

“The Twelve Days of Christmas”

*A companion piece to
The Advent Devotional:*



*“For a Time Such as This,
He Comes!”*

Photographs by Father Gerald Schweitzer

Text by Rev. Dr. Donald Wagner

Introduction to “The Twelve Days of Christmas”

I am convinced that the work of the Holy Spirit is much like that of the lowly, majestic honeybee: Ongoing and with Purpose. Work on the Advent devotional, *For a Time Such as This, He Comes!* had just been completed and, not unlike that most familiar of Christmas stories, I had just laid down for a long Winter’s sleep when what to my amazement



awoke me was not the sound of reindeer, but the voice of the Spirit saying, “There’s more!” The next morning work began on this Advent devotional companion piece, “The Twelve Days of Christmas”.

With the collaborative photographic genius and faithfulness of Fr. Gerald Schweitzer leading the way, these Christmas season devotionals bring to life twelve very intentional gifts of God which arrive in the person of Jesus throughout this journey.

1. The First Gift: God comes to us.
2. The Second Gift: God will be known.
3. The Third Gift: God endures with us.
4. The Fourth Gift: God gives us a song of life.
5. The Fifth Gift: God is present in the Word.
6. The Sixth Gift: God hears our prayers.
7. The Seventh Gift: God’s Righteousness lives forever.
8. The Eighth Gift: God blesses the journey of those who seek God.
9. The Ninth Gift: God endures in every season.
10. The Tenth Gift: Your life is precious and held in God’s eyes.
11. The Eleventh Gift: God remembers you in Jesus.
12. The Twelfth Gift: God does not withhold the Only Son for your life.

Read and ponder each day as the Gift of God they are—and may God bless you with the delight and joy of those who first journeyed in faith towards the Star, from where they were to where God would have them be. Blessings on your pilgrimage of faith.

Pastor Don

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Fr. Gerald Schweitzer, Photographs
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The First Day of Christmas

“God, give your judgments to the king. Give your righteousness to the king’s son.”

Psalm 72.1

What are the first words a father offers to his son? What are the feelings he hopes to express? What are the dreams he tells him? What are the things about which he warns him? What does a man say to the child who now bears his lineage?

As I first held each of our three sons for the first time I can tell you the words I spoke to them were, “I love you.” I wanted each of them to hear those words from my lips to their ears, from my heart to theirs. To this day, I repeat those words as

often as possible to each of them, for in my soul they speak the truth concerning all other things.

In the gift of Jesus, God whispers to each of us, ‘I love you’. In the birth of the Son, God embraces us in the home of God’s heart which will never let us go. In the arrival of the Christ-Child, God’s judgment and righteousness shine for all time in a unending chorus of praise.

The first Gift of Christmas in a time such as this is the knowledge that God will never ‘call it in’ or virtually tend to us, God will not ‘shelter in place’, regardless the government or order. God comes, touches, takes on, heals, redeems and reconciles. God loves, and those are the first words spoken to—and in—Jesus.

Prayer: Open my ears to your Word, Lord. Let your Love be our language, now and forever. Amen.



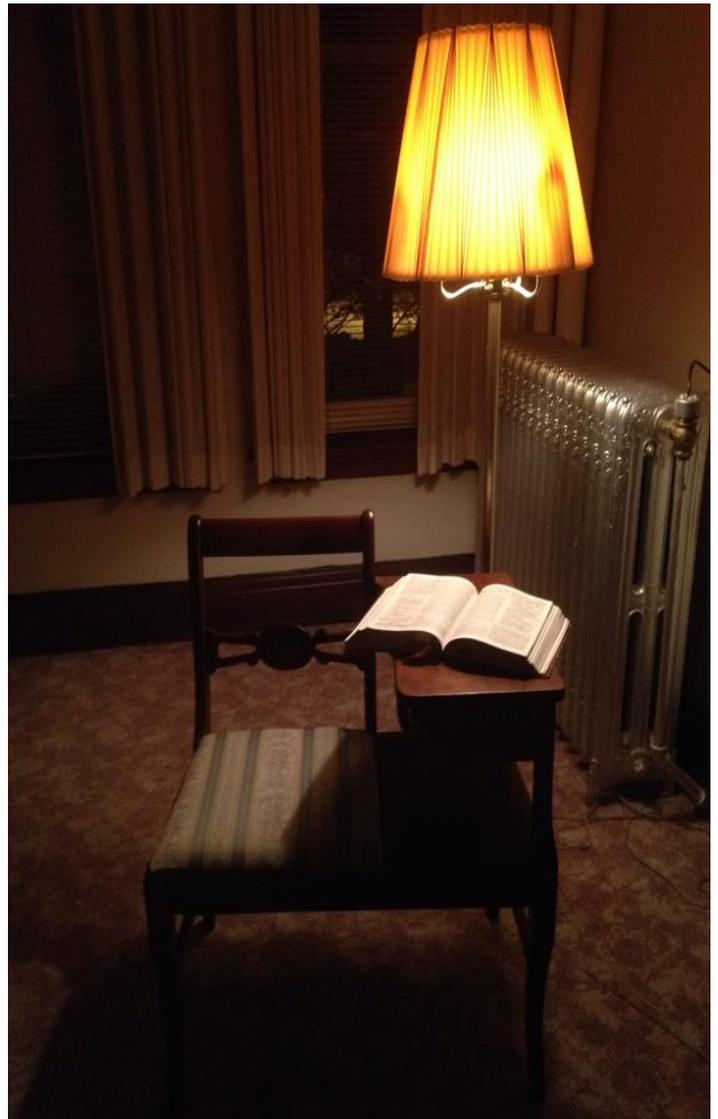
The Second Day of Christmas

“Let him judge your people with righteousness and your poor ones with justice. Psalm 72.2

Each Sunday during the portion of our Service known as, ‘A Time for the Child in us all’, a child who asked during the week prior to bring a question next week, presents their inquiry. Several of those burning questions of the faith still grace my office door and give those who visit me reason to pause, smile and think. One of those questions was simply, “Did Jesus play any games when he was a kid?”

Without a doubt, that is one of my favorite all time questions. We become so consumed by the stories of Jesus’ ministry and mission, we forget that Jesus was a kid, just like you and me. Oh, there was that time when He stayed behind at the Temple when He was twelve years old, but that is it. Nothing more. It is as if He was born, studied hard, became a carpenter, did His work, then fulfilled God’s mission in His life. End of story—or the Beginning, depending on how you read it.

Yet, there is something that resonates in my



soul that Jesus may have acquired much of His understanding of justice and righteousness on the basketball courts of downtown Nazareth. There Jesus picked up more than a game of hoops, He picked up what it means to be seen and known in the neighborhood as One who cares and levels the playing field for all.

The second gift of Christmas is simply this: God will not be masked. God will be known, in the Temple, as well as on the streets and in the games children play. Thanks be to God!

Prayer: Lord Jesus, face of God, thank You for coming, ready to Play. Amen.



The Third Day of Christmas

“Let the mountains bring peace to the people; let the hills bring righteousness.”

Psalm 72.3

You know who I am talking about, maybe you are one of them, maybe I am—those always circling airplane or helicopter parents. You know, the ones who have never allowed their children to grow up, to experience life, to fail, to recover, to try again, to fess up to shortcomings, to find their way or their faith. Then, at the tender age of thirty or forty something, the propeller comes off the shaft, the whole system breaks down and it is the parent who takes on the blame or is blamed when all that is left is the ashes of the fiery crash.

God does not do that. Immanuel, God with Us, means exactly that: God is with

us in all things, at all times, in every moment dirtying God’s own hands with us, not for us. God sits beside us in the pew, sometimes holding us in God’s lap, sometimes setting us down on the floor so we can walk up to the Chancel on our own. *God takes on our journey without taking over our experience. God takes on our life without taking over our living.*

The third gift of Christmas in a time such as this is the Comfort and Strength God announces to us in the birth of Immanuel. God is not so sanitized and sterile in Heaven that God will not be found taking hold of the hand that reaches out to God in Jesus. God feels the heat of our tears and the uncertainty we face, especially when things like a pandemic stop us in our tracks—and God does not take those things away from us, but is With Us, now and forever, the Gift from the Parent.

Prayer: Lord God, allow me the privilege to walk with Jesus in all things. Amen.



The Fourth Day of Christmas

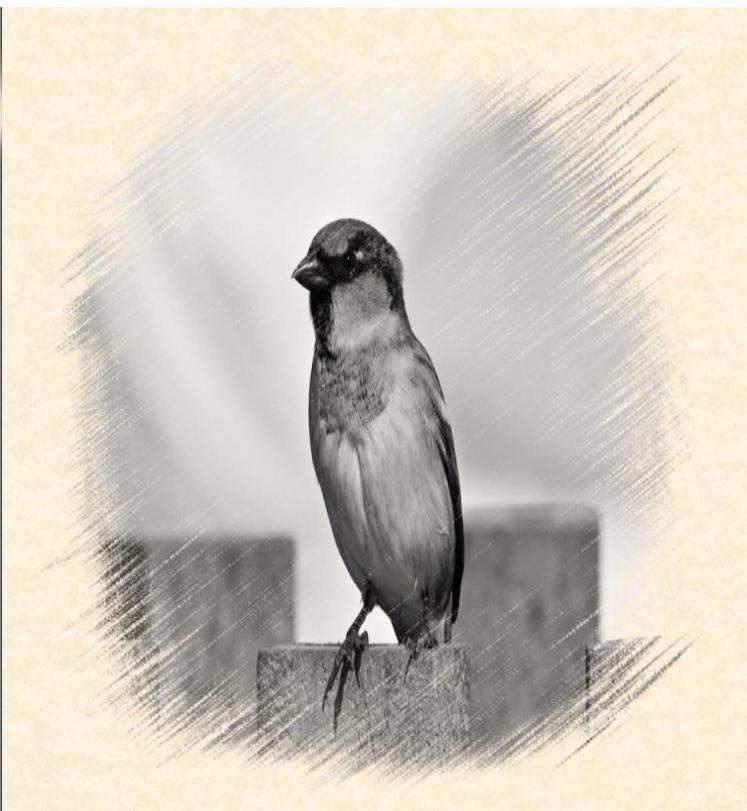
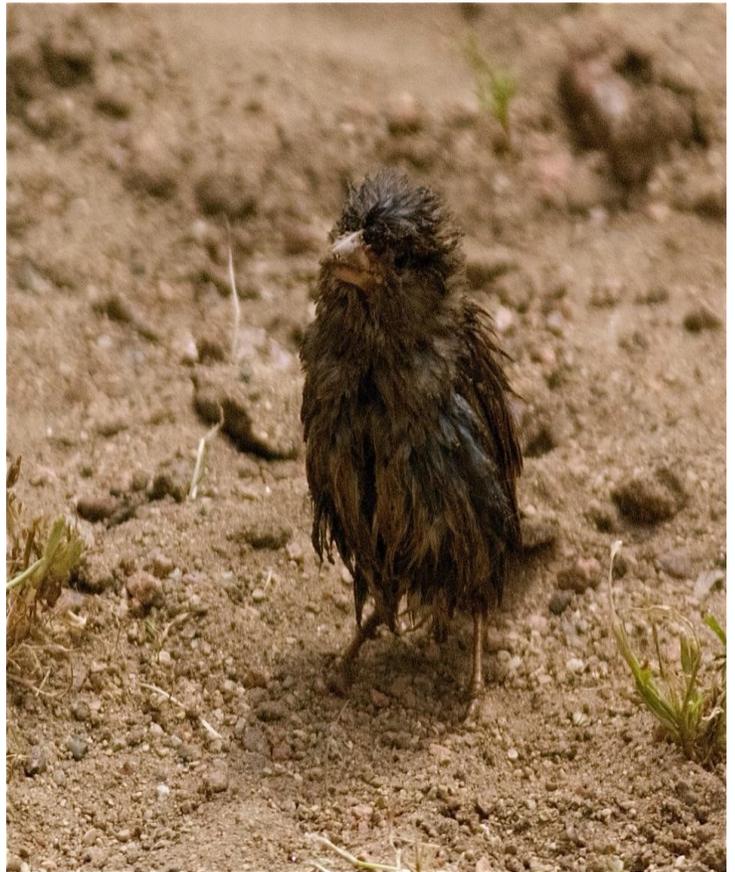
*“Let the king bring justice to the people
who are poor; let him save the children
of those who are needy,
but let him crush oppressors!”
Psalm 72.4*

“God’s eye is on the sparrow and I know God watches me . . .” I cannot tell you how many times over the years the words of that song were a part of my life, but this I can tell you, my mother taught them to me—and to scores of other kids as we sang in the Children’s Choir of my childhood church. Those words were a relief valve for any child who felt themselves outside the circle, for any child who was the younger sibling, for any child who knew what it was to not have everything, anything, going their way, for any child who imagined being invisible in the midst of the world. Those words were hope, desire, prayer, a call for judgement and a statement of faith all rolled into one. Nothing gets by the watchful eye of God. Nothing.

And, just when it seems the darkest, just when the odds seem the longest, just when

the way becomes even harder, there God is, birthing New Life, announcing Wholeness like the world has never seen, all the while inviting the most unlikely of all people to be the privileged first observers and evangelists of this Truth. God comes for such as the sparrow among us, the broken down, the good-as-dead, the invisible, the overlooked, the shot-at, the oppressed, the ignored and the robbed of spirit. God comes. God will not stay at a safe physical distance from our distress. The fourth gift of Christmas is this: God is lifting up, healing and giving a song of Life to the sparrow, to you and to me.

Prayer: Thank you, God, for the song of the lowly sparrow, for the song of Jesus in our world. Amen.





The Fifth Day of Christmas

“Let the king live as long as the sun, as long as the moon, generation to generation.”

Psalm 72.5

My Grandpa Wagner was 100 1/2 years of age at his passing, my Dad is currently 95 years of age—and my wife, Nancy, is beginning to think those words, “. . .till death do us part”, which she and I both spoke when we were married, might be more of a life sentence than she first realized. Ha!

The prayer of the Psalmist is for more than days, though, it is a prayer for Life in every day, a legacy of faith throughout all the years and a sense of continuity of family bloodline in every generation. It is an invitation for humanity to fully

participate in what God is doing throughout history.

The One who comes, the One birthed of Mary, the One who is Emmanuel, brings to earth that sense of Divine, linking human mortality with Eternal Wonder in every age.

The fifth gift of Christmas is that for which the Psalmist prays: The Word present in Creation itself, the Word made flesh, the Word who is Light for all people, *lives forever and ever*. From beginning to Beginning, He is God.

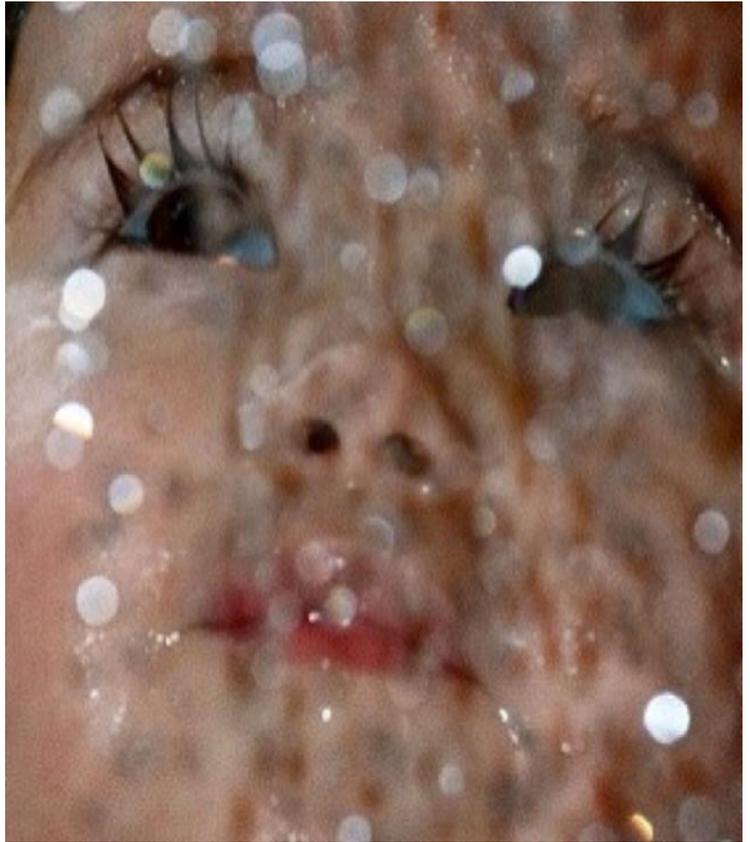
Prayer: Before the sun or the moon, You are the Son bringing Life forever. Amen



The Sixth Day of Christmas

*“Let him fall like rain upon fresh-cut
grass, like showers that water
the earth.”
Psalm 72.6*

The sound of rain falling on a tin roof sends my heart and mind back to childhood. I grew up in a home with a tin roof. The barn and each of the machinery sheds on our farm had tin roofs. Many an evening found a peaceful conclusion with the pitter-patter of rain on the roof ushering in sleep, just as many a hard and hot summer's day found a welcome reason to stop and savor a sudden downpour from a storm we had seen advancing for hours reaching its zenith with roof-hammering authority.

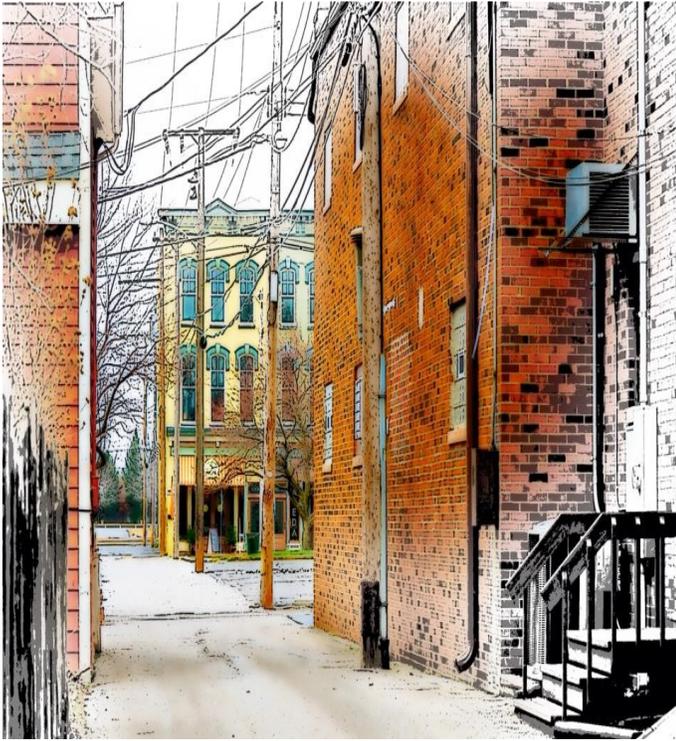


Rain washes and makes new, it can also overwhelm and sweep away. Rain nurtures the soil and the soul, it can also darken the depression and make drear the prospects. Rain for forty minutes can stop a drought, rain for forty days and nights can flood a world and forge a new narrative.

The Psalmist is clear about the blessing being sought: Let the One who is to come be as rain on fresh-cut grass, Majesty releasing the luxurious scent of Wonder into the world; Let the One who is to come be as Nourishment to the earth, reviving the soul and giving strength to those seeking a new Beginning in Him.

The sixth gift of Christmas is simply this: God hears the prayers of Psalmist and servant alike. God knows the need of those who choose to follow a Star. Before we prayed it, God is already becoming the One we desire. Can the rain water of Baptism be far behind?

Prayer: Lord God, heighten my senses in adoration of your Blessed Arrival. Wash me, wash us all, in His Goodness. Amen.



The Seventh Day of Christmas

“Let the righteous flourish throughout their lives, and let peace prosper until the moon is no more.”

Psalm 72.7

Empty streets are seldom a sign of anything prospering. Covid has cleared even the alleyways of folk congregating as once they did: The fear of contagion, the concern for spread, the desire not to infect is heavy on the minds of many. The State can tell us to stay at home, quarantine and shelter in place yet, most often, it is not until something like a deadly virus touches our own life or the life of a loved one that we will heed and abide by such an order. Most often, we seek to flourish on our own terms, in our own

ways and with our own agenda, others be dipped.

Yet, the Biblical narrative, including the Story of Jesus' birth, relates God's ongoing history of inviting us to righteousness, to faithfulness, to Covenant keeping and to community-building. The God who will not be told by any government to stay home or quarantine, the God who comes into the morass of our daily modernity, is the God Who Comes for a purpose: To build a community forever forged in striving for the common good, living for the praise of God and seeking the welfare of all God's children. In other words, a community of Righteousness.

Such a community is a song of praise before the Throne of God. Such a community cannot be quelled by virus, government or even threat of death. Such a community lives for Life beyond itself, in the Peace that only God can offer.

Thus, the prayer of the Psalmist. Thus, the Gift of Jesus. The seventh gift of Christmas is this: Righteousness rooted in the Child of God will live forever, not for itself, but to the glory of God, the answer to the Psalmist's prayer.

Prayer: Let me embrace Your Righteousness, Gift of God, and glorify You until the moon is no more. Amen.



The Eighth Day of Christmas

“Let the kings of Tarshish and the islands bring tribute; let the kings of Sheba and Seba present gifts.”

Psalm 72.10

“We three kings of Orient are, bearing gifts we traverse afar . . .”

I wonder if the ones who first told the birth narrative of Jesus, who recorded it as we have it in the Gospel of Matthew, knew for certain that there were three kings, wise men or magi who came to Bethlehem? Or was their storytelling a nod to these words in Psalm 72, an underscoring of Jesus being the One foretold by the ancestors as the Royal Deliverer?

I wonder why Matthew included the story, yet Luke did not? “I wonder, as I wander out under the sky . . .” if the story of kings bringing tribute, gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh sought to speak more to the impending power of Jesus’ ministry and the shadow of the cross than to His unexpected appearance in the humility of Bethlehem?

I wonder, were the story to be retold today, if the kings would be led to a small community near the steel mills of East Chicago, Indiana, and what their gifts might be? Or if they were to be led to chain their bicycles to a lamp pole, lest their transportation be stolen as they presented their gifts to a Child and parents inside a café along the darkened and brooding streets of the city, where the homeless sleep and the jobless weep? Would the star that leads them be likened unto the red flashing hand for the foot traffic signal?



Would the star that leads them be likened unto the red flashing hand for the foot traffic signal?

The eighth gift of Christmas is this: Those who watch, are led. Those who are ready, arrive. Those who anticipate eagerly, bring the best gift, themselves, wherever He is, however He comes—and God blesses their journey to be told forever.

Prayer: Lead me, guide me, receive me as I am: king/pauper/seeker of You. Amen.

The Ninth Day of Christmas

“Let all the kings bow down before him; let all the nations serve him.”

Psalm 72.11



I am forever amazed by birds. No, I am not an ornithologist, that would require far too much work and study. For the most part I cannot name every breed and variety of bird I see, but I can tell you which are the pretty ones and which ones have beautiful songs. Count me, among the avid casual observers, aware of the bird's comings and goings and constantly noting who arrives in

the Spring and when—and who leaves at the end of Summer or in the Fall. Most noteworthy to me are the ones who stay throughout the Winter, like the Cardinal.

Anybody can do Spring, Summer or Fall, but to do the Winter? That is another level of wonderment altogether. Winter birds must be able to forage for food that is hard to find, to seek shelter which has become sparse and rangy, and to keep themselves warm when the rest of the world around them has become a deep freeze. Winter birds are hardy, to say the least, and worthy of our admiration beyond the most profound of thoughts. They are a paradigm of trust, both in the way they tend and look out for each other and in the manner by which they resolve to see the year through, regardless the circumstances, weather or happenings.

Were humanity to bow down before the One birthed in a barn the way that birds follow their own instincts concerning seasonal migration or staying, would we find more contentment and joy in the journey? Were we to sing our song before the Lord regardless the weather or the land in which we resided, would our voices be found holy in the ears of God?

The ninth gift of Christmas is this: When we pray for a Savior, God sends us a Winter bird in Jesus. God sends One who sees us through in every season, no matter what, and that is a song which delights my soul. I pray it does yours, as well.

Prayer: In every season, may we be found bowing down to You, God who holds my life and song in your Heart. Amen.



The Tenth Day of Christmas

“Let it be so, because he delivers the needy who cry out, the poor, and those who have no helper.”

Psalm 72.12

Among those of the world whose gifts include being able to see God at work and share that vision through the lens of a camera is my good friend and colleague, Fr. Jerry Schweitzer. This measuring cup is case and point: On the surface, one could ask what the measure of your life is and how that might be expressed, but look more deeply and one could also be prompted to consider who holds that measure and how tenuous their hold on you might be. It is all a matter of perspective, calculated perception and human/Divine understanding.

To some, this is little more than a measuring cup suspended in midair by a fishing line. Yet, to others this picture poses more questions than it offers responses, for it is an invitation to ponder mortality, vulnerability, place, value, worth, respect, dependency and interdependency, all with a red measuring cup. And, what is up with the cup being red, anyway? Is that a sign of anger? Or of the Spirit's Presence? Hmm.



Hung on a cross suspended in the Sanctuary of a worship home of a congregation of God's people, Jesus answers our questions of mortality, vulnerability, place, value, worth, respect, dependency and interdependency in the sight of God. With Mary, Child and all the angels looking on in the background, who among us can assess the impact this One Life, born in Bethlehem, will have on the most vulnerable, marginalized and overlooked among us, as named by the Psalmist? Is it just a construction cable holding Him there? Or is the Hand of God lifting Him up for us to see, Face-to-face for the very first time all over again? The tenth gift of Christmas is this: Your life is held precious and holy in the sight of God, as is every person's life on earth. For such as this, He comes.

Prayer: Let my measure in life be You, Lord Jesus, let it be You. Amen.



The Eleventh Day of Christmas

“He has compassion on the weak and the needy; he saves the lives of those who are in need.”

Psalm 72.13

I cannot help myself: Whether in isolated countryside or in the midst of vacated tenement inner-city housing, when I see abandonment I pause and wonder.

I wonder of those who left and why they chose to leave. I wonder whether deserted buildings represent rejected

dreams—or just simple weariness in pursuing them. I wonder if the choice to walk away from the mailbox and never return was, indeed, a choice or if it was forced. I listen for the voices of children echoing through the seasons and wonder where they are now. I strain to smell the food on the stove and imagine a family sitting at the table, while wondering if the lack of food is what drove them away. I wonder if compassion is what gave them a new beginning elsewhere or whether compassion is what provided them the means and strength to leave.

If you have never been there, it is hard to imagine—like an empty pedestal setting unused in the midst of a woodlot, holding up nothing other than the sky above it.

Still, there it is, a silent sentinel reminding those who come after that not everything you dream and envision comes out exactly as you planned. Still, you try, even if what you do holds up nothing more than the sky or reminds others of a life you once lived down the lane, just beyond the mailbox. And, why?

Because the eleventh gift of Christmas is this: The compassion of God is so great that God comes in Jesus to meet you at the end of the lane or in the midst of the woodlot, wherever it is that life has led you, and cares for you. God remembers you in Jesus.

Prayer: Thank you, God, for knowing exactly where I am and having compassion, no matter what else happens. Amen.





The Twelfth Day of Christmas

*“He redeems their lives from
oppression and violence; their blood
is precious in his eyes.”*

Psalm 72.14

The journey of the magi, the kings, the Wise Men, to the place where Jesus was born is given to be twelve days, but the days are not the important part of this story. That they followed a star which was so obvious that it drew them from a long distance away, yet curiously did not draw similar attention from

Herod, the chief priests or the legal experts in Jerusalem, also is amazing, but not the important part of this story. Even that men, *men*, stopped to ask directions along the trip (*Imagine!*) is not the important part of this story. No, the important part of this story, God’s Ongoing Story, is this, the twelfth gift of Christmas:

Governments come and go, nations rise and fall, leaders are elected then go home, viruses have appeared and disappeared throughout history, oppressors become the oppressed, slaves become the masters, kings become servants, servants become rulers, armies hold sway then are vanquished and various religions in the human experience have both, sanctioned horrible evil and excesses of good, all in the name of God, still . . .

In the eyes of God, the blood of God’s children, all God’s children, is precious. Precious to the extent that God does not withhold the only Son to redeem their lives from oppression and violence. The light of the Star bows in adoration before the Light born below and, as a crystal reflects the world around it, so the Child reflects the Kingdom of which He is King and Savior forevermore. We, along with wise people in every age, are moved to praise God, for in the Gift we are saved.

Prayer: God of Precious Love, my soul overflows with Joy in You. Amen.

