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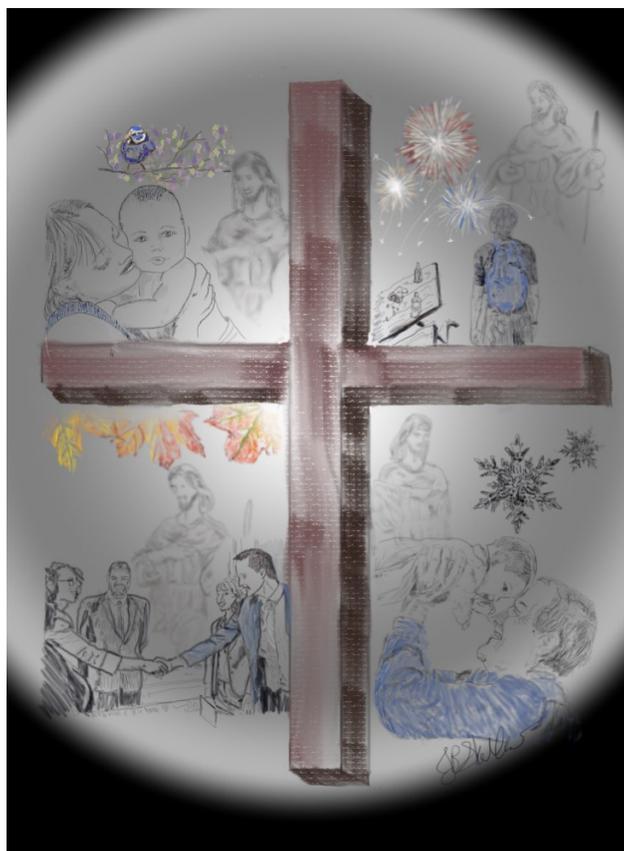
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Emmanuel *in Every Season*

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

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.

December 20

“Jesus wept.”

- John 11:22-48

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.