

# Christian Odyssey

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Exploring Life and Faith

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WORLDWIDE  
CHURCH OF GOD

*Living and Sharing the Gospel*



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## Letters to the Editor

### 'God told me'

It has been some time that I have left the brotherhood of the church, yet I still read the messages through the website.

I was reading Mike Feazell's article on "God Told Me" (October), and I was surprised that many things he mentioned were the same as I believed to be true. And yes, I learned a couple of other things, especially with the way he ended the article.

Thank you all for still being there.

Juan Ramos  
Internet

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Michael Morrison

**EDITOR:** Tom Hanson

**SENIOR EDITORS**

Paul Kroll  
Randal Dick  
Terry Akers

**DOCTRINAL ADVISOR:** John E. McKenna

**ART DIRECTOR:** Ron Grove

Published by the Worldwide Church of God

President: Joseph Tkach

Communications Director: Mike Feazell

Personal Correspondence: Paul Kroll

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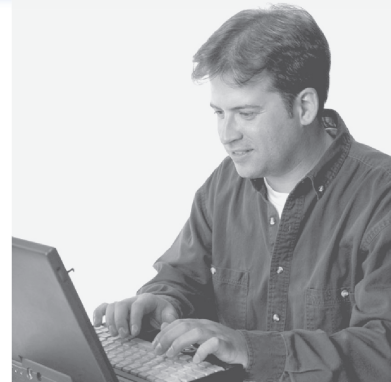
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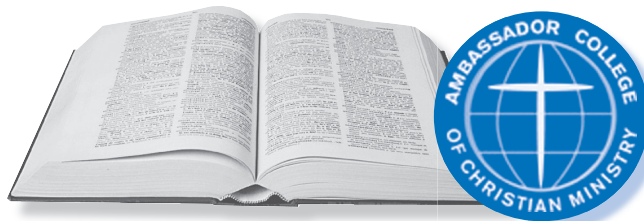
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## In his name

By Joseph Tkach

“Whatever you ask in my name,” Jesus said, “I will do it” (John 14:13). Some people seem to think that Jesus is giving us a blank check—we can ask for anything at all, and he will sign his name to it and pass it along to the Father, and it will be done—guaranteed.

We all know that this doesn't work—and it's a good thing it doesn't! Some people pray for rain at the same time as their neighbors pray for sunshine. The home seller prays for a high price, the home buyer prays for a low one.

If God had to answer every request he was given in the name of Jesus, the world would be chaotic, driven by the whims of well-meaning but foolish people.

Even if humans could all agree, we simply don't have the wisdom to be telling God how to run the universe.

So what did Jesus mean?

### Whatever we ask

“I tell you the truth,” Jesus said, “my Father will give you whatever you ask in my name.... Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete” (John 16:23-24). Does this mean that we fill out the request form, and Jesus signs it and sends it to his dad? “Hey, Dad, I've got a buddy here who wants a million dollars. How about doing it as a favor for me?”

No, that is not the way it works.



Jesus is not a middleman who stamps his signature on our request, pretending that our request is really his. He says: “I am not saying that I will ask the Father on your behalf. No, the Father himself loves you” (verses 26-27). We have permission to go to the Father directly, because God loves us just as much as he loves his own Son. (Does that thought astonish you as much as it does me?)

Hebrews tells us that Jesus gives us permission to go to God directly. We do not need a middleman. So what does it mean to ask in the name of Jesus?

Let's imagine that we are in an ancient palace. The king is sitting on his throne, his prince at his right hand, dozens of guards at attention, hundreds of loyal servants waiting for orders so that every decree will be carried out immediately.

And now imagine that we go into the palace, and the guards immediately make way for us, knowing that we have permission to approach the king. They swing aside, snap to attention and give us the

royal treatment.

We walk into the throne room, bow before the king, bow before the prince, and then tell the king: “In the name of the prince, I ask you for a better job and a nicer home.”

Maybe my palace protocol is a little rusty, but it seems a little odd for me to speak “in the name of

the prince” when the prince is sitting right there. Maybe this is not what it means to ask “in the name of Jesus.”

### More than pronunciation

Some people think that Jesus was talking about pronouncing his name in a certain way. They believe we have to get his name right—like a secret password—before the request will get through the heavenly filters. But when ancient peoples talked about someone's “name,” they were not worried about the right pronunciation—they were referring to a person's status or importance.

We can see that in the book of Hebrews. It begins by telling us that Jesus has inherited a better name than the angels have. The name in that context seems to be

**If God had to answer every request he was given in the name of Jesus, the world would be chaotic, driven by the whims of well-meaning but foolish people.**



Suppose that a police officer says, “Stop in the name of the law”—it means that the officer has the force of law behind the command.

“Son,” but the precise word isn't really important—the point being made is that Jesus is superior to the angels. He has a higher status, a greater glory.

See *In his name*, page 4

# In his name

Continued from page 3

When we talk about the superior name of Jesus, we are really talking about his superior importance. When we pray in the name of Jesus, we are not dealing with a special word—we are dealing with a special person. When we pray in his name, we are praying according to the way that he is—according to his nature. Our praise and requests should be something that fits his character.

Let's use another analogy. Suppose that a police officer says, "Stop in the name of the law"—it means that the officer has the force of law behind the command.

But suppose that same officer asks for a bribe: "Give me \$20,000 cash in the name of the law." Using the words "in the name of the law" does not automatically give the officer legal support, does it? When the officer says "in the name of the law," he is supposed to be acting within the rules of the law.

In the same way, when we use Jesus' name, we are not obligating him to support our own whims and desires. Rather, we are saying that we are already in accord with what he wants. We are saying something that he has authorized us to say.

Rather than forcing him to conform to our wishes, "in his name" means exactly the opposite: We are conforming to his wishes, we are acting within his will. When we speak on his behalf, we need to

make sure that we are saying something that he would agree with.

When we say "in Jesus' name," we are conforming to the words of the Lord's prayer: Let your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Let it be done in my life. If my request is not according to your will, then feel free to change

**I suspect that on many things, God's will is not set in stone.**

sometimes help us come to a better understanding.



"In everything," Paul says, "by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God" (Philippians 4:6). Whatever is on your heart, whatever it is that you want, ask God for it.

**Jesus has given us the authority to ask—but it is a request, not a command. We can trust God to answer in the best possible way, at the best possible time.**

it to what it needs to be. "In Jesus' name" is our affirmation that, as best we know, our request is within his will.

### **Let your requests be known**

However, if we have to pray according to God's will, what's the point of praying? Isn't he going to do his will whether we ask for it or not? Doesn't it go without saying that if we ask God to do what he already wants to, that he will do it?

But it is God who tells us to pray. In his wisdom, God has decided to do certain

things only in answer to prayer. Sometimes this is so that we will learn, in the process of prayer, what his will is, and whether our request is for selfish purposes. We don't always understand what God's will is, and praying can sometimes help us come to a better understanding.

But I suspect that on many things, God's will is not set in stone. God may not have decided, for example, which person we should marry—but he has already decided how we should treat the person we marry. He requires that we choose the person, and choose each day how we will interact with that person. Prayer can help us here, too.

Prayer changes us—but it also affects what God does. Since he has decided to do certain things only in answer to prayer, he decides what to do based in part on what we do, on what we

need in the situations we have chosen, and on what we ask him to do. He has the power to carry it out, the compassion to help us in our needs, and the wisdom to know what is really best for us.

"In everything," Paul says, "by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God" (Philippians 4:6). Whatever is on your heart, whatever it is that you want, ask God for it.

Jesus has given us the authority to ask—but it is a request, not a command. We can trust God to answer in the best possible way, at the best possible time. But whatever we do (prayer included), we are to do it for the glory of God (1 Corinthians 10:31). When we do that, we can be confident that we are praying in Jesus' name. 🦋



# Slugging it out



By John Halford

I don't usually like to lead you up the garden path, but I wonder if you could join me on mine for a moment. I want to show you a slug.

This is a particularly impressive slug. It is about four and a half inches long, and has a lustrous silvery sheen—well, to be strictly honest, perhaps it is more of a slimy gray—but it does have a bright royal purple panel on each side. I have seen it several times as it slides across from the lawn to flower bed, where it apparently hangs out during the day.

It is steadily chewing its way through our flowers, but I haven't the heart to reach for the slug pellets. I have become rather fond of this slug, and I have the distinct impression that I have seen it before. I seem to remember it crossed my path last year. But do slugs live that long?

## A long, slow life

A few minutes of research on the Internet showed me that they did. In fact, I learned that a slug can live up to six years—given favorable circumstances, like not being eaten, trodden on or eating a slug pellet. I wanted to know more. (If you stay with this article, you'll find out why, I promise.)

I bet you don't know much about slugs. For example, did you know they are not insects? They are molluscs, like clams and squid, and are distantly related to the octopus, but it is pretty distant. Octopi are considered to be quite intelligent; some people think they may be an intellectual match for animals such as rabbits.

Slugs certainly are not. They



probably do not have any measurable intelligence at all. But they make up for that in numbers. Someone has calculated that there are as many as 26,800 species of slug. Most of them live on dead or decaying organic matter and even fungi. There are only a few species that feed on live plants—unfortunately those are the kind we have in our gardens.

Biologists call slugs gastropods because they, like Napoleon's army, march on their stomachs. Also, like Napoleon's army, they don't do well in cold weather, surviving by burying themselves in the ground wrapped in a cocoon of their own slime.

It has been estimated that there may be 250,000 slugs—weighing perhaps 70 pounds collectively—per acre of farmland.

## 'International' slugs

Since becoming slug conscious, I have begun noticing them on my travels. The biggest I have seen were in Sweden—massive black slugs, maybe six inches long, although I understand the biggest in the world are twice that size!

When in Holland I had the opportunity to find out how fast they can travel. I met a four-inch Dutch slug, engaged on a suicide mission across a cycle-path. It did not seem to be phased by the people flashing by. How fast was it going?

I decided to time it. (I know, I know—I need to get a life.) I laid my mobile phone next to it to see

how long it would take to travel its length.

Almost immediately the phone, set on loud ring/vibrate went off. I would have thought this would have the same effect on the slug as a stun grenade would have had on me at close quarters, but it didn't miss a beat. It took just under two minutes to travel the six-inch length of the phone. That works out at about 15 feet an hour, doesn't it?

What else can I tell you about slugs? (I am assuming you are still reading this, and probably wondering why. I really will get to the point, soon, honest!)

Well, they have as many as 27,000 backward slanting teeth, which act with a rasping movement, like a shark's.

They also have a guillotine-like jaw, similar to that of an alligator. No wonder they play havoc with plants. They can eat several times their body weight in a night.

They have eyes on the tips of their tentacles, and some species may also have infrared sensors,

which allow them to detect food, if not mobile phones. Oh yes, and they like beer.

This really isn't very interesting, is it? But I am afraid slugs just aren't. I suppose I could liven things up by telling you about their sex life. Apparently they start out as males, spend their breeding life as hermaphrodites, and then become female in old age. They have a most elaborate mating ritual—although

See Slugging it out, page 6

**Since becoming 'slug conscious,' I have begun noticing them on my travels. The biggest I have seen were in Sweden—massive black slugs, maybe six inches long.**

# Slugging it out

Continued from page 5

exactly why they need one isn't clear. Some species climb trees in pairs and hang from the branches by strands of their own saliva. I'd better leave it there. What happens next might offend some sensitive readers!

## From humble beginnings

So why am I wasting your time with this? Slugs really are some of the more boring, and even disgusting of God's creatures, aren't they?

But watching that slug make its laborious progress across my garden path, and realizing it might have been doing that for six years, reminded me of something the great Christian writer, C.S. Lewis, wrote in *Mere Christianity*.

In a discussion about what it meant for Jesus to come and live on earth as a human being, he wrote: "The Eternal being who knows everything and who created the whole universe, became not only a man, but (before that) a baby, and before that a fetus inside a woman's body. If you want to get the hang of it, think how you would like to become a slug or a crab."

Have you ever thought of it like that? At this time of year, we remind ourselves of the birth of our Lord and Savior.

Although common-sense tells us it probably wasn't really like that, we have a romantic impression of the

Nativity scene in the stable. There is the calm mother with her beautiful baby boy: "The cattle are

lowing, the baby awakes. But little Lord Jesus no crying he makes."

I don't know how aware of his circumstances the baby Jesus was, but if in some way he was able to understand his situation, I bet he would have felt like crying.



Jesus had been God, the Lord of creation. Now he was a helpless baby, unable to talk, to stand or even control his bodily functions.

**'The Eternal being who knows everything and who created the whole universe, became not only a man, but (before that) a baby, and before that a fetus inside a woman's body.'**

C.S. Lewis

Think about it. Not so long ago he had been God, the Lord of Creation. Now he was a helpless baby, unable to talk, to stand or even control his bodily functions.

He who had possessed all power was dependent on his mother for everything. He got cold. He got hungry. He got colic, and had to be burped.

His glorious, divine existence had been exchanged for the comparative squalor of life as a human being.

Whereas once he could roam the Universe, unencumbered by the limitations of time and space, now he was wrapped in swaddling clothes, unable to move. He could get

tired, dirty and discouraged. He would have to learn to crawl, to talk and feed himself.

I don't know if there was an ancient equivalent of the nursery rhyme that goes: "What are little boys made of. Slugs and snails and puppy dog's tails..." But if Mary had ever sung it, I think Jesus would have muttered a rueful "Amen."

Those 30 or so years during which Jesus slugged it out in our world must have seemed like a long time. No wonder he prayed to the Father as he faced the end of his physical life with the unspeakable torture of crucifixion, "Glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began" (John 17:5).

## Changing places

Watching that slug and remembering C.S. Lewis' words gave me a new appreciation for Jesus and the sacrifice he made.

I would not want to change places with a slug for one minute, let alone half a lifetime. But that is, in effect, what Jesus Christ was willing to do in order to become our savior.

"I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full," he said in John 10:10. He knew what life could be like, and he wanted to share it with us—not what we call life, squashed into a few decades, constrained by time and space and trapped in a decaying physical shell.

Real life is so much more than that. It is everlasting, indestructible, freed from all the weaknesses of mind and character. It is greater than anything we can really grasp, because: "Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for those who love him" (1 Corinthians 2:9).

We cannot fully grasp it, any more than that slug on the path can understand what my existence is like. So this isn't really about slugs. It is about Jesus—who became one of us for a while so that we could be with him forever. 🐌

# Moving mountains and cursing fig trees

By James R. Henderson

**H**ave you ever wondered why Jesus said some of the things he said?

For example, Mark 11:22-24 suggests that if, in faith, we want to tell a mountain to throw itself into the sea, it can happen.

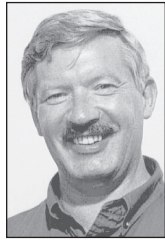
However, why would I want to tell a mountain to throw itself into the sea? What would it accomplish other than making me feel more than a little powerful, creating a blot on the landscape, and upsetting conservationists? Did Jesus really mean that we should use faith whimsically, to accomplish whatever takes our fancy?

Sometimes I think Jesus used ideas for their shock value in order to get the attention of his listeners. Remember when he said that if your right hand offends you, you should cut it off? Or if your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out?

If these passages were to be taken literally, there would be a lot of one-eyed, one-handed Christians walking around. Christ was making a point through exaggeration. The point was that we should deal decisively with our sin before it takes over our life.

Jesus compared prayer to a child asking his father for something and believing that the father would respond. So great is our heavenly Father's desire to give to us that he knows the things we have need of before we ask him (Matthew 6:8).

So what is Mark 11:22-24 all about? There is a context. There are powerful lessons to do with faith and prayer. The day before, Jesus, by his divine power, had caused a leafy but fruitless fig tree to wither. This was to teach his



disciples that it is possible to seem spiritual and yet to not produce the fruit God seeks from us. He had also cleansed the temple of those who exploited the house of prayer for personal profit.

In remembering the fig tree, Jesus tells his followers to “have faith in God.” Was he saying to them that they too, if only they really believed, could curse fig trees? I don't think so. Or was he stressing that the religious life without faith is of no use to God and that it may as well wither up and die?

The context also shows in verses 25 and 26 that prayer made without forgiving those who may have wronged us, just as we want God to forgive us, will not be heard and fulfilled.

Therefore this passage explains that we don't automatically get everything we request in prayer—there are conditions of faith toward God, of bearing the fruit he requires of us, and of mercy shown to others.

It is not wise to let one passage of Scripture dictate the totality of doctrine on a particular subject. Mark

11:22-24 is one of many references to praying in faith. A prayer of faith re-affirms God's sovereignty, not ours—that his will be done, not our own will (Matthew 6:10).

This touches on one of the problems with the “name it and claim it” prayer styles—the implication that faith gives us the ability to coerce God to give us what we demand. Such thinking implies wrongly that God's sovereignty is subservient to ours.

Matthew 7:7-11 says that we can

ask the Father, and he will give us “good things.” Does that mean that God gives us what is good for our longterm development, just as a parent gives a child what the parent thinks is best? If we desire something in prayer that is not for our good, should God honor that request?

James, the brother of Jesus, exhorted Christians to “ask in faith, with no doubting, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind” (James 1:3). Don't suppose, he says, that you will receive any answer from prayer if you are double-minded and uncommitted in your own request.


We need to be convinced about the value of prayer. The reference Jesus made to believing we can move mountains affirms this. It

is impossible to make an impression on God without faith that God is who he says he is, and also that he rewards those who seek him diligently (Hebrews 11:6).

A major problem that the readers of James' epistle had was that they let their own selfish desires dominate their prayer life. “You ask and do not receive

because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures” (James 4:3).

What did they want God to give them? Various ideas are suggested—success by the world's standards (4:4); God to be on their side and to win their battles for them (4:1-2); their self-seeking positions to be realized (3:14). Righteousness, argues James, is about faith. Faith is believing that God will do what he says he will do (2:23).

See Mountains, page 16 

**Sometimes I think Jesus used ideas for their shock value in order to get the attention of his listeners.**

# Using Christmas to teach children about Jesus

By Ted Johnston  
Generations ministry  
national co-director



Parents or guardians are usually the most important influences in their children's spiritual development. This presents both a responsibility and an opportunity.

Concerning the responsibility, parents have the God-given assignment to teach their children about God and his love (Deut. 4:10; 6:7).

Concerning the opportunity, young children tend to see their parents as "god-like" in authority and credibility.

Parents can capitalize on this window of opportunity—it may remain open for only a few years.

Wise parents are therefore opportunistic—capitalizing on teachable moments in the lives of their children. One such moment comes around each December as Christmas dominates community, school and family life for most people in North America.

Though we may object to the commercialism of much of these Christmas celebrations, we can take advantage of this annual opportunity to help children learn about the miracle of Jesus' birth.

For most of my adult life I avoided Christmas, believing it to be pagan both in origin and in contemporary practice. I have come to learn that my claims of pagan origin were, at best, over-stated

and that my former working assumption of, once pagan, always pagan, was simply false (read our article, "Paganism, Pagans and Pagan Customs" posted at [www.wcg.org/lit/church/holidays/pagans.htm](http://www.wcg.org/lit/church/holidays/pagans.htm)).

I now realize that God is Creator and Redeemer of every day on the calendar. Although we do not know with certainty the day of Jesus' birth, the lengthy biblical accounts of his birth invite our celebration and focused worship (read "The Date of Jesus' Birth" posted at [www.wcg.org/lit/jesus/datebirth.htm](http://www.wcg.org/lit/jesus/datebirth.htm)).

Indeed the birth of Jesus is perhaps the greatest of all God's miracles—for through this

birth, God took on human flesh in order to become Immanuel—God with us—God come to be one of us; God come to save us. Glory to God in the highest!

This biblical message of Christmas, appropriately presented, captures the imagination and hearts of children everywhere.

Think about it—God chose to enter our world in the flesh of a

baby—Jesus, fully the Eternal Son of God, and yet fully a human baby!

Why God came in this way is part of the mystery of Christ. In coming as a baby, God fully identified with our lowly state—sharing fully our experience, including all of our suffering.

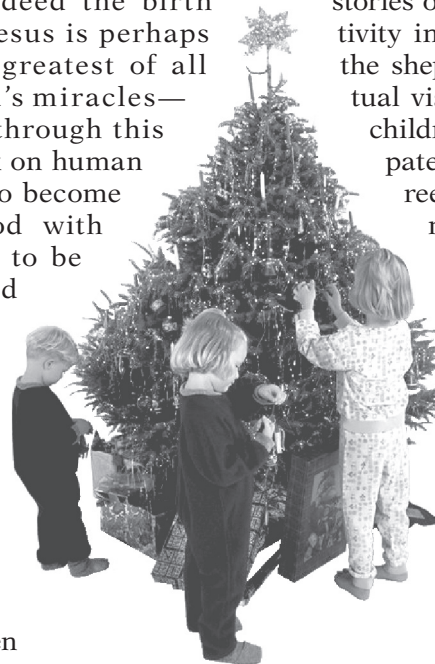
What a powerful way to show children that God loves them—he was once a child, just like they are. And the Christ child grew up, became a man and died and was resurrected so that they can be with him and share his joy forever.

Christmas offers parents and children's ministry workers a wonderful opportunity to share Jesus. This can be done by enacting the stories of Jesus' birth—his nativity in a stable, the visit of the shepherds, and the eventual visit of the Magi. Many children delight to participate in these dramatic reenactments. They also make powerful outreach events.

Within the home, Christmas decorations can serve as teachable moments for children.

An evergreen Christmas tree can be a captivating illustration that Jesus is eternal life. Lights on the tree illustrate that Jesus is the light of the world.

The exchange of presents can be used to tell chil-



Christmas decorations can serve as teachable moments for children. An evergreen Christmas tree can be a captivating illustration that Jesus is eternal life.

**The birth of Jesus is perhaps the greatest of all God's miracles**





A manger scene on the mantle can be used to illustrate the entire nativity story.

dren about God's greatest gift—his Son who came wrapped in swaddling clothes. A manger scene on the mantle can be used to illustrate the entire nativity story.

My encouragement to parents and congregations is this: use Christmas for the powerful teachable moment that it can be. Teach about Jesus—and in particular, the miracle of Jesus' birth. Don't miss out on this great opportunity.

To help you capitalize on the opportunity of Christmas, here are some ideas adapted from "Help Your Child Discover the Real Christmas," Gospel Light, 1992.

### Help your child know the simple facts of Jesus' birth

- Read the story of the first Christmas to your child from Bible storybooks or from an easy-to-under-

stand version of the Bible. Tell your child that they will hear the story again in church.

- Attend the Christmas service as a family, no matter how busy your schedule may be! Listen to the gospel and sing the Christmas hymns together.

- Visit your Christian bookstore and choose "Baby Jesus" books or videos that will appeal to your child.

### Help your child feel that Jesus is God's best gift of love

- Remember that much of a child's response is a reflection of the attitudes he or she sees at home. Nurture feelings of joy, love and thankfulness in your child.

- Avoid (as much as possible) the hectic holiday bustle that makes a young child feel left out. Concentrate instead on preparing for the celebration of Christ's birth in a spiritual way by praying together and celebrating the Advent season.

- In the presence of your child, give thanks to God for Jesus.

### Help your child express joy, excitement and feelings of love

- Include your child in making Christmas decorations, food, gifts and cards for family members and friends.

- Show gladness to your child as you sing the songs of Christmas. Learn the songs your child is singing at church so you can sing them together at home, too. Emphasize Christ-centered songs.

- Be sensitive to moments when it is natural to talk about God, and encourage your child to talk to God with thanks and praise.

## Use Christmas for the powerful teachable moment that it can be.

### Celebrate the Nativity

- Keep the meaning of Christmas clear throughout the holiday season by frequently commenting, "Christmas is a happy time because it celebrates Jesus' birthday."

- Bake and decorate a birthday cake for Jesus. Children will understand that because Christmas celebrates Jesus' birthday there should be a cake. Sing "Happy Birthday" to Jesus and plan together what your family can give him for a gift of love.

- Give Jesus a birthday present as a family, by doing something

extra special for others. Make cookies (or even a whole dinner) and deliver them to elderly relatives and shut-ins. Take canned foods or personal care items to a rescue mission. Adopt a needy family through a charity.

### Keep Santa in the proper perspective

- Explain that Santa legends are based on the real Christian minister Nicholas, who loved God and gave generously to the poor.

- Avoid the "What do you want Santa to bring you for Christmas?" and "Be good for Santa!" emphases.

- When your child wants to talk about Santa Claus, listen attentively.

Then turn the discussion to Jesus and his birth. 🦋



# Christmas past and present in the church

By Paul Kroll

The Advent-Christmas season is almost upon us, that joyful time of year when we celebrate the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Have you ever wondered how Christmas came to be part of the annual Christian calendar? Here's the fascinating story, which we begin with a surprising observation. Neither Jesus nor the apostles commanded or even suggested that the church should have a Christmas festival—and no evidence of such a celebration is in the New Testament.

In the church of the second century, we see evidence of an annual celebration of Jesus' resurrection in the spring (our Easter), but no celebration of his birth. (It's possible that the roots of the resurrection celebration go back to the apostolic church.)

The church also added Pentecost and Epiphany to its yearly worship calendar in the second century. Epiphany, on Jan. 6, celebrated not the birth of Christ, but the manifestation of his divine sonship, his kingship and his divine power as displayed in his baptism, the visit of the Magi, and his miracle at the wedding feast in Cana. Pentecost commemorated the coming of the Holy Spirit.

Epiphany was the church's earliest annual celebration in connection with the Incarnation of Jesus. However, it was not until the fourth century that we have clear evidence of the birth of Jesus being celebrated on Dec. 25.

## Why Dec. 25?

One theory for the origin of Christmas is that it was intended to compete with or supplant the pagan celebration of the sun-god on that date. According to this hypothesis, accepted by most scholars today, the birth of Jesus was given near the date of the winter solstice. On this day, as the sun began its return to the northern skies, the pagan devotees of Mithra celebrated the birthday of the invincible sun. The cult was particularly strong at Rome when Christmas celebration arose.

The idea is that the church tried to counteract this pagan worship with its own celebration of Jesus' birth. That makes good sense, since the church was, in effect, providing its members with a Christian worship and fellowship opportunity while the pagans were cavorting and doing homage to their gods. It was also an opportunity for

the church to preach the true gospel. If this reasoning is correct, what Christians did, then, was to redeem in Christ an understanding that he (not a pagan sun god) was the true Son and Sun of Righteousness (Malachi 4:2)—the true light that lights our path with his grace (John 8:12).

Another idea as to why Christmas celebration began and expanded throughout the church has to do with its need to combat a then rampant heresy about Christ's Person. The council of Nicea in 325 had condemned Arianism, which claimed that Jesus Christ was only an exalted creature and not true God of true God.

It was not long afterward that the Christmas festival first appeared in Rome, and then spread to the churches in other parts of the Roman Empire. In this view, the controversies of the fourth century about the incarnation and person of Christ impelled the church to create a festival that would celebrate the mystery of God becoming man, as a kind of teaching tool for the church.

**It was not until the fourth century that we have clear evidence of the birth of Jesus being celebrated on Dec. 25.**

## Birthday of Jesus?

Why wasn't Jesus' birthday celebrated earlier than the fourth century? One reason might be that neither the day nor month of Jesus' birth is given in the Gospels or any other early Christian writings—and cannot be determined with any certainty. Despite this, it seems to have been the opinion of some church leaders in the first four centuries that Christ was actually born on Dec. 25.

Theologian John Chrysostom (347-407) appealed, in support of this view, to the date of the registration under Quirinus (Cyrenius). He apparently believed that the census and tax records of Jesus' family were preserved in the Roman archives. Justin Martyr (100-165), in his noted *Apology*, stated that Jesus was born at Bethlehem, saying such can be ascertained "from the registers of the taxing" (*Apology I*, 34).



Justin Martyr

Tertulian (160-250), spoke of "the census of Augustus—that most faithful witness of the Lord's nativity, kept in the archives of Rome" (*Against Marcion*, Book 4, 7). The early church father, Hippolytus (180-236), came up with a Dec. 25 date, which he attempted to calculate from information in the Gospel of

Luke regarding the ministry of the priest Zechariah, John the Baptist's father (Luke 1:5, 8-10).

Whatever the facts might be about the date of Jesus' birth, it is clear that the church sensed the need to have a festival that commemorated the birth of our Savior. In the words of the church historian Philip Schaff, it was inevitable that the church would have "sooner or later called into existence a festival which forms the groundwork of all other annual festivals in honor of Christ" (*History of the Christian Church*, volume 3, "Nicene and Post-Nicene Christianity," page 395). Schaff points to Chrysostom's observation that without the birth of Christ there would be no salvation history in Christ—no baptism, passion, resurrection, ascension or outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Hence, there would be no celebration of Epiphany, of Easter or of Pentecost."

However meaningful Christian worship was during the Christmas season, we must also acknowledge that Christmas was often celebrated with the same sensual excesses as some pagan feasts had been among the general populace. Truly, at times in the history of the church, it was needful to put Christ back into Christmas.

### Puritans in Britain and America

"Puritans" was the name given in the 16th century to a group of Protestants that arose from within the Church of England. As part of their broad-based reform agenda, they demanded that the church should be purified of any liturgy, ceremony or practices that were not found in the Bible.

Since the Christmas celebration was not mentioned in Scripture, the Puritans concluded that it must be stopped. When the group came to political power in England under Oliver Cromwell (1599-1658), they immediately proceeded to outlaw Christmas.

Cromwell and the Puritans even banned special church services, not just on Christmas but also on Easter and Pentecost. Christmas Day was a regular work day and shops remained open. Parliament was to sit as it usually did. Criers were sometimes sent through the streets, shouting, "No Christmas today, no Christmas today."

The year 1642 saw the first ordinance issued forbidding church services and civic festivities on Christmas day. These were issued regularly in the ensuing years. On June 8, 1645, the Puritan-dominated Parliament abolished the observance of Christmas, Easter, Whitsuntide and the Saints' days.

**Without the birth of Christ there would not be any salvation history in Christ.**



Oliver Cromwell

In 1660, things changed. The Monarchy was re-established, and the Puritan clergy were expelled from the Church of England. Many Puritans migrated to New England in America, beginning in the second decade of the 17th century.

In Puritan New England, Christmas was a regular workday, and any violation of this was punishable by fine or dismissal. In 1659, the Massachusetts Puritans declared the observation of Christmas to be a criminal offense. Offenders had to pay five shillings as a fine. In Massachusetts, Dec. 25 did not become a legal holiday until 1856.

It is hard to realize now that worship on Christmas was outlawed in New England until the second half of the 19th century.

### Twelve Days of Christmas and Advent

"The Twelve Days of Christmas" is more than a secular, traditional Christmas song. At one time it was common for Christmas worship and celebration to last 12 days, from Dec. 25 until Jan. 5, the beginning of Epiphany. This tradition has virtually disappeared.

Today, the season of Advent begins the yearly worship or liturgical calendar. Advent is celebrated on the four Sundays preceding Christmas. It is devoted to the commemoration of the coming of our Lord in the flesh as well as to his return at the final judgment. That's why they are called Advent Sundays, since *advent* means the coming or arrival, especially of something extremely important. (What event could be more important than the coming of the Son of God in human flesh—and then his coming again as King of kings and Lord of lords!)

Lawrence Stookey, in his book *Calendar: Christ's Time for the Church*, explains it this way: "The primary focus of Advent is on what is popularly called 'the second coming.' Thus advent concerns the future of the Risen One, who will judge wickedness and prevail over every evil. Advent is the celebration of the promise that Christ will bring an end to all that is contrary to the ways of God; the resurrection of Jesus is the first sign of this destruction of the powers of death.... The beginning of the liturgical year takes our thinking to the very end of things" (pages 121-122).

### Meaning of Christmas

For the church, the entire Christian year centers on the person and work of Jesus Christ. Christians do not "celebrate" or "keep" days as though holy in themselves, but rather worship Christ and recall the great events of our salvation, using those special times as opportunities for worship.

The purpose of the annual worship year is to keep our minds focused on the story of salvation and to worship Jesus Christ in a way that ministers to his glory. Specifical-

**See History Corner, page 16** 

# A Lesson About Instructions

## Mark 6:7-12

*Calling the Twelve to him, he sent them out two by two. . . .*

By Mike Feazell

The first time Jesus sent out the disciples, he gave them some pretty specific instructions: Go two by two, take a staff (presumably a shepherd-style staff, not an office staff), but don't take anything else—no food, no satchel, no money. Wear sandals, but don't take a change of clothes. When you get to a town, stay in the first house you enter until you leave that town. And if anybody doesn't welcome you or listen to you, shake the dust off your feet on your way out of town.

Strange stuff. Apparently they followed the instructions, and apparently they had a good trip—they drove out a lot of demons and healed a lot of sick people by anointing them with oil.



But why the unusual instructions?

Some people think those instructions should still be followed today. Not many people, thank God, but there are some who prey on unsuspecting generous people, citing this passage as their badge of authority to move in and leech off somebody by masquerading as a “servant of God.” Don't listen to such people—they're con artists, not evangelists or prophets or whatever else they might call themselves.

So what did Jesus have in mind with these strange rules for this first “disciplic” excursion? Mark is brief, just giving the facts, but not the background. His first readers probably knew what was behind these instructions, but a couple of thousand years down the road we have to piece it together from what we know of the religious and social customs of first century Judea.

The command to go two by two might reflect Deuteronomy 17:6 and 19:15, where Israel was taught that at least two witnesses were needed to establish the truth of a matter—in this case, the veracity of Jesus' ministry.

They were to take no food, satchel or money. It

might be that Jesus simply wanted to illustrate the fact that his followers were to trust God for their needs. Or it might be that he wanted to show that his followers were not like certain speakers of the day who traveled into towns with a collection bag to gather money. Or maybe the idea is that they were to travel light to symbolize the urgency of their mission.

Beyond that, it gets pretty murky. They were to take a staff, or walking stick. We could invent a meaning for the walking stick, but it would be our invention. For example, we could say that the disciples would be shepherds of the flock one day, and the staff symbolizes that. But we would be guessing.

Why sandals? We're not told. The shaking of dust from the feet might be easier to understand. According to tradition, when a Jew returned to Judea from visiting a foreign country, he was to shake the dust off his feet, thereby keeping the land unpolluted from the dust of gentile lands. The disciples were to shake the dust off their feet as a witness against any Jewish towns that refused them, maybe symbolizing that such a town was cutting itself off from Israel by refusing Jesus.

Whatever the reasons behind them, these instructions were not intended to be the norm for all mission style work from then on. They were unique instructions for a unique band of men on a unique mission, unique even for them. The commands were specific to that



particular mission, and they probably had something to do with presenting a symbolic testimony to Jesus as Messiah, even though we're not directly told that.

It's a good idea to look at the principles behind a particular instruction as a way of helping us determine whether and how to apply that instruction to ourselves in our day.

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particular mission, and they probably had something to do with presenting a symbolic testimony to Jesus as Messiah, even though we're not directly told that.

The Bible is full of instructions that we should follow, but it is also full of stories about instructions that were given to particular people for particular reasons in their particular times.

Naaman, an Aramaic general who suffered from leprosy, was told by **See Instructions, page 16**

# Traveling Light

## Modern Meditations on St. Paul's Letter of Freedom

Eugene H. Peterson

By Terry Akers

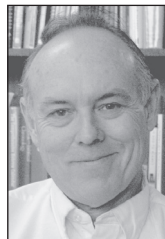
In the late 1980s, before authoring *The Message Bible*, a popular contemporary paraphrase, Eugene H. Peterson wrote a book expounding the message of Christian freedom proclaimed in Paul's epistle to the Galatians. *Traveling Light: Modern Meditations on St. Paul's Letter of Freedom* is a powerful devotional commentary in which Peterson's gift for modernizing Paul's words is clearly evident.

Peterson served for 29 years as a pastor and has written more than 20 pastoral and spiritually oriented books including *Run With the Horses*, *Subversive Spirituality* and *The Contemplative Pastor*.

Until his retirement, he served as professor of Spiritual Theology at Regent College in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada.

Through each chapter of *Traveling Light* (Helmets & Howard, 1988) Dr. Peterson paints a picture that defines the central theme of Galatians—our freedom in Christ.

He describes a defining moment in his life in the early 1980s when he saw that many Christians were not living lives that reflected the true



freedom we enjoy in Christ: "When I looked at the people I was living with as a pastor, I realized how unfree they were. They were overcome with anxieties in the face of rising inflation. They were pessimistic about the prospects for justice and peace in a world bristling with sophisticated weapons. . . ."

"They were living huddled, worried, defensive lives. I wanted to shout in objection: Don't live that way! You are Christians! Our lives can be a growth into freedom instead of a withdrawal into anxious wariness."


*Traveling Light* distinguishes between the "fantasies of freedom" based on the illusions of money, power, sex, fame and leisure, and true freedom realized in an internal faith-based relationship with Jesus Christ—the freest person who ever lived.

Throughout the book, Peterson illustrates from experience: "When I live in faith I live freely. When I set God at the center of my life, I realize vast freedoms and surprising spontaneities. When I center

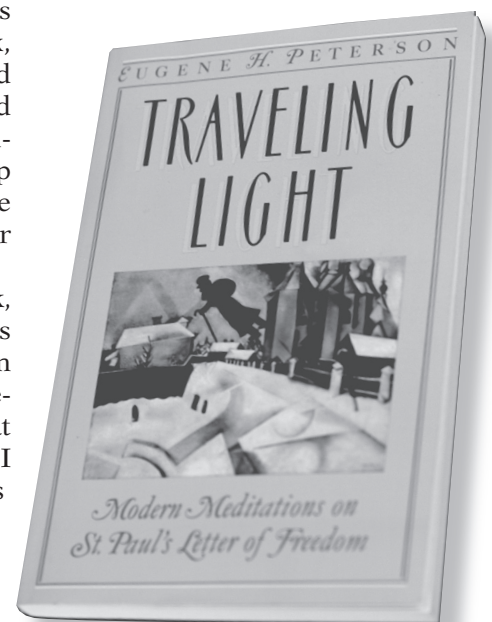
my life on my own will, my freedom diminishes markedly. I live constricted and anxious."

*Traveling Light* demonstrates the need for believers to realize their true identity as real people in Jesus Christ.

In the concluding chapter, Peterson summarizes: "Apart from faith in God we live in a world of brute determinism, bullied by those who are stronger than we, coerced by laws that are alien to our nature, constricted by hostile forces. Or, we live in an absurd, haphazard randomness."

"In faith, we find ourselves in a conscious and developing relationship with a free God and therefore able to experience and realize freedom ourselves, achieving 'an elegant solution,' forging 'a beautiful life.' This book brings to life the full meaning of the message of Galatians—'If the Son makes you free, you are free indeed.'" 

**Eugene Peterson saw that many Christians were not living lives that reflected the true freedom we enjoy in Christ: "When I looked at the people I was living with as a pastor, I realized how unfree they were."**



# Faith in Victory and in Death

A study of Hebrews 11:23-40

By Michael Morrison

It is easy to have faith when everything is going well. But faith is needed most when we face danger. The “faith chapter” continues with stories of how people remained faithful in life-threatening situations.



## Moses

The author takes several episodes from the life of Moses. He starts with his parents, Amram and Jochebed: **“By faith Moses’ parents hid him for three months after he was born, because they saw he was no ordinary child, and they were not afraid of the king’s edict”** (Heb. 11:23, Today’s New International Version throughout).

Moses’ parents saw that God had a special purpose for this boy, and they risked their lives to keep him (Ex. 2:1-10). The lesson implied for the readers (who seem to be facing a threat of persecution) is that they should not be afraid of a government edict, either.

**“By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh’s daughter. He chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin”** (Heb. 11:24-25). Moses turned down a privileged position, and chose instead to be part of the people of God. He gave up the easy life and suffered. If the readers

have faith like Moses, they will be faithful, even if they are persecuted.

**“He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward”** (v. 26). The readers were also facing disgrace for the sake of Christ. Even if they might lose a lot of money, the choice should be clear, because God offers a far more valuable reward. It’s in the future, but it’s worth waiting for, even if we have to suffer for our allegiance to Christ.

**“By faith he left Egypt, not fearing the king’s anger; he persevered because he saw him who is invisible”** (v. 27). The first time Moses left Egypt, he was afraid (Ex. 2:14), but the author here is probably referring to the Exodus, when Moses had courage. (There are several parts of Hebrews 11 that are not in chronological order. The author is giving a motivational speech, not a history lesson, and he is selective about which events he reports, and in what order.) The point for the readers: Do not be afraid of the king—keep God in the picture. Moses saw God at the burning bush, but for us he is invisible.

The author then presents two more examples from the Exodus: **“By faith he kept the Passover and the application of blood, so that the destroyer of the firstborn would not touch the firstborn of Israel. By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as on dry land; but when the Egyptians tried to do so, they were drowned”** (vv. 28-29). The Exodus is credited to the faith of all the people. The Egyptians had



God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would the heroes of Hebrews 11 be made perfect. God wants us to join them, and we will be rewarded together.

faith, too—they believed they could cross the seabed just like the Israelites did. But their faith was in vain, because it was not based on the promise of God. All the great moments of Israelite history came about through faith, so we should not be surprised if God calls on us to have faith in perilous circumstances, too.

### Life in Canaan

The author then moves to the Israelite conquest of Canaan, and in doing this, he has skipped an important moment in Israelite history: Mt. Sinai. Hebrews says nothing about the role that Moses had in building the nation, because those situations were less relevant to the readers. The author is trying to get the readers to stop looking to Moses and his covenant; he is not going to praise it here. He emphasizes Moses' role as a fugitive, as a person who went out.

Then the people reach Canaan: **“By faith the walls of Jericho fell, after the army had marched around them for seven days. By faith the prostitute Rahab, because she welcomed the spies, was not killed with those who were disobedient”** (vv. 30-31). Surprise! The heroes in Israelite history include a non-Israelite woman. She was saved by faith, in contrast to people who disobeyed (disobeyed God, that is, rather than the king of Jericho).

The author could go on, but he has already amassed enough evidence to illustrate his point, so now he wraps it up: **“And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson and Jephthah, about David and Samuel and the prophets....”** (v. 32).

The author does not dwell on the history of the people as a nation—he was more interested in illustrating people who were isolated and persecuted. But he mentions some blessings that came with faith. Through faith, these people **“conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised”** (v. 33). They gained Canaan, but they did not gain all that God had promised (v. 39).

The author then skips to the end of the Scriptures for some final examples. Through faith, he says, some people **“shut the mouths of lions [Daniel 6], quenched the fury of the flames [Daniel 3], and escaped the edge of the sword [possibly the story in Esther]; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies”** (v. 34).

### A great contrast

Then the author moves from triumph to tragedy: **“Women received back their dead, raised to life again. [But] there were others who were tortured, refusing to be released so that they might gain an even better resurrection”** (v. 35). In times of triumph, Elijah and Elisha brought people back to life (1 Kings 17:17-23;

2 Kings 4:17-35). But other equally great prophets were persecuted to death for that “better resurrection.” The author's comments remind one of a story from the Jewish history book 1 Maccabees, chapter 7. Here we are told about seven brothers who were tortured by the Syrian ruler, while their mother reminded them that God would resurrect the faithful—a resurrection even better than Elijah and Elisha restoring people back to life.

History is full of people who refused to give up, even when threatened with death, and God wants his people to have faith like that—a faith that sees beyond the temporary treasures and temporary trials of this world, and seeks the heavenly country, the city built by God, the place of permanent reward.

Hebrews tells us what it may cost: **“Some faced jeers and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned; they were sawed in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated—the world was not worthy of them”** (vv. 36-38). If you are persecuted, the author says, you are in good company. The world does not deserve to have such honorable people in its midst, but God puts his people here anyway.

**“They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground. These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised”** (vv. 38-39). These trials were not punishments from God, nor evidence that God had taken away his protection. These people were strong in faith, and yet had troubles in this life. That's because the promise of God is not a better life in this world—it is life in a better world.

We will all die, but for those who die in the faith, the promises are guaranteed. The readers are worried about threats of persecution, so the author encourages them to keep their eyes on the eternal, not the temporary.

**“God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect”** (v. 40). God wants us to join the heroes, and we will be rewarded together; we will all be brought to the finish line if we keep the faith. 🦋

#### Questions for discussion

- In what circumstances would I choose pain over pleasures? (v. 25)
- Why was Rahab the only person in Jericho who put her life in God's hands? (v. 31)
- Who turned weakness into strength? (v. 34) Can I do that, too?
- In what way were the Old Testament heroes waiting for us? (v. 40)
- What New Testament heroes of faith are there? Who had victories, and who had tragedies?


# Instructions

Continued from page 12

Elisha the prophet to dip in the Jordan River seven times to cure the disease (2 Kings 5). Should we go jump in the river to heal our skin problems? The Israelites were told to go outside the camp with a shovel to relieve themselves (Deuteronomy 23:12-13). Should we avoid toilets and drive out of town when we need to relieve ourselves?

It's a good idea to look at the principles behind a particular instruction as a way of helping us determine whether and how to

apply that instruction to ourselves in our day. Some biblical instructions might not apply to us at all. Others might need to be applied in ways that are appropriate for our day and circumstances, rather than the specific ways they were applied in biblical stories.

Jesus said that what marks us as his true disciples is that we love one another (John 13:35). Now there's an instruction that means exactly the same thing today as it did when it was first given. Wouldn't it be great if we gave that one the most attention? 

# Mountains

Continued from page 7


A life of faith involves making peace with others (3:18), not causing dissention by pushing our own cause or point of view. The effective prayer of the righteous person,

which avails much, is a prayer for others, for those who are sick, for those in distress, not a prayer that is overcome by selfishness (4:16).

Faithful prayer does not always play out according to our plans. Prayer is about trusting God and leaving situations in his hands. It is about showing love by petitioning God on behalf of others.

Sometimes, when we pray, we present both the problem and our favorite solution to God, instead of leaving him to choose an answer for us. Not that it is wrong to think things through and offer ideas in prayer, but do we limit God's answers in our mind to only what we think should happen? We need to open our minds to the infinite wonder of God—"to him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think" (Ephesians 3:20).

We all need and value the intervention of God. In his sovereignty God can and does choose to supply what is good for us according to the abundance of his grace. He seeks to give us gifts and blessings. However, those blessings are not provided on demand. We share in suffering as we are part of humanity.

Jesus taught that prayer is more about what we can give than about what we can receive. God is not a lucky charm or a winning lottery ticket. From the viewpoint of Jesus, prayer is a special relationship to be cherished, a relationship that brings us comfort and hope that the great God of the universe has taken a special interest in each of us. May he express through us that same interest toward others. 

# History Corner

Continued from page 10

ly, Christmas, Advent and Epiphany were meant as vehicles to celebrate Jesus Christ.

The yearly Christian festivals remind us of the leading events of the gospel history, and beckon us

to participate in worship of Christ. In the words of Philip Schaff: "The church year is, so to speak, a chronological confession of faith; a moving panorama of the great events of salvation; a dramatic exhibition of the gospel for the Christian people" (*History of the Christian Church*, volume III, pages 387).

May you have a blessed and joyous Christmas! 

## Lectionary Readings for November-December 2005

### Nov. 1 All Saints Day

Psalm 34:1-22  
Matthew 5:1-12  
1 John 3:1-3  
Revelation 7:9-17

### Nov. 6

Joshua 24:1-25  
Psalm 70 or 78  
Matthew 25:1-13  
1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

### Nov. 13

Judges 4:1-7  
Psalm 90 or 123  
Matthew 24:14-30  
1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

### Nov. 20

Psalm 95 or 100

Ezekiel 34:11-24  
Matthew 25:31-46  
Ephesians 1:15-23

### Nov. 27 Advent; Year B begins

Psalm 80  
Isaiah 64:1-9  
Mark 13:24-37  
1 Corinthians 1:3-9

### Dec. 4

Psalm 85  
Isaiah 40:1-11  
Mark 1:1-8  
2 Peter 3:8-18

### Dec. 11

Psalm 126  
Isaiah 61:1-11

John 1:6-28  
1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

### Dec. 18

2 Samuel 7:1-16  
Psalm 89  
Luke 1:26-38  
Romans 16:25-27

### Dec. 25 Christmas

Psalms 96-98  
Isaiah 9:2-7; 62:6-12; 52:7-10  
Luke 2:1-20; John 1:1-14  
Titus 2:11-3:7; Hebrews 1:1-12

### Jan. 1

Psalm 148  
Isaiah 61:10-62:3  
Luke 2:22-40  
Galatians 4:4-7