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**Sunday 18 December 2022 to Sunday 25 December 2022**

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Sunday 18 December 2022

# Just do it!

by Colleen Fitzpatrick

**When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife (Matthew 1:24).**

Read Matthew 1:18–25

As a trained social worker, I have learned that rather than giving advice, it is more helpful to listen, point out options and talk through the implications of such choices. I don’t know about you, but I know that if someone tells me to do something, I am just as likely to go and do the opposite.

I wonder how Joseph felt about his decision to split with Mary. It would seem he had some reservations about it. He did not want Mary to be shamed. And then the angel came to him in a dream and told him what to do! How hard was it for him to change his mind? How did he feel when he did?

Not much is known about Jesus’ earthly father. We know he was not Jesus’ biological father and that he was descended from David. In Matthew’s Gospel, we read that Joseph had several dreams, each of which resulted in decisive action. He was told in a dream not to desert Mary, to flee to Egypt with Mary and Jesus, to go to Israel, and to settle in Nazareth. Each time, he unquestioningly followed the instructions delivered to him while he slept.

Joseph took the angel’s advice on trust – he accepted the spiritual direction that was offered.

When faced with life-changing decisions, it is good to talk them through with others; it’s also good to pray about them and commend our decision-making into God’s good hands, asking that our decisions are blessed. And perhaps looking at the options and the likely outcomes of each is helpful to use for yourself and when others come to you to discuss a decision they have to make.

And, of course, if an angel comes to you in a dream, be sure to trust their instruction!

**God of wisdom and strength, be with us as we grapple with decision-making. Help us to accept spiritual directions when they are offered. Bless our decisions so that they may glorify you and benefit those around us. Help us be respectful listeners when others need to talk things through, and thank you that Jesus decided to come to earth so he could bring us to eternal life. Amen.**

Colleen Fitzpatrick trained as a social worker and worked in foster care and adoptions. She was the director of Lutheran Community Care in South Australia. Colleen is now retired but is a member of several committees and boards within the LCA and the community. She has a husband, John, two daughters and three granddaughters. Colleen lives in Adelaide, South Australia.

Monday 19 December 2022

# Perfect peace

by Colleen Fitzpatrick

**You will keep in perfect peace those whose minds are steadfast because they trust in you (Isaiah 26:3).**

Read Isaiah 26:1–6

I invite you to journey with me through these next days as we contemplate the amazing gift that was prepared for us to receive that first Christmas.

I’d been going through a busy patch – you know how retirees always say, ‘I’m so busy now. I don’t know how I had time to go to work’? Well, my various committees had all been scheduled to meet within a two-to-three-week timeframe. There seemed to be extra child-minding requirements for the gorgeous grandchildren. Adding to that, I had accidentally damaged a finger, which now required physio appointments and regular exercise so I could get back at least some use of it. Then I received the reminder that the deadline for completing these devotions was fast approaching – including four based on the Book of Isaiah.

These days preceding Christmas can be fraught with distraction and busyness, not to mention worry and tension. When venturing out to public places, it’s not uncommon for Christmas music to be blaring. There is some tension as to whether we are celebrating Christmas or having a non-religious holiday season. Whatever it is, these are not necessarily calm or peaceful times.

But wait: in this song of praise we are reading today, the promise of peace shines, glistening like an oasis in a desert. ‘You will keep in perfect peace those whose minds are steadfast because they trust you.’

We just need to hold onto that; to believe that ‘the Lord himself is the Rock eternal’. We can affirm our trust in God when we are at our lowest, be that in the middle of the night or at busy times during the day. God’s ear is always open for our prayers. God’s care is always there for us. One of the reasons I like to wear a cross is that it provides me with a tangible reminder of Jesus’ gifts to me – the gifts of forgiveness, salvation and just being there for me. The gift of peace.

The Lord really is my Rock eternal. May Jesus be your Rock, too, today and always.

**Lord God, thank you for being my Rock eternal. Thank you for your steadfast love that surrounds me today and every day – no matter what happens. Strengthen my reliance on you so I can rest in the assurance of your promises and experience your peace that is beyond any human understanding. Amen.**

Tuesday 20 December 2022

# With redemption comes transformation

by Colleen Fitzpatrick

**When they see among them their children, the work of my hands, they will keep my name holy (Isaiah 29:23a).**

Read Isaiah 29:9–24

I have really struggled with this text, trying to understand what is happening here. The words used depict a situation that is not pleasing to God. Even the way the people worship God is not acceptable – it is only based on human rules, and the hearts of the people have strayed from God.

Some of you may remember the ‘worship wars’ that prevailed within our church as new songs replaced old hymns and new forms of liturgy were developed. And the next thing we knew, sermons were no longer delivered from the pulpit (my pastor even walks around when he preaches), and some pastors stopped wearing those dress things we were familiar with. Then, of course, we had the pandemic, and online worship was the order of the day, opening up new vistas for mission and ministry within our communities.

We have developed new rules to suit new times. Our prayer must be that our worship is acceptable and pleasing to God.

The exciting part of today’s reading is not about how far we have drifted from God – evidenced in so many of the challenges that exist in society today – but rather, the promise, the hope, that with redemption comes transformation.

I long for the time when we see our children keeping God’s name holy and standing in awe of our God, not to mention gaining understanding as they seek instruction. May we as Christians be winsome and welcoming, so that we see more people finding redemption and being transformed by God’s saving grace. And may we continue to find new ways of sharing Christ’s love within our community.

**Transforming God, help us to be good ambassadors for you. You came to us as a child of lowly parents. Open our hearts to see beyond the outside trappings of worship and our church life and find new ways to share your love. Grant us generous spirits so we can celebrate differences and rejoice in changes and inclusiveness. Amen.**

Wednesday 21 December 2022

# Called to transformative action

by Colleen Fitzpatrick

**Woe to those who … do not look to the Holy One of Israel, or seek help from the Lord (Isaiah 31:1).**

Read Isaiah 31:1–9

Here is another affirmation of God’s power. Things weren’t going well for God’s people, who were looking for help from the Egyptians. There is some strong language here with references to ‘the wicked nation’ and ‘evildoers’.

I wonder how that compares with where we are today. Are we a wicked nation full of evildoers?

We are exhorted in Philippians 4:8: ‘Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things’. That is getting more and more difficult as moral standards seem to be sliding to an all-time low. Violence, abuse and harassment are rife from the highest to the lowest levels in our society. The rich are getting richer, and the poor are struggling to put food on their table, let alone have a roof over their head.

Add to that the threat of war and rumours of wars, and the constant news about natural disasters, floods and the threat of bushfires.

Today’s reading again raises the question for me, ‘Where is the hope?’.

And the response is once again clear. ‘The Lord of hosts will protect Jerusalem; He will protect and deliver it, he will spare and rescue it’ (verse five).

In these final days before Christmas, let’s take the time to pause and reflect on what we need to cast aside – what idols are standing in the way of our life with Christ? Remember that yesterday, we read that redemption brings transformation.

Maybe as we prepare to celebrate Christmas, we can allow God’s love to flow into our lives more fully to transform us and open our hearts to find new ways to serve God and each other. We can rest secure in the knowledge that God is on our watch, looking out for us and making sure we are okay.

**Forgiving God, help us always be mindful of your loving presence and not be distracted from our calling to be your children. Fill us with the confidence that your love is always there for us, no matter what challenges we face. Help us find delight in your world and the people around us. Amen.**

Thursday 22 December 2022

# Salvation is here!

by Colleen Fitzpatrick

**The Lord is our king; it is he who will save us (Isaiah 33:22b).**

Read Isaiah 33:17–22

I love choir music. One of my favourite Christmas pieces is by the English composer John Tavener. It is a Christmas proclamation beginning with the words, ‘God is with us. Hear ye people, even to the uttermost ends of the earth’. Listening to it moves me deeply. You can hear the confidence and joy ringing in the choristers’ voices.

To me, today’s reading shouts out a Christmas proclamation, a prophecy of deliverance. Hooray! Let’s shout it out: ‘the Lord is our king; it is he who will save us’.

In these days of uncertainty, that sounds amazing! The past three years have not been easy. Here in Australia, we have gone from crippling drought to soaking rain and floods. We have gone from lives of freedom where we could come and go as we pleased, through to times of lockdowns, restrictions and forced compliance, to comparative freedom once more.

Where we were once a land of plenty, we have had to get used to shortages and gaps on supermarket shelves and the constant commentary of labour shortages. Never before have our medical staff and those supporting their work had it so tough.

And on the world stage, there are wars and rumours of wars – including 33 countries listed as being at war right now; there are floods, droughts and famines. Mass shootings and attacks on life and property are commonplace.

Advent is a time of preparation and getting ready. We have had time to reflect:

Hope is like a light shining in a dark place; we cannot have hope without faith.

Peace passes all our human understanding; for peace, we need quiet minds and open hearts.

Love places the needs of others above our own needs. God’s love for us does not impose conditions or expectations. It’s a free gift for all.

Joy comes to us in unexpected ways when we most need it. We can delight in all of the good gifts that God gives us every day, particularly God’s precious Son.

Today’s reading is preparing us to really celebrate the coming of our Saviour King. He is coming soon – we can trust God’s promises. When the he comes, the terror will have passed. There will be no hostile attacks. There will be enough for everybody. There will be justice and fairness for all. What a fitting message for today, two days before Christmas Eve.

**Gracious Lord, our heavenly King, we yearn for your coming when God’s promises to us will be fulfilled. As we prepare for Christmas, fill our hearts with hope, peace, love and joy so we can truly celebrate your coming. Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.**

Friday 23 December 2022

# Let’s sing

by Colleen Fitzpatrick

**Sing to the Lord a new song; sing to the Lord, all the earth (Psalm 96:1).**

Read Psalm 96

It was the evening after the Great Storm in Adelaide, on 12 November 2022, to be exact. We were on our second day of the blackout. John, my husband, was dial twiddling on his faithful radio instead of channel surfing on our powerless TV.

He landed on a station featuring hymn singing. It reminded me of listening to community hymn singing on the wireless as a child. The hymns being sung could not be classed as new to me, but they may have been new to some. They were hymns of praise, though sung in harmony with gusto culminating in ‘How Great Thou Art’. As I listened, I could sense the joy in the praises sung.

Choir singing seems to be undergoing a bit of a revival. Earlier in the pandemic, online choirs were formed, uniting people from many diverse locations. Pub choirs have developed, and one of our friends took up choral singing in his 60s, never having sung before. The benefits of singing are well documented. You just need to try it to see how good a rousing chorus can make you feel.

Why shouldn’t we sing to our Lord? Sometimes when I’m singing in church, I think about the communion of saints, who I am sure are joining in. I’m sure my dad would be rumbling along in the bass section, my mum singing alto, and maybe my sister producing the beautiful underlying harmonies on the organ as was her habit. Other times, I get lost in the beauty of what is being sung – or I just want to sit and let my soul be nurtured by the voices around me.

In this psalm, we have the earth and heavens, the sea and all creation singing for joy – singing praises to God who comes in judgement. God is a good and righteous judge and, obviously, is a fan of singing.

I pray and hope that you have been singing and will continue to sing new and old songs to glorify God, not just at Christmas but also into the future. And let’s not forget that God has given each of us a voice. I am sure God has an uncritical ear, so there is absolutely no excuse for not singing!

**Creative God, thank you for giving us voices so we can sing your praises. Thank you for the joy we can share through singing – and for the memories that old songs evoke. Thank you for those writing and singing new songs and the musicians using them to bring the Christmas message to us.We look to the time when we can sing eternal praises to you with our loved ones and the communion of saints. Amen.**

Songs of Praise on ABC TV on Sunday mornings and Vision Australia Radio could be a couple of places where you can access new and old music to sing along with.

Saturday 24 December 2022

# A time to ponder

by Colleen Fitzpatrick

**But Mary treasured up all of these things and pondered them in her heart (Luke 2:19).**

Read Luke 2:1–14 (15–20)

Yesterday, we heard about singing a new song of praise to the Lord who was promised to come. Today, we have an angel making a proclamation backed up and amplified by ‘a great company of the heavenly host’, announcing the arrival of the Lord. The proclamation was made in an amazing lightshow to a most humble group of people – shepherds.

How is Christmas Eve for you? Is it just another night preceding another family gathering? A time to nostalgically remember all of those you have loved and lost? Another night to spend on your own, making the most (or least) of your own company? Are you exhausted by the responsibilities of organising and catering for the family get-together and the long lists of things still to be done? Or are there concerns about potential bad behaviour and ongoing family issues?

Will you hear the proclamation?

Some years ago, a friend spoke to me about something that had happened and said I could ‘ponder these things in my heart’. I often remember her words, particularly at Christmas, when I hear today’s reading and the verse, ‘But Mary treasured up all of these things and pondered them in her heart’.

What would it have been like for Mary? She was a young woman who, in the last stages of pregnancy, had made a long and arduous journey with her husband. On arrival, they found that all the accommodation was booked out and that the only available spot was a stable, where she went into labour and gave birth to her Son, who she was told would be the Saviour of the world. They were visited by a group of shepherds who wanted to see their baby Son. Imagine how the shepherds would have explained what they had seen and heard and why they had come to visit! They certainly would be treasured memories.

Fast forward to the events of Good Friday – maybe those treasured memories remained to give Mary comfort and hope as her beloved Son gave his precious life for all of us. May your treasured memories this Christmas bring you comfort, joy and renewed hope in the promises that the Christ-child came to fulfil.

**Precious Saviour, thank you for sharing our human experience and becoming one of us. Help us listen to the proclamation of the good news of your birth, and help us make time to ponder your love and what it means for us. Bless us this Christmas as we gather with families and friends, are on our own or remember those who are no longer here. Help us to glorify you today and always. Amen.**

Sunday 25 December 2022

# A simple call

by Tom Brennen

**And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn (Luke 2:7).**

Read Luke 2:(1–7) 8–20

May the blessings of Christmas be with you this day as we celebrate the birth of our Lord and Saviour!

When I began my ministry as a lay preacher within the church, my pastor of the time was a former farmer. Luke was his favourite gospel. It was simple, evocative and written for those outside the Jewish faith. Luke offers a simple record of the birth of Christ. But despite this simplicity, there is much for us to reflect on. There is much that brings our minds to the future ministry of this little child.

The simple record brings forth much conversation. The most common image of the site of Jesus’ birth is a stable not too dissimilar to stables today. However, some traditions suggest Jesus was born in the lower room of a crude dwelling where animals were housed, and others say that he was born in a cave. One tradition even proposes that Jesus was born in the open air, for that is where a manger would most likely be. That Mary herself had to wrap Jesus in cloth highlights how alone the family was. This task was usually undertaken by a relative who would be with the young mother at the birth.

The explanation for this situation today is simply that ‘there was no place for them in the inn’.

One commentator sums this up bluntly: ‘There is much we do not know. We only know that everything points to poverty, obscurity, and even rejection.’

In Australia and New Zealand, the lands have been ravaged by bushfires, floods and diseases these past years. Our financial situation has been impacted significantly. In particular, rising inflation is placing many families under increased pressure.

Christmas has always been a time to celebrate and be with family. It is easy for many of us to seek to celebrate in a manner that causes us to forget our troubles and the troubles of others, ‘the reason for the season’, and the humble beginnings of the Lord of our lives.

Among the presents and celebrations on this day, let us not forget the child in the manger who calls us to follow his ministry of caring for the poor and rejected. Many of us will sit at plenteous tables with our infants well-clothed and resting safely. Let us give thanks for our circumstances but also use what we have to help those in need.

**Lord, in our plenty, we give thanks on this day that celebrates the birth of your son. Move us to care for our sisters and brothers in need. Amen.**

Tom Brennen is currently serving as principal of Lakeside College, a Prep to Year 12 Lutheran school located in Pakenham, Victoria. He has served as a missionary in the Middle East and has a passion for bringing Lutheran thinking to issues of social justice. As an educator, he is dedicated to ensuring a transformative Lutheran education is accessible to all families across Australia. Tom holds a Master of Education from Australian Lutheran College, a Graduate Certificate in Educational Leadership from Australian Catholic University and undergraduate degrees in arts, music and education. As an active academic, Tom has written and presented on many diverse topics, such as worship in Christian schools, the interaction between social justice and Lutheran schools, leading staff professional development and cross-cultural schooling.