and rules. His purpose was to make the two groups become one in him. By doing this he would make peace. <sup>16</sup> Through the cross Christ ended the hate between the two groups. And after they became one body, he wanted to bring them both back to God. He did this with his death on the cross. <sup>17</sup> Christ came and brought the message of peace to you non-Jews who were far away from God. And he brought that message of peace to those who were near to God. <sup>18</sup> Yes, through Christ we all have the right to come to the Father in one Spirit.

<sup>19</sup> So now you non-Jewish people are not visitors or strangers, but you are citizens together with God's holy people. You belong to God's family. <sup>20</sup> You believers are like a building that God owns. That building was built on the foundation that the apostles and prophets prepared. Christ Jesus himself is the most important stone in that building. <sup>21</sup> The whole building is joined together in Christ, and he makes it grow and become a holy temple in the Lord.

<sup>22</sup> And in Christ you are being built together with his other people. You are being made into a place where God lives through the Spirit.

14

"Christ is the reason we are now at peace." Do we believe that? Jesus prayed for us all to be one. Do we care about that? There is division in the world, and there is division in the Church throughout the world.

Among the people of the Church of Christ in Thailand, a favorite hymn is "All Throughout the World We Stand," written in 1963 by Japanese Christians, Tokuo Yamaguchi, and Hidetoshi Ikemiya. Some of the lyrics, in English translation:

Rallying from lands apart, tongues with accents new,  
Still, as family, one in heart, one in all we do.  
In this age of dark and dread, panic all around,  
Point the only path to tread; in Christ, the TRUTH is found.

Our challenge is to live the Gospel. To understand how much God sacrificed in sending the Son to live among us and suffer because of us. Can we be at peace together?

December 15

John 7:37-38

<sup>37</sup> The last day of the festival came. It was the most important day. On that day Jesus stood up and said loudly, “Whoever is thirsty may come to me and drink.” <sup>38</sup> If anyone believes in me, rivers of living water will flow out from their heart. That is what the Scriptures say.”

15

Can we be constantly refreshed during a time of waiting? Can we refresh anyone else? Jesus says that anyone who believes—perhaps a better translation of the Greek word would be “trusts”—anyone who trusts in him will be so filled with refreshment that living water would flow out from their heart.

What is “living water”? It is water that moves. Even in ancient times, people knew that the safest, purest water was spring water—water that bubbles up out of the ground. River water could be contaminated from upstream. “Still” water was dangerous to drink unless it came from a deep enough, and clean enough, well.

In Lebanon, there is a resort town called Zahle. In Zahle, there is a mountain spring that is so cold and fresh, the restaurants there place bottles of cola or other soft drinks in the spring to cool. These drinks come out of the stream cold and refreshing. The water itself is pure and delicious.

In the Bangkok Combined Choir, we singers are advised NOT to drink cold water. It's an ancient belief in the Far East, that warm or hot water is good for your health. It may be partly that warm or hot water has been boiled, and is, therefore, safest to drink. But, in tropical climates, it makes one sweat, and then the breezes feel cooler. Talk to any member of the older generation. Or any lover of coffee or tea anywhere in the world.

What could be more refreshing than to be in company, in communion with, the Son of God? What could be more refreshing than the One Who Lives? Jesus invites us to be so refreshed that we can't help but be refreshing to others.

December 16

John 14:6-6

Jesus answered, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. The only way to the Father is through me.”

16

These words have sometimes been understood as words of exclusion, words of rejection. They have sometimes been used to provoke a sense of failure in those who hear them.

Remember that Jesus did not gain followers through scolding them. Yes, Jesus did scold from time to time—but he always saved such criticism for people who had already closed their ears. He always saved such criticism for those who were satisfied that they were more faithful than Jesus.

That's a bad place to be—for anyone to assume that they are more faithful, honorable, and true than God's Messiah. More faithful than the One who came to serve and to sacrifice? If we are in that place, we can't become better people or even be kind to another person. Not genuinely, because we are already too wrapped up in admiring ourselves.

One Pakistani refugee friend of mine tells of sitting with asylum seekers from several countries at a social service center here in Bangkok. One person (not Pakistani) began to scold other refugees who were Muslim, saying, “Your prophet is false. Our Christian God is the only right one.” Turning to my friend, he said, “I know you agree with me, brother.” My friend's answer? “I will not be part of such arguments. For me, Jesus teaches me to love everyone.”

If we are waiting for God's truth, love, and joy to be born and to grow in our lives, then we have already admitted that we are not superior beings. Instead, we are everyday people waiting for God. We are beginning to know the Way, the Truth, and the Life.



## December 17

### Matthew 28:19-2

Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely, I am with you always, to the very end of the age.

17

The above verses are called the Great Commission of our Lord Jesus Christ to His disciples. This commandment was given nearly two thousand years ago, and today is still very much relevant. If we ask the foundational question of what the church's mission is, the answer is to glorify God by sharing the gospel (good news) of Jesus with our family, friends, neighbors, and society - by discipling one another, so that we all can be more Christ-like.

Other than the Lord's Prayer, these may be the favorite verses of most Thai Christians. Had someone not come from far, far, away to tell of Jesus and the Good News, had someone not believed and lived these verses, there would be no Christians here. My own Naga people in India will testify to the same truth.

Celebrating Christmas will be meaningful only if we as a church both individually and collectively share the love of Jesus to others. This is done not only by giving material gifts but also by sharing the good news of Christ because only Jesus will give hope, peace, joy, and purpose.

As we all eagerly look forward to this Christmas season, let's build a family of joyful believers in Christ Jesus, loving one another, and loving those who are now without Christ by bringing them to Jesus and into the family of the church. Don't wait for others to share the gospel, but challenge yourself prayerfully to "go and make disciples" as Jesus commands all of us.

Ajarn Worchihan Zingkhai  
Mission Co-worker from Nagaland, India

## December 18

### John 8:12

<sup>12</sup> Later, Jesus talked to the people again. He said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never live in darkness. They will have the light that gives life."

18

Jesus is born to be the Light of the World. There is much darkness in our world today: wars, persecution of the powerless, earthquakes, weather disasters, and foolish leaders.

There is also the darkness of inequality. Some have far too much, and some are starving and in danger. And some are in despair, even if they DO have food and shelter, because they are beset and tormented by the lies of the world: "You are nothing if you are not beautiful, or young, or fashionable, or wealthy." "You are nothing if you do not have the constant joy of those who buy the best cars, the best cosmetics, the best vacation trips, the best wine." "You are nothing if you cannot build a taller building than all the others." "You are nothing if you cannot buy the politicians and influence their actions." "You are nothing if your football team loses."

It took a while, but the culture of youth and wealth has come to Thailand - wealth as a way to pursue youth, and youth as the best time to enjoy wealth. I remember a time in my childhood when older people were deeply respected. And if you had wealth, you probably were old. The respect for elders is still there, certainly much more strongly than in the West. But I'm still a little surprised to see so few gray heads here. Back then, all the older people had gray or silver hair. Today, almost everyone dyes their hair black - except for those younger people who bleach their hair auburn. But youth and wealth are rather hollow pursuits.

Jesus comes in simplicity. He shines a light that shows us what is real, what is valuable, what will last. He shows us that envy of others is not only disgraceful; it is a waste of time. He shines the Light that shows us what lies we are being told every day. He brings the Light that shows us that even at our darkest times, God's love is powerful to save.

## December 19

### John 9:4-5

<sup>4</sup> “While it is daytime, we must continue doing the work of the one who sent me. The night is coming, and no one can work at night. <sup>5</sup> While I am in the world, I am the light of the world.”



Advent is a time of waiting, of reflecting on the direction our lives are going, and always of looking toward the Light of the World. But it does not have to be a time of sitting still.

It can be a time of honoring God through the work we do. Martin Luther, the great reformer of the Church, was perhaps the first to remind Christians that each of us has a calling from God, and we can honor God even if our work is to sweep the floor every day. It is not only preachers and teachers and scholars who receive the blessing that says, “Well done, good and faithful servant.” (Mt. 25:21)

Like many other countries, Thailand has a tradition of taking off one’s shoes before entering a home, a temple, or other respected places. Part of the reason is that historically, Thai homes had almost no furniture. Living was done on the floor, and the floors were kept as clean as possible. They still are, and people still sit, as well as eat, on the floor in many homes. Respect is due to those who clean floors.

One preacher, Barbara Brown Taylor, speaks of the Great Banquet in God’s Future, when we all eat together and rejoice. But she warns us: Jesus will not be sitting with us, even at that great feast. He will be serving.

## December 20

### Matthew 5:14-16

<sup>14</sup> “You are the light that shines for the world to see. You are like a city built on a hill that cannot be hidden.

<sup>15</sup> People don’t hide a lamp under a bowl. They put it on a lampstand. Then the light shines for everyone in the house. <sup>16</sup> In the same way, you should be a light for other people. Live so that they will see the good things you do and praise your Father in heaven.”



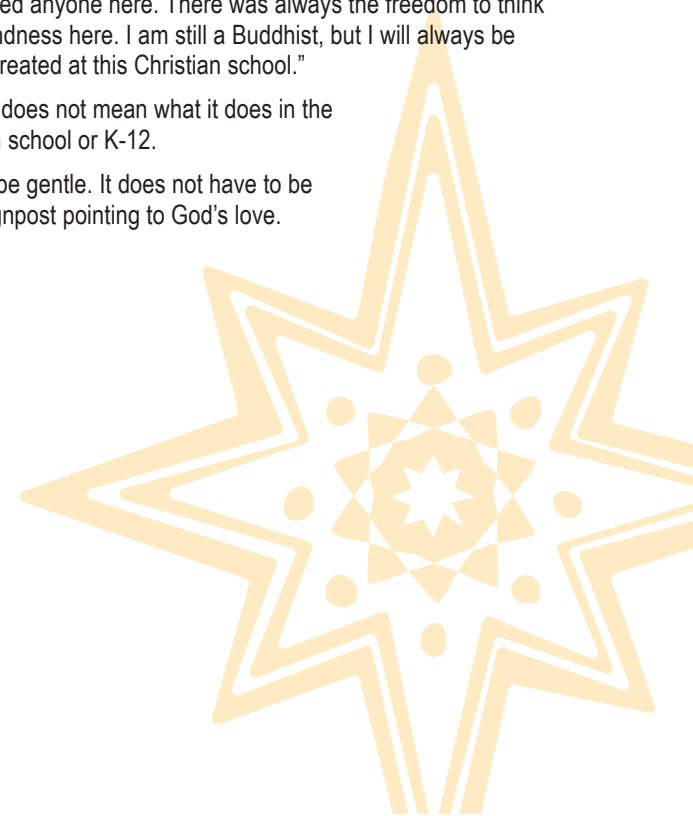
Jesus is the Light of the World. But he also calls us the Light of the World. But we are flawed; we are sinners; we have faults. How can we be an example to others?

Well, light is not necessarily an “example.” It also points out what is real and what is true. Sometimes the clearest signpost that points to God is human kindness. Simple kindness can be just like a lamp on a lampstand. It can help light the way for someone else.

Recently, an alumnus of one of our partner Christian Schools said the following: “When I was a student at Bangkok Christian College, I knew it was a Christian school. But they never forced anyone here. There was always the freedom to think and to learn. There was kindness here. I am still a Buddhist, but I will always be thankful for the way I was treated at this Christian school.”

Note: “college” in Thailand does not mean what it does in the U.S.A. It means either high school or K-12.

So, the light we shine can be gentle. It does not have to be blinding. It can still be a signpost pointing to God’s love.



## December 21

### Psalm 98:1-6

- Sing a new song to the Lord,  
because he has done amazing things!  
His powerful and holy right arm has brought him  
another victory.
- <sup>2</sup> The Lord showed the nations his power to save.  
He showed them his goodness.
- <sup>3</sup> He has kept his promise of love and loyalty to the  
people of Israel. People everywhere have seen our  
God's power to save.
- <sup>4</sup> Everyone on earth, shout with joy to the Lord.  
Start singing happy songs of praise!
- <sup>5</sup> Praise the Lord with harps.  
Yes, praise him with music from the harps.
- <sup>6</sup> Blow the pipes and horns, and shout for joy to  
the Lord our King!



When I returned to Thailand after a 40-year hiatus, I was pleased to learn some original Thai Christian songs. Back when I was a child, almost all the Christian songs I heard and sang were translated from western hymns and songs of the spirit.

Now, many are loved and sung here.

One of my favorites, "Shelter in God" (pak ping nai Pra-jao), by Winida (Treepoonphol) Chaisookthaksin, comes from the biblical image of God as our Rock amid trouble and turmoil. Following are some of the lyrics, translated into English:

Shelter in God....  
God is the solid rock....  
Now I won't have to fight alone  
Because the one who wins over sin and death  
Walks beside me.

A hospital chaplain in Bangkok tells of a depressed patient who didn't want a visit and didn't want to talk, but who said it would be okay if the chaplain wanted to sing. Upon hearing "Shelter in God," she experienced a miraculous change. The patient wanted to know about this God, and in the course of the conversation, she decided to become a Christian.

"God has done amazing things!"

One of many YouTube versions, this one from the funeral of a dear friend and church elder of the Yellow Bridge Church in Bangkok:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H6VSmEmZp0E>

## December 22

### John 1:1-3, 14

Before the world began, the Word was there. The Word was with God, and the Word was God. <sup>2</sup> He was there with God in the beginning. <sup>3</sup> Everything was made through him, and nothing was made without him.



The Word. The *Logos*. In the Greek, it was the λόγος. The ability to speak. To be heard and understood, and to hear and understand. Is there a miracle greater than this? Language is one of God's most powerful creations.

I am a lover of language, due to growing up bi-lingual in Bangkok. I am always interested to learn the origins of words and expressions. Recently, a Thai friend taught me a saying, which is apt for those times someone almost bumps into things or people because their nose is in their cellphone: "They do not see the eye of the boat; they do not see the eye of the horse." It comes from Thai chess. The boat is like the rook, and it can move in unexpected ways. So can the horse, which is like the knight. We all do better to maintain an awareness of what is coming our way. And if we have words to describe it, all the better.

Before there was language, there was the Communion of God—the love between the Creator, Son, and Spirit.

In the time of Jesus, the Word—the *Logos*—was already known among Jewish philosophers as not just "Word," but as the divine lively principle which is all through the universe. To say it another way, *Logos* was an attempt to put into one term the worlds and worlds of life, wisdom, creating power, and joy that are the very small beginning of the edge of what we know of God.

The early Christian translators struggled to find a way to put this Greek concept into Latin and later, other languages. Some decided to use the "Living Word," rather than simply, "Word."

We can begin to see why Jesus spoke in parables. We need many words, many names, and many pictures for God's truth.

And yet, like John's Gospel, we can look to Jesus as the Living Word.



## December 23

### Romans 6:23

<sup>23</sup> When people sin, they earn what sin pays—death. But God gives his people a free gift—eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

23

Sin is most easily explained as “missing the mark.” A term from archery. When the arrow flies and misses the mark, that is sin. There is another way to explain it: separation from God.

C.S. Lewis, the great Christian writer, said there is a deep, inner part of every person—the core, the center of the self. Every decision in life makes a mark on the core of ourselves. And over time, the center of ourselves becomes more beautiful; we become a creature who belongs more and more in heaven; or—we become uglier; we become a creature who belongs more and more in hell.

In Thailand, like many places in the world, many people believe that their suffering is punishment for a previous life of sin. The way to address it is to accumulate good works, in the hope of improving one's present and future lives. Doing good does bring rewards, of course—but it's tough to keep up with our own failings and mistakes.

The Apostle writes that God gives us a free gift—eternal life in Christ Jesus. The nature of a gift is that we must accept the gift or turn away.

Salvation is God's gift through Jesus Christ. We have a part to play. It is in the choices we make—both big and small. Both life choices and daily choices. Are we setting our feet toward the path of Life or the path of Despair?

This is the time of year to notice that God offers a Gift.

## December 24

### Psalm 10

Earth, sing to the LORD!

<sup>2</sup> Be happy as you serve the LORD!  
Come before him with happy songs!

<sup>3</sup> Know that the LORD is God.  
He made us, and we belong to him.  
We are his people, the sheep he takes care of.

<sup>4</sup> Come through the gates to his Temple giving  
thanks to him. Enter his courtyards with songs of praise.  
Honor him and bless his name.

<sup>5</sup> The LORD is good!  
There is no end to his faithful love.  
We can trust him forever and ever!

24

The day before God's Gift is born into the world. It's a time of hope and joy. A time of peace and serenity. A time of healing in the deep places of our hearts.

Not everyone is joyful at this time of year, though. Some struggle greatly with loneliness, or memories of sadness, or regrets when they imagine that everyone else is lighthearted at the celebration of Jesus' birth.

But remember: God sent the Chosen One, the Christ, at a time of darkness and great trouble. A time when the Roman Empire was crushing nation after nation.

The Baby came to us in poverty and humble surroundings. He was honored by those smelly outsiders, the shepherds (according to Luke's story), and by those other outsiders, those suspect idolaters, the wise men (according to Matthew's account). And then, Matthew tells us, he became a refugee. He came to be one of us.

Bangkok has about 8,000 refugees, out of a total of 38,000 or so in the whole country. Many of these brothers and sisters of ours are Christians. But Christian or not, they all escape for the same reasons: violence and/or persecution in their own country. It is the same reason, of course, that Jesus became a refugee. Not everyone can be happy on Christmas Eve, but we can all understand that Jesus came to go through what we go through. And we can live in hope.

We are not expected to be spiritually healthy before God's gift comes to us. God's Gift, the Messiah, the Prince of Peace, comes to bring spiritual healing. We have only to open our hearts and minds as we wait for him.

December 25

## Revelation 3:20-21

<sup>20</sup> Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in and eat with you. And you will eat with me.

<sup>21</sup> “I will let everyone who wins the victory sit with me on my throne. It was the same with me. I won the victory and sat down with my Father on his throne.”

Remember. The newborn Jesus was laid in a manger. A place of food for the lowly. Not even for the lowliest people, but for animals. Livestock. Remember the Song of Mary in the first chapter of Luke's Gospel: He brought down rulers from their thrones and raised up the humble people. He filled the hungry with good things....”

And here, in the final book of the Bible, the Risen Christ tells us that everyone who “wins the victory” will sit on the throne. The highest throne in the Universe. With Christ. And how does one achieve the highest throne? Certainly not the way the two brothers, James and John, had requested in Mark's Gospel: “Let us share the great honor you will have as king. Let one of us sit at your right side and the other at your left.” (Mk 10:37)

No one gets to the great throne in God's Future by asking to be important. The way to the throne is to open the door where Jesus is standing and knocking. And what is that door? For all these centuries, we have understood that it is the door to our hearts. Jesus came as a baby—humbly. And we are invited to open the door—humbly.

A Thai Christian asked me once, how it is that westerners who have no earthly king can appreciate the truth that Jesus comes as our king? Strangely, I had assumed it would be easier to accept if one had no earthly king. It still gives me pause for thought.

Open your heart. Jesus is waiting to come in, and he will be bringing a feast. He will be raising you to a throne.



25