

Abingdon Baptist Church Advent devotionals

Week 1

Rev David Fleming

Sunday, November 27th: A different Christmas

Reading Psalm 80:1-7

“Restore us, O God of Hosts; let your face shine, that we might be saved! (Psalm 80:7)

The TV is full of adverts that offer us a perfect, fairy tale Christmas. John Lewis even offers us children who ignore their own presents in order to bring their parents a gift. But the odds are that the next 28 days are not going to run that smoothly. Work parties and family gatherings may have more tension than laughter; plans may go awry; the turkey may not defrost. Maybe that is part of the problem. Our image of Christmas is so ideal that the reality will never compare. But we can enjoy a Christmas filled with joy and peace and hope. These devotions are all about doing that; keeping a sense of perspective and keeping the focus of Christmas where it ought to be. But there is one thing you need to know first: there is nothing we can do that will make Christmas perfect. That is something only God can do. So come along with us in the coming weeks as we read, think and pray together – no matter where you are or what you encounter over the next four weeks.

PRAYER: Lord God, come to me and transform my Christmas this year. Fill it with joy and light, no matter what my circumstances are. I pray in your son's name. Amen.

Monday, November 28th: An Easy Christmas

Reading: Isaiah 64:1-4

“Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down... (Isaiah 64:1a)

My memory of a childhood Christmas is watching my dad fiddle with the fairy lights and pour the drinks, watching my mum make the cake and cook the roast. I would come down on Christmas morning and play with my new toys. Funnily enough, my memories do not include my doing much to help.

Nowadays, my wife and I are the ones rushing about. December means, let's be honest, a lot of extra work and stress. And in a couple of weeks I will find myself wishing that someone else would do the shopping, baking, decorating and cooking for us. I want someone to do Christmas for me, so that I can just sit back and enjoy like I did when I was a child.

But that is really what the message of Christmas is about. God opened the heavens and sent his Son down to us. He would share our life of sorrow, pressure and toil, and surrender his life to set us free. He did all the hard work so that we need only receive the gift he offers this Christmas – Joy, peace, hope and life.

PRAYER: Son of Mary, Son of God, come to us today and help us rest and you prepare for us a joyful celebration of your birth this Christmastime.

Tuesday, November 29th: Determination!

Reading: Isaiah 64:5-9

“There is no one who calls on your name, who rouses himself to take hold of you ... (Isaiah 64:7)

Every year the media offers us the “must have” toy that every child clamours for. Demand always outstrips supply, so there will be stories in the news of parents travelling hundreds of miles on the rumour that the toy can be found in such a such store; of the toy selling for hundreds of points on the internet. Such determination!

Some people invest so much in the perfect present, the perfect Christmas. But all that energy cannot really make it perfect. To do that we need someone who cares about us enough to show REAL drive. Someone who will even give his life, if that means that we have the perfect gift. That is what Christmas is all about. The Son of God left his place in heaven to become human and live with us here on earth. He offered up his life on the cross in order to offer to us the perfect gift – New life in God.

Prayer: Thank you for saving me by your life, death and resurrection. Change me so that I might celebrate your birth with joy this Christmas. Amen.

Wednesday November 30th: Families

Read: John 1:29-42

“He first found his own brother Simon... (John 1:41a)

Some brothers and sisters get on well. They share, can work together, get together without tension at Christmas. Andrew and Simon Peter seem to have been like that, and the first thing Andrew did when he met Jesus was to go and find Simon to bring him along. They had worked together, and now they would follow Jesus together.

But some families struggle, especially at Christmas. Some family Christmases are more like civil wars, and the only way to keep the peace might seem to be to stay apart. Transforming Christmas needs a peacemaker; someone to step in from the outside and bring peace.

That is, in a nutshell, the Christmas message. Our human family was feuding, at war with itself and with God. Jesus came as the prince of peace to bring together brothers and sisters, and to bring together humanity and God.

Prayer: Lord, if my family gathers together this Christmas, bless our time together. If there is any hurt or tension or offence, bring us peace. Amen.

Thursday, December 1st : CHRISTMAS GOD'S WAY INSTEAD OF MY WAY

Read: Isaiah 53

He was despised and rejected by others, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain. (Isaiah 53:2–3, TNIV)

'For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,' declares the Lord. (Isaiah 55:8, TNIV)

If I had it my way, Jesus would have come as a powerful king, not a helpless baby. If I had it my way, Jesus would have fought against injustice in the world, not been crucified as a silent lamb. If I had it my way, the angels would have announced his birth to the world, not to the shepherds. If I had it my way, there would have been no doubt that God was with us.

But God's way is not my way. The Advent was not what was expected, but it was what was needed. God came as one of us. He came into our littleness, our lostness and our wondering "Does anybody care? Do I matter at all?" If he had come as a heavenly warrior, or a mighty king, or in power and glory it would simply have reinforced the chasm between God and humanity. But he became like us so that we could become like him. The beauty of Isaiah 53 is that it spans Jesus' ministry, from the cradle to the cross. It reminds us that Jesus understands our lives as we suffer, struggle, and endure sorrow. Some people look forward to Christmas; others dread it as a painful reminder of loss. Isaiah reminds us that Jesus understands us because he has walked a painful path ahead of us.

Prayer: thank you that you know what I go through. Thank you that you understand. And thank you that you know all my struggles and faults, but you still love me.

Friday December 2nd : CONTENTMENT IN A CONSUMERIST FRENZY

Reading: Luke 2:29-32

"Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, (LUKE 2:29)

Traditionally, Advent does not only look forward to Christmas day, it looks forward to the return of Jesus and the resurrection of the dead.

When the aged prophet Simeon cradled the Christ-child in his arms, he burst forth in a glorious prayer of praise, rejoicing that he was now ready to die. He had seen Jesus. He had the hope of salvation visible before him. Seeing Jesus had given him hope for the future as well as joy in the present.

This first celebration of Jesus' birth was, in a sense, a hymn to contentment. Simeon had Jesus, so he had everything he desired. As our media seeks constantly this season to awaken

in us the desire for more and more, contentment seems to be the least likely theme for Advent. So what will it be this year? A time of yearning for more and more, or Can we truly say with Simeon that we're content to depart this life in peace because we, too, have seen the Christ-child and know our future is secure?

Prayer: Lord, help me to learn contentment and to realise that when I have you, I have everything. Amen.

Saturday December 3rd: "Incarnation [noun]: taking on a human form or nature."

Reading: Philippians 2:6-11

. . . he made himself nothing, by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. (Philippians 2:7)

"Veiled in flesh, the Godhead see, hail the incarnate deity" (O come all ye faithful)

When I was growing up we owned a crib set, which was always put out during advent on top of the TV (for the benefit of younger readers, this was in the days before flat screens). The set was made out of painted plaster, and boasted the usual array of shepherds and wise men. I remember that the stable was a red-roofed barn from a farm set I had once owned. Over the years the crib set began to deteriorate. Joseph's nose broke off, one of the kings lost his gold, one shepherd disappeared altogether. There was not a figure that did not show signs of wear and tear. Time took their toll.

Christmas is a celebration of incarnation. It is about Jesus entering a human life which was earthy and earthly.

Neither the circumstances nor the birth of Jesus itself were nice and clean. And His birth was the passageway into a life that took its toll—a life spent in servanthood to both God His Father and to human beings. The toll was nothing other than both His life and His death.

Perhaps towards the end my crib set, battered and broken, was a better symbol of the incarnation of Jesus than it had been when it was pristine and fresh out of the wrapping.

Prayer: Lord, this Christmas I will make lots of mistakes. Help me to remember that you do not expect me to be perfect, you expect me to follow you. Amen.