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**Sunday 28 November 2021 to Sunday 5 December 2021**

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Sunday 28 November 2021

# To the moon and back!

by Darren Pope

**There will be signs in the sun, moon and stars … When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near (Luke 21:25a,28).**

Read Luke 21:25–36

Dappled silhouettes sway as lush leaves dance in the summer breeze. As they transition gently, the tarnished gnarled remnants flutter silently downward, weaving a mat of biomass. Wintery westerlies sing a restful lullaby, and dormancy prevails. Stillness. Rest. Recharge. The majestic magnolia tree framed by my window actively heralds new seasons. Patiently, we wait as across the night sky, celestial stars twinkle as moon phases wax and wane. The ordained passage of time ticks by.

Change is coming. Change is exponential by nature and our constant companion as we do life together. Driving past my magnolia, casual observers gain a momentary glimpse, a selective snapshot of ‘now’. They may only see full bloom or perhaps mere skeletal sticks. Change is incremental, too, honouring a journey of small daily growth.

Recharged, the tiny shoots become tightly twirled buds, bursting energetically into the light. Generous beauty is unveiled and shared. New life, hope and growth rise up. Advent pokes us in our slumber and stirs our anticipation of what is to come. In the tomb below Golgotha, dormant and still, Christ rested. Our loving Lord burst energetically into the light, and generous beauty was also unveiled and shared. Advent encourages us to lift our eyes in hope. A new season is coming. New life. Hope. God’s work changes everything.

His love is a timeless treasure. He loves you always.

He loves you to the moon and back!

**Lord of love, thank you for the gift of your grace each day. Thank you for loving me, no matter what. Thank you for being with me today. You and me, Lord. Amen. Let’s go!**

Monday 29 November 2021

# How’s your vision

by Darren Pope

**The prophecy of one whose eye sees clearly, the prophecy of one who hears the words of God, who has knowledge from the Most High, who sees a vision from the Almighty (Numbers 24:16).**

Read Numbers 24:15–18

Holding my iPhone at arm’s length and adding the magnifier widget to my favourites has become a thing! Footy players become so much clearer – even downfield – when I don my glasses. Great eyesight is something I have had the luxury of taking for granted for a long time, but I can notice the change. Maybe it’s time for an optometrist check-up. How’s your vision?

Looking a long way into the distance helps us think, plan and anticipate changes with a long-range view. If you peer toward the distant horizon at the Nullarbor Plain, baking heat creates a shimmering haze. What we see or think we see can potentially be misleading.

Balaam tended to share variable versions of the truth! Can Balaam really be trusted? He made this prophecy at least 1400 years before the time of Christ. That’s a distant view toward a far horizon! Given Balaam’s sketchy reputation, can the coming of a messiah be trusted?

This Advent, we also hear the word of God and have eyes to see. We are created as cerebral, articulate and spiritually thoughtful beings. We can read of stars and sceptres and conjure up images of kingly things. We don’t need to rely on an ancient micro-moment of prophecy because we have the blessing, freedom and daily opportunity to be informed by God’s word revealing the eternal truth in the Bible. God’s word can be trusted. His love spans all time, across great distances and remains the same. He doesn’t hold us at arm’s length. Through his grace, he comes to us daily with the gift of unconditional love and forgiveness. It’s always God’s work, and his love is for all. It’s clear to see this Advent. Our king is coming!

We pray:

**Lord of love, lift my eyes today. Help me see you clearly in each moment. Thank you for being my king and touchstone of truth. Thank you for loving me. Amen.**

Tuesday 30 November 2021

# In him

by Darren Pope

**The Lord will be a refuge for his people, a stronghold for the people of Israel. In that day the mountains will drip new wine, and the hills will flow with milk (Joel 16b,18a).**

Read Joel 3:16–21

Ever tucked something special away in a safe place and needed it sometime later, but you just couldn’t remember where it was? No doubt, it was somewhere safe! It feels so good when you replay the video in your head, and it helps you remember what you did, why you did it and where your safe place is.

Dripping with new wine, flowing with milk and running with water. These are powerful images of a reviving and refreshing change, sustaining a vibrant life after a time of deep and crusty dryness. It’s a picture of a positive hope-filled future. That’s God’s work for us. He is our safe place. We can safely tuck away our thoughts, actions and words with him. Through his unconditional love, our coming king keeps our deep, dark stuff in the safe place of his heart.

The best bit is that when he takes on our ugly stuff, it is forgotten forever! Each day, and again this Advent, because our sin is hidden in him, we are freely and openly welcomed to savour fresh milk, commune in grace through new wine, and receive his baptismal spirit of new life through refreshing water.

Our sin is gone. Our hope is in him.

We pray:

**Lord of love, you know my dark and ugly stuff. Thank you for taking it and tucking it away in your heart. Thank you for your nourishment today. Thank you for being my personal hope for tomorrow. I am safe in you. Amen.**

Wednesday 1 December 2021

# Shady shelter

by Darren Pope

**Everyone will sit under their own vine and under their own fig tree, and no-one will make them afraid, for the Lord Almighty has spoken (Micah 4:4).**

Read Micah 4:4–7

As I nimbly switched from forehand to backhand at full pace, my Dunlop Volleys squelched through the crusty court surface and sank into the black sticky mire below. Ah, the 70s! Growing up in the country and playing hardcourt tennis meant my Saturdays were spent enduring blistering temperatures on the court and actively exerting myself amidst stinking hot South Australian summers. It was hot enough standing still, let alone playing hard as the dry heat sucked the air out of my lungs. Yep, you could have cooked an egg on the court, I reckon!

There was so much relief when the singles match was over, and I could finally come off the court. My focus was to get into the shade, stop, find water and then food and rest to recover. I still had my doubles match to play. As we travelled to different clubs, my favourite venues were the ones with a glory vine wending its way overhead. Summer vines are filled with lush, broad, intertwined leaves and tendrils. They weave a haven from the harsh and searing sun and allow dappled light and a cooling breeze to filter gently through, refreshing our salty skin and sun-sapped souls. Their specific purpose was to provide a shady shelter.

As humans, we actively live each day. It’s not a passive journey or the free ride of a passenger. The journey of doing life together is demanding. It can be taxing, hard, hot, and it can suck the air out of our lungs. Where can we find a shady shelter today – and in the days to come? In the Gospel of John, we read that God is the vine, and we are the branches. In him, we will be more fruitful. Our loving Lord is the foundation. It’s his work to provide us with strength, structure and support, all while being deeply rooted in the love of our Heavenly Father.

We know our king is coming. Advent is a verb, so we don’t just sit and wait – we do Advent. We actively look forward, anticipate and remind ourselves of the deeply personal relationship that God shares with each of us through his Son. We walk in the name of the Lord – forever.

We can walk, serve, rest and play comfortably, confidently and safely in his love.

We are refreshed and nourished in his shady shelter.

It’s always God’s work. As a vocation, our life of service and worship is the response to what he has already done for us. How will you do Advent?

We pray:

**Lord of love, thank you for coming to me again today in love. Your gracious love amazes me, comforts me and inspires me. You know the day I have in front of me; thank you for walking with me. Thank you that I can lean into you and be okay. Amen.**

Thursday 2 December 2021

# Ugh! That’s hopeless!

by Darren Pope

**But first he must suffer many things and be rejected by this generation. ‘Where, Lord?’ they asked. He replied, ‘Where there is a dead body, there the vultures will gather’ (Luke 17:25,37).**

Read Luke 17:22–37

Darkness, suffering, pain, loss, rejection, disaster, death and destruction. Wow, that sounds like a really discouraging reading. It just doesn’t seem fair that people doing life together will experience all these things in their journey. It paints a really depressing image of what life on earth is like, and ultimately, an apparent lack of purpose when it all comes to a screaming end! Okay, so it’s obvious that all this stuff happens in real life, and it’s just the human experience of living as broken people, steeped in the stain of sin. So, is there good news in all this mayhem and malice?

Read the text again. This time, notice the messages that aren’t so obvious. Did you spot the good news this time? The silent voice that roars loudly in this text is the one that heralds the active advocacy of Christ in every ugly moment this earthly life can muster. Yes, we can see the vultures appear when the crowds shouted for crucifixion, and the guards gambled at his feet, but even more clearly, we find encouragement and courage to take on life’s challenges with Christ as our guide. Luke hints that our future is hopeful, not horrific. He portrays a time when suffering will end and that Christ, being fully human and fully God, will completely absorb and shoulder every moment of our sinful suffering. Our loving, active and present Lord is for you. He comes to you. He gives you his love, peace, forgiveness and purpose, unconditionally.

Still hopeless? No.

Our hope is in Christ.

That’s grace.

We pray:

**Lord of love, thank you for being my guide. Thank you for being my hope. Thank you for knowing me deeply and still loving me. Amen.**

Friday 3 December 2021

# Pad up!

by Darren Pope

**Our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed … So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armour of light (Romans 13:11b,12b).**

Read Romans 13:11–14

You little beauty! Summer is here, and that means cricket is back on the field and on our screens. I love going to the cricket with my family to cheer on our team in all game forms.

Even traditional test match cricket has morphed and adapted as players bring a diverse skill set and experience from shorter and faster game versions. Intuitive cameras and in-depth commentary allow spectators to experience being immersed and involved, virtually seeing, hearing and feeling what the players experience. Stunning stumpings, faster, swinging, and spinning bowling, reverse sweep slog shots and massive sixes make games a super spectacle. But it also incrementally increases the risk for the players and umpires on the field. Protective technologies have needed to grow with the game. Players protect themselves by being personally stronger, more flexible, better conditioned and more knowledgeable about their game.

As much as the game seemingly promotes an all-out attack, high-level defence is critical to ensure effectiveness and sustainability. Players and umpires suit up before play begins each session. Players don leg pads, arm and groin protectors, rib guards, gloves, and helmets. Not one of these items actually aid the players to run faster or hit the ball better, but together, every item helps them feel less risk and play safer. Feeling safe brings a sense of increased confidence to take on super-fast bowling and smash it over the boundary rope. They still get hit by the ball, bowled out, caught out or run out, but they can participate fully, knowing that their protective body armour is shielding them.

In Ephesians, we read of the armour of God. This armour is not designed for attack. Every item permits purposeful protection. God freely offers each item to us to protect our whole being each day. Even when we don God’s armour, we will still be tempted in all aspects of living, but we can engage fully with life, feeling just a little more ‘bullet-proof’ because God has already given his life in love for us.

The song lyrics of Bulletproof by Citizen Way highlight God’s work for us and the confidence we can place in him each day.

Your Love made a wayNow I'm not afraidNo matter what the world may say or what they doI am bulletproof because of You,Because of You

I know you got this whole thing under controlMy soul is untouchable becauseYou've already won meMy victory is not in this flesh and boneIt's in the cross and I knowNobody's taking it from me

I got my armour nowNo fear no doubt can shoot me down.

(CCLI Song # 7059862 by Ben Calhoun | Bryan Fowler | Chris Stevens | Josh Calhoun)

Can we take on life by ourselves? Probably, but not really.

Put on the whole armour of God. Lean into him. It’s enough!

Game on. Pad up.

Check out the video here here: www.youtube.com/watch?v=4gG6ST0DVkw&list=PL-dVgy51zsN9zvvVTN2tvnK0B5yI2mROH&index=29 (Citizen Way 2016).

We pray:

**Lord of love, thank you for being my defender each day. I know you got this whole thing under control; my soul is untouchable because you've already won me.** **Amen.**

Saturday 4 December 2021

# Your rider is on their way!

by Darren Pope

**For you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins (Luke 1:76b,77).**

Read Luke 1:68–79

The family consulted, order details entered, and voucher code completed, the tracking app swings into high gear as we eagerly anticipate the arrival of our favourite gourmet delights.

As the minutes pass, regular update messages are received, and finally, our rider is on their way. Taste buds begin to tingle as the tracking map updates to show progress and the arrival time. Amped up anticipation is building with the promise of imminent arrival. We watch for the lights in the street and wave out to signal the correct address for delivery. With our masks on for the handover, it is time to tuck in and eat. Finally, what was promised has arrived.

Lighting the first candle of Advent helps us to attentively anticipate the promise of a saviour who comes to us. Is Advent an ancient act? What do we have to look forward to? As we prepare for Christmas, our anticipation is amped up with the promise of an imminent arrival. Our coming king requires us to act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with our Lord. In response, we prepare the way by sharing the good news of salvation through the forgiveness of sins. Our loving Lord knows us well. He knows us personally, and he comes to us at our place with the free gift of unconditional love, forgiveness and mercy through his grace.

What was promised has arrived!

We pray:

**Lord of love, help me to act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with you today. Amen.**

Sunday 5 December 2021

# Be prepared

by Georgie Schuster

**As it is written in the book of Isaiah the prophet: ‘A voice of one calling in the wilderness, “Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him”’ (Luke 3:4).**

Read Luke 3:1–6

My friend once described herself as an ‘event cleaner’. This means someone who really gets stuck into a thorough clean just before the guests arrive. I had to smile because I identify with that. When I know someone special is coming over, I put in extra effort to make my place look as good as it can. The rest of the time, things seem to accumulate. Other things take priority, or I get busy or tired.

There are times when my spiritual life gets a little messy too. Things accumulate and weigh me down. I hold on to past hurts longer than I should before offering forgiveness. I allow ‘stuff’ to make demands on my time and focus. But if I knew that Jesus was coming today …

John said it plain and straight. ‘Prepare the way for the Lord; make straight paths for him.’ There is urgency in his voice as he implored those who came to hear to repent and be ready with open ears and hearts to receive Jesus. He earnestly desired people to position themselves to see and receive God’s salvation.

God’s desire is for us to live in the restored relationship that Jesus paid for. What ‘things’ might need clearing away today as we prepare the way for the Lord?

**Dear God, please reveal the things I need to clear from my life. Help me to deal with them. Thank you for your love and mercy. In Jesus’ name, I pray, Amen.**