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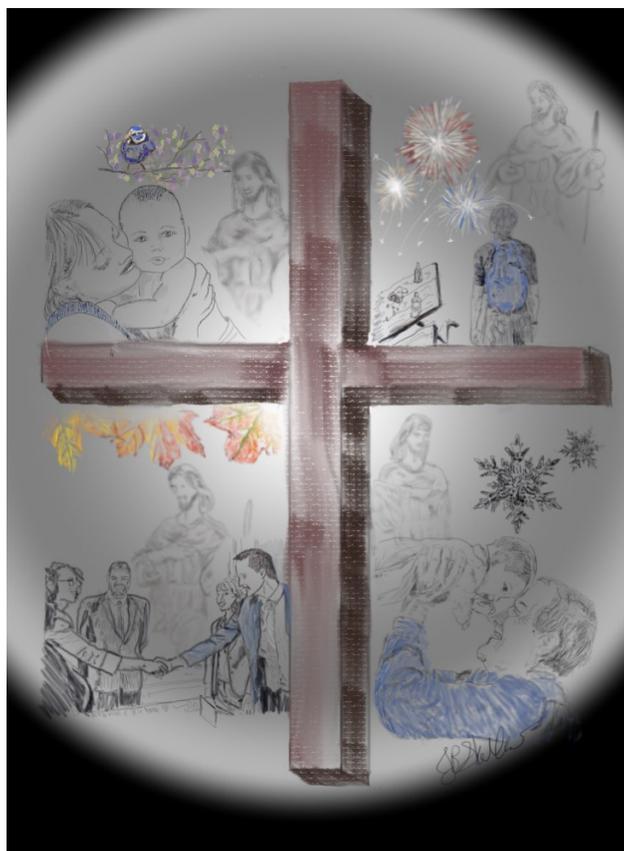
Cover Art

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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 Salemink

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.