



A
Name
Above
All
Names



Advent 2023

The theme for this year's Advent focus is "**A Name Above All Names.**" Through their writings, this year's contributors to our devotional book reflect on some of the many names we find for God and Jesus in Holy Scripture. Our weekly lighting of the Advent Candles will carry the same theme as we reflect on words from the Apostles Creed:

"I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of Heaven and earth;
And in Jesus Christ His only Son our Lord...
And I believe in the Holy Spirit."

Names are important. As we begin our Advent observance, listen to the words of Marshall and Kimberly Angel as they reflect on the God of many names who calls us by name.

Blessings on you and yours in this holiest of seasons.

Our Thanks

We extend our gratitude to all our writers for the 2023 Advent Devotional book. We are grateful for your time, your thoughts, and your insight as we learn from you ways that will draw us closer to Jesus as we await His coming once again.

Thank you to Joy Circle who sponsored this year's book, and to Evonne Mobley and Carolyn Hale Cubbedge who co-chaired the project.

As always we are grateful for Jennifer Brookins and Jennifer Baker of our office staff for their expertise and help.

The cover artwork was provided by Karen Wilson Lampley of The Honeycomb Sign Company, Knoxville, TN.

He Who Called You by Name

ISAIAH 43: 1-3

From the beginning, when Adam called every living creature by name (Genesis 2:19) to that gladsome end when Jesus shall confess our names before the Father and before His angels (Revelation 3:5), the acts of naming, of calling--God's names--our names--have always been and will always be ripe with meaning.

Our son, Lochlan, is named in honor of his grandfather, Fred McLaughlin Greene, and our daughter Elaina's name means light (James 1:17). There are of course moments in the Bible when people were called forth by God, and their names were changed. Like Sarai to Sarah—Mother of Nations (Genesis 17:16). Or Simon to Peter—Rock of Christ's Church (Matthew 16:18). Or even Naomi who in her grief renamed herself Mara—Bitter and Afflicted, but whose name was restored in faith: Naomi—Pleasant and Beautiful (Ruth 1:20-21, 5:13-17).

The unchanging truth is that we are our names ... and God is His. In these Holy Nights of Advent, we ponder embers that glow and flames that kindle, and we rejoice in stars that blaze. And we look yonder. We look yonder in awe for He Who Created You (Isaiah 43:1). We look, and we hope: for unto us is born a Savior, which is Christ the Lord (Luke 4:1).

But—how can this really be? And why?

Because—He Whose Name is Above Every Name (Philippians 2:9) knows our names.

“But now thus saith the Lord,
he who created you, O Jacob,
he who formed you, O Israel:
Fear not, for I have redeemed you;
I have **called you by name**, you are mine.
When you pass through the waters I will be with you;
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame
shall not consume you.
For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.”

Marshall and Kimberly Angle

THE FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT
December 3, 2023

**I BELIEVE IN GOD THE FATHER ALMIGHTY,
MAKER OF HEAVEN AND EARTH**

God the Father

“A father of the fatherless, and a judge of the widows, is God in his holy habitation. God setteth the solitary in families: He bringeth out those which are bound with chains, but the rebellious dwell in a dry land.”

Psalm 68:5-6

What does a father do?

He loves his family.

He provides for them.

He defends them.

He teaches his children about God and Jesus.

Our heavenly Father does the same things.

He loves us with a love that is everlasting.

He provides for our every need.

He defends us when we find ourselves in dire situations.

He teaches us through His word: our Holy Bible.

I have lived many years. Although there have been ups and downs throughout my life,

I would never want to change any of it.

I know that God has been with me through it all.

Every Sunday when we recite the Lord's Prayer, we begin it with "Our Father."

That's who He is.

Nancy Barnwell

Gracious, heavenly Father,

Help us to feel your presence every day.

In Jesus name I pray, Amen.

Monday, December 4, 2023

Creator

“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.”

Genesis 1:1

“Thus the heavens and the earth were completed in all their vast array.” Genesis 2:1

The Marvel of God’s Creation

Some who are reading this know of one of my life’s quests: To complete a hike of the Appalachian Trail from Georgia to Maine. This summer I ended my hot, wet, sweaty, nearly 3-week section hike through New Jersey and New York at Kent, Connecticut. In all these years of section hiking, I have had a chance to experience the “vast array” of God’s work from Georgia to Connecticut.

This year I got to walk upon my first glacial carved ridgetops, with a view of the Manhattan skyline in the distance. The lushness of the “green tunnel” in July, compared with the spring freshness of May trips in the past, is a prelude to coming evergreen forests in the far northeast.

The chance to truly appreciate God’s creation very intimately—“dry ground (land) and the water and the sky and the birds of the air and creatures that move along the ground”—cannot be understated. The rhythm of a day spent outdoors, and the parallels of real life and trail life including the obvious “ups and downs,” becomes a routine matching sunrise and sunset. There is also the narrowed focus on what is important in life (like water sources and a flat tent site).

The hiking community bonds over shared experiences/miseries. Something that many backpackers discover is the kindness of strangers toward us “pilgrims.” Over my many years on the trail there have been instances of what I describe as divine interventions by those who are literally called “trail angels.” On this last trip, I was feeling sorry for myself as I took a wrong turn and detour out of Pawling, NY, and was walking the highway back to the trailhead, getting more aggravated by the extra distance I had to walk.

A passing car driver hollered out the window “want a ride?” I got to meet Keith and his daughter Greta and got a ride and a bag of fresh fruit. That 3-minute interaction and kindness was the point at which my mood and day turned around! I remember that Ben remembered me before my last trip at prayer time at Wesley Gardens Sunday service. He prayed for me and for those that might cross my path for blessings, but also for those that might meet me and for that to be a blessing to them. I say to Ben, “I carry enough weight on my back as it is!”

Ash Grimmatt

I pray to let us daily recognize and appreciate God’s work around us, whether it be sunshine or rain or mountains or rivers. I also pray to recognize and appreciate God’s blessings for us. We should work to provide blessings to others especially when they least expect it. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen

Tuesday, December 5, 2023

King of Kings

“On his robe and on his thigh he has a name inscribed,
‘King of Kings and Lord of Lords’.” Revelation 19:16

It is hard to forget the scene in James Cameron’s *Titanic* when Jack stands at the bow of the ship with his arms spread wide, calling out to the open sea “I am king of the world.” Jack’s kingdom did not make it past an iceberg.

How often do I proclaim supremacy over my own life? Am I not self-made? In reading Revelation 19:16 the imagery brings to mind the great equestrian statues of ancient Rome. The placement of this monument in any forum was to declare the supremacy of Caesar in the civic and spiritual realm. Yet this verse paints a powerful image of Jesus Christ as the ultimate ruler and authority over all things—the real King of the world.

I have to ask myself, in the forum that is my life, does Christ stand at the center or do I? As believers, it is essential to remember that Jesus Christ is not a king or lord, but THE King of Kings and Lord of Lords. This title signifies His supremacy and sovereignty over every aspect of creation, ships and icebergs included.

Much of the 19th chapter of Revelation is about the King of Kings defeating “the beast.” In a world filled with uncertainty and chaos, we can find comfort and assurance in this truth. Despite the beasts and challenges we face, we serve a God who reigns supreme and rules all land and sea. We are encouraged to place our trust in Him and seek His security, guidance and wisdom in every area of our lives.

This Advent season I am going to focus on His authority in my life and live in the peace of His saving grace. I will name aloud and give Christ my beasts. In doing so I hope to experience the fullness of His blessings and walk confidently in His unfailing love. For a little follow up, read 1 Timothy 6:11-16 which furthers the concept of Christ’s kingdom being not of this world.

Scott Cleaveland

Prayer of Thanksgiving
Hallelujah, for the Lord God omnipotent reigneth.
Hallelujah, King of Kings and Lord of Lords,
for You shall reign forever and ever.
Hallelujah. Amen.
Hallelujah.
Amen

Wednesday, December 6, 2023

Provider

“And my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of His glory in Christ Jesus.” Philippians 4:19

In the middle of going back to school to change careers, I was thrown a curve ball. Initially, my dad and I planned that he would help with most of the finances, so I could focus on my studies. In my 2nd semester, God had different plans and called my dad home. At that moment, I felt that God couldn't be providing what Michael and I needed.

I was not so gently pushed into trying to figure it out on my own. Full-time school, no job, and I was gifted guardianship of an amazing 12-year-old. The inside turmoil and panic were soon replaced with a peace that I am still trying to wrap my head around two years later. Paul writes about it earlier in chapter 4 of Philippians. That peace and contentment is the foundation of knowing that God truly is the only Provider we will ever need.

I'm sure many of us have had conversations with our children (or ourselves!) about the difference between wanting something and needing something. While that may involve material things, I believe that Paul is writing about our emotional needs in this chapter. Through challenging times, when I keep my eyes focused on God, He ALWAYS provides everything that I need. A kind word, a hug, someone to listen, someone to pray with, and peace that surpasses all understanding that is more precious than silver and gold.

They are what God provides if I walk with Him every day. When I am in God's presence, I realize that that is all I want, as well as all I need. There is peace in knowing that everything is taken care of and that God will always be my Provider of everything I need.

Jennifer Thomasson Baker

God, Thank you for knowing my every want and need. Thank you for providing all that I need today and all that I will need in the future. To our God and Father be glory.

Thursday, December 7, 2023

I AM

Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, before Abraham was, I am."
John 8:58 NRSV

In the early oral history of the Hebrew people, Moses asked God what His name was, (see Exodus 3:13-14). God said unto Moses, "**I AM THAT I AM**": and He said, "Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, **I AM** hath sent me unto you." Since that time, He has been known by the Hebrew word pronounced, "YAHWEH," translated "**I AM.**" (Boldface mine)

Realizing just how sacred the name of God is, too holy to be uttered, the Israelites then and the Jews now, would not, and are forbidden to say nor write the Name. Instead, as it is in the English translation of the Hebrew Bible, they would use another word such as Elohim אֱלֹהִים or spell the Name, G-D. I have a friend, Jewish and Israeli, who will send me a Christmas card with the words, "May G-D Bless! On your Holy Day."

This Advent season, as we prepare for Christmas, remembering the birth of Jesus, we will think of an infant baby lying in a manger. But that's not the beginning of the story as we might say. The beginning of the story began before time. According to John's Gospel the beginning was the Word which was with God. And the Word that was with God was the Light coming into the world. We know Him as the promised Messiah, Christ, **I AM**. How blessed are we to know the story of Jesus from the beginning. He could show us His Father. This man had known Abraham (John 8: 57) because as the Son of God, He was before Him and is still "**I AM.**"

T. Noel Cooper

To the Glory of God, the Father. Amen

Friday, December 8, 2023
The Alpha and the Omega

“I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “who is and who was and is to come, the Almighty” Revelation 1:8

In this Advent season, we are reminded just how almighty our Savior is. John, in the Book of Revelation, depicts God by utilizing three different verb tenses—present, past, and future. God always is. Then God became one of us as a child in a manger in Bethlehem and will come again in power as the Glorified Christ. Therefore, God is the Alpha and the Omega.

John’s symbolic language suggests that the Book of Revelation was not written exclusively for the seven congregations in Asia Minor, but rather was written for all believing Christians—including us! Just as the first-century Christians struggled against the violence and cruelty of the Roman Empire, so we are confronted by rampant materialism, secular values, racism, and violence. Like our brothers and sisters in Asia Minor, we need to hear the words of Jesus: “In this world, you will have tribulation, but be of good cheer. I have overcome the world” (John 16: 33).

When fear takes us by the throat and refuses to release us, we must take to heart what Jesus said to Jarius when his daughter was close to death: “Don’t be afraid. Just believe” (Mark 5:21). We need to say these words to ourselves, especially when things don’t work out as we had hoped. We belong to an approachable God who is always there, who always cares for us, and who will always bring us to salvation, no matter what happens to us tomorrow or the next day, or the day after that. Our destiny lies with the God who stretches from beginning to the end and who offers us a life that never ends.

Edwin Chase

O Lord, in the midst of many voices, help us hear your summons. May your voice be the first and final one in our lives. Amen.

Saturday, December 9, 2023

Love

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life.

John 3:16

A Name for God is Love

Two thousand and twenty-three years ago, in a barn in Bethlehem, love was born. His name is Jesus. He lived, preached and taught about God's love and eternal life; died on a cross; arose from the dead; and He ascended to Heaven. He sent the Holy Spirit to live in us and to equip us for this life. This is the greatest gift the world has ever known.

John 3:16 should be memorized by every single soul. Movies and books have been written about love, but this is not God's love. His love is not based on performance. It is not earned. It doesn't keep score of wrongs. The slate is cleaned even though no one has perfect scores, and His love never leaves us.

I had read about Jesus and thought I knew Him, but one day I really knew Him and that made all the difference.

May Jesus be known this Christmas, worshipped in our homes, and shown our gratitude for such a life. That is the love that will never leave, and it is not just a Christmas gift but an everyday gift.

Sue Ellis

Holy God, may Jesus be lifted up on high in our lives as our Lord and Savior. Thank you for this love and for your salvation. In the mighty name of Jesus. Amen.

THE SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT
December 10, 2023

JESUS CHRIST, HIS ONLY SON, OUR LORD

Savior

“For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.” Luke 2:11

The Christmas season and the anticipation of the birth of Jesus is my favorite time of the year. Unfortunately, for most of us, it can also be the most stressful time. The calendar speeds up from October-December with the wonderful fall weather that plays host to numerous festivals in Savannah; preparations for hosting family at Thanksgiving; followed by planning to travel at Christmas and all of the end of the year requirements for work. It is easy to lose sight of this wonderful gift from God.

This verse details the angel of God telling the shepherds the news of Jesus’s birth. Amazingly, they rushed to see the Child. Should we not be able to set aside all the stressors of the modern world to stop and worship the wonder of the miracle of His birth?

Jesus is always with us—whether we see Him or feel Him. He is there to lift the heavy loads we carry. When I am feeling stressed and overwhelmed, I need reminders to trust in Him. I am thankful when tasks are completed and the timing of events go smoothly. I try to remember these successes are the works of Jesus—not me.

Corie Turley

Dear Lord, I pray we remember your presence with us during the Advent season and always. Help us to give our burdens over to God. Amen

Monday, December 11, 2023

LOVE

Jesus said "Which of these three do you think proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell into the robbers' hands?" And he said, "the one who showed mercy toward him." And Jesus said to him, "Go and do the same."

Luke 10:36-37

I guess you could say that one of the names for God is "Love." I think about some of the things I hear Bible scholars say about Love. Some say that we must point out where someone is falling short of "my" understanding of the Christian ideal to show that we love them. But then, these same scholars will point out that we are saved by Grace, not by what we do, or don't do. Then why do we spend so much time pointing out each other's failures?

Why not celebrate with each other what we have in common? Love each other for what they are and what God has done for them, instead of not being able to worship together because of a very few differences we have?

Jesus was asked "What is the greatest commandment"? His answer was "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and foremost commandment. And a second is like it, you shall love your neighbor as yourself."

When Jesus gave the parable of the Good Samaritan, the Samaritan didn't quiz the man. He saw a need and answered that need and loved the man. If only we could do the same. If only we could do what the God of Love commanded us to do and not try to BE God, what would this world look like?

Ken Rimes

Dear God, help me to be more like You and love people as you do. Amen

Tuesday, December 12, 2023

Bread of Life

Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life.
Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me,
will never be thirsty." John 6:35

She called late on a Saturday night. I did not know her. Don't know how she got my name or phone number. But she had a request. I was busy finishing my sermon for Sunday morning, as I often did late on Saturday night. I tried not to plan anything that would take me away from home or my computer on Saturday evening. I needed to be ready for Communion. But she had a request.

She lived on the east side, and I lived in the western part of the county. She wanted me to call Domino's and order her a pizza that could be delivered to her home. And of course that involves my paying. If I paid over the phone, they would deliver the pizza, and I could go back to my sermon. But I couldn't do that. I did not have a credit card. To pay for it, I would have to drive from the west side of the county to the east side of town and give them cash.

I had to fight the negative attitude about this disruption that was growing in me. I was going to do it, but I wasn't happy about it. As I was getting all of her information, so I could give it to Domino's, she added to her order. Could she also have some breadsticks? And then it hit me as if I had been sucker punched. I needed to prepare for Communion, and she wanted BREAD!

How often had I reminded congregants about the meaning of the bread we shared every time we took Communion? How often had I reminded them that Jesus was the Bread of Life? How often had I reminded them that the Bread of Life was life-giving? How often had I told them that the Bread of Life had been broken for them?

I drove to Domino's with a broken and contrite heart. I pray that the breadsticks and Pepsi she had that night were good. I know they were meaningful for me.

Carolyn Hale Cubbedge

God, Bread of Life, make us truly mindful of your life-giving love for us.
May we never miss an opportunity to share the Bread with others. Amen.

Thursday, December 13, 2023

Servant

“Here is My servant Whom I have chosen, The One I love, in Whom I delight; I will put My Spirit on Him, and He will proclaim justice to the nations.” Matthew 12:18

Servants of the Servant: Lessons from a Lemonade Stand

Today's Bible verse comes from Matthew's gospel, but Matthew is quoting Isaiah (Isaiah 42:1-4 in Matthew 12:18-21). Jesus fulfills Isaiah's prophecy. Being a servant is not popular, but Jesus came as Servant to all. He even says He came not to be served but to serve (Matthew 20:28 and Mark 10:45). Jesus shows us how to be a servant by washing His disciples' feet (John 13:1-17).

When I watch you serve people in need by building Tiny House furniture for homeless veterans, or by sacking groceries for needy people, or by sorting school uniforms for Urban Hope and refugee children, or by mowing that enormous lawn at the Living Vine Christian Maternity Home, or by repairing vehicles for drivers in poverty through the Grace Monkeys ministry, I see your servant hearts.

At Vacation Bible School this summer, two little girls came one morning with an envelope sealed with lots of tape. When I finally pried open the envelope, I found a note, “Miss Nelle, find a good use for this.” The envelope was bulging with cash. They had given all the funds from their lemonade stand on the sweltering prior afternoon.

The two little girls were excited their donation bought food for hungry people in need. They showed me how to be a servant of the Servant.

Nelle Bordeaux

Dear Heavenly Father, help us all to be servants for the sake of the Servant, Your Son, Jesus. Amen.

Thursday, December 14, 2023

Light of the World

Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

John 8:12

"As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world." John 9:5

Jesus said, "For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind." John 9:39

"You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house.

In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven." Matthew 5:14-16

"In him was life, and the life was the light of men.

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it." John 1:4-5

When Jesus calls Himself the "Light of the World," He is referring to something truly amazing. Light makes it possible to see, but it can be so powerful that it makes people blind!

But we need His light. We follow our Lord's Light that overcomes the darkness and shows us our way in a troubled world. It is our Savior's Light that allows us to walk the path of faith without getting lost. Without His Light, we would have no way to feel confident in our faith, our behavior, and our salvation.

Not only is He the Light of the World, but He calls us to become the light of the world ourselves! Do not ever be ashamed of your beauty, your wisdom, your abilities, your kindness, your grace; your light. Let your light illuminate the house, the city, and the whole world. As a child of God, shine your light like the stars in the sky, holding fast to the word of life (Eph 2:14-16), and in so doing, express God's glory fearlessly before all the world.

Glen Doki

Lord Jesus, thank you for being the Light of the World, the life that is the life of all people. Help me to become the light of the world that shines before others. Let me serve You with good works to give glory to our Father who is in heaven. May Your holy name be praised forever and ever!

Friday, December 15, 2023

Good Shepherd

"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them."

John 10:11

I find that the Bible is more meaningful when the scripture is put in context. Several years ago, our Sunday school class studied *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23* by Phillip Keller, and I learned more about sheep and shepherds than I ever thought I wanted to know. Sheep are pretty much helpless, subject to all sorts of afflictions if left on their own. They are anxious, timid and fearful and will not rest if they don't feel safe and content. Sheep can often become "cast"—that is when they get turned over on their back and cannot get up without the help of their shepherd. Shepherds must rub a mixture of linseed oil, sulfur, and tar on the sheep's faces to prevent them from becoming so irritated by flies and parasites that they work themselves into a frenzy. Also sheep can be so stubborn that they will fall down a cliff just to get a mouthful of green grass. And sheep are infamously prone to wandering (like us!).

While the facts and behavior of sheep were interesting, I think this study stuck with me because it helped me understand the comparison of Jesus to a shepherd. Jesus's followers understood what it meant to be a good shepherd. Sheep are completely dependent on the shepherd for almost every need. A flock's success is dependent on the care and attention of their shepherd. A good shepherd is invested in their sheep both monetarily and emotionally. The sheep trust that he will provide pastures for grazing and streams for drinking. They know he will protect them from wolves, fences, and danger. Every evening the shepherd will account for his sheep and watch them through the night. This dependency gives the sheep a sense of peace and security. The sheep flourish, are well fed, and content. On the other hand, a shepherd who is a hired hand and has no investment in the sheep can be less attentive, leaving the sheep vulnerable to all sorts of danger and ailments.

When we trust Jesus to provide for us both spiritually and physically, we can also find peace and security. Our security rests in the promise of eternal life, and in the assurance of God's kingdom, here on earth. Our protection comes from the Holy Spirit and the scripture. Our abundant and flourishing life comes through Jesus, who knows our needs, and who hears and answers our prayers. We can rest well, knowing our Good Shepherd, Christ Jesus, is watching over us.

Caroline Livingood

Jesus, you are the Good Shepherd. Lead me to green pastures, protect me from danger, and guide me to eternal life with you. Help me not to stray from your flock, but to experience the peace and contentment that can only be found through trusting you. Amen

Saturday, December 16, 2023

Cornerstone

“Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God’s people and also members of His household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus Himself as the chief cornerstone. In Him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord.” Ephesians 2:19-21

I took my first trip to the UK in 2013 after graduating with my Bachelor’s degree. Many of the sites we visited were hundreds of years old. I lost count exactly how many times our tour guide said, “You can still see the Norman foundations.” My first thought was that the Norman conquest left its mark. Upon further reflection, those Norman foundations have some real staying power. They were constructed so well that builders for ages to come continued to use the foundations for their own constructions. A cornerstone, sometimes referred to as a foundation stone or a setting stone, is the first stone set in a masonry foundation. Additional stones are set in reference to the cornerstone. The cornerstone is used to determine the position of the entire structure.

In Isaiah 28, God promises the people of Judah to send the cornerstone, His Son, who will provide the firm foundation for their lives. Later, Ephesians 2 provides a very clear metaphor of the role of Christ in the church and as the foundation of our faith and personal relationship with God. “How firm a foundation, ye saints of the Lord, is laid for your faith in His excellent Word.”

During this season of Advent, we await the coming of Christ, the laying of the cornerstone. The words of an anthem performed by the men of the Chancel Choir comes to mind: “The stone that the builders rejected became the cornerstone of a whole new world.” As the cornerstone of the church, Jesus is our standard of measure and alignment. He holds us together and guides us. He provides us with hope and a future.

Sheila Watts

Dear Lord,
Thank you for sending your Son to be the cornerstone that joins us together and provides a guide and measure for our lives. Amen.

THE THIRD SUNDAY IN ADVENT

December 17, 2023

The Holy Spirit

“For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”
Isaiah 9:6

Wonderful Counselor

Couples Therapy

Names are more than a title or happenstance in Hebrew culture. They describe the essence of God within a being. The name is a glowing billboard of God’s spirit, uniquely manifesting in time and space. The name is more about God than about whom the name is given. The person stands as a sign about the truth of the name.

Take Moses for example. Moses means “draws from the water.” From being drawn from the water as a baby, to drawing water from his uncle’s well in Midian, then drawing the people of God through the parted water of the Red Sea, and even drawing water from the rock; Moses became a living advertisement for a unique manifestation of God’s presence with his people. God draws his people from the water. Moses’s life was a symbol of this truth. When the prophet uses the name “Wonderful Counselor” in Isaiah 9:6, it is part of a larger name written more accurately as a sentence: **“A-wonderful-counselor-is-our-God, the-everlasting-Father-is-an-official-for-well-being.”**

Isaiah is telling us a truth about God’s presence among his people. He speaks in present tense because it is already true. However, that truth would become manifest as a walking billboard in the person of Jesus.

As my wife and I leave our couples therapy session today, with a great counselor and friend, I feel seen, I feel heard, I feel known—by myself and others. I feel like I’m glowing with love. When we arrive home, I make some afternoon coffee, sit down in my favorite chair, and close my eyes. The presence of the more Wonderful Counselor comes over me. I feel seen, I feel heard, I feel known-by myself and others. I feel like I’m glowing with love. I am awestruck by His availability, at any moment, even this moment, to lift my weary head and remind me of my name: Beloved.

Christian Swails

Wonderful Counselor, beneath the swarm of life around me is a deep down quiet place. You beckon me to tarry there. I stop. I breathe. Can I share with you the burdens of my heart and mind?

Monday, December 18, 2023

Prince of Peace

“For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” Isaiah 9:6

We have had an exciting six months in our lives, as our twin daughters gave birth to baby girls six months apart! Such wonderful miracles and blessings from God for us to love! As we awaited their arrivals and anticipated the names their parents would give them, it brought great excitement and anticipation for us! What special gifts!

While these precious baby girls were born as children of God and their parents, there was one child born for all of us and that was Jesus Christ! “For unto us a child is born”—all of us, collectively as a blessing to the world! Seven centuries before the King of Kings’ miraculous arrival, the prophet Isaiah told of Jesus’ coming. The child would not just be any child for He would be God’s son arriving as an infant to live among us, suffer for us and reign eternal to save each of us! “The government will be on his shoulders”—the suffering servant would become the leader with all the authority in heaven and on earth given to him.

“And his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace.” Wonderful as incomprehensible or beyond understanding; Counselor as someone with great wisdom; Mighty God as more than a just a man; Everlasting Father as in the trinity and life eternal; and Prince of Peace bringing peace to each of us by taking away our mourning and pain as the old order of things would pass away.

Susan Hancock

Dear God, during this season, thank you for sending a child born for all of us, a son given to each of us—the greatest gift we could ever receive. Amen

Tuesday, December 19, 2023

Eternal One

“I am the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the ending, saith The Lord, which is, and which was, and which is to come, the Almighty.”

Revelation 1:8

Alpha and Omega are the first and last letters in the Greek alphabet. People in Biblical times would refer to them as we would say “from A to Z.” However, their use in several places in the Book of Revelation is clearly intended to indicate that God exists completely outside the framework of time as we understand it. There is a similar reference at the beginning of the Gospel of John. “In the beginning was the Word ...and the Word was God.”

These words are familiar to us from the concluding lesson in the Lessons and Carols service during the Christmas season. The British scientist J.B.S. Haldane once said: “The universe is not only stranger than we imagine, but stranger than we can imagine.” So it is with God, Who truly passes all human understanding. God exists not only for all time as we measure it, but for all eternity in ways that only He can imagine.

The great and wonderful news is that this eternal God so loved us that He sent his only son Jesus to suffer and die to save us from the consequences of our sins and to offer us the promise of eternal life with Him. That is the point of this season of joy. In the midst of all the distractions, this is where we need to keep our focus.

During our brief time on this earth, God will ALWAYS be there for us. It is our responsibility, and should be our joy, to show our gratitude for God’s marvelous gift to us by living in the way that Jesus prescribed, loving God with all our power and our neighbor as ourselves. In that way our behavior will serve as an example and help to lead others to Christ.

Byron Boyd

Almighty, eternal God, help us to remember and celebrate the gift of your Son during this hectic and overcrowded season. Please let our gratitude be reflected in our behavior toward others. Amen.

Wednesday, December 20, 2023

Teacher

Jesus said, "Suffer little children, and forbid them not to come unto me: For such is the kingdom of Heaven." Matthew 19:14

Jesus—the Teacher

His disciples must have seen signs of restless, squirming little children. They wanted to prevent such a state for Jesus. Jesus was healing the sick and the lame, restoring sight and speech, curing leprosy and more. His followers grew to thousands everywhere He went. And yet He reached out to the children..."Of such is the Kingdom of Heaven."

Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—sounds like a rap group? Not really. They're a godly group with segments in the best-selling book of all time: The Holy Bible!

Matthew, Mark, Luke and John each tell of the teachings of Jesus. Here we are taught The Lord's Prayer. The Beatitudes, also. Jesus teaches about loving our enemies. He calms the winds and the sea. With five loaves and two fishes, he feeds the five thousand. He speaks in parables so that all may understand. Thousands follow Him...and yet, He reaches out to the children..."Of such is the Kingdom of Heaven."

Kindergarten and first grade teachers understand this. They start the year with a lot of raw material. Many five and six-year olds today do not yet have many skills. Some don't even know their colors. Others have never been away from home for a full school day. "Reading and Writing and 'Rithmetic" have not progressed very far. These little ones are not use to much sharing and listening. Then here they all are: beginning their new year together. "Of such is the Kingdom of Heaven." Good teachers are a gift from God.

No matter how many others clamor for Jesus, it is to the children that He beckons. Yet He bids us all to come to Him. In all the rush and busyness of today's world, Jesus calls to us. Now.

"Jesus loves me! This I know, as He loved so long ago,
Taking children on his knee, saying, "Let them come to Me."

Camille O'Neill.

Dear Lord, we are all raw material, needing your teachings. As little children, help us to follow Thee. Amen

Thursday, December 21, 2023

Guide

“But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come.” John 16:13 (NIV)

No matter our age, we all need guidance. I enjoy working with the children's choir on self-control, which is a difficult task to achieve for all of us. But being in control of ourselves is the perfect way for the Spirit of truth to guide us. A guide is like a rule, and rules are the guardrails of life. Just as guardrails keep us from running off the road, rules help us to stay on the narrow path of truth.

The children's choir has five guides they use to develop self-control. One of the five is based on the golden rule. If the Spirit is our guide, we can be more effective in how we treat others and be better witnesses. The Good Samaritan was certainly guided by the Spirit in his treatment of a stranger.

Raymond Patricio

As we go about our daily tasks during this special time of the year, may your Spirit guide us. May it lead us to see those in need around us, and help us respond as you would have us to respond. Amen

Friday, December 22, 2023

Truth

“This is he that came by water and blood, even Jesus Christ; not by water only, but by water and blood.

And it is the Spirit that beareth witness, because the Spirit is truth.” 1 John 5:6

In a trial, the jury must determine the facts of a case by examining the evidence and weighing witness testimony. We know there is only one truth, but without omniscience we are left to search out the truth through witnesses, much like pieces of a puzzle. In turn, we attempt to recreate the full image with the few pieces we recover.

Each side of the case presents the pieces they hold and persuades the jury to interpret the picture they paint. Knowing this man-made system is imperfect, the jury is told to determine the truth by standards called “preponderance of the evidence” or “beyond a reasonable doubt.”

The scripture replaces uncertainty by acknowledging that God has the pieces to all the puzzles. We speak of “truths,” little pieces of a larger picture. Knowing Jesus Christ as the Truth is a challenge. The fallibility of our witnesses hiding puzzle pieces, painting over the original image, and not knowing how the pieces we have fit together can make the idea of ever knowing the Truth seem out of reach. But knowing Jesus Christ as the Truth is the faith. Letting go of the puzzle pieces and trusting that God has the full image is the leap. Puzzle pieces are an earthly comfort and offer only a glimpse of the magnificent and mysterious image. I can turn my puzzle pieces over in my hand, memorizing the curves and corners. I can see my puzzle pieces and arrange them so I can see the image that pleases me. In doing so I struggle to remember they are merely puzzle pieces and not the Truth.

Meredith Layman

Though they give me comfort, help me let go of the familiarity of earthly puzzle pieces and look to You, the full picture. On the days I feel I am not meant for this world, guide me to where I fit in the image, lead me in Your work and let me shine Your light so others may know the Truth. I trust you are the full image, the Truth. Amen.

Saturday, December 23, 2023

Healer

“Heal me, O Lord, and I shall be healed; save me, and I shall be saved; for thou art my praise.” Jeremiah 17:14

Two days before Christmas, the celebration of the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ! A bustling time for everyone – cooking, cleaning, last minute shopping, making sure everything is “just so.” Plus there are work, church and volunteer obligations. So much to DO before the BIG DAY! Well, if you’re reading this entry, you’ve “penciled in” a few minutes to be still in His presence for peace of mind, serenity and thinking about His presence, His love, His Son Christ Jesus, His Holy Spirit who lives in your heart.

Foremost in my thoughts and prayers are God’s healing powers in the lives of the Monahan family, spiritually, physically and emotionally. And how grateful I am, especially after Pat’s diagnosis of stomach cancer and the ensuing major surgery and chemo treatments, that Christ Jesus is the “Main Man” in our lives!

Jehovah [Yahweh]—Rapha,” The Lord Who Heals” is one of the many different names of God in the Old Testament. Being a researcher by nature, I discovered that all derivatives of “to heal” appear 250 times in the Bible. The very first reference to God’s healing appears in Exodus 15:26 when God says to Moses “...for I am the Lord, your healer.” Throughout the Old and New Testaments, verse upon verse (about 1,500) reveal how God, then His Son Christ, fully human and fully divine, healed and is healing: physically (2 Kings 5:10; Matthew 4:23; 19:2), emotionally/mentally (Daniel 4:34; Psalm 34:18; Mark 6:56) and spiritually (Psalm 103:2-3; Luke 5:20). Just to cite a few!

These words have brought great comfort and peace to Pat, our sons and me during these past several months. God’s work is never done! So... this humble and reverent follower and disciple of Christ, named Jesus, prays daily for you, gentle and kind readers. Thank you for your daily prayers and kind thoughts for us. And, yes, Jesus is the reason for the season. Thank you dear Christ for Your healing powers, Your love, Your strength, Your faith in us and Your gift of each day. Merry Christmas and a very Happy New Year!

Sharlene Monahan

Dear Heavenly Father, thank You for Your gift and power of healing. I pray for Your healing of all who are ill, grieving, in recovery or are in spiritual or mental turmoil. You are Jehovah Rapha, the Lord who heals. Please heal the spiritual, emotional and physical wounds of Your Kingdom on Earth with Your steadfast love. Thank You with all my heart, soul, mind and strength. Amen

THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT
Christmas Eve, December 24, 2023

GOD IS WITH US

Messiah

The woman saith unto Him, "I know that Messiah cometh, which is called Christ: when He is come, He will tell us all things." John 4:25

Christmas is the beautiful season celebrating God entering humanity. The crystal-cold nights, veiled in an indigo sky with stars that lead you into a celebration of the long-awaited Baby. The Messiah has come. Messiah means Anointed or Appointed One. In John 4, this story from antiquity elaborates that the Messiah was appointed to talk with an unlikely recipient of divine news. A woman. It's the longest conversation with Him recorded in the Bible. Written down for us to read through the ages--it must be essential.

God was looking for spirit-filled, heartfelt worship from humankind. Worship? Picture worship as what you trade your heart for--what you value. Messiah's message spotlighted that God wanted to be valued with every fiber of this woman's being in response to His love, enough love to introduce Himself personally. Messiah was that living proof.

This dialogue hasn't ended. Messiah is still Anointed. God is still Spirit. If you're reading this, you're not physically with God in heaven at this moment. You can be with Him in spirit and in truth, exactly where you are now. Quiet your thought-life. Give your heart to Him. Wait to learn how Messiah is all the same, as in history, appointed just for you.

Life is challenging. This is an imperfect world. Holidays may highlight this. The old saying, "I can't be there with you physically, but I'm with you in spirit," may be your reality this Christmas. God knows. He appointed Jesus to be the Messiah so that He could know, and you could know Him. To the woman in John 4, Messiah masterfully gave a glimpse into God's heart. On this side of history, God as Spirit is the epitome of, "I may not be there physically, but I'm with you in Spirit."

Anne Eller

Dear God, Thank You for the Messiah, and for the Holy Spirit. Remind me to quiet my thoughts, and worship You. In Messiah's Name. Amen.

Christmas Day, December 25, 2023

Emmanuel

“Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means, ‘God is with us.’”

Matthew 1:23

Matthew 1:18-25

The birth of Jesus means a lot of different things to people. It means the revelation of God. As Jesus put it “when you’ve seen me you’ve seen the Father.” It means we have a God who understands us and our struggles. As Hebrews put it, “We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with us in our weakness, but one who has been tempted like we have.” It means God loves us. John simply said, “For God so loved the world he gave his only begotten Son.” It means we are forgiven. As Jesus himself said, “The Son of Man came as a ransom for sin.”

All of those things are important to us in our understanding of God and our relationship to Him. But in the end, maybe the most important thing the birth of Jesus means is the fulfillment of a promise God has made again and again, “I will be with you.” The angel told Joseph in a dream the baby to be born was the fulfillment of a long held promise from God through the prophet Isaiah, “Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means “God is with us.”

It reminds me of the last words of John Wesley on his deathbed, “Best of all, God is with us.” We are never alone, never abandoned, never rejected, never turned away, and never hopeless. Yesterday, today, tomorrow, forever God is with us. Thanks be to Christ who came to be with us, lived, died, and rose for us, and now lives in us. When we feel alone, we don’t have to look any further than our own hearts. Merry Christmas. His name is Emmanuel.

Ben Martin

Lord Jesus Christ, on this Christmas morning we give thanks that you came to be with me and promised you would never leave me. As you now live in me, help me be a witness to Emmanuel to those who have not yet discovered you.” Amen.