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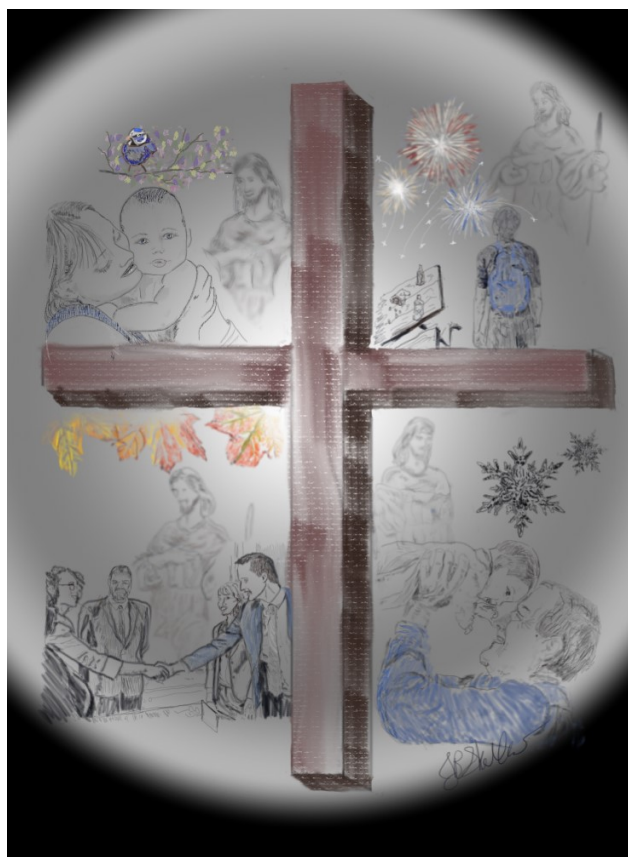
Cover Art

Joni Skellie

Emmanuel

in Every Season

Summer



An Advent Devotional

*Jesus we proclaim,
warning and teaching everyone
with all wisdom,
that we may present everyone
mature in Christ.
- Colossians 1:28*

December 3

*“You will conceive in your womb and bear a son,
and you shall call his name Jesus.”*

- Luke 1:26-33

You don't watch summer growth in real time. But come back from vacation, like I did, and the jaw drops. The shrubs on our back property line were all overgrown again.

It makes me laugh, though, because I remember what they once were. We bought those shrubs by mail order. When they arrived, they came in a single poster tube, trimmed to root and main stem. I opened it in shock and laughed to my wife, “Look at our hedge!”

We planted them, a row of sticks, and laughed again, but they grew, slowly at first. Now they grow maddeningly fast.

The same is true of our children. When did we first start to love them? When we first learned my wife was pregnant, there was love. When we first felt a kick, there was love. When we settled on a name, there was love. Finally, when we saw their little bodies in our arms, there was love. It wasn't new love. Now they are growing like... shrubs? Family love grows along with them.

It is a marvel to think of the Creator of all, the Lord Almighty, like a branchless shrub, first planted in Mary's womb. The Savior of the Nations could see nothing outside His mother's womb. The Word made flesh could speak no words. The omnipresent God could not disconnect His umbilical cord and take a break, chilling on a mountain peak.

This is what it means for the Son of God to become one of us. He lives our life from weakness to weakness, from the confinement of the womb to the confinement of the cross. Often, as readers of the Word, we skip ahead, like a family coming back from vacation to see all the growth. We think of Jesus, thirty years young and healing the sick. But He also lived through those years of growth, developing for us, to give us life. He sanctifies all of human life, beginning through to new beginning, filling humanity with love.

- Rev. A. Daniel Guagenti

We pray: Lord of all life, grow Your love in us, no matter our station in life. You, Emmanuel, are with us, sanctifying us for eternal life. Thank You! Amen.

December 8

“Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?”

- Luke 2:41-52

We say it more and more as we get older: “My father used to say...” “My mother taught me...” Too bad we didn't write down those words of wisdom.

Only now are we keenly aware of how resistant and stubborn we were to heed what our parents said to us as we grew up. Only now do we notice the permanent worry lines etched on our parents' brows from our misspent youth. Only now do we sense their heartache from our rebellion and disobedience. Only now, we're on the receiving end as we raise our children.

As we age, we also grasp the agony we have caused our Heavenly Father with our resentfulness toward His wise direction. We realize His heart breaks when we are disobedient to Him. We know He is disappointed and saddened when in stubbornness we have gone our own way in defiance of His will.

Being more aware of how rebellious we were at times with our parents, we are ever more grateful for their patience and steady, dependable love as we grew up. Being more aware of how rebellious we are toward our Heavenly Father instills in us an eternal gratefulness for Jesus' sacrificial death for the forgiveness of our sins. His long-suffering is shown when we cry out to Him in penitent confession, knowing that forgiveness is as close as our confession. That readily available forgiveness of our Lord was shown in our parents' ready forgiveness when we disobeyed them. Forgiveness repairs relationships broken by sin, whether the ties are with earthly or heavenly family.

Thank the Lord today for your parents, biological or otherwise. Thank them for their unconditional love which pointed to our Savior's unconditional love shown on the cross. And take a moment to tell them they were right. Then watch their faces light up with joy.

- Rev. Raymond Saleminck

We pray: Heavenly Father, thank You for faithful parents who did their best to raise us in the faith and exemplify Your love with their love. Bless our efforts as we raise our children in the church. Amen.

December 7

*“One thing is necessary.”
- Luke 10:38-42*

When we think about times of growth in our lives, we usually think about mastering several new skills. Kids grow as they simultaneously learn to read, write, and count. Young adults learn to work, pay bills, take care of kids, and be a husband or wife. In retirement we learn to handle volunteer requests, grandkids, and often times myriad doctor visits.

As we approach Christmas, we do all kinds of things to prepare, like getting presents, making plans for time off, figuring out special meals and much more. We often think about how we and everyone else get so busy this time of year that we forget what is most important.

I would like to share two things for you to think about. One is that growth does not have to be about mastering skills and doing tasks. Second is that as in life, so, too, in Advent and Christmas, the one thing needful is to be with our Lord.

Our Lord gives us birth, and He gives us growth. He gives us life, and He is with us in the life He gives. We grow because we receive His grace, mercy, and peace. As we gear up to celebrate Christmas, everything is because He came. Because we have life in and through Him, we desire to celebrate His birth with our family and friends.

Growing in life and focusing on the one thing needful in the Christmas season are linked. We are joined to the life of Christ. We live in Him. We do not have to do a bunch of things even though we will do many things. We do one thing: live the life He gives. We receive life from Him and reflect Him in our lives as His people. He gives growth, and He is the One to celebrate.

- Rev. Matthew Brackman

We pray: Lord Jesus Christ, thank You for giving us life. Thank You for growing us as Your people. Because You are the one thing needful at Christmas and in life, we ask for Your blessing upon all of our preparations and celebration. Amen.

December 4

*“When Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary,
the baby leaped in her womb.”
- Luke 1:39-56*

Wombs are supposed to be safe places. Soft, like the yarn of a meticulous knitting. Snug, like the grasp of God’s own hands. But before your eighteen-day cardiac cells started palpitating, before your seven-week brain began to wave, creation’s decay already ate away at you. Your own sinful nature twisted you inward with a monstrous rot that wrought dysfunction, discomfort, disease, and disaster from the instant your DNA first replicated.

Jesus—our Emmanuel, God with us—entered this space too. He, though, dwelled in the womb and was without sin. In His Incarnation, Jesus composes of this precious time a song about forgiveness, embrace and exchange, substitution and atonement. Tiny Almighty choreographs in it a dance of grace and faith, promise and purpose. “For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy” (Luke 1:44).

How precious His compassion has held you too since you first appeared in utero, that He has inhabited not only flesh but also cross and grave with you to comfort and deliver. He who has brought life and immortality to light still loves nothing more than to shine in the darkness, and even the valley of the shadow of death has not overcome it. “If I say, ‘Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light about me be night,’ even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is bright as the day, for darkness is as light with you. For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made!” (Psm. 139:11-14).

- Rev. Michael Salemink

We pray: Come, O Lord, fill our hearts and mouths and eternities with the joy of Your smiling presence. Amen.

December 5

“Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to Your Word.”

- Luke 2:21-40

“There’s a baptism today in church. Do you know what that means?” “Yeah, all the good seats will be filled at the restaurant by the time church lets out.” Admit it, have you ever felt this way when you noticed the lid off the font in preparation for the sacrament? We often decry the rush that surrounds the weeks leading up to Christmas. However, if we’re not careful, we can let this same rush govern every season of our lives.

Amidst the usual hustle and bustle in the temple, on this day in our text, time seems to almost stand still. Already, on the eighth day, Jesus had been circumcised, as were boys before Him stretching back all the way to the days of Abraham. Now, on this day of our infant Savior’s presentation, His young adult parents are greeted by two faithful seniors. Three generations are gathered for praise, promise and proclamation. Likewise, the baptism that may delay our departure for lunch, is a celebration and precious reminder of God’s love for all of us. The white gown, symbolizing Christ’s robe of righteousness, will be placed on that baby in Holy Baptism today in our church. Parents and grandparents will all crowd together for photos. This same white gown will appear again at that child’s confirmation. It will even be draped as a pall over the casket on the day of their burial. It’s a beautiful reminder that Christ’s promise of mercy, forgiveness, and eternal life are ours throughout every age and stage of this life. That’s what this Baby, whose birth we ready ourselves to celebrate at Christmas, came to accomplish for us.

The lid is off of the font. The seats may be filling up at the diner. That’s okay. In this sacrament, God Himself welcomes a brand new child into His Kingdom and sets a place for them at the family dinner – His heavenly banquet. That’s something that all of us, young and old can celebrate.

- Rev. David Tannahill

We pray: Bless us again this Christmas, as we pause to remember Your lifelong gift of grace that we share. Amen.

December 6

“The father of the child cried out and said with tears, ‘Lord, I believe; help my unbelief.’”

- Mark 9:14-29

A teenager is performing some household tasks. Maybe she is thinking about her recent engagement. Suddenly, a bright light explodes before her, and a fearful being appears. Falling to her knees, afraid her time on earth is over, Mary hears the most incredible message. She, who is yet a virgin, will become pregnant by the power of the Most High God, and this child will be none other than the Messiah prophesied of old.

A man, beaten to within an inch of His life, hangs tortured and naked between two vicious criminals. He has been convicted of treason against the state, proclaiming Himself King of the Jews. He’d saved many others, but apparently, He was not able to save Himself. How could this man, so easily beaten, be the Savior of all?

Your child is lying in a hospital bed. The doctor has just shared with you that there is nothing more he can do. Words fail you as you realize that there are only hours before the light fades from your son’s eyes. You know the promises of Jesus, that He has taken your son’s sins upon Himself, and thus granted eternal life. Yet it is so hard to hold on to that as your whole body is ravaged by grief.

The seasons of our lives flow from tranquil spring to the frigid death of winter. Cold doubts assail us. Thankfully, our Father does not stop providing simply because we are struggling. The man in our reading struggled with doubt when his son was afflicted, yet he went to Jesus, trusting in His mercy. Jesus promises that the winters of our lives will pass, and life will bloom anew in the glorious spring of His eternal kingdom. While winter still rages, we find His warmth in that place where His Word is preached and His gifts are given. Come and hear Jesus, for He is the Resurrection, and His Word is life eternal.

- Rev. Wm. G. Sabol

We pray: Come, Lord Jesus, and stir up in our hearts the hope of Your resurrection, that our doubts may be tamed and our trust in You be strengthened. Amen.

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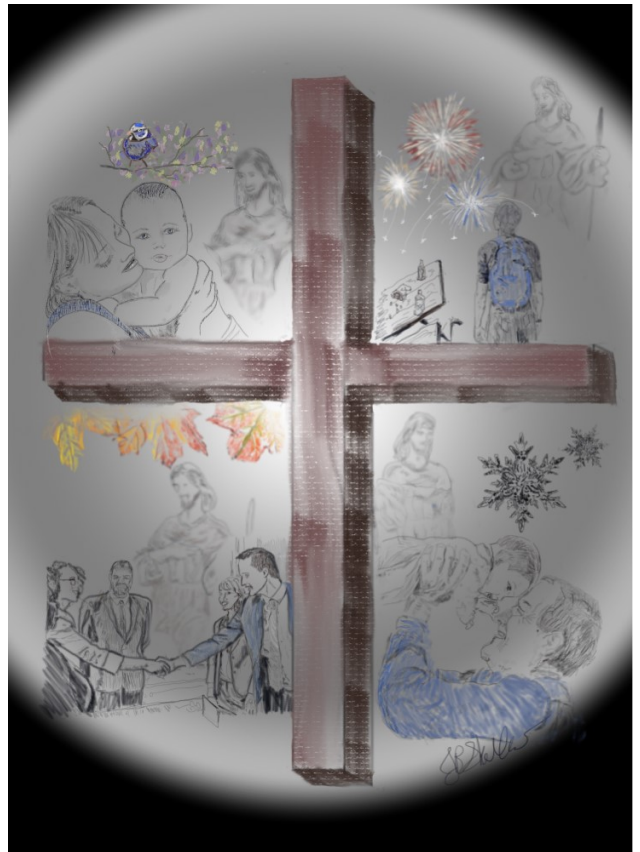
Cover Art

Joni Skellie

Emmanuel

in Every Season

Autumn



An Advent Devotional

*Truly, truly, I say to you,
unless a grain of wheat
falls into the earth and dies,
it remains alone; but if it dies,
it bears much fruit.*

- John 12:24

December 10

“Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him.”

- Luke 10:25-37

A cornucopia filled with fruits, vegetables, and grains symbolizes for us the richness of harvest. For those of us who are autumnal consumers, the bountiful result can be the only way we think of harvest. Laborers, however, think of harvest differently. They know the deposit of strength—blood and sweat—needed to transform fields and groves from full to empty.

Harvest requires sacrifice. The tree gives up its fruit. The laborer pays in strength.

This is no less true for human life. We rightly hope to harvest peace, love, and joy. To achieve these fruits requires sacrificing for our neighbors.

When a mother finds out she is pregnant, she is much like the Samaritan rounding the bend and discovering the faint stirrings of life. She doesn't yet know the person in need. She senses that aid for this person will be costly in every way.

A consumer-dominated culture says, “You need to make sure you *want* that child.” No human being, whether Jew, Samaritan, or Gentile, whether male or female, whether old or young, whether viably self-sufficient or nearly expired, is an object fit for our consumption. We are neighbors, at least, and through self-sacrifice, we can become so much more to each other. Jesus sacrificed all He had for the harvest. What did He win? His harvest is a family of eternal love.

- Rev. A. Daniel Guagenti

We pray: Lord of Calvary, fill our hearts with mercy for our neighbors, trusting that all we sacrifice is repaid in Your eternal kingdom. Amen.

December 15

“He must increase, but I must decrease.”

- John 3:25-30

The life of a Christian is one of increase and decrease. We begin about as low as you can go: dead. We are raised about as high as you can go: united to Jesus. As we live out our lives as His people, we are brought low by sin and lifted up by forgiveness.

We do not grow because we sin less or are better behaved. We grow by ourselves decreasing and our Lord increasing in us. The Law opens our eyes to how much more we sin than we previously thought. The Gospel shows us how much more He forgives. We see how much more He acts in our lives to motivate us to serve our neighbor. Any outward increase in following His Law is generated by His Holy Spirit within us. We recognize it is His work in us, and not our work.

This concept plays out in life, too. Have you noticed how hard it is to simply be happy as friends or family increase? It's hard to be purely happy for them without an iota of envy creeping into our heart. It's difficult to see others increase in life, in possessions, in relationships, without being a bit jealous. We are happy for them. We would also like to have that increase and blessing as well.

We must decrease and our Lord must increase to resolve this problem. As we find contentment in Him and all He gives us, it is easier to rejoice with those around us who are increasing. This could help us as we hear what others received for Christmas, bought for kids or grandkids, or did with their family for Christmas.

Notice how our spiritual and practical lives are interconnected. Notice how as we decrease our Lord increases, and that is a fantastic blessing.

- Rev. Matthew Brackman

We pray: Lord Jesus Christ, increase in us. May we decrease so that You may increase in and through us. Let us take joy in the increase of those around us. Let us look with joy to the increase You give to us as Your people. Amen.

December 14

“Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.” - Luke 13:1-15

“Who’s to blame here?” “It’s not *my* fault!” “I’m not perfect, but he is worse.” Such are some of the common reactions of humans when something bad happens. We naturally want to place blame, make excuses, and draw comparisons.

Jesus was presented with an issue of Galileans (Jews) who were executed by Pontius Pilate. Their blood was mixed with blood of animal sacrifices—a scandal for the Jews. Jesus responded, “Do you think the slain were worse sinners than others?” Jesus also brought up an incident when 18 were killed. Were they worse than average? Who’s to blame?

Two incidents, and Jesus said the same for both. “Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.” He gave no explanation; no comparisons; no blame, even for Pilate. Rather, “*You* repent.”

The lesson speaks to *you*. When bad things happen that affect you (and they will), your sacrifice is personal repentance. Ask yourself, “How have I failed in my actions and attitudes?” Then, in humble repentance say, “God forgive me of my wrong deeds and thoughts in this bad situation.”

Repentance is not easy. No one can repent for us. And there is no way we can force repentance on someone else in placing blame. God *gives* you the chance to repent so that bad things can be set right, or that we can cope with trouble. In humility, we sacrifice our self-esteem to draw strength from divine grace.

Repentance is not easy. But the benefits are great. It’s a lot easier to cope with evil when you are secure in grace. God opens the door to renewal, then we enter, leaving ourselves behind. In that sacrifice, we give up the burden of justifying ourselves.

- Rev. Ronald Richeson

We pray: O God, forgive my temptation to justify myself. Help me to see my faults, repent of them, and receive Your forgiveness. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

December 11

“He went and lived in a town called Nazareth. So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets.” - Matthew 2:18-25

“This is not the life I expected.” Have you ever found yourself saying this to yourself? “I didn’t picture my marriage would look like this.” “I didn’t imagine having a child with special needs.” “This is not the direction I thought my life would take.”

Joseph may have found himself saying something like this. Like most young men looking forward to his wedding he may have had a vague picture of a settled life with his wife and child. Instead, he became the loving adoptive father of Jesus, who was “conceived by the Holy Spirit” and “born of the virgin Mary.” Then, facing peril with life-or-death consequences, he was directed to take actions he never could have imagined.

Joseph had to make plans and provisions to flee, with wife and child, from a violent situation in his homeland. When he was able to return, caution led him to settle in a different city from the one he may have planned. Certainly, this was not the life he expected.

However, throughout these events God was with Joseph. He led Joseph. From the vantage point of God’s Word you and I are even able to see how God fulfilled His plan through Joseph. As Matthew assures us, “So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets” (Mt 2:23 NIV). The result is that Jesus, whose nativity we are preparing to celebrate, did not die until the time appointed at Calvary that was set for our salvation.

Even in the midst of those times which may leave us bewildered, God is with us and is at work in our lives. His love for us is steadfast. He continues to pour His love, mercy and forgiveness into our lives – and through us into the lives of those in our midst. That doesn’t surprise God or come as unexpected. It just may not happen in the way that we were expecting.

- Rev. David Tannahill

We pray: Heavenly Father, thank You for sanctifying all the unexpected events and moments of my life. Help me to see Your hand of blessing at work throughout my days. Amen.

December 12

“What God has joined together,
let not man separate.”
- Matthew 19:3-11

The problem with human sexuality is that it involves human promises. God intends that we experience sex through the promises we make in marriage. But these promises are a problem.

For better or worse, in sickness and health, and all other conditions, we promise to forsake intimacy with all others until we are parted by death. We promise that as long as we live, we will be with to this person and no one else.

But frustrations and temptations come along. How can we say that we will always love this man, or this woman? For newlyweds, the vows seem easy and natural, but for those with experience, these promises are no joke. How can I say that I will love this person only? How can I trust that my husband or wife will fulfill their promises to me?

Thankfully, there is more to marriage than human promises. Regarding marriage, Jesus said, “What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate.” Notice what he says: “What God has joined together....” Marriage is not merely a couple’s promises to each other. Marriage is created by God and involves His promises, too. This is a great miracle, and it is our great hope.

When we promise to care for and love each other, God is at work. God has given you your wife or your husband. In their love for you, God is fulfilling His promise to care for you. In the same way, God shows His love to your spouse through your love and care.

The problem of sexuality is also its great blessing. When we keep our promises, we see God working through us. Our faithfulness to our spouse is an expression of God’s love and faithfulness. My promise is also God’s promise.

- Rev. Jonathan Mueller

We pray: Faithful Lord, show us Your work in our marriage vows. Where we are weak and faltering, remind us that You are strong and faithful. May Your promises always be fulfilled, to us and through us. In Jesus’ name, amen.

December 13

“Then the sons are free. However, not to give offense, take that shekel and give it to them.”
- Matthew 17:24-27

What motivates sacrifice for a Christian person? In Matthew 17:24-27, Jesus taught a lesson about why we sacrifice that distinguishes Law and Gospel.

Since the days of Moses, a yearly tax of one-half shekel was expected of every man aged 20 and older. The collection would support the worship leaders and facilities of the Jews. That is, the tax was a matter of *law*. When this matter was laid before Jesus, He engaged Simon’s thinking as to whether the king’s sons, or just “others,” were subject to the tax. Simon answered, “others,” presuming that members of the king’s family were not subject to the same law.

Now think—if the sacrifice of the tax was for the maintenance of God’s house, and God was the true King, then the Son of God was not subject to the tax *under the law*. However, Jesus showed a proper humility and obedience as a human. He arranged for paying the tax. Jesus was a King’s Son, and so was Simon, by God’s grace. Though He wasn’t obligated, Jesus paid one shekel for Himself and Simon. He did not hold Himself above “others.”

Now—is a Christian *obligated* to pay a “tax” to the King? Do we “owe” God something? Those are *law* questions, and, ultimately, we are free from that law as children of God. But, to avoid giving offense to others *and* to contribute to the King’s work, we sacrifice, following Christ. That is a Gospel motivation, born of our adoption by grace. We sacrifice and follow the law willingly *because* we are free. New life inspires new obedience.

- Rev. Ronald Richeson

We pray: Dear God, guide us as Your dear children in making our sacrifices in love, as You sacrificed for us. Through Christ, our Lord. Amen.

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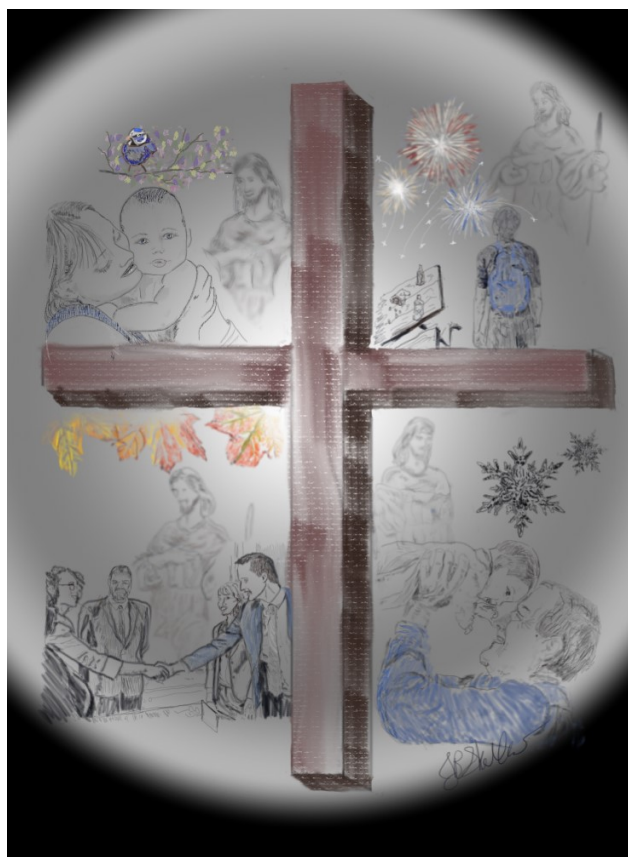
Cover Art

Joni Skellie

Emmanuel

in Every Season

Winter



An Advent Devotional

*For to me
to live is Christ
and to die
is gain.*

- Philippians 1:21

December 17

“Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will but yours be done.” - Luke 22:39-46

We pray for the dying, though we do not always know exactly what we are praying for. Sometimes it seems like too much to ask for healing in those last days, though we believe miracles can happen. Sometimes it seems like we are speaking into cold air. On occasion, when death does come, strangely, death itself can feel like prayer answered. The blessed is no longer in pain. There has been final healing.

In Jesus' case, He knew what He was asking for. He did not want to die in the agonizing way He did. He asked if the cup could pass.

We speak of the cross as a tree, Calvary as the mirror image of Eden. The cross is the bare-branched tree, no longer adorned with the life of summer, the glory of autumn, or the flower of spring. In that season of winter, the tree gives neither shade nor fruit, and there is much less to please the eye. But the tree endures.

“Don't take your hand off the back of the bike,” my child implores. It is a prayer, of sorts, the kind you could call “unanswered.” For I know that to help teach how to ride a bike, I have to take my hand off the back eventually. I know the child will fall more than once. I know we will both need to endure.

In the seasons of life where prayers feel bare-branched, waiting and waiting, we know our God is still behind us, enduring with us. The cross is a picture of God's willing endurance.

We don't always know what we're asking for. Not only what He wills but when He wills it, is for the best. We trust it; we cling to it. We know that if it feels that He has let us go, He has not left us.

- Rev. A. Daniel Guagenti

We pray: Father, we do not know how to pray as we ought, so thank You for Jesus, interceding for us, teaching us to pray and to wait, for Your mercies are new every morning. Amen.

December 22

*“My God, My God,
why have you forsaken me?”
- Mark 15:33-39*

“I just wish I could have one day without pain,” the octogenarian whispered. As we age, our bodies wear out. Parts no longer function well or at all. Dull aches and sharp pains become daily companions, caused by years of wear and tear on the body.

Loved ones stand helplessly by with tearful eyes as family or friends endure the trials and travails of frail bodies. Death seems to be a welcome respite, prayed for even, and though Christians are opposed to it, we understand how attractive assisted suicide can be.

In agony, we cry out, “Give me relief, Lord!” Jesus healed many while He walked the earth, never turning anyone away. Why does He now? St. James says the prayer of faith will heal the sick one (James 3:13); so why do our prayers go unheard or unanswered? Is this God's will, that suffering be our lot?

God assures us He is always near, closest in our suffering, but that nearness doesn't always mean relief. Just ask St. Paul. As Jesus endured six long hours of excruciating pain on the cross, His Father was near, watching and, well we can imagine, weeping like we do. His only Son bled there, gasping for breath, dying an undeserved punishment.

Jesus' suffering gives meaning to our suffering. His willingness to hang upon the cross tells us that when we suffer, our Lord suffers with us, cries with us, agonizes with us. He feels our pain as His own. He dies our death, having taken our sin upon Himself.

His immediate and close presence serves to strengthen us during difficult times. His resurrection reminds us of the promise He spoke in our baptism, to take us to heaven. There, all pain, tears, and aches will cease forever. All failing bodies will be renewed, recreated, made infallible and immortal. All the memories of past suffering will be gone, never to be experienced again.

- Rev. Raymond Salemink

We pray: Heavenly Father, visit us with Your grace and compassion in our sufferings and uphold us with Your gentle strength. Amen.

December 21

*“He saved others; he cannot save himself.”
- Matthew 27:32-44*

While Jesus hung on the cross, those standing around Him hurled insults. In this crowd were the Pharisees. They said, “He saved others; He cannot save Himself.”

Although their mockery came from hatred and unbelief, there was a particle of truth in what the Pharisees said. Jesus did save many from hunger, sickness, deafness, blindness, and all sorts of problems. He even saved some from death. But He did not save Himself from death. Why is this?

There is, perhaps, more than one answer to the question. Jesus died because He was faithful to His Father. And Jesus died because of His love for us. But we can also say that Jesus willingly died on the cross because of His hope for the future. Even as He was dying, Jesus knew that His Father would not forget Him in the grave. Even in the extreme pain of His last moments, Jesus could look forward to a life to come. Jesus died knowing that death was not His end. Even in death, Jesus had faith that His Father would raise Him to new life.

When we approach the end of our lives, we can follow Jesus' example. Unlike Jesus, we do not have power over death. But like Jesus, in our last moments we can look forward to a life to come. Because Jesus rose from the dead, we are sure that we will rise, too. We know that our present suffering will not last forever. We know there is a better life ahead. That is our comfort, even in death.

Jesus could have saved Himself. But instead He chose to save us. Through His sacrifice, His hope for life has become our hope. At our death, we look forward to the life to come.

- Rev. Jonathan Mueller

We pray: Holy Father, three days after Jesus' death, You restored Your Son to life. Grant us a share of His hope, that when we come to our final moments, we may look forward to the day when You will raise us, too. In His name, amen.

December 18

*“But Jesus said, No more of this!’ And He touched his ear and healed him.”
- Luke 22:47-53*

The days of Advent and Christmas are exciting. We have celebrations with family and friends. We rejoice in the birth of our God who has come to save us. We expect to be happy. We expect people to love their neighbor more at this time of year than any other time.

Sometimes we feel like we are betraying the season or the season is betraying us. We expect a kiss of joy, but we are depressed. We expect gatherings with others, but we are lonely. We expect love from our neighbor, but we struggle in our relationship with our spouse or other family members.

Rejoicing in the birth of our God who came to save us can strengthen us in such times. Remembering that our Lord was born in order to be betrayed and crucified can strengthen us. We will likely all experience some hurt even during this most wonderful time of year. Some will experience more than others. Part of what we celebrate is that our Lord came to heal these hurts. He is our true joy, even if we struggle with depression or sadness. He will never leave nor forsake us, so we will not be alone. He came to heal our relationship with our God, and He brings His gifts of forgiveness and strength as we deal with hurts in our relationships with our spouse or family members.

In our text Jesus says, “No more of this!” (Lk 22:51). He then heals the one who was harmed. Jesus speaks healing into our lives. He gives us the kiss of peace that brings true joy. This joy lifts us up and through the struggles we face in this season of joy and all the days of our lives. We have God with us in our lives.

- Rev. Matthew Brackman

We pray: Lord Jesus Christ, bring Your peace which passes all understanding to bear upon us during this season. Let us live in the true joy of Your healing touch. Lead us through the struggles we face now and in the days to come. Amen.

December 19

“Behold I did not find this man guilty of any of your charges against him.”

- Luke 23:1-17

December 20

“Jesus wept.”

- John 11:22-48

David Milgaard spent over two decades in a Canadian prison for a murder he didn't commit. The case was made famous in the Tragically Hip song “Wheat Kings,” which includes this lyric: “Twenty years for nothing: well, that's nothing new / Besides, no one's interested in something you didn't do.” At the time he was prosecuted, attorneys in Canada noted that juries were demonstrating a “guilty unless proven innocent” bias. After all, jurors responded in surveys, why would people be in court if they hadn't done something wrong?

Jesus submitted himself to the same vagaries of human (in)justice. A Jewish king and a Roman prefect both found “no guilt” in him. But that did not stop them from letting their soldiers mock and punish him. To paraphrase a later statement by Pilate, “What is innocence?” He must have done something wrong, even if we can't figure out exactly what it was.

If our governments are so unjust, wouldn't God want us to reject them? Yet Jesus said that Pilate's power was given to him “from above” (John 19:11), from the same One who gives the new birth of water and the Spirit (John 3:3). Paul picks up this theme, speaking of the anti-Christian Nero as “God's servant for your good” (Rom. 13:3). Peter echoed this teaching, urging us to “be subject the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether ... to the emperor... or to governors” (1 Pet. 2:13-14).

What Jesus did wrong, that led to his death, was to reveal the corruption in our own hearts. We couldn't stand that kind of holiness in our midst, so we killed it. In so doing, salvation came to creation. Jesus turned our government's sinfulness into the revelation of God's righteousness. By our injustice, God's justice was satisfied, and we are saved.

- Rev. Charles St-Onge

We pray: Lord, when we suffer under injustice, remind us of our own unrighteousness, and cause us to remember the righteousness won for us by Christ. Amen.

I attended high school without air conditioning. August sweltered and May made us squirm under Iowa sunshine. Open windows and box fans couldn't stave off stifling heartland humidity in upstairs classrooms. Once in a while we received the clemency of an early-afternoon dismissal. Such reprieves never happened as often as the students felt necessary. It left us to presume the superintendent simply didn't understand the experience. His office, after all, had climate control.

Sinfulness suggests a God like that. He's lounging around an air-conditioned office in another dimension preoccupied with paradise's comforts. Do whatever you like as long as you don't kill each other, break stuff, or make too much noise. Because if He has to get up and check out what's going on, He'll take it from your hide. But God being uninvolved only turns out worse than God being overinvolved. A God aloof enough to allow is also aloof enough to abandon.

The real God gets so close that He weeps when we do. John 11:35 says more than the answer to a trivia question. “Jesus wept” offers one of the most poignant statements of the Gospel. Our Lord became incarnate to feel our sufferings with us. He sees past what we either desire or deserve and instead beholds what we need. Jesus surely has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows. He identifies with our sins and assumes even our death. We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin (Heb. 4:15). He has learned our crying that we might catch His giggling, in that kingdom where Heavenly Father wipes all faces and mourning is no more – if not even before.

How can we do other than trust the One who loves us so? Let the tears fall, little Lord Jesus. It's the only way we'll ever get to laugh together.

- Rev. Michael Salemink

We pray: Lord Jesus Christ, so draw us to Yourself that we never grieve or rejoice alone. Amen.

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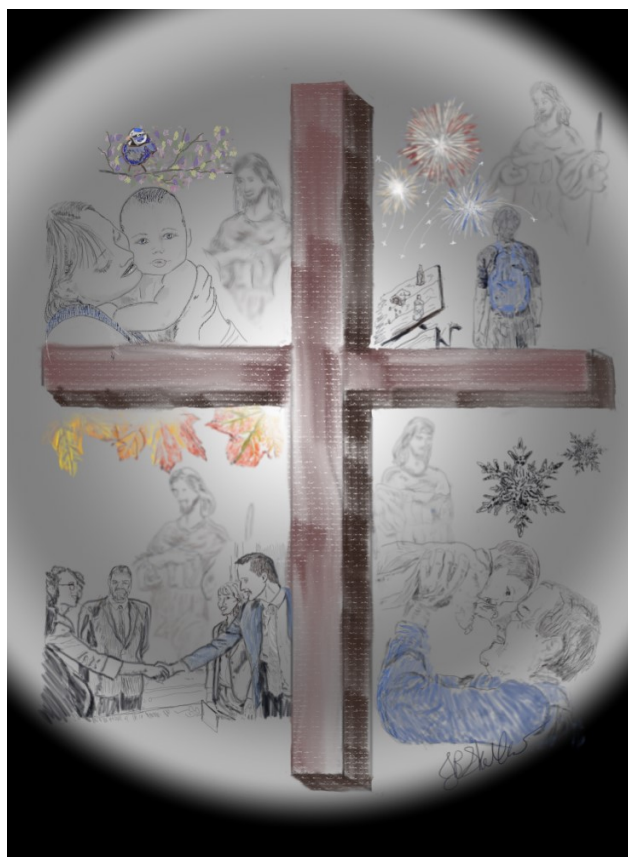
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Emmanuel

in Every Season

Spring



An Advent Devotional

*If anyone is in Christ,
he is a new creation.
The old has passed away; behold,
the new has come.
- 2 Corinthians 5:17*

December 24

“Then he took it down and wrapped it in a linen shroud and laid him in a tomb cut in stone, where no one had ever yet been laid.” - Luke 23:5-56

It is harrowing to read of the object brought down from the cross. No longer a he, “it” is brought down, wrapped up and left behind. Often when we see a dead body, there’s no mistaking. The person you knew is gone. “Shell” is the right word for what is left.

Each spring our congregation hosts a plant swap. We share seedlings, divided plants, and stories of gardening successes and challenges. This past year a man brought dried out flowers, the seeds preserved in the flower. The flower’s glory was shriveled, but it remained the best container to transport precious cargo.

We see this each year: plants we had forgotten growing back in springtime. God has written into the laws of nature our hope for rebirth and renewal.

Yet no other body had contained such seeds before Jesus. There had been prophecies, temporary resurrections. Still, the widow’s son in Zarephath (1 Kings 17:8-24) had not raised a crop of new life. He raised his mother’s spirits and left this earth again in his time.

Jesus is breaking new ground. This is the point Luke is making mirroring the virgin tomb with the virgin womb. Jesus was the firstborn from the virgin. He is the firstborn from death. His victory predestines ours, “in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers” (Romans 8:29).

“It” was brought down. He is raised up. New creation was contained in that wilted flower, so that the ancient song must be fulfilled: “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom He is pleased!” (Luke 2:14).

- Rev. A. Daniel Guagenti

We pray: “O Savior, child of Mary, Who felt our human woe; O Savior, King of Glory, Who dost our weakness know: Bring us a length we pray To the bright courts of heaven, And to the endless day.” (LSB 359)

December 25

*“Children born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.”
- John 1:9-16*

Who doesn’t love a baby? My oldest daughter is going through a baby phase, obsessed with any infant that comes along. If someone’s had a baby, she wants to see pictures. If someone at church has a baby, she wants to hold it.

The reason, I believe, that Christmas remains so much more popular than Easter is because it’s fundamentally a holiday about a baby. Marty Robbins sang that “Christmas is for kids, anyway.” Good Friday is a grown up, almost R rated, holiday (think of the film “The Passion of the Christ”). No one really wants to hear about a man beaten, whipped, and then nailed to a cross to die. But the story of a baby lain in a manger, sung about by angels and visited by shepherds, resonates even in our secular culture.

Christmas is about birth – not just the incarnation of Jesus, but yours and mine. Even the cutest, most innocent looking baby is “conceived and born sinful and under the power of the devil until Christ claims us as His own.” Satan wants nothing more than a world of creatures cut off from their Creator.

By water and the Spirit, God rebirths us and makes us little babies once more. The Lord gives us a trust in Jesus’ life, death and resurrection that makes us no longer children of this world, but children of God. Our baptisms lay us into the manger with Jesus, so that the angels of Bethlehem are as much singing about us (“peace on earth!”) as they are about Christ.

It is Good Friday and Easter that gives Christmas its meaning. But Christmas is the time to remember that those who have received Jesus, and believed in His name, are now children themselves once more.

- Rev. Charles St-Onge

We pray: Blessed Father, cause us to rest in your loving care as your beloved children. In the name of Your Son Jesus we pray. Amen.