



Four weeks of daily meditations
to lead us through Christmas to January 1

New Baby. New Life. New Year

BY BECKY AHLBERG

For many, especially church leaders, Christmas is more chaos than celebration. Besides the extra programs and parties, family responsibilities and expectations also expand. These short meditations (starting on the next page) are designed with leaders in mind. Take a few minutes each day to ponder these thoughts designed to help you find the wonder of the incarnation in the midst of your responsibilities.

Advent is simply a time to prepare for the celebration of Christ's birth. In liturgical settings, Advent begins four Sundays before Christmas and centers around these four concepts: hope, peace, joy, and love. For our purposes, we will focus on those four words, but start on the first Sunday of December and finish on New Year's Day.

May your holidays be blessed as you celebrate God's gift to you while you give of yourself to others.

Hope

Week 1

December 6-12

Sunday, December 6

Read Isaiah 7:14; 9:6, 7.

Anticipation is so energizing. It stirs the senses and builds excitement. Ask any mother-to-be, engaged couple, or high school graduate heading to college, and they will tell you the months and weeks leading up to their big event are some of the most hopeful days of life. They are looking forward.

This year, once again, we look for hope. We long to know there is more to this life than the crazy schedules and frenzied activity of holiday celebrations.

Isaiah wrote of the coming Messiah centuries before he came, and his words brought hope to the people of God. They waited expectantly for the Messiah to come. Even in the worst of times, the hope of his coming gave them strength to go on and the will to endure hard times. God's people were facing exile, persecution, and separation from loved ones and home. Hope was at the heart of their ability to cope.

That hope can be yours today. Hope that has changed lives. Hope that keeps you looking forward.

What challenges and struggles are you facing right now? Do you need some energized coping skills? Stop right now and ask God to renew your hope, remind you that you're not alone, and bring to mind what you need to keep you looking forward.

Monday, December 7

It's Pearl Harbor Day—"A date which will live in infamy," as Franklin Roosevelt so memorably said.

On December 7, 1941, America's naval fleet at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, was attacked by the Imperial Japanese Navy. When the smoke cleared, 2,403 Americans had been killed and 1,178 were injured.

Christmas 1941 came barely two weeks after that attack. Families tried to go about their celebrations in the usual ways, but the worry over war and the unsettled affairs all over the world clouded the usual lighthearted and warm celebrations. American families were already

Ask God to give you the eyes to see hope this Christmas.

mourning the loss of soldiers in Europe, and now how many more lives would be lost?

Just three days before Christmas, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill surprised President Franklin D. Roosevelt with a trip to Washington, D.C., where they jointly lit the White House Christmas tree. In this most remarkable moment, and in the twinkling lights of a Christmas tree, many found a way to hope again.

Do you need some renewed hope this year? Maybe you're looking for something too big and dramatic. Try looking at the small things that can light up your life and rekindle a sense of purpose and hope as you serve others. Ask God to give you the eyes to see hope this Christmas.

Tuesday, December 8

Have you finished your Christmas shopping yet? Have you even started? How many parties and gatherings do you have on your calendar? How many Christmas programs or Christmas Eve services have you scheduled this year? Sometimes just thinking about these things can make a person weary!

Now add to this list the hurting members of your congregation who find the holidays depressing or wounding, and who need your wise counsel and pastoral touch. Maybe **you** find Christmas depressing and wounding, and it becomes a weary ordeal as you try to find the Christmas spirit somewhere. Perhaps you feel you must hide behind a spiritual façade.

Take a minute and read through Isaiah 40:28-31 and then ask yourself: is your hope in the Lord? I know you know that the Lord is the everlasting God. Let that fill you with hope as you plan your day today. He won't grow tired and weary, even if you do.

Ask him to be the wind beneath your wings this Christmas season. Find the strength to soar above the weariness because you trust God to carry you to New Year's Day and beyond!

Wednesday, December 9

Start your thoughts this morning reading Romans 5:1-5. *Perseverance* and *character*—these are two strong words, but we usually don't think of them as the stuff of Christmas. And yet, they are at the heart of it.

When you come right down to it,



Christmas is a pretty rough story. Think of the cast in this play, and how those two words made Christmas possible: Mary, Joseph, the shepherds, Anna, Simeon, and Christ. For all of them, there could easily be a focus on shame and suffering, and yet each of them experienced and understood that God's love had been poured into their hearts . . . with a plan and a purpose.

Their job? To persevere through their suffering and shame, so character could lead to hope—for each of them, and for each of us. What a gift!

Boast in the hope of the glory of God. Look for it today as you serve. Thank him that he persevered for you, and think of the character and hope that can be born out of the situations where you must persevere today . . . and tomorrow . . . and next week.

Thursday, December 10

Today brings another atypical Christmas passage, 2 Corinthians 4:7-9, 16-18. This “jars of clay” passage is one of my favorites for lots of reasons, but maybe never more so than today as I ponder a new thought: *Jesus chose to become a jar of clay himself! Fully man, fully God. Now that is a treasure in a jar of clay!*

What could illustrate the fragility of the life Jesus embarked upon more poignantly than a newborn baby? What life on earth ever embodied the images in this passage more than Jesus? “Pressed . . . but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed” (vv. 8, 9). What an apt description of the incarnation for Je-

sus. Despite the fragility of the human experience, he conquered death.

But jump down to verse 16, “Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day.” Without discounting the challenges you face every day, can you let the story of Christmas, the reality of the incarnation, help you put them in the “light and momentary troubles” (v. 17) category that an eternal perspective can bring? That is the essence of hope.

Friday, December 11

Read 1 Timothy 4.

In this well-known passage, the apostle Paul shares his wisdom with young Timothy and reminds him his behavior is critical to his credibility as a leader. It's always good for leaders to remind themselves of these important truths. And right in the middle of it is this nugget, “That is why we labor and strive, because we have put our hope in the living God” (v. 10). Ours is not hope built on quaint stories or wishful thinking.

The incarnation wasn't magic. It was the purposeful, powerful behavior of the almighty God sending his Son to cement his credibility. He didn't just talk about love; he embodied it. He didn't just talk about relationship; he moved first.

For hope to be credible today in a world awash in hopelessness, we must make the incarnation believable. Do people see Christ in you? Do they see you labor and strive because you have put your hope in the living God? As messengers of the Christmas story,

we must bring the credibility that stirs hope in those who hear that message.

Saturday, December 12

An interesting juxtaposition today: Read Philippians 2:3-11 through the lens of Christmas. The phrase he “emptied Himself” (v. 7, *New American Standard Bible*) describes Jesus' perfect Christmas gift to us. Then read (or better yet, sing!) the words to “O Little Town of Bethlehem,” and imagine yourself in the midst of that unheralded event. His ways are not our ways.

O little town of Bethlehem,
How still we see thee lie!
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep,
The silent stars go by.
Yet in the dark street shineth
The everlasting Light;
The hopes and fears of all the years,
Are met in thee tonight.

How silently, how silently,
The wondrous Gift is giv'n!
So God imparts to human hearts
The blessings of His Heav'n.
No ear may hear His coming;
But in this world of sin,
Where meek souls will receive Him still,
The dear Christ enters in.

O holy Child of Bethlehem,
Descend to us, we pray;
Cast out our sin and enter in,
Be born in us today.
We hear the Christmas angels
The great glad tidings tell:
Oh, come to us, abide with us,
Our Lord Emmanuel!

—Phillips Brooks, 1868

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Peace

Week 2

December 13-19

Sunday, December 13

We begin our second week of meditations with a focus on peace. *Read Luke 2:8-11.* For too many of us, peace needs to be the absence of conflict. Is that what peace is? The angel's message was to poor, harassed shepherds. What they probably heard most clearly was, "Fear not" (v. 10, *King James Version*) . . . a good place to start when seeking peace.

Few things can rob our sleep, our perseverance, or our focus on ministry like fear. It is the ultimate paralyzer. It crushes hope and cripples faith. In Scott Lencke's blog, "The Prodigal Thought" (January 12, 2013), he posits that the opposite of peace is fear. "So, when I, as one created in God's image and being re-created in the image of Christ, feel all out of sorts, not knowing the peace of God, I might just consider what kind of fear has laid hold of my heart."

Jesus himself said, "In this world you will have trouble, but FEAR NOT, I have overcome the world" (John 16:33, author's paraphrase). What is robbing your peace and causing you fear this Christmas? The good news is not just an angel's; hear the words of the Prince of Peace: fear not!

Monday, December 14

My first child was born on January 6. He wasn't due until January 20, so I had insisted I could keep my music ministry running through the Christmas season. A full choral program, children's program, soloist work in a local performance of Bach's "Magnificat," a Christmas Eve service, and all the family stuff of Christmas a week later, and well, let's just say I

overdid it a bit.

A daunting 26 hours of labor later, I held my baby boy in my arms and the agony quickly became ecstasy. He was perfect. I just lay there staring at him in my arms. I found myself thinking of Mary. I was 26. She was maybe 16. I understood how I got pregnant . . . did she? I was in a world-class hospital in Los Angeles; she was in a stable. How did she do that? *Read Philippians 4:6, 7.*

We blithely talk of peace, but Mary, she walked the walk. It helped that an angel told her, "Fear not." The angel also reminded her, "With God, nothing shall be impossible" (Luke 1:30, 37, *King James Version*). Start there as you make your requests known to God today, and may the peace that passes understanding guard your heart.

Tuesday, December 15

Read Matthew 1:18-25.

Joseph is almost a mystery player in the Christmas story. We barely get to know him, and yet he may be the best example we have of someone who put his trust fully in the Lord. He would have had to. In the midst of the shame culture of that day, the events that unfolded with his betrothed Mary would have been excruciating.

Another angel said, "Do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife" (v. 20). In the movie *The Nativity Story*, there is a poignant scene in which Joseph dreams that Mary is about to be stoned in the streets of Nazareth. An angel intervenes and tells him to take Mary as his wife and name the child Jesus. The next day he finds Mary and tenderly quotes what the angel has told him; he then says,

"I know, Mary. . . . An angel came to me in my dream."

Mary replies, "You believe me?"

"I believe you. The child will need a father. I will declare him as my own."

And with quiet resolve, and surely the peace that passes understanding, they move forward together trusting God for the difficult journey ahead.

Peace engenders trust. Ask God to give you the peace that passes understanding for what lies ahead on your journey today.

Wednesday, December 16

Read Ephesians 2:14-22.

Jesus is our peace. It was one of his purposes in coming. He was the only one who could destroy "the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility" (v. 14). He knew our nature and how easily we fall into conflict. He knew we would need help. He knew he couldn't build the church he wanted without bringing people together and making them see each other as family, not enemies. He knew the walls would have to come down.

Are there walls in your life that need to come down? Making peace with someone may be the best Christmas present you can give yourself this year. You may need to ask for forgiveness. You may just need to clear up a misunderstanding, taking the first move to make it happen. Pray about that today.

Being a peacemaker takes courage and preparation. Pray about what to say. Pray about how to say it. Pray for the courage to make a move. And then move, knowing that Christ came to bring peace on earth and is right there with you in the process.

Thursday, December 17

Read and memorize Isaiah 26:3.

A steadfast mind is a key ingredient



of peace. Here are a few synonyms for *steadfast*: unwavering, unflinching, resolute, committed, dedicated, unwavering. So, if I read this right, finding peace is up to you and me! At Christmas, maybe more than at any other time, distractions abound. It's easy to think running away or just canceling Christmas would eliminate the chaos of the season. But is all the busyness the problem, or is it a state of mind?

What are you thinking about? What is capturing your attention these days?

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. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you (Philippians 4:8, 9).

Did you catch it? Look at that list: true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, praiseworthy. What an amazing Christmas list of words to focus your thinking! As you start your day today, try to match each word with something wonderful about Christmas, and remember that the God of peace has promised to be with you as a reward for your steadfast mind. Even in the Christmas chaos.

Friday, December 18

Read John 14:27.

Jesus would be in a tomb less than 24 hours after he spoke these words. It's a stark reminder that a steadfast mind is able to focus with an unwavering,

unflinching, resolute, committed, dedicated, unwavering resolve to be used of God for his purposes, and therein to find peace that the world does not, cannot give.

Do you equate peace only with tranquility, calm, serenity, and the absence of conflict? That may be why it eludes you today. Just "getting away from it all" may certainly be necessary in our lives. Jesus did that too. But we must

Making peace with someone may be the best Christmas present you can give yourself this year.

be careful not to equate rest and rejuvenation with true peace. If we don't have peace, the momentary relief from conflict is just that, momentary. The trouble will be right back.

The Prince of Peace longs to convince you that the peace you seek is found in active pursuit of purpose, not escape. It's a peace that propels you toward purpose—even in the midst of the worst conflict and chaos. That is how we let the peace of Christ rule in our hearts and minds.

May you find (or renew) purpose today that will lead to peace.

Saturday, December 19

One of my favorite carols is "I Heard the Bells on Christmas

Day" by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. He wrote it on December 25, 1864, while in despair at the horrible cost of the Civil War. He had recently lost his wife and as he nursed his severely injured soldier son, Christmas brought a unique kind of misery that year. He did not know that Gen. Robert E. Lee's surrender at Appomattox Court House was just a few months away. The despair of war was rife across the country.

These are three of the poignant stanzas he wrote that day. Don't just read the words; listen to a version on youtube.com (I've listed a few suggestions beneath the poetry excerpt).

I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day
Their old familiar carols play,
And wild and sweet the words repeat
Of peace on earth, good will to men.

And in despair I bowed my head:
"There is no peace on earth," I said.
"For hate is strong and mocks the song
Of peace on earth, good will to men."

Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:
"God is not dead, nor doth he sleep;
The wrong shall fail, the right prevail,
With peace on earth, good will to men."

—Henry W. Longfellow, 1864

Check out these YouTube versions of "I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day":

- Casting Crowns, www.youtube.com/watch?v=F756Mjxxrv
- Gaither Vocal Band, www.youtube.com/watch?v=T-bH5u5hEDI
- Choral arrangement with slides from the Civil War, www.youtube.com/watch?v=oZtNIZmnEMU.

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Joy | Week 3

December 20-26

Sunday, December 20

Today there will be people in your services who come only at this time of year. Perhaps it is part of their family tradition or it just seems right, but they come. What will they leave with today? Guilt, a sense of isolation, boredom, rolling eyes and shaking heads?

Let's resist the temptation to give them the scriptural fire hose in one great burst—even if we think it might be our only shot! Could we make this year's Christmas experience one of joy? Not just laughter or warm fuzzy stories or little Christmas vignettes about "the true meaning of Christmas," but a little glimpse of the joy of the Lord?

Can we come together out of the sheer joy of belonging to God and to each other because Jesus made it possible for us in his birth and life? Can we sing with abandon and hug with delight and take Communion in wonder and model for our guests that there isn't any place we'd rather be than together, worshipping, and telling God how grateful we are that he loved us first?

Joy is infectious. Pray that we spread it to everyone we meet today!

Monday, December 21

The opening line of "Joy to the World" is sometimes sung incorrectly as, "The Lord *has* come." That is not the way Isaac Watts wrote it. He wrote, "The Lord *is* come." Watts was not describing a past event (the birth of Jesus), but rather looking forward to a future event (the return of Jesus).

This hymn text was written as a paraphrase of Psalm 98, one of several

psalms considered messianic. Watts understood it to be about the reign of the Messiah. And that's precisely what the song is about. It speaks of Jesus' coming to earth when "the Savior reigns" and when "He rules the world with truth and grace." Watts wanted us to think of that glorious day when the "nations prove the glories of His righteousness, and wonders of His love." It could not happen without the birth of Jesus. *Read Psalm 98 through the lens of Christmas.*

Real joy comes when we stretch ourselves beyond what we thought we could do and accomplish more than we thought possible.

When you sing this beloved carol this season, remember we have **two** occasions of "good news that will cause great joy for all the people" (Luke 2:10) worth singing about: one has happened, one is coming. May that thought bring you great joy!

Tuesday, December 22

"We consider Christmas as the encounter, the great encounter, the historical encounter, the decisive encounter, between God and mankind. He who has faith knows this truly; let him rejoice."—Pope Paul VI

The incarnation is a moment in history, but it also is a moment (or moments) for each one of us when "God with us" becomes a personal

encounter. Recognizing that encounter changes things. There's a palpable "before and after" that may not be definable, but it is discernable. It may come over time or in a deep "aha!" moment, but its effects are profound. It's what drives us to carry on, even when we doubt. It's what moves us to risk, even when we can't see a way. It's what comforts us when we have no explanations for the difficult things of life. It's what brings euphoric rejoicing when our calling is confirmed as God uses us to make a difference. He is with us.

"Oh come to us, abide in us, our Lord, Immanuel" (from "O Little Town of Bethlehem"). "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us" (John 1:14). "Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Colossians 1:27).

Rejoice!

Wednesday, December 23

Read Hebrews 12:1-3.

"For the joy set before him he endured . . ." (v. 2).

Is there a more graphic reminder of the purpose with which Jesus came among us? The long view was essential to his ability to endure his humanity experience.

It is true for all of us. Planning, sacrifice, blood, sweat, and tears are a part of every worthwhile endeavor. Why? For the joy set before us. Examples: pregnancy, labor and delivery, raising kids, training for a race, getting your education, building a career, making disciples, caring for elderly parents, bringing redemption to broken relationships—fill in the blank with your endurance experience. It's fixing our eyes on the goal that propels us to



finish and to avoid the things that “so easily entangle” us.

Joy doesn’t come because every obstacle is removed from our pathway or when things are easy. Real joy comes when we stretch ourselves beyond what we thought we could do and accomplish more than we thought possible. What daunting task is facing you this Christmas? Can you identify the joy set before you? If not, maybe you need to spend some time finding it.

And be grateful that Jesus believed his considerable sacrifice worth the joy set before him. It wouldn’t be Christmas without it!

Thursday, December 24

Having grandchildren is a particular joy. I am constantly amazed at their humor, insight, and ability to live with joyous abandon. They make me laugh and watch in wonder as they encounter their world.

“Christmas is for children” is a common phrase this time of year. Decorations, extra “goodies” to eat, and, of course, gifts are some of their favorite things. We love to see them squeal with delight.

But is that what brings them joy? The older I get the more I realize that children are elated with just about anything if they are with someone they love. It’s never more evident than when they come to the house—any time of year—and they see you at the door. “Grandma!” they shout as they run to you. You scoop them up in your arms and kiss their little face and the joy between the two of you is electric. Not because of toys and treats, but just because you are together.

On this Christmas Eve, even in the

midst of all the glitter and goodies and gifts, may you know the deep joy of just being loved and safe in the arms of Jesus.

Friday, December 25

It’s Christmas Day—a day defined by giving. But oh how quickly (for many) it has become the season of “getting.” Today as you open gifts and celebrate with your family traditions and one another, here are a few Scriptures to remind you of who gave first, and how very much:

“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

“Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God” (John 1:12).

“The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Galatians 2:20).

“Walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God” (Ephesians 5:2).

“Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (1 Peter 1:3).

May you find the joy of giving today, too.

Saturday, December 26

Read 1 Peter 1:3-9.

We ended our thoughts yesterday with the first verse of today’s Scripture. The

phrase “inexpressible and glorious joy” (v. 8) is the one that always jumps out at me. It’s the day after Christmas and these may not be your first thoughts! However, Christmas can bless us every year by allowing us to embrace anew the incarnation and the sheer joy of belonging to God—and it’s all because of his willingness to move first.

Emily E. S. Elliott captures it in her carol, “Thou Didst Leave Thy Throne”:

Thou didst leave Thy throne
And Thy kingly crown
When Thou camest to earth for me.
But in Bethlehem’s home
was there found no room
For Thy holy nativity:

O come to my heart, Lord Jesus,
There is room in my heart for Thee.

Heaven’s arches rang
When the angels sang,
Proclaiming Thy royal degree;
But of lowly birth
Didst Thou come to earth,
And in great humility:

O come to my heart, Lord Jesus,
There is room in my heart for Thee.

Old-fashioned words, perhaps, but filled with the wonder and awe of Christ’s coming, and a reminder that inexpressible and glorious joy can fill even the most humble and difficult circumstances—even yours—when you make room for Christ.

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Love

Week 4

December 27 —
January 1

Sunday, December 27

Do you remember O. Henry's story *The Gift of the Magi*? Jim and Della, dirt poor but determined to give the perfect gift to each other, end up in an ironic situation: both have sacrificed the very thing that prompted their perfect gift. Jim sold his beloved heirloom watch to buy jeweled hair combs for Della's long and beautiful hair. Della sold her hair to buy a platinum chain for Jim's watch. Because they do this out of love, what each one really gives the other is the greatest gift, the gift of love. Even in their poverty, they have discovered how very rich they are.

Read 1 John 4: 9, 10. How very rich we are. God, himself has given us the greatest gift, the gift of love. What shall we give him? Consider the final stanza in Christina Rossetti's well-known poem, "In the Bleak Midwinter."

What can I give Him,
Poor as I am? —
If I were a Shepherd
I would bring a lamb
If I were a Wise Man
I would do my part,—
Yet what I can I give Him,—
Give my heart.

Monday, December 28

Perhaps the greatest Christmas text is also one of the most familiar to Christians: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to

save the world through him" (John 3:16, 17).

God so loved . . . so "agaped" the world, he put his privilege, his position, and his power aside and gave. He did what was best for us, not thinking of himself. And more than that, he allowed himself to be humiliated to complete the gift.

Jesus said, "Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:13). The cross stands at the other end of the manger, and it is closely followed by the resurrection.

Remind yourself of the experience of God's love in your life . . . and be grateful.

Our personal challenge at Christmas is to take the long view and remember the scope of why God sent his Son . . . not just to be born, not just to die, but to defeat death and connect us back to him. Love wins in the gift God sent. Be encouraged and reminded of God's deep love for you.

Tuesday, December 29

Read Ephesians 3:14-19.

We pray for other people all the time. How many times have you sat in your office or in a home or at a hospital bedside and prayed for someone to know the deep love of Christ? Praying for someone is an act of love and creates a bond of friendship, even kinship, as we make our requests

known to the Lord. We pray, believing God hears our prayers and that prayer will offer hope and comfort to those we care about.

But today, read this Scripture as a prayer for **you**. Let it wash over you and remind you that Paul is praying for the strength and power of Christ's love to fill you to your very core. In the midst of your work, it is easy to forget to seek God for yourself; to admit that you need him to heal your wounds, hear your prayers, calm your fears, fill you with his presence not just as you serve, but as you acknowledge your need of him.

Wednesday, December 30

Read 1 Corinthians 13 through the lens of Christmas. Verses 1-3 can sum up much of our problem with the whole Christmas season: it is filled with busyness and observances that are often void of "the real meaning of Christmas." Why? Because they "do not have love."

How many gifts did you give out of obligation? How many parties did you attend because it wouldn't look good to miss them? I hope you were able to do plenty of things that were filled with love. That is what keeps the season overflowing with love and thankfulness, instead of just feeling busy.

Love and thankfulness should go hand in hand. Gratitude is a mature expression of love that deepens it. It's the difference between a coerced "thank you" from a child and a heartfelt expression of affection and commitment affirming a loving relationship.

First Corinthians 13 is about being



a grown-up; about leaving childishness behind and looking forward to deeper and deeper love. I think that is why love is greater than faith and hope, which are built on expectations and promise. Love is built on experience. Today, remind yourself of the experience of God's love in your life . . . and be grateful.

Offer him your love and devotion because you are so grateful to know him and be known by him. May you "be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God" (v. 19) today and always.

Thursday, December 31

Read Romans 8:28-39.

It's New Year's Eve, a time for reflection. Another year has passed by and a new one dawns tomorrow. In this passage from Romans are some important promises to contemplate as you look back at this past year and forward to the new one:

"In all things God works for the good of those who love him" (v. 28). Can you look back and see God's hand in the days of 2015? What do you see? What are you still looking to find?

"If God is for us, who can be against us?" (v. 31). How does that promise buoy you for 2016? Can you enumerate challenges that lie ahead?

"We are more than conquerors through him who loved us" (v. 37). What did you conquer in 2015? What do you need to conquer in 2016?

"For I am convinced that [nothing] will be able to separate us from the love of God" (v. 38, 39). How does holding on to that promise affect your view of the future? Spend some moments

right now in prayer thanking God for the blessings and challenges of 2015 and asking for a deep sense of his presence in 2016.

Friday, January 1, 2016

Read Hebrews 1:1-3.

This passage brings the story of the incarnation full circle. We have come through another year to remember

What did you conquer in 2015? What do you need to conquer in 2016?

Jesus' birth with calls to hope, peace, joy, and love. I hope your Christmas celebration was meaningful. And now as you head into the new year, clean

up the leftovers, return gifts, and put away the decorations, never forget that his coming, though a gift to you, was a sacrifice for him.

I pray that the depth of that sacrifice moves you beyond the quaint story of a manger and hay. Never forget that he sits at the right hand of the Father—in majesty. Scenes of Heaven in Revelation refer to him as King of kings and Lord of lords. How humbling and awe-inspiring to consider the lengths to which he would go to show his love for you.

And I pray the perfect ending to your joyous celebration will find you moving beyond the baby in a manger, even beyond the cross and your redemption. May this new year find you worshipping with all your heart at the feet of the King of kings.

Becky Ahlberg serves as executive director of My Safe Harbor in Anaheim, California.

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