



A Season of Hope

An Advent Devotional
Based on the traditional Chrismon Tree

For our ministry partners in the Montana Synod of the
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America



Montana Synod
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.

By Chaplain Chris Haughee
Intermountain Residential Services
Helena, Montana

The Evergreen Tree

“HIS WAYS ARE ETERNAL...” HEBREWS 3:6

The Chrismons, or “Christ Monograms” are all hung on a tree, the Chrismon Tree. The tree itself is also a symbol for the Christmas season, a reminder of the truths we celebrate as we recall Jesus’ birth.

Legends of the Christmas Tree abound, both secular and religious. Every year, without fail, we can find some group or another arguing over whether the tree should be called a Christmas Tree or a Winter Tree, or something else entirely. The most famous trees in the United States, or at least those most pictured in popular media, are probably the Capitol Tree in Washington, D.C. and the tree in Rockefeller Center.

Having grown up in Western Washington State, evergreen trees abounded. We were surrounded by them as much as we were by mountains, hills, clouds and rain. In fact, Washington is called the “Evergreen State.” Winter, Spring, Summer, or Fall... you can always expect the same appearance from the evergreen tree. It is constant... enduring.

This is what makes it such an excellent symbol for the season of Christmas. We celebrate the in-breaking of the eternal God into our broken world—a world governed by days, months, and years. The seasons come and go, our children grow up and move away, we ourselves age... nothing seems to stay the same. Into our constantly shifting world came the changeless One, God Almighty, in the tiny baby of Bethlehem. Enduring everything that comes with adopting our humanity, Christ was subject to the pains of change, loss, and living in this fallen world. Yet, through all that, Jesus was able to show us the eternal and unchanging ways of God.

God loves his Creation. God loves each of us! He loves us enough to step out of the perfection of heaven into our dirt and dust, our pain and frustration, and live with us. The ways of God are eternal, and linking all these ways together is the tremendous love God has for us. So, as we look on the tree, we can reflect on something that reminds us of God’s unchanging, unwavering love for us.

As we explore the Chrismons, these symbols of Christmas and our faith, my prayer is that you delve deep into the love God has for you in Jesus Christ. May these devotions warm your heart and feed your soul! Know, too, that in working through these symbols you are connected with other supporters of Intermountain and the children of the Residential program in Helena, Montana. We will all be covering “the same ground” as we walk together towards Christmas morning, in the eternal ways of God, our heavenly Father.

Sincerely,

Chaplain Chris Haughee

Prayer: “God, your ways are unchanging. From eternity past into the unmeasured future, and in this very moment now, you love me. That love has never wavered, and never will. Thank you for your Son, Jesus Christ, who clearly shows the lengths you will go through to express that love. As I gaze upon the evergreen tree, I pray that my faith would be as unchanging. Help me to hold fast to you, and to your love, through the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.”



The Pearl

“THE PEARL OF GREAT PRICE” MATTHEW 13:45

The first Christmas we will consider is one of the simplest. The circle is suggestive of a pearl, especially as Christmas ornaments are usually white and gold in color. Jesus told a parable about the Kingdom of God being like a Pearl of Great Price. When the merchant in search for the finest of pearls finds this fantastic specimen, he goes and sells everything he owns in order to purchase it. This was certainly a transaction made where quality was of a higher priority than quantity!

About this time every year, both children and adults are hastening to finish up their “wish lists” for parents, friends, relatives, or Santa Claus. As a child, before I could even write, I remember getting the Sears “Wish Book” in the mail and combing through the toy section and carefully copying the letters that described the things I wanted. Sometimes, I’d draw a picture so Santa would be sure to get it right. Surely you’ve seen the TV ads by now that will encourage us to participate in the “spirit of the season” by considering our own desires as well as that “perfect gift” for that “certain someone.” Indeed, this aspect of the season can get a little tiresome, especially for parents of children who get whiny and very rude about their... ahem... “requests” this time of year.



The corrective for all this wanting and desiring is usually heard as some version of Jesus’ message that it is “more blessed to give than to receive,” and that is indeed a wonderful message. But, notice something about the parable of the Pearl of Great Price... it is still about receiving! It’s not about giving away everything with no expectation of return. No, not at all! In fact, in its truest sense, Jesus’ spirituality is not “anti-receiving,” but is more concerned by that which our heart longs to receive in the first place. Are we more concerned about our stuff, or the Kingdom of God? Is our focus on the things we can carry or the One who carries us? The exchange of all our stuff for the joy of being a part of God’s Kingdom is a fantastic deal. And, it could be argued, why couldn’t I have BOTH? Should I not be prudent and hold on to some of my things and still try and purchase that lovely pearl?

It appears as though Jesus would suggest the price is too great. You cannot purchase the Pearl of Great Price unless you, too, sell everything you have. And, until you realize that you are indeed willing to release all those things you have (along with the desires for the items still on your wish list!) that you can truly step into the joy of knowing what it is to be a Kingdom child. If we can take our eyes off the gifts long enough to embrace the Giver, we will see that, indeed, all we need has been given to us (Matthew 6:33).

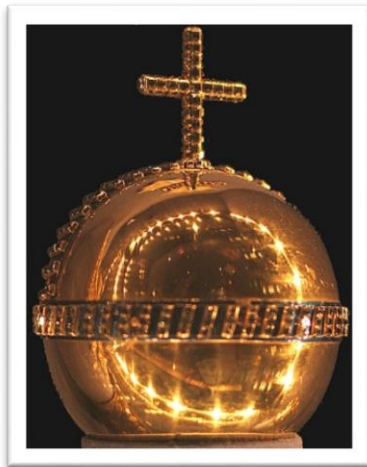
Prayer: “God, your Kingdom and my place in it is worth more than all the items I have on my ‘wish list.’ Help me to see the joy of releasing my desires and longings into your care. I know that you provide for me everything I truly need. In Jesus’ name. Amen.”

The Cross on the Orb

“ARE YOU NOT THE GOD WHO IS IN HEAVEN? YOU RULE OVER ALL THE KINGDOMS OF THE NATIONS.” 2 CHRONICLES 20:6

The Cross on the Orb is a symbol of God’s sovereignty, his absolute rule and authority over all of Creation. The Orb reminds us of the globe—the whole world: every tongue, tribe, and nation. The cross reminds us of the love of God for the world He has created and all its inhabitants. God, as our Sovereign, did not seek to lord his authority and rule over us, but rather humbled himself to become a human being among us! This is a tremendous act of sacrifice, the setting aside of heavenly glory for the grime and filth of living in our fallen world. This act of love is what we celebrate at Christmastime. It’s a wonderful thing to know that the all-powerful God of the universe has come among us and lives within his people!

God’s reign, and the power that God clearly possesses, sometimes poses a problem for us. Especially in a day and age where if any tragedy befalls any individual or group of people ANYWHERE in the world we can know about it almost instantly... well, in a world like this, we can certainly start to wonder if God really IS in charge. We are bombarded with the hurt of this fallen world twenty-four hours a day and seven days a week on network and cable news. At any particular moment, we can know with certainty that innocents are dying, children are



starving, depraved men and women are abusing those under their care, politicians are growing more corrupt, famines are breaking down the social fabric of a nation, wars are destroying a people and a way of life... all this and much more. It’s depressing. It’s likely that some of you reading this even skipped through the litany of troubles as quickly as you could.

All these things seem to be ample evidence that the world is rudderless and God is no longer on the throne. In the midst of this avalanche of bad news, we need a little perspective. We need to see what Isaiah did when he was in the midst of his own grief and stress wondering what God was doing and how he was going to work through the difficulties his people faced from all around them. In Isaiah, Chapter 6, verses 1-4 we read: “In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord, high and exalted, seated on a throne; and the train of his robe filled the temple. ² Above him were seraphim, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. ³ And they were calling to one another: ‘Holy, holy, holy is

the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.’ ⁴ At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke.”

Did you notice the first seven words of that passage? “In the year that King Uzziah died...” Perhaps you can remember how the nation felt after the death of John F. Kennedy. If not, then certainly you can recall some other national tragedy like the terrorist attacks of 9-11-2001? Or, maybe these events are too far removed because crowding into your mind is your own personal tragedy. In these moments, even, God wants us to know that He remains upon the throne. His heart breaks with ours. He mourns for the toll that sin and death has taken on this world. And, someday soon, God will set all things right again. Until then, we hope for that future while remembering to trust in God’s care along the way.

Prayer: “God, remind me that is as much a miracle that there is so much good in the world as it is a tragedy that there is so much evil. Embolden me to speak and act in ways that bring healing and peace in my community, and trust that you are still enthroned over this world. Come quickly, Lord Jesus, Amen.”

The Crown

JESUS ANSWERED, “YOU SAY THAT I AM A KING. IN FACT, THE REASON I WAS BORN AND CAME INTO THE WORLD IS TO TESTIFY TO THE TRUTH. EVERYONE ON THE SIDE OF TRUTH LISTENS TO ME.” JOHN 18:37

Pilate questioned Jesus before his crucifixion, asking if he was a King—the King of the Jews. The Kingship and the Kingdom that Jesus represented are so radically different from the kingdoms of this world that Jesus had difficulty getting Pilate to understand. Jesus does not deny that He is a King, but informs Pilate that his Kingdom does not find its source of authority in human self-determination or military might. No, Jesus’ Kingdom has an authority and timelessness to it because it rests upon the truth. This truth abides in the nature of God and God’s relationship to all He has created.



Jesus rules over us by virtue of his very nature, not because he has been elected by popular vote! Indeed, in the closest thing Jesus came to standing before the people for a vote he was resoundingly defeated by Barabbas! No, Jesus does not need you or I to vote for him, acknowledge him, or invite his Lordship over all of Creation. Rather, Jesus positions himself as a spokesman to this truth, having been born into this world for this purpose. Those who honestly seek truth listen to the words Jesus speaks.

What are the implications of this truth? We must ask ourselves, “How do I carve out time in a busy Advent season to truly SEEK truth?” If we examine our schedules, how much time would we discover is devoted to watching, listening, and sharing with others those things we know are **not** grounded in God’s truth? Often, just asking this question allows me to “redeem” those activities by bringing God into them and finding a way to connect the truths of God’s Word and God’s Kingdom into the mundane day-to-day activities I am invested in.

Sometimes it isn’t that easy... not that cut and dry. How do we judge what is true for ourselves? Do we rely on public opinion or that which is popular? Do we consult with those whose opinions we generally respect? What role does our church, pastor, or other spiritual leaders have in our decision making? Do you know how to find answers in God’s Word for the questions you have? Or... do you simply follow your heart?

Consider again Jesus’ words: “Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.” Take time to listen to Jesus today. Take 15 minutes for silence. Go for a walk... without your iPod, a friend, or the dog! Turn on Christian radio and really listen to the words of a song or two. Sit quietly with a blank sheet of paper and write, doodle or draw something that represents what you think Jesus might be speaking to you about. But... and here’s the key... Don’t stop there! Investigate God’s Word to see if what you believe you are hearing is something that you can find confirmation of in scripture. May God bless you with listening ears and an open heart today!

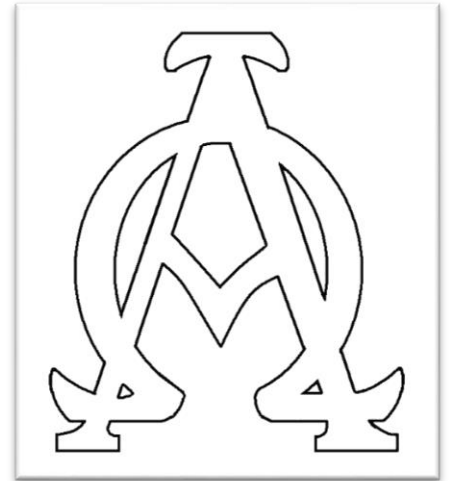
*Prayer: “Jesus...Holy Spirit... God my Creator and leader, I know you are speaking. Help me to listen to you and distinguish your truth from all other messages I hear in this busy season. Help me to find the company of others that are really seeking your truth so we can grow together. I thank you, Jesus, that between the two of us only one can wear the crown. This day, I choose for **you** to wear the crown. Lead me and guide me in truth. Amen.”*

Alpha and Omega

“I AM THE ALPHA AND THE OMEGA,” SAYS THE LORD GOD, ‘WHO IS, AND WHO WAS, AND WHO IS TO COME, THE ALMIGHTY.’” REVELATION 1:8

The Greek letters Alpha (which is the first in the Greek alphabet) and Omega (the last of the Greek alphabet) are from Revelation 1:8 and 22:13, and are symbolic of Jesus. Jesus came once as the suffering servant and will come again as the triumphant king. The Alpha and Omega also symbolize the continuity of God’s presence throughout all of human history.

In the closing chapter of the Bible, Jesus speaks these words: “Look, I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to each person according to what they have done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End” (Revelation 22:12-13). Jesus speaks not only as One who “bookends” history, but as the friend and confidante who wishes to walk all of life’s path WITH us. He wants to be as critical a part of our personal histories as He has been to human



history. As someone who is simultaneously at the beginning and the end of the story, we can trust his guidance! As someone once said, “Everything will be good in the end; if it’s not good, it’s not the end.” We can keep moving into the unknown future, because we know the one who knows the future—our Alpha and Omega.

Speaking of the end of things... I am married to a wonderful woman who does one thing that absolutely baffles me. She often reads the last chapter of a book while she is only half way through... just to make sure it’s going to turn out the way she thinks it should! I can’t do that... I enjoy the suspense and waiting to see how things unfold through the story as it is told. Now, in life, we are the opposite. I will rarely venture out unless I can be reasonably sure of a positive outcome. I am cautious... steady. My wife’s faith is more natural, honest, and intuitive.

If you think about it, our life and faith is lived out in the space between the final passages of Acts and the Epistles and the images given to John on the island of Patmos that give us the closing chapter of time. We live between the two advents of Jesus—his birth in Bethlehem, and his return to make “all things new.” We can, in a very real sense, turn to the final chapter of the book and see how the story turns out. God wins. Sin, death, and the grave... they all lose.

As Alpha and Omega, Jesus is at the beginning and the end of the story at the same time. There is no twist or turn in the telling that catches Jesus off guard. We can rest in his care and rely on God’s empowerment. This is good news, indeed!

Prayer: “God, you are eternal. Jesus, as Alpha and Omega, you have the ability to care for me and the foresight to see anything that this world might send my way. Help me to trust in You and rely on your guidance. Be with me today and work in each and every situation so that I might bring you the glory and honor and praise you deserve. Amen.”

Candle

“LET YOUR LIGHT SHINE BEFORE OTHERS, THAT THEY MAY SEE YOUR GOOD DEEDS AND GLORIFY YOUR FATHER IN HEAVEN.” MATTHEW 5:16

The candle is symbol of light and life. The candle like the one we use on Christmas trees would not have been familiar to Jesus and his disciples, as they would have used oil lamps. Thus, the stories Jesus tells about letting our light shine before others reference lamps. For example, Jesus said, “No one lights a lamp and puts it in a place where it will be hidden, or under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, so that those who come in may see the light” (Luke 11:33).

The tradition of using small candles to light up the Christmas tree dates back to at least the middle of the seventeenth century in Germany. Apparently, they did not have the same kinds of fire codes we have to deal with nowadays! I can hardly imagine having lit candles on the tree in our house... that sounds like a terrifically BAD idea. Before the idea of placing candles on the tree, candles were commonly used in advent wreaths in both Catholic and Protestant churches as a way of marking the Sunday celebrations in Advent. If you have an advent wreath in your church or home, you are carrying on a rich tradition. For centuries, candles and Christmas have been intimately related, bringing light into some of the shortest days of the year.



Thankfully, candles on the tree have gone the way of the horse and buggy (I know that the Fire Marshall is pleased!). However, other forms of light are in abundant supply this holiday season. Whether it's new-fangled LED bulbs or an endless string of those “mini-lights” I am constantly tangling up, I love the beauty that Christmas lights bring. Of course, we aren't the only ones for whom light is an important piece of holiday celebrations this time of year. Each December, the children at Intermountain all get together to hear from our Jewish students and our Jewish Educator, Janet Tatz, about the Hanukkah celebration—sometimes referred to as the Festival of Lights!

I find that beyond the beauty that these lights bring to the season, light from a candle, bulb, or lamp is intensely practical. In Montana, Advent brings with it days that have less than nine hours of sunlight! We leave for work in the dark, and return to our homes in the dark. There are people I know that suffer from “Seasonally Affective Disorder” (SAD) because of the lack of sunlight during the shortened Winter days!

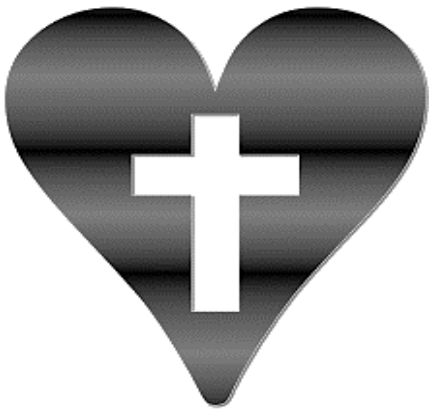
We need light... both spiritually and physically. As we gaze upon the candle, let us remember to shine our own “light” this season! May we help brighten someone's day and cheer them up a little in the process.

Prayer: “Light of the World, you have shone your light upon us. Jesus, you have come into our spiritual darkness and given us the light of life. Help us not to hoard the treasure you have placed within us, but may we shine forth in the darkness—sharing your grace, hope, and love to all we encounter. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Heart with a Cross

“THIS IS HOW GOD SHOWED HIS LOVE AMONG US: HE SENT HIS ONE AND ONLY SON INTO THE WORLD THAT WE MIGHT LIVE THROUGH HIM.” 1 JOHN 4:9

God is constantly changing our perceptions of what should be. Nothing quite works the way we might normally expect after God enters in... a King is born in a feeding trough, the Creator of the universe limits the divinity to a as small a measure we might imagine—an infant that cannot care for or defend itself, and that God-child, when grown, what then? Well, he commits himself to ministry among those the religious establishment has long written off, befriends those the Law of God seems to imply are unclean and outside of God’s blessing, then finds himself misunderstood, accused, convicted and killed in the most humiliating way possible.



That death, of course, happened on the cross. The cross, once an instrument of humiliation, torturous pain and eventual death, has now become a symbol of God’s love and our hope of new life in Jesus Christ through the forgiveness of sin. This is in keeping with God’s way of turning our way of thinking upside down. Something which symbolized the worst of the Roman oppression of God’s people—the reminder that they were not their own but were dominated by foreigners—has been so engulfed in the love of God that it is now a reminder that such oppression never has to be our final reality!

Furthermore, the cross is within the heart because of our call to take up our own cross and follow Christ, to bring his being into our being, his life into ours. Crucifixion and the cross take on a new meaning for us, as we join Paul in saying, “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. 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). But what does that mean... what can that possibly mean to many of us who are trying to balance the demands of the Kingdom and the way of the cross with what we have determined is sensible, prudent living? Dying with Jesus on the cross is a lovely metaphor, but what does it actually imply? And please, my sinful flesh pleads, don’t suggest anything too radical that might change the way I have come to live out my faith in relative comfort...

We are far enough into this Advent devotional to ask... if we have made it this far, what difference has it made for you and me? Has my observance of Advent distinguished me from the throng going about the paces of another dizzying holiday season? I must ask that question of myself, because the cross is not meant to be laid upon the outside of my heart. It is not as if we take our faith and place it on top of everything we already have committed ourselves to... at least that’s not the way it is supposed to be. No, the life of Christ—a radical individual by anyone’s standards—is to take root *within* my heart. His life is my life because what I am is filtered through the understanding that my heart has been altered... changed... renewed.

Ask yourself... what one thing would change in my holiday observance if I examined it in light of the call to “die” with Christ on the cross and live with him into a new way of life? Do you have that one thing? Good. Now ask God for the courage to make that change and see the difference it makes this Christmas.

Prayer: “God, only you can help me make this change, but I want to do it. Give me the courage to not only hear your voice, Holy Spirit, but to heed it. In Jesus’ name. Amen.”

The Shepherd's Staff

"I AM THE GOOD SHEPHERD. THE GOOD SHEPHERD LAYS DOWN HIS LIFE FOR THE SHEEP." JOHN 10:11

When I think of the people who have shaped my life a fairly long list comes to mind. I would imagine you have a similar list... parents, teachers, coaches, and friends might figure prominently on that list. Grandparents or a special pastor or mentor might also appear there. But who else has played a role in guiding and shaping us? Who are the individuals that have guided our path that we might not know personally?

I can think of employers... maybe even a few that would figure more prominently on my list of those who have shaped me than I would initially recognize. Governmental leaders influence our lives, and I have also trusted in the guidance of doctors and nurses along the way. When you think about all the voices that speak into our lives... those that guide and direct us, the list grows pretty long. But, nowhere on my list would I think to put a shepherd—I don't actually know any shepherds! Maybe you do, and the image of the shepherd's staff is something more familiar to you than it is to me. No... when Jesus refers to himself as a shepherd, I have to commit a little extra time to study and reflection to find out exactly why he might do that.

In the parable of the Good Shepherd, Jesus makes clear the relationship he has with us. We are under his care and protection. We are guided by the Shepherd's voice and are led in the way we should go. Other voices may assail us and call for our attention, love, and devotion. But, to heed those voices would be our peril. Only in the voice of our Good Shepherd do we find the safety and security we are longing for.

So, in considering the Shepherd's Staff, how remarkable is it that the first to hear the news of Jesus' birth were the shepherds in the fields around Bethlehem? Just as David once cared for his father's sheep upon those same hills, the shepherds outside Bethlehem would be witness to God's glory. But, the glory of Christmas morning was not the glory of the reemergence of the political power David knew, nor was it a victory over Israel's foes like when a young David slew the giant Goliath. It was not even in the beauty and awesome power of the heavenly host arrayed to sing the message of the Savior's birth to these first messengers of Christ's birth. No, the glory that came with Christ's birth was that God was with us. Our Good Shepherd was among us—to love us, to guide us, and to lay down his life for us. The glory of God was known through humility.

A shepherd is known primarily for one main trait: his or her dedication to the protection of the sheep. That's it. It's amazing to think that this is enough for our God. Given all that God is and all that God can do, Jesus asks us to think of God in this most basic way... as the One willing to be identified by the depth of his love for us. That, my fellow sheep, is amazing!

Prayer: "Good Shepherd, forgive me all those times I am tempted to find a leader more 'significant' than a shepherd. I am easily impressed by other voices, led down other paths, and captured by other loves. Only you are that GOOD shepherd, willing to do anything to express your love for me. Keep me near to you that I might never forget the sound of your voice and the power of your call. Thank you, Lord. Amen.



Epiphany Star (5-pointed star)

THE MAGI ASKED, “WHERE IS THE ONE WHO HAS BEEN BORN KING OF THE JEWS?
WE SAW HIS STAR WHEN IT ROSE AND HAVE COME TO WORSHIP HIM.”
MATTHEW 2:2

Epiphany often gets blended right into the Christmas narrative, with the Magi appearing prominently in nativity plays and scenes. Truth is, though, the Magi showed up quite a while after the birth. Epiphany... if your church celebrates it, lands on the first Sunday in January, when most people are thinking more about New Year’s resolutions than the Christmas story. With that in mind, we look ahead a little so we don’t miss the significance of this part of the story.



Matthew records that after Jesus had been born, the Magi arrived from the East and appeared in Jerusalem asking questions about the newly born king. This was disturbing news to the man who was the present King of the Jews, Herod the Great. In Herod’s rage, he first attempts to deceive the Magi into leading him to the newly born Jesus, and when that fails, Herod has all the young boys of Bethlehem slaughtered. Herod viewed a defenseless child as a threat to his own power and position, and the Magi’s quest for the child provided the only confirmation Herod needed to take decisive and bloody action. The establishment of God’s Kingdom will always threaten the power structures of this world, and often that threat is met with misunderstanding, persecution, and violence. When the proper response to Jesus’ birth would be worship, as the Magi intend, the response of Herod is violent and self-protective.



Coming back to the symbol of the 5-pointed star, or the “Epiphany Star,” we can make a few more observations that might help us see the connection to our lives. The name “Epiphany” comes from the Greek word *epiphania*, and means “to show, make known, or reveal.” A good mental image suggested by the word is that of a Christmas present being unwrapped and opened. With two small children in our household, I doubt that ANY present would go unnoticed and unwrapped, but it certainly IS possible to miss the significance of Jesus’ birth in the flurry of most Christmas morning festivities.

The star was there to reveal or make known something that might otherwise go unnoticed. What is it in our Christmas celebrations that might go unnoticed? Is it the presence of Christ in the midst of the rush to get everyone the right present? Is it the call to serve others in a season that focuses a great deal on making wish lists and attending to our own desires? Whatever it is, ask God for an “epiphany” that enriches your Christmas experience.

Prayer: “God, you have revealed yourself to us in Jesus Christ. If I want to see you, I simply need to draw closer to Jesus. But, I confess that I often miss Jesus in the midst of all the hurriedness of the season. Give me an open heart, open ears, and open eyes today so that I don’t miss what you want to reveal to me today. Amen.”

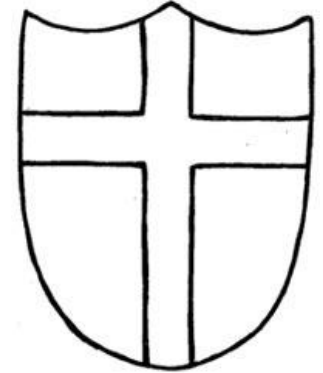
Shield

“PRAISE BE TO THE Lord FOR HE HAS HEARD MY CRY FOR MERCY. THE Lord IS MY STRENGTH AND MY SHIELD; MY HEART TRUSTS IN HIM, AND HE HELPS ME.”

PSALM 28:6-7

There has been, without a doubt, some sort of struggle for you as you have attempted to observe regular devotional times throughout the Advent season. I am guessing that there are things that have “come up” that were unanticipated and have sometimes crowded this time out. There have, perhaps, been a few times when you overslept or thought you’d get to it later, and before you knew it the day had flown by. Do any of those sound familiar? I know they do for me!

We might not normally think of those circumstances as an “attack,” but I believe that is exactly what they are. In our walk with God it would be irresponsible to ignore the reality that we have a few things working against us. One, we all have a fallen nature and bodies that are under the corruption of sin and death. We get tired, hurt, sick... or maybe we are just a little lazy at times. Our flesh works against us, so that, like Paul we cry out, “I want to do good, but don’t do it. The evil I don’t want to do, I often seem to do anyways!” (see Romans 7). In addition to these weaknesses, we also have a very real spiritual enemy in Satan. He is not at all interested in Jesus’ followers getting back to the true meaning and significance of the Christmas season and Advent. Anything Satan might be able to send your way to disrupt your devotional time is likely to have occurred, especially if this is a new discipline or experience for you.



Who do we have to help defend us against this onslaught from without and within? Who will be our defender and protector? Those who are in need and are under attack need the Lord to be their shield. The shield symbol reminds us of the protection we have in God’s care, and the cross on the shield reminds us that Jesus Christ is our Protector. Any attack or accusation that might be leveled against us has been accounted for in the forgiveness Jesus provides. We have been claimed as God’s own through Jesus’ death on the cross. In addition, the resurrection assures our hope that we have the new life that Jesus has promised! The Holy Spirit has come into our hearts and not only leads us into the truth, but protects us from the lies of our accuser, Satan, by interceding with us before the Father (Romans 8:16-27).

Now, in order for a shield to be affective, it must be raised up against the attack. Take a few moments now to write down and bring to mind those things that have made you feel pressured or under attack this Advent season...

Having written those things down, close this time in prayer by asking for God to be your defender and to help you fight off these attacks. Jesus is eager to come to your defense if you will only let him!

Prayer: “Lord God, my shield and defender, thank you for your help and protection. Defend me against... (read your list) and give me the strength to stand firm. Holy Spirit, guide me in truth and protect my mind from attacks from without and from within. In Jesus’ name. Amen.”

**“SHE WILL GIVE BIRTH TO A SON, AND YOU ARE TO GIVE HIM THE NAME JESUS,
BECAUSE HE WILL SAVE HIS PEOPLE FROM THEIR SINS.” MATTHEW 1:21**

Acronyms abound in my workplace... I don't know about yours. So, when I see the three letters “IHC” my mind drifts to what it could possibly be an acronym for! There are certainly some fun possibilities here: “In His Care,” “I Have Chosen,” and maybe you can think of a few yourself. But, in truth “IHC” is not an acronym... It's an abbreviation.

IHC are the first three letters of JESus in the Greek, reminding us of the name given to the baby who is “God with us,” Immanuel. The name Jesus is a version of Joshua, sometimes spelled “Yeshua,” and means “Yahweh (the Lord) is my salvation.” Don't see the connection between “God with us” and “the Lord is my salvation?” Well, revisiting the Old Testament call of Joshua might be helpful.



Joshua was the leader that came in on the heels of Moses, arguably the most important Old Testament figure. It would be Joshua's role in God's plan to lead the Israelites into the Promised Land. The catch? It was a BIG one! The Promised Land was already occupied, and the present occupants were not going to go without a fight. Faced with this daunting challenge, Joshua hears this message from the Lord:

“Be strong and very courageous. Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go. Keep this Book of the Law always on your lips; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful. ⁹Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, **for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go.**”
(Joshua 1:7-9, NIV)

The key to making it through the battles to come... their “salvation”... was in the promise that the Lord would be with them and go with them wherever they went! Because “God with us” remained with Joshua, he could say with assurance, “the Lord is my salvation!”

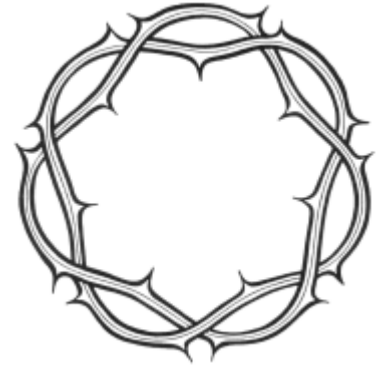
We fight our own battles as we work out the implications of our salvation. This process is often referred to as sanctification. Piece by piece, inch by inch, we push back the old ways of living without God and we make room for God. We can be strong and courageous as we fight these battles of faith because we know with assurance that Jesus has come, and God is indeed with us.

Prayer: “Yeshua... Jesus... Our ‘God With Us,’ thank you for coming and being ever with me as I fight the battles of faith. Help me to be strong and courageous—not in my own strength and ability, but in Your strength and ability! I know that my old habits will not be easily replaced by new and better ways of living and loving you. So, give me the persistence I will need to not give up and to daily grow closer to you. Amen.”

Crown of Thorns

“THEY PUT A PURPLE ROBE ON HIM, THEN TWISTED TOGETHER A CROWN OF THORNS AND SET IT ON HIM.” MARK 15:17

Why put a crown of thorns on the Christon Tree? It does provide quite a contrast to the other crown we find on the tree, the one that represents the triumphant reign of Jesus Christ over all Creation. Perhaps the best reason to include the crown of thorns on the tree is that it reminds us that Christ’s humiliation preceded his exaltation—He was brought low for you and I, dying for our sin. Then, after death and burial, Jesus was raised to new life and seated on the throne and crowned with glory.



The “hymn” recorded in Philippians, Chapter 2, reflects on this glorious truth and how it should spur us on to imitate Christ’s humility in our own dealings with one another:

⁵ In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

⁶ Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;

⁷ rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.

⁸ And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death—
even death on a cross!

⁹ Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,

¹⁰ that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

¹¹ and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father. (Phil. 2:5-11, NIV)

Because Jesus was obedient to the will of the Father, accepting our sin as his own and paying the penalty, we have the gift of new life. Our obedience to Christ’s call, as an echo of his own obedience, is to God’s glory and the praise of Jesus, his Son.

Prayer: “God, as I look upon the crown of thorns, I remember that you took that shame upon yourself for my sake. You humbled yourself to death, but even before that you humbled yourself to become a child born in a lowly manger. May I have the willingness to humble myself to be led by you, eager to serve others and love them as you do. In Jesus’ name. Amen.”

Butterfly

“THEREFORE, IF ANYONE IS IN CHRIST, THE NEW CREATION HAS COME: THE OLD HAS GONE, THE NEW IS HERE!” 2 CORINTHIANS 5:17

Have you put up your Christmas Tree yet? I love Christmas, and so I am eager to get the tree up as soon as possible, sometimes even BEFORE Thanksgiving! (I know, that is breaking a major rule for some of you...) But, maybe there are a few of you who don't put the tree up until Christmas Eve? I always thought that was a little late, but it does insure that most of the family will be home to help. It's fun to hear about the different traditions families have around this time of year and around the decorations that go on the tree.



Ah, yes... decorations for the tree! How many of you, like me, have had to make some difficult decisions about ornaments that get kept and ones that get passed on, donated, or thrown away? As you sort through ornaments, what kind of questions do you ask yourself to determine if a certain ornament is going to stay or go? Sentiment plays the strongest part in my decisions. It certainly weighs in more heavily than the appearance of a decorative piece. Think of the oldest ornament you have on your tree... why is it there?

As we move further and further into a relationship with God through Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit might nudge us to do some sorting of our own. Not ornaments, mind you, but rather the trappings and “decorations” of a lifestyle that might not fit as well with your new identity in Christ as they did with your old self before choosing to follow Jesus. This transformation from old to new is gradual, but not without dramatic moments and difficult decisions. The Chrismon of the Butterfly suggests this same sort of gradual, yet dramatic, transformation.

While there are many illustrations that can be made about the new life in Christ and Jesus' ability to bring life from death, but the butterfly is perhaps the best. The contrast between the nature and appearance of the caterpillar and the beauty of the butterfly that emerges from the tomb-like chrysalis is remarkable and astounding. A caterpillar can be beautiful, in its own way, but regardless of its beauty it is most certainly earth-bound. Only the butterfly can take wing and rise above the “stuff” that defines the caterpillar's existence.

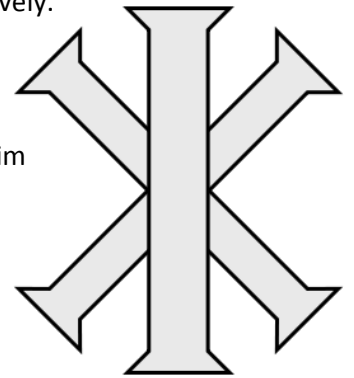
As you reflect on things both old and new, take a moment to thank God for the old things in your life that once defined you but no longer keep you grounded and... stuck. Because of Jesus, you are free to live in a whole new way. Maybe you can't see it as clearly now as when that transformation first occurred, or maybe the process has been so gradual you need some help seeing how different you are now that years ago. But, God sees it... He, after all, is the one who gave you wings!

Prayer: “God, I confess that I don't often feel much like a butterfly... soaring above those things that once dragged me down in a life of sin and hopelessness. Open my eyes to see the new life you have given me and renew in me a hope of what is still yet to come. Thank you for changing my life, from the inside out. In Jesus' name. Amen.”

Iota Chi

JESUS SAID TO THEM, “BUT WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM?” SIMON PETER ANSWERED AND SAID, “YOU ARE THE CHRIST, THE SON OF THE LIVING GOD.” MATTHEW 16:15-16 (NKJV)

Iota and Chi are the first two letters of the Greek words for “Jesus Christ,” respectively. Combined, they form a six-pointed star, which reminds us of the six days of Creation. As the opening words of John’s gospel remind us, Jesus was instrumental in the Creation of the world, along with the other aspects of God’s Triune personhood. “Through [Jesus, the “Word”] all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made” (John 1:3).



Over 2,000 years removed from the birth of Jesus, it can be a little difficult for us to understand the disconnect between thinking of God as the Creator of all that we can see, all that has ever existed, and all that will ever be... and, a baby. But we’ll get back to that in a moment.

Certainly, when Jesus started his earthly ministry, he was a grown man. The son of a carpenter, he most certainly carried on the family business until he left Nazareth to travel around the Galilee and further south into Jerusalem. So, it is unlikely he anything other than a pretty rugged fellow... he did, after all, manage to carry his cross (with a little help to speed things up) even after being beaten and whipped, battered and bloodied! But, even the most impressive man we could think of would still be a man. This is the mental hurdle Jesus’ followers would have had to get over to make the declaration Peter makes in Matthew, Chapter 16: “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God!”

What helped Peter and the other disciples get to this point? Certainly, the amazing miracles helped. For some, it might not have been until his resurrection and ascension that it fully came home to their hearts and minds... this man that I have followed for three years... He is God! What an amazing thing to hold these two seemingly contradictory ideas in balance—fully God and fully man!

Now, back to the Christmas story. Maybe we have become so familiar with it that we have lost some of its absurdity to the world: God became a baby. The Lord of the universe entered a young woman’s womb. The God of eternity who can see beyond the limitations of time and space became a baby, unable to focus on objects further than a few feet away. Wholly dependent on his mother and father to provide his every need. Incapable of defending or protecting himself. This baby... THIS baby, is God.

Creator has become created in order to show us the amazing lengths to which the love of God will express itself in identifying with each and every one of us. Look to the manger and see the love of God for you this day!

Prayer: “God, help me not take for granted the amazing depths of your love. You shatter my categories of what God should say and do. When I want power and might, you come meekly and in humility to offer yourself. You even give me the option to accept or reject you this day! Amazing. I want never to lose the beauty of your love, and the power of your heart of service. In Jesus’ name. Amen.”

“CHRIST IS THE MEDIATOR OF A NEW COVENANT” HEBREWS 9:15

The Chi Rho monogram is made up of the first two letters for the Greek word for Christ, “christos.” The title Christ is a transliteration, a word that comes into the English usage almost unchanged from the original Greek word. Furthermore, “christos” is the Greek translation of the Hebrew word “messiah,” meaning God’s anointed one. As God’s Anointed, Jesus takes on the roles of prophet, priest, and king for his people. These themes are explored throughout the book of Hebrews. In the passage referenced above, it is Jesus’ priestly function that is in focus, and the ability Jesus has to bring us into a new covenant.

The old covenant, or agreement, between God and his people centered on the law and sacrifices made continually for cleansing from sin. The new covenant, however, is centered on the cross and Jesus’ death and resurrection. Sometimes, looking back on the offerings God commanded the Israelites to make in Leviticus are helpful for an understanding of how Jesus brought these sacrifices, and their symbolism, together in one individual. From Leviticus 7, we read:



¹¹ “These are the regulations for the fellowship offering anyone may present to the LORD:

¹² “If they offer it as an expression of thankfulness, then along with this thank offering they are to offer thick loaves made without yeast and with olive oil mixed in, thin loaves made without yeast and **brushed with oil**, and thick loaves of the finest flour well-kneaded and with oil mixed in. ¹³ Along with their fellowship offering of thanksgiving they are to present an offering with thick loaves of **bread** made with yeast. ¹⁴ They are to bring one of each kind as an offering, a contribution to the LORD; it belongs to the priest who splashes **the blood** of the fellowship offering against the altar.

The “Fellowship Offering” is sometimes called the Peace Offering. It was a reminder of the sacrifice needed to make us acceptable to God, a source of thanksgiving (hence, the combination with the Thank-Offering). Jesus himself referred to his body as bread, or the bread of heaven (connecting this image, then, to the manna God sent to the Israelites in the desert as well as the unleaven bread of the Passover meal and the bread of sacrifice). Thin loaves made without yeast (like the loaves made for Passover) were brushed, or anointed, with oil. Finally, the blood of the animal sacrificed with these grain offerings was also sprinkled against the altar of the Lord.

Jesus fulfills a unique role as our mediator because he is both the priest AND the offering in this new covenant. We can be thankful that, unlike the offerings of the old sacrificial system, Jesus’ offering his life up for us was once and for all. All our sin has been forgiven.

Prayer: “God, you have made peace with us by sending your perfect son to die as the atonement—the once for all sacrifice—for our sin. Now, because of what He has done, there is nothing I can do to separate myself from your love. May I offer up my life as a continual offering of thanksgiving for what you have accomplished for me. In the name of the Holy and Anointed One, Jesus, I pray. Amen.”

The Dove

“THE HOLY SPIRIT DESCENDED ON HIM IN BODILY FORM LIKE A DOVE. AND A VOICE CAME FROM HEAVEN: ‘YOU ARE MY SON, WHOM I LOVE; WITH YOU I AM WELL PLEASED.’” LUKE 3:22

The descending dove is symbolic of peace, innocence, and purity. It is depicted as descending in reference to the manifestation of the Holy Spirit as a dove during Jesus Christ’s baptism by John. Ever since John penned those words, the Holy Spirit been shown in art as a dove almost as often as it has been shown as fire, in reference to the Spirit’s presence in “tongues of flame” at Pentecost.

Consider, for a moment, the significance of the Holy Spirit’s role in Jesus’ birth. We read in the first chapter of Luke:

²⁶ In the sixth month of Elizabeth’s pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, ²⁷ to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. ²⁸ The angel went to her and said, “Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.”

²⁹ Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. ³⁰ But the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. ³¹ You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. ³² He will be great and will be called the **Son of the Most High**. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, ³³ and he will reign over Jacob’s descendants forever; his kingdom will never end.”

³⁴ “How will this be,” Mary asked the angel, “since I am a virgin?”

³⁵ The angel answered, “**The Holy Spirit will come on you**, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. ³⁶ Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. ³⁷ For no word from God will ever fail.”

Having read that familiar passage, can you see that the Holy Spirit was the agent by whom the Fatherhood of God would be claimed over the child, Jesus? Later, at Jesus’ baptism, the Holy Spirit comes again. At this appearance, the voice of God was heard to say, “You are MY son...”

It is strongly suggested in scripture that Mary was right to be concerned about becoming pregnant while still being a virgin. What would people assume about the father of her child? It was clear to everyone that it was not Joseph, and even though he took Mary as his wife, the rumors of Jesus’ mysterious conception must have dogged him. Just as the Holy Spirit confirmed for Jesus his connection to his heavenly Father, the Spirit speaks to our hearts and reminds us that we are sons and daughters of God as well! (see 1 John 3:1; 4:13-14)

Prayer: “Holy Spirit, you have always testified to the truth. If we listen to your voice, we can know that we are truly your sons and daughters. With Jesus, we look to our heavenly Father for our true identity and purpose. Thank you, Jesus, for all you had to endure for our sake, and today I stand with you as someone willing to be misunderstood by the world in order to be known as your own. Holy Spirit, guide me this day and always. Amen.”



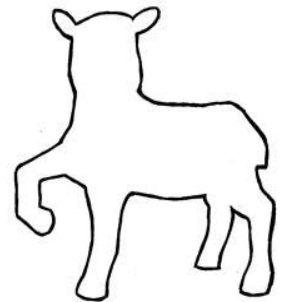
The Lamb

“LOOK! HERE IS THE LAMB OF GOD WHO TAKES AWAY THE SIN OF THE WORLD.”

JOHN 1:29

Perfectionism. It's a problem I have inherited from my mother. As a result, a good deal of my natural bent is to make self-assessments of my worth based on my performance. Perfectionism is an ugly disease of the soul that is only cured by acceptance of the grace of God. Even then, I know in my case at least, the effects of perfectionistic tendencies take decades to work through... especially as they bleed over into my spirituality.

You see, I would have made a great Pharisee. If it was about keeping the rules better than others, I could probably fool myself into some level of self-acceptance. However, the truth would have still rung loudly in my soul: I am NOT perfect, and I cannot meet the demands of the law of God which demands perfection. Even in the keeping of sacrifices, whether the literal blood of an animal or in the promises and sacrifices the perfectionist SAYS they make for God, we are only reminded of our shortcomings. Why would God have created the sacrificial system in the first place? It just seems mean... right? Well, let us consider the lamb...



Why a lamb? Why is it the “lamb” of God that takes away our sin? Well, according to Levitical law, it was the sacrifice of a bull or a goat that was most common for atoning for sin (though Leviticus 4:22 does mention a lamb as a suitable sacrifice for a sin offering). Most likely, the image that we are meant to draw from John the Baptist's words designating Jesus as the “Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” are the larger images of the substitute sacrifice provided for Abraham that spared Isaac (Genesis 22:13) and the Passover lamb whose blood was placed on the doorposts of the families of God's people in Egypt in order to escape the punishment and judgment that came with the 10th and most severe plague (Exodus 12:1-13). Adding to the possible symbolic significance is the idea that the Passover lamb was to be eaten by the household on that night as they prepared themselves to be freed from slavery the next morning. These may be seen as foreshadowing the reinterpretation of the Passover meal by Jesus as the “Lord's Table” in which he likens his body to the bread and asks that all take and eat.

These symbolic references have no hard and fast interpretations that we can rely upon as THE way to understand their significance. The main idea is to see the theme of sacrifice and atonement for sin by a substitute's blood being shed in our place as the key elements for understanding what Jesus has done for us. The sacrificial animal, whether a goat, bull, or ram, was to be spotless, pure, and without defect. This is certainly true of Jesus, who was without sin. As Paul states, “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21). This is good news for ANYone, but especially for recovering perfectionists like me.

Prayer: “Lamb of God, you have indeed taken away the sin of the world. Have mercy on me, a sinner. I know that no matter how hard I try, I will not be perfect. Jesus, only you are perfect. Help me to accept the offer of exchange: my sin for your righteousness. I cannot think of a better gift this Christmas than to accept this gift and to know the fullness of your love and grace. In Jesus' name. Amen.”

The Shell

“THEREFORE GO AND MAKE DISCIPLES OF ALL NATIONS, BAPTIZING THEM IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT.” MATTHEW 28:19

The shell is a symbol of baptism, reminding us both of Jesus’ baptism by John as well as our own baptism into identity with Jesus Christ. Sometimes, the shell will appear with three drops of water, symbolic of the Triune nature of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The shell also reminds us of the missionary push of the church out from Jerusalem, over the seas, into the rest of the Roman Empire and beyond.



In January 2012, I had the pleasure of joining other pastors on a trip to the Holy Land. Two places were highlights for me. The first was on the Sea of Galilee, also known as the Sea of Tiberias. On the upper Northwest corner of the lake, near ancient Capernaum, warm springs feed into the Sea. As a result of the incoming water, warm and nutrient rich, it has been a favorite place for fishing for millennia. It is the site of Jesus’ post-resurrection “fish fry” with the disciples and the reinstatement of Peter (John 21). As I walked the shore there, I was amazed by what covered the beach... there was far more in the way of little shells than there was sand or pebbles! Seashells were everywhere. To think that I was so near the place

Jesus had walked, spoken, healed, and founded his church... it was an amazing feeling. That sense of presence, along with the surprising abundance of seashells will forever stay in my memory.



The other site that I loved was on the shore of the Mediterranean. The ancient Caesarea Maritima was a well-established center of Roman culture in the Holy Land long before Paul appeared there to stand trial before Felix and Festus in Acts, chapter 24 and following. The arrow on the photo of Caesarea Maritima shows the remains of the seaside palace where Paul would have come before Felix to plead his case. Paul was unsuccessful at that time, so he remained imprisoned in this port town for two full years!

(Acts 24:27). I am sure Paul did not get to enjoy the beauty of the seaside as much as visitors today can. I still have a few seashells on my dresser at home from the shore just to the north of Herod’s palace, a stone’s throw for where Paul would have been jailed for his faith.

The seashell reminds us of baptism... the act of identifying with Christ, of dedicating our lives to God. Consider the cost others have paid in years past to pass on the message of salvation. Though my identification with Christ has not cost me as dearly, I am thankful for those that have followed in Paul’s example and not considered it too great a cost to be imprisoned or jailed for their faith.

Prayer: “God, thank you for those over the years that have been baptized and identified with you, even to the point of imprisonment or death. May my life be lived as a legacy to their faithfulness and sacrifice. Amen.”

Fish (Ichthus)

“FOLLOW ME, AND I WILL MAKE YOU FISHERS OF MEN.”

Jesus' first disciples were fishermen from Galilee, and much of Jesus' ministry took place around the Sea of Galilee (also called the Sea of Tiberias). Fish and fishing make up a number of significant narratives in the New Testament. It is not surprising, therefore, that the early church assumed the symbol of the fish as something that would designate someone as a Christian or a place as a gathering spot for Christians.

The fish was also believed to be a secret sign used by these early Christians who were persecuted for their faith. To show another person that they were a believer, they would draw a fish, or one half of the fish in an arcing scratch on the ground. If the other person was a Christian, they would then complete another arc that would create the basic fish symbol.



Sometimes the fish symbol was combined with a symbol for bread, designating a place where believers would gather for the Lord's Supper. Furthermore, the first letters of the Greek words for “Jesus Christ, God's Son, Savior” spell “ichthus,” the Greek word for fish. In this way, the symbol also made clear the basic teachings about Jesus—that he was God's Son, who died and was raised to be the Savior of the world.



Today, the place we might see the fish symbol would be on the back of someone's car. It is now so widely recognized as a symbol of Christianity that it has inspired (maybe “inspired” is the wrong word?) all sorts of mocking variations from fish with feet and the name “Darwin” inside, to spaceships and UFOs, to flying spaghetti monsters (I am NOT making that up)! Only in America can you find someone willing to make a buck off of mocking someone else's sincerely held religious beliefs... but, I digress. Back to the significance of the symbol and it's connection to the Chrismon Tree.

Because it is such a widely known symbol, the fish is usually one of the more prominently displayed Chrismons and those most likely to be understood as designating the tree as “Christian” for those visiting the church who are unfamiliar with the tradition of having a Chrismon Tree. In working with children, this symbol is easy enough to make and to explain that it lends itself well to a starting point and connection for young hearts and minds. At Intermountain, it will be among the Chrismons that the children make to help decorate the first ever Chaplain's Tree at our annual Festival of Trees in December. Despite all the children have endured in their short lifetimes, many of those that come to Intermountain choose to identify with Christ. They are proud to learn and grown in their faith throughout their treatment. Will you pray for them now?

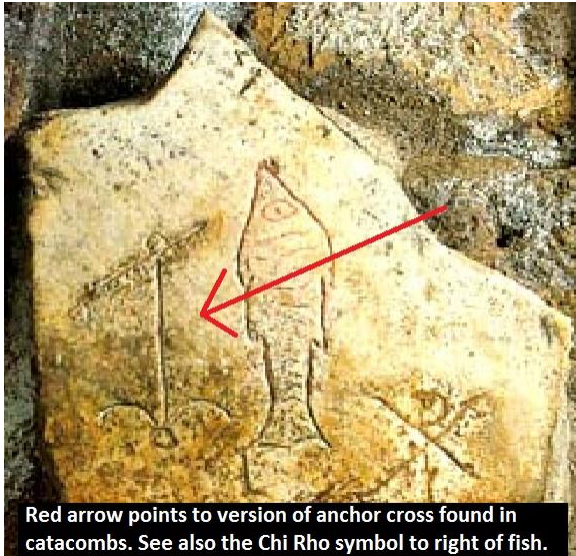
Prayer: “God, thank you for the children at Intermountain and for their faith that has endured the difficulties life has sent their way. Help them get back to their families healthier and stronger for what they have learned from staff, therapists, teachers, counselors, and the chaplain. Guard their hearts and help them grow closer to you each day. In Jesus' name. Amen.”

Anchor Cross

“WE HAVE THIS HOPE AS AN ANCHOR FOR THE SOUL, FIRM AND SECURE.” HEBREWS 6:19

Here in America, the Christmas holiday concludes around the New Year. The two blend right into each other. We go from the gluttony of holiday feasts to making resolutions to eat better and exercise more!

Even if we forego the resolutions, the New Year is a time when many of us look back over the year that has passed, and also look ahead into the next calendar year. This two-way focus goes back to the Roman calendar. You see, the Romans named this first month of the year after the god, Janus, who literally had eyes in the back of his head! One face looked to the coming year, while the other looked into the year that had gone by.



Red arrow points to version of anchor cross found in catacombs. See also the Chi Rho symbol to right of fish.

Looking ahead into the next year can be a frightening and fearful prospect. Is that true for you? Maybe it's the general condition of the world that has you concerned? Perhaps there is an aging or failing family member that you doubt will make it to see another Christmas and holiday season. There can be many reasons to fear or be anxious. In these moments, we need something that holds us steady and gives us reason for hope.

If you are looking ahead to 2014 with some fear or trepidation, ask yourself, "What is my anchor?" The anchor on a ship can be lowered into the depths to help keep it from crashing upon the rocks. Metaphorically, then, Jesus is our anchor and helps keep our spiritual lives from shipwreck. The nautical image of the anchor is also representative of

navigation, and being guided and kept safe despite the storms of life. When Christians have been persecuted and forced to hide for safety, the emblem often used has been the anchor cross.

In the sixth chapter of Hebrews, the author references the promises God made to make Abraham the father of a great nation. If the God who made those promises to Abraham is the same God we serve, the author submits, we can hold on unwaveringly to the promises of new life in Jesus Christ. The hope of a new and resurrected life, free from the burdens of sin-sickness and out from under the fear of death, is the hope the persecuted church relied upon. Likewise, when many things in our lives are changing, difficult, and scary, our trust in God as our anchor is firm and secure.

Prayer: "God, you have always served as my anchor. Help me to remember that whatever storms lie ahead, you have the ability to keep me safe and secure through them. I trust you, no matter what. In Jesus' name. Amen."

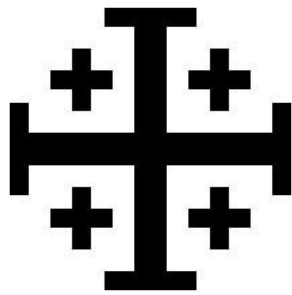


The Jerusalem Cross

“IN THE LAST DAYS THE MOUNTAIN OF THE LORD’S TEMPLE WILL BE ESTABLISHED AS THE HIGHEST OF THE MOUNTAINS; IT WILL BE EXALTED ABOVE THE HILLS, AND PEOPLES WILL STREAM TO IT.” MICAH 4:1

I like this cross, in particular, because I was given a necklace with this cross made of olive wood. It was a gift to the members of a pilgrimage group I was a part of when we went to the Holy Land. I liked this cross enough that while I was in Jerusalem, I found a vendor in the market that sold stoles, and I bought a beautiful stole with Jerusalem crosses on it.

The Jerusalem Cross, sometimes referred to as the Crusader’s Cross, was used on the shields of the Crusader Kings of Jerusalem. The four smaller crosses refer to the four compass points and the church’s mission to take the gospel to every corner of the earth. This mission started in Jerusalem, symbolized by the center cross, and radiated out from there to “every tongue, tribe and nation” (Revelation 7:9). There are five crosses total that make up this “Jerusalem Cross,” and these also correspond to the five wounds of Christ (two each in his hands and feet, and the spear that lanced his side).



I can see a connection in my own woundedness and my ability to carry forth the great commission of taking the good news of Jesus to the four corners of the globe. You see, it has not been in my strengths and giftedness that I have been successful in sharing God’s love. It’s not when I put on my “best face” that I communicate most significantly with the congregations I get to visit or the children and staff I am chaplain to at Intermountain. No. It is in woundedness and vulnerability that the light of the gospel shines most purely. Through sharing my own personal struggles and questions, others have been free to share their own. And, together, we have drawn closer to Jesus.

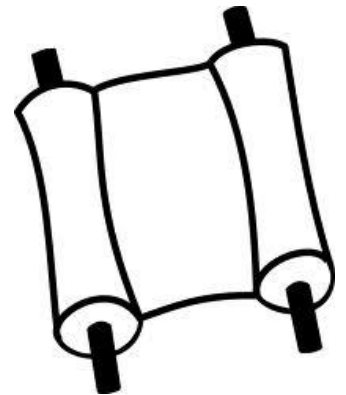
I also like this cross because it reminds us that we do have a mission as a church, as the people of God. As long as the cross of Jesus takes the center role in our efforts (the big cross in the center), we can each bear our own cross (little crosses around the large central one) and work towards the goal of honestly bearing the light and life of Christ to others (Luke 9:23). Then, sometime after the gospel has gone into all the world, Jesus has said that he will return. Those that have been scattered to spread the good news will be gathered together to worship Jesus in the most beautiful melting pot of races, ethnicities, languages, and cultures we could possibly imagine.

Prayer: “God, you will send Jesus again to draw all the nations together in worship and praise. Until that time, give me the courage to see my woundedness not as a hindrance in sharing the gospel, but as the vehicle through which people will actually connect with your love and grace. May my efforts to share you with others be pure in motive and persistent in love. Just as your love radiates through my body, may your love radiate through the larger body of believers, your Church. May I hold fast to the message of the cross and its ability to redeem the sin sick soul, and be willing to bear my own cross as I crucify my selfish ways and look to serve you and others in humility. In Jesus’ name. Amen.”

The Scroll

“THEN HE ROLLED UP THE SCROLL, GAVE IT BACK TO THE ATTENDANT AND SAT DOWN. THE EYES OF EVERYONE IN THE SYNAGOGUE WERE FASTENED ON HIM. HE BEGAN BY SAYING TO THEM, ‘TODAY THIS SCRIPTURE IS FULFILLED IN YOUR HEARING.’” LUKE 4:20-21

Imagine being Jesus as a young man, working in his father’s carpentry shop, travelling into the neighboring city of Sepphoris to do business or to get some item that wasn’t available in the town of Nazareth. Think of the oppression he would encounter every day, knowing that the Romans might keep order in Galilee, but would do it by the most ruthless and efficient means possible. And, all the while, Jesus would be growing in his understanding of who he was, what he was called to do, especially as he read through the Books of the Law and the Prophets. Day by day, week by week, month by month, and year by year the anticipation of what was to come coupled with the tension of his responsibility to wait on the Lord and the Spirit’s leading would have caused more than a few sleepless nights. Perhaps this is what led to Jesus’ habit of early retreats to pray for clarity?



The Chrismon of the scroll represents the Books of Moses, as the first five books of the Old Testament are commonly called. These books form the Torah and constitute the most sacred law of the Jewish people. The passage in Luke, Chapter four, makes reference to Jesus’ reading from Isaiah, which would not have been one of the Books of Moses. However, Jesus referred to the Law alongside the prophets when he spoke of his purpose, saying, “Don’t misunderstand why I have come. I did not come to abolish the Law of Moses or the writings of the prophets. No, I came to accomplish their purpose” (Matthew 5:17).

Everything Jesus read in scripture revealed two things: the heart of God for all creation, and the will of the Father for the Son to seek and save the lost. With this understanding of scripture and a conviction deep within his soul, Jesus took up the scroll and read to those gathered in the synagogue:

¹⁸ “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free,

¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.’

²⁰ Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him. ²¹ He began by saying to them, ‘Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.’” (Luke 4:18-21)

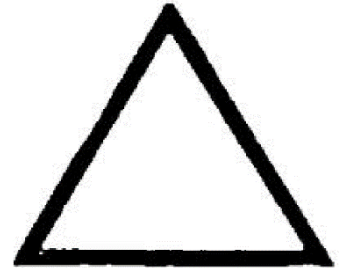
Jesus knew that his mission would put him in conflict with those that couldn’t, or wouldn’t, choose to see him within those same pages of scripture he had grown to know and love so well. It was more than just a matter of intellectual interpretation, it was a matter of understanding the heart of the Father. Now we have not only the testimony of the Father and the Son, but we also have the indwelling Spirit to lead us and guide us each day.

Prayer: “God, your ways are true and just. Help me to see Jesus in all of Scripture, the fullest expression of your grace and compassion for all of the human race. As I see your will in your Word, help me also to work for the freedom of those oppressed and healing for those blinded by sin and pride. In Jesus’ name. Amen.”

Equilateral Triangle

“BUT THE ADVOCATE, THE HOLY SPIRIT, WHOM THE FATHER WILL SEND IN MY NAME, WILL TEACH YOU ALL THINGS AND WILL REMIND YOU OF EVERYTHING I HAVE SAID TO YOU.” JOHN 14:26

The Equilateral triangle has three sides of equal length and size. Therefore, the interior angles are the same, as well. In this sense, while the triangle is often shown sitting on one side as its “base,” each side of the triangle could serve that purpose and thus are co-equal. This makes it an excellent symbol for the Trinity: God as Three-in-One. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—each different in their personhood and relation to one another, but also unified in their divinity, purpose, and will. The equilateral triangle is simple in its construction, but profound in its nature. As a simple geometric figure, it can be combined with multiples of other equilateral triangles to form beautiful patterns and mosaics.



Jesus, in preparing to conclude his physical, earthly presence and ministry, speaks to comfort his disciples. He promises them that his leaving them is all a part of the plan and will of the Father, and that in so doing, he can send the Holy Spirit, who will fill them, guide them, and lead them into the truths he had already taught them! Here we see all aspects of the Triune nature of God in concert with one another to fulfill the divine purpose for the church.

Now, some will shy away from the doctrine, or teaching, of the Trinity because it is hard to understand, and even more difficult to explain or defend. It requires a certain amount of faith to accept the teaching around God as Three-in-One because it holds in tension truths that we would normally say are mutually exclusive—how can something or someone be both three persons and one being? Believe me, if this wasn’t what scripture taught, I’d be happy to ignore it! But, you know what... there are other things that scripture teaches that are also hard to accept at face value. So, it takes a certain measure of faith and trust in God to believe what he has revealed.

What do I mean? Well, how much more difficult is it to explain the Trinity than it is to describe to someone how the God of the universe becomes a baby? And, if that were not enough, this baby grows up, never sins, is falsely accused of sedition, is crucified by the authorities and then is buried. BUT, he doesn’t stay dead. He is God, after all, and he comes up from the grave, appears to his followers many times over about seven weeks, and then floats off into the clouds to be reunited with God the Father. I could go on... but you get the point.

If this all doesn’t sound a little ridiculous to you, you have lost how absurd the gospel sounds to the thinking man or woman of this world. It sounded crazy to the sophisticated Greeks (even the word “sophisticated” comes from the Greek word meaning “wisdom!”) and sounds just as crazy today to your non-Christian friends. Now, I believe ALL the crazy things written in that last paragraph. Why? Because I have faith in what God has revealed about himself and I have seen the difference God makes in people’s lives. Embrace the supposed “foolishness” of the gospel and all of who God is—our Three-in-One God.

Prayer: “God, you are Three in One: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Thank you for symbols like the Triangle that help us understand to some degree this truth about your nature. But, Lord, you are not a triangle, and even the best explanations fall short of the mystery and immensity of your Holiness. Help me to accept by faith what I cannot make sense of through the wisdom of this world. In the name of the Creator, the Christ, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.”

Tau Cross

“NOW IT IS HIGH TIME TO AWAKEN OUT OF SLEEP; FOR NOW IS OUR SALVATION NEARER THAN WHEN WE FIRST BELIEVED.” ROMANS 13:11

Can I confess something? I am not a big fan of a lot of Christian Contemporary music. It’s not that I don’t love the subject of what it proclaims—I LOVE God!—but, I find that some of it doesn’t seem to have the same artistry and craftsmanship found in truly good secular music. So, when I find a Christian artist that I do like, it’s usually because there is a depth and artistry behind the music. I find this depth and artistry in someone I have had the honor to meet and bring in for a concert at a church I recently served. His name is Jason Gray, and I REALLY like his music. I would recommend him highly.

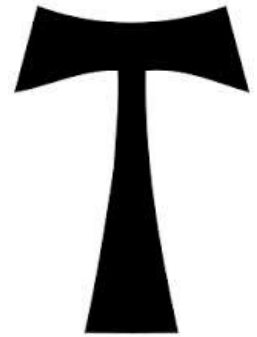
Jason has a song entitled “Everything Sad is Coming Untrue,” a literary reference from J. R. R. Tolkien. Jason Gray explains,

“The title for the song is a quote is from *The Lord of the Rings*, spoken by Samwise Gamgee after he wakes up from his ordeal with Frodo. Gandalf speaks to Sam, who has thought Gandalf dead.

‘Well, Master Samwise, how do you feel?’

But Sam lay back, and stared with open mouth, and for a moment, between bewilderment and great joy, he could not answer. At last he gasped: ‘Gandalf! I thought you were dead! But then I thought I was dead myself. Is everything sad going to come untrue? What’s happened to the world?’

‘A great shadow has departed,’ said Gandalf, and then he laughed, and the sound was like music, or like water in a parched land; and as he listened the thought came to Sam that he had not heard laughter, the pure sound of merriment, for days without count. It fell upon his ears like the echo of all the joys he had ever known.”



We all know this: Bad things do happen. But, thank God, that is not the end of the story—Amen?

As the lyrics of Jason’s song state: *“Broken hearts are being unbroken / Bitter words are being unspoken / The curse undone, the veil is parted / The garden gate will be left unguarded / Could it be everything sad is coming untrue? / Oh I believe everything sad is coming untrue / In the hands of the One who makes all things new.”*

Now, what does all this have to do with the Tau cross? Tau is a Greek letter that corresponds to our letter “T.” This cross is also called the cross of hope, because of its “unfinished” look. This cross is representative of salvation promised, but not yet fully realized. On Christmas Eve, our anticipation for the birth of Christ is at its height. Salvation and the child of promise’s birth is near.

The salvation that Paul writes of in Romans, chapter 13, is only going to be fully known when Christ comes again in glory. And, with each day that passes, we draw closer to that unknown day, and the fulfillment of time and history. One day, there will be no more death, dying, hurt, or tears (Revelation 21:4). One day, everything sad will no longer be true. Until then, we live in the “in between” and not-yet-fully realized nature of our salvation in Jesus Christ. Everything sad is BECOMING untrue, and that process is a glorious thing to behold.

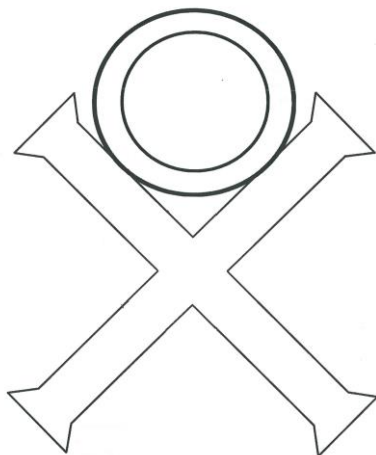
Prayer: “God, You make all things new. Death is not the end of the story. Our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. Everything sad is coming untrue and we can see it with our own eyes. On this Christmas Eve, we give you our anxious hearts and anticipation, and ask that you fill in us our deepest longings with the presence of the one we long for, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.”

Christ child in the Manger

“SHE GAVE BIRTH TO HER FIRSTBORN, A SON. SHE WRAPPED HIM IN CLOTHS AND PLACED HIM IN A MANGER.” LUKE 2:7

We come to the day we have long anticipated—Christmas morning. I hope this devotional finds you in the quiet of a beautiful winter’s morning. Maybe you can enjoy a quiet moment with God before the bustle of a later family gathering? Perhaps that gathering has past, and later in the day you’ve been able to carve some time aside to reflect. Either way, thank you for making this journey with me and with others who are connected to Intermountain’s ministry. It has been an honor and privilege to share with you a piece of the work I have done in preparing the hearts of the children for Christmas this year. As we come to the end of this devotional series, I hope you will continue to pray with and for our work. Thank you for joining us on this journey to the manger... which brings us to our final Chrismon.

This Chrismon symbolizes the divinity of the Son of God represented by the circle (or halo) lying in the humbleness of the earthly manger, or feeding trough for animals. Sometimes the symbol is surrounded by a circle (as in the example to the right). The image of the Christ child in the manger is a familiar one. As we close our time together, let us consider the words of the Christmas carol, *Away In A Manger*:



Away in a manger, no crib for a bed,
The little Lord Jesus laid down His sweet head.
The stars in the sky looked down where He lay,
The little Lord Jesus, asleep on the hay.

The cattle are lowing, the Baby awakes,
But little Lord Jesus, no crying He makes;
I love Thee, Lord Jesus, look down from the sky
And stay by my cradle till morning is nigh.

Be near me, Lord Jesus, I ask Thee to stay
Close by me forever, and love me, I pray;
Bless all the dear children in Thy tender care,
And fit us for Heaven to live with Thee there.

Prayer: “Jesus, You have called us all here, together... on our knees before your manger bed. Thank you for loving us enough to descend from heaven and be among us as a helpless baby. I do ask that you would always stay beside me, walking with me through the days ahead, and preparing me for heaven by making me more and more into your likeness. In your name, I pray. Amen.”