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**Sunday 17 December 2023 to**

**Sunday 24 December 2023**

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Sunday 17 December 2023

**A lot happens before Christmas!**

by Jo Corney

***There was a man sent from God whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light (John 1:6,7).***

Read [John 1:6–8,19–28](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John+1%3A6-8%2C+19-28&version=NRSVUE)

It is a week until we celebrate Christmas! There’s a lot that occurs before Christmas arrives. Where we live, Christmas lights abound for weeks before Christmas, alerting me to its coming! There are many homes adorned with extravagant displays of colourful flashing lights. While I view Christmas lights, I look for nativity scenes, stars or angels. As I await Christmas, I am on the lookout for these lights to bear witness to the Christmas story where we remember the first coming of Jesus.

Compared to how many light displays I see, there are comparatively few of the traditional symbols of Christmas. However, I see many homes decorated with white lights only. These present differently to the variegated hues. The white is complete in its elegance – I want to gaze on these as I enjoy their impact. They clearly dispel the darkness by their shining, where the coloured lights create a muddy blue tone around them. They are still pretty, but I find they have a different impact than the warm or cool white lights.

As I reflect on our reading for today, I see the preparation for Jesus. We see John the Baptist, who came before Jesus as a witness to testify concerning Jesus, who is known as the ‘light of the world’. We are in the final week of Advent – our time of waiting that comes before Christmas when we remember the first arrival and the promised second coming of Jesus to our earth.

This year, I hope my experience of this time leading up to Christmas will find me ‘bearing witness concerning the light’. I hope to embrace Advent rather than wish it away so that I am encouraged and refreshed in the ‘light’ of Jesus in my personal space of faith. I hope for this so that when Christmas arrives, my experience of it is as full as possible – full because the lead up to it has had witness born in me, to me and by me, concerning the ‘light of the world’ – Jesus.

Every blessing for your Advent journey into Christmas.

***Loving Lord, please refresh in us the sense of you, ever for us and with us, as we journey to Christmas and always. In the name of Christ, Amen.***

*Jo Corney is an active member of the LCANZ in Queensland. She has served over many years in voluntary parish pastoral care, ministry and development and representative roles. Over recent years she has been privileged to serve in the delivery of chaplaincy for Lutheran Services.*

Monday 18 December 2023

**A profound space**

by Jo Corney

***Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit (Galatians 5:25).***

Read [Galatians 5:25–6:10](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Galatians+5%3A25-6%3A10&version=NRSVUE)

Advent is the season of waiting – we are in the final week of it for 2023! In this season, do you have times when you find yourself reflecting on matters and experiences of faith? My Advent weeks are chaotic, but over recent years, I’ve been blessed by using reflective practice to give me a space to slow down for a bit, often, and take intentional time to be prayerful. Within these are spaces of ease and difficulty as I sit with God. Regardless of this, I continually find engaging in prayerful reflection on my own journey precious.

Hearkening to the mystery of our Triune God helps me arrive at Christmas more deeply connected and in awe of God’s incomparable love for me as gifted in Jesus. It, in part, underpins the joy in my celebration of Christmas! During these weeks, reflective practice and prayer help me to ‘live by the Spirit’ and perhaps know more of what it is to be ‘in step with the Spirit’. I know it helps me in my practice and experience of – and connection to – my faith.

This Scripture spoke right into my human condition when I wrote this reflection. The following verse says, ‘Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other’ (verse 26). I can recall times when I have internally become conceited and then my outward behaviours have become a blend of provoking and envying others, coupled with trying not to! It’s a miserable space and usually robs me of my peace and joy.

I see from these verses that to live by the Spirit and be in step with the Spirit is enabled by not becoming conceited, provoking and envying others. This means I must continually check my heart to catch my conceit when it is young – before it's grown and recruited provocation and envy come into the mix.

Perhaps you have a way to do this also. However you keep your heart and mind focused on Christ to live by and in step with the Spirit, may you continue in it. My sense of God’s Spirit being real in my moment-to-moment is most complete when my mind and heart are not bound in conceit and envy. Until we are with Jesus for always, may we be helped by the Holy Spirit to live in the beautiful, profound mystery of life, where we know and are in step with the Spirit of God.

***Loving God, thank you for your presence with us through your Holy Spirit. Thank you that we can know you with us and for us always through this. As we approach Christmas, please refresh us in our experience of this in you. In the name of Christ, Amen.***

Tuesday 19 December 2023

**When the text shouts!**

by Jo Corney

***See what large letters I use as I write to you with my own hand (Galatians 6:11)!***

Read [Galatians 6:11–18](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Galatians+6%3A11-18&version=NRSVUE)

What jumps out to you when you read Scripture? I find it changes most times I read the section. I find it helpful that my attention is caught by different parts of the Holy Scripture as I read. I’m grateful for this, as what comes forth to me is usually of help – perhaps comfort, direction, loving discipline, inspiration, confirmation or encouragement. My experience is that reading the words of Scripture is overall for my lasting good.

There were many points in this reading that I have mused over in preparation to share some reflections. The vibe I sense from the reading is that Paul was pretty fed up with the Galatians and the ongoing detour related to the need (or not) for circumcision – that knowing Jesus wasn’t sufficient! Paul is clear that it is the experience we have of being made a new creation in knowing Jesus as Lord of our life that is the point. He is loud about this – this could be the origin of using capslock to yell in email or text! Paul puts his volume into his words by saying, ‘See what large letters I use as I write to you with my own hand’. He really wants to make the points, be heard, and impress this content so it doesn’t have to be dealt with again – no more detours on this point. He wants to open up the freed path that is the journey of growing in love, experience, knowledge and devotion in life with Christ.

Friend, we believe and know it is God’s grace that allows our restored relationship with him for eternity, through his reaching to us in his complete love through Jesus' birth, death and resurrection – grace alone, faith alone, Christ alone. What a help and blessing it is to have the words of Scripture call to us – depending on our space, whether they call loudly or gently – may we find them to ever be for our overall good.

***God of grace and love, thank you for making the way for us to be in a restored relationship with you forever. As we approach Christmas, may we be renewed in our hearts by your grace, love and all that the gift of your Son to humankind gives to us. In the name of Christ, we pray, Amen.***

Wednesday 20 December 2023

**How good it is to be remembered!**

by Jo Corney

***I thank my God every time I remember you (Philippians 1:3).***

Read [Philippians 1:1–11](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Philippians+1%3A1-11&version=NRSVUE)

One day, I received an email with the Scripture reference of Philippians 1:3–6 included. It was an encouragement in my day! I was grateful for this. If a chaplain has a tricky day, it can mean someone else has had a trickier one – this contact arrived on such a day.

These verses say, ‘I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus’.

I have read that, on average, we have approximately 60,000 thoughts per day. This feels about right in my experience. I find many thoughts contain those I care for – some passing thoughts, and some linger longer. On the day I’ve mentioned, it was helpful to know I was remembered and cared for by being reminded via the scriptural reference to the good work of God continuing in me to its completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

Sometimes, I manage to act on my thoughts towards others by reaching out by text or phone call to let them know they are remembered; however, compared to the volume of those that pass through my mind, this is a small number. I can say that over time, I have grown in the practice of committing those who are in my thoughts to God in prayer. I was uplifted and helped when an intentional remembrance of me was made known. The experience has encouraged me to let others know, as I can manage, that they are thought of and remembered. I hope my sharing encourages you.

***Loving Lord, in this busy time leading to Christmas, please help us to remember others and, as we can manage, be encouragers. Please help us to also notice when others encourage us on our journey of life and in our experience of faith. In the name of Christ, Amen.***

Thursday 21 December 2023

**The gospel remains perfect!**

by Jo Corney

***What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretence or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice (Philippians 1:18).***

Read [Philippians 1:12–30](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Philippians+1%3A12-30&version=NRSVUE)

Do you marvel at those with seemingly unmovable faith and focus? Paul seems to be an example of this.

Paul seems to have arrived at a point of experience of God and faith where the dreadful hardships of imprisonment and the behaviour of rivalrous and envious people could be looked past. He writes how the proclamation of Christ continued regardless of the hearts of those who proclaimed it. Whether this proclamation is from hearts of selfish ambition or goodwill, the gospel of Christ was still made known. How remarkable! Paul seems resolved to see the good of how the gospel rings out and to be confident it continues to do so despite the crookedness of the human condition of some who proclaimed it.

As I reflect on this reading, I appreciate how Paul’s words call forward through time to me. Sometimes, I am discouraged as I perceive the sharing of the gospel to be tricky in its presentation. And then I read the Bible and see experiences recorded from 2,000 years ago that could have been concerning, too. Paul comments on being imprisoned for the defence of the gospel, but he reassures us that the gospel of Christ goes forth regardless of the motivation of the ones sharing it. He says the proclamation of Christ continued to happen from those of diverse hearts but also from many who grew in confidence in Christ and in goodwill. I’m encouraged that despite the challenges of the ‘human condition’ in delivering the gospel, it still went forth, and the good news of Jesus spread.

Between the time of Paul and 2023, the perfection of the gospel of Christ has continued to be shared by imperfect people – as Paul shared, ‘What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretence or truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice’. How grateful one can be for this.

***Loving Lord, thank you for the encouragement of your word and its timeless relevance to our journey of faith and relationship with you. Please help us to ever know you for us and with us. In the name of Christ, Amen.***

Friday 22 December 2023

**What is complete joy?**

by Jo Corney

***Then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind (Philippians 2:2).***

Read [Philippians 2:1–11](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Philippians+2%3A1-11&version=NRSVUE)

What is it like to have ‘joy complete’? It seems that Paul shows that an experience in a faith community of being like-minded, of the same love and being one in spirit and mind makes for joy in its completeness. Sometimes, I have found this – it's been a rich experience! I hope you’ve had this also. So, joy in community is beautiful. I crave this to be a common experience. As I find myself thirsty for joyous community, I find myself thinking about my part in it: how can I participate in this?

The first verse of the reading gets my attention because of the many times ‘if any’ is noted. Look where this phrase shows up – it precedes the experiences listed of ‘encouragement from being united with Christ’, ‘comfort from his love’, ‘common sharing in the Spirit’ and ‘tenderness and compassion’. The words ‘if any’ reflect a continuum that could scale from the smallest to the largest experiences of these, but it says ‘if any’, so, if any (or more) of these are part of our experience of God and faith at even a tiny level, it seems we are to be aware of our contribution to joy in community life. However, I find it interesting that the areas of experience noted are likely personal experiences from a relationship with Jesus. From my personal space of ‘if any’, I can offer something into the completing of joy by ‘being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind’.

How does joy show up for you? I value joy as I think it has a quality of endurance, so I am still aware of the presence of joy (and the strength that can come from it), even during difficulty. It is not happiness, as this is more ‘a high’ that is short-lived and transient. Joy is noted as the second fruit of the Spirit – I observe that the presence of joy in personal and relational life is welcomed.

I hope for more experiences of joy in my own journey with God. And from this, I hope to offer what I can to the making of joy, made complete, for the communities of which I am part.

***Loving God, thank you for the experiences of joy in our faith journey, both personally and in community. Please bless us with joy that endures and the strength and encouragement that comes from this. We ask your blessing and help in the name of Christ, Amen.***

Saturday 23 December 2023

**Although he’s God, he’s mindful of me**

by Jo Corney

***For he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant (Luke 1:48a).***

Read [Luke 1:(46b)47–55](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Luke+1%3A+46b-55&version=NRSVUE)

This a beautiful reading. Verse 47 starts with Mary speaking and saying, ‘My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour’. This then leads into the text of our reflection: ‘For he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant…’. I’m curious about what had previously happened for Mary to end up aware that God had been mindful of her humble state.

If you read Luke 1 from the beginning, wondrous events are recorded. But the events concerning Mary are extreme – to name a few, this young woman is visited, at God’s direction, by the Archangel Gabriel, who greets her as one ‘highly favoured’ and caringly informs her of her forthcoming role in the history of the world. Mary is the one chosen to conceive by the Holy Spirit, carry, bear and raise this child who will be great and called the Son of the Most High (Luke 1:28–32), whose purpose is to enable reconciliation between God and humankind by his life, death, and resurrection, all because of God’s incomparable grace and love for us. Hmm, I can’t really get my mind around how Mary managed the overwhelm of this situation. I find it remarkable that she could reply at all, let alone as she does in verse 38.

As you read Luke 1, before today’s devotional verses, you will see that Mary visits Elizabeth – it is in this space where Mary says, ‘My soul glorifies the Lord ...’. I wonder if the human condition would have made it easy for Mary to become conceited, considering the role she had been chosen by God to undertake. Her words don’t reflect that, though. Mary’s words make me feel a sense of the connectedness to the relationship she shared with God – that she was completely known and wholly loved. In the safety of this space with God, she could express her experience that God had been mindful of her – a young woman who, compared to God, could only consider herself in a humble state. It seems Mary had a solid grasp on who God was and who she was, yet Mary seems to rest in that space. To me, that appears precious and prized – glimpsing God’s fullness and knowing herself, hence sincerely saying words from her heart, ‘He has been mindful of the humble state of his servant’. Oh, to have a heart like Mary’s!

Every blessing for your Christmas season.

***Almighty God and loving Heavenly Father, thank you that you are mindful of our humble state, and we are completely known by you, and yet we are wholly loved. Please help us to rest in you. In the name of Christ, Amen.***

Sunday 24 December 2023

**Miracles we do immediately; impossibilities take a little longer**

by Pastor Tim Castle-Schmidt

***For nothing will be impossible with God (Luke 1:37).***

Read [Luke 1:26–38](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Luke+1%3A26%E2%80%9338&version=NRSVUE)

As I try to insert myself into this story of an angel appearing to a young woman and ‘announcing’ that she will become pregnant, the word ‘impossible’ jumps right out at me. That is precisely what we are asked to believe happens here: the absolute impossible. Yet, if we think about our lives, often it can feel as though when we have requested the impossible, we have not received it. Cancers have not been healed, sight has not been restored, and wars continue to spread.

And yet, when we consider what we celebrate at Christmas – God, the creator and sustainer of all things, becoming human – I think we can see that tonight, Christmas Eve, the most impossible thing has happened: God has stepped into all those impossible situations – cancers, blindness, wars – and has entered into them with us. Tonight, we sit and look up at the night sky to see that God has come to be here with us – it is as if the stars are like little pinholes in the universe through which the eternal Father peeks in to see his Son born as one of us. That’s not just impossible, but for us, it's inconceivable (pardon the pun). Imagine you are Mary holding onto the Son of God for the first time; imagine you are Joseph trying to take in what has just happened.

And then remember you are a Mary or a Joseph, for whom God has done the impossible and entered into your life.

***Lord Jesus, we cannot imagine what it was like for you to enter into this world, and yet, with the excitement of first-time parents, we thank you. Help me to believe in the impossible and revel in every glimpse of you breaking into our world. Amen.***

*Tim Castle-Schmidt is the pastor of Onkaparinga Lutheran Parish in the Adelaide Hills. After spending many years as a teacher in Lutheran schools, he finally listened to God’s call to the pastoral ministry. Tim is passionate about social justice and engaging the church with contemporary society. Tim shares his life with Fiona, Miranda, a Jack Russell called Otto and 11 chooks. By his own admission, Tim is a broken man. Broken in body, mind and spirit, he is learning that God is at work in and through human brokenness. For while God has not ‘fixed’ him, God continues to work through his brokenness to connect with the world.*