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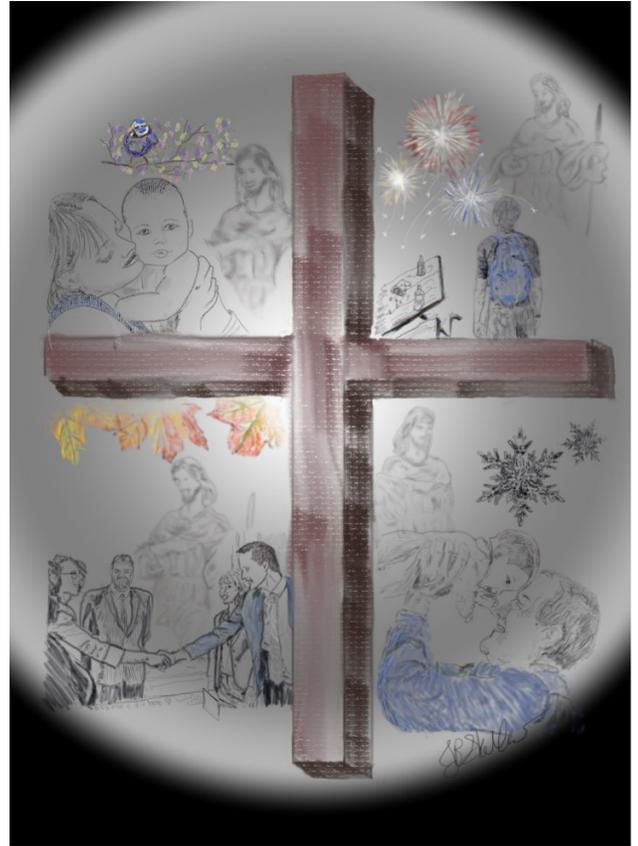
Cover Art

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.