

A vibrant, stylized illustration of a nativity scene. At the top center, the infant Jesus lies in a manger, wrapped in white cloth, with a bright star above his head. To the left, a glowing angel with outstretched wings floats in the dark blue night sky, surrounded by small white stars. Below the angel, a large, bright white star with multiple points radiates light across the scene. In the foreground, a brown cow and a white sheep stand on a bed of golden straw. A small lamb is nestled in front of the white sheep. To the right, a dark silhouette of a stable with three figures is visible. In the bottom right corner, there is a golden incense burner and a small, dark, ornate bottle. The title "Experiencing Jesus" is written in a large, flowing, golden script across the center, partially overlapping the star and the animals.

Experiencing Jesus

ADVENT DEVOTIONAL BOOKLET

Experiencing Jesus



Advent begins four Sundays before Christmas and continues to Epiphany on January 6th. The season of Christmas is almost a time of sensory overload. We see all the lights and the decorations – do we see the little child in the manger? We smell all the amazing food that is prepared; the biscuits baked, the plum pudding soaking and the turkey cooking – do we smell the hay or the animals in the stable or the smelly shepherds? We touch the presents and wrap them under the tree – do we feel the softness of a newborn baby? We taste and speak of holidays and culinary delights – do we speak of God’s Son born for the world? We hear the carols and Christmas songs and the laughter and the Ho Ho Ho of Santa – do we really hear the words of the Christmas songs sung of Jesus’ birth?

Each week of these devotionals, the focus will be on a different sense to experience all that God gives to us in the birth of Jesus, the Saviour of the world. May you use these devotionals to experience Christmas in a different way and help you understand why we worship such a tiny baby. May they strengthen your faith and grow your understanding of God’s immense love. Each devotion contains a short reflection, Bible reading and prayer. I would encourage you to read the Bible readings along with the devotion as you see, smell, touch, taste/speak and hear God’s grace through **“Experiencing Jesus”**.

May you experience Christmas with your family in a different way this year!



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SEEING Recognising the Light

1st Sunday in Advent

Read: John 1:1-14



"The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world." John 1:9 (NIV)

Recently when travelling up the coast of Queensland, we happened to come across some amazing caves just outside of Rockhampton – the Capricorn Caves. They are Queensland's oldest tourist attraction, opening to visitors in the early 1880's. These limestone caves are privately owned and are truly a wonder with many adventures – rock climbing, abseiling, fossicking and caving. Not that we did all these things, but what amazed me was the Cathedral Cave that had been set up as a chapel. Pews had been set up and with the natural acoustics the music played for us was 'heavenly'. Many weddings are held here, and orchestras and music bands hold events in this room.

When the lights were extinguished and music was played my senses took a tumble. The absence of light was filled with the presence of music. When one sense (sight) was deprived, the other senses (hearing, smelling and touch) took over. Many times, we take for granted our senses that fill our lives with a certain quality of life. God gave us these senses to fill our lives and give us quality experiences. In the Book of John, John begins not in the normal way with the story of the nativity, but rather fills our senses with the understanding of who Jesus really was and why He was coming into the world.

Jesus is referred to as the light and it is through being in the light that we see Him best. In the darkness we cannot recognise anything well and can make mistakes and have accidents, but it is when we are filled and surrounded with light, the light of Jesus, that all becomes clear. *"Life was in him [Jesus], and that life was the light for all people."* John 1:4 (NIV) Jesus is our light, and it is when we see everything through the lens of Jesus, that we can live our lives to the full. Experience Jesus this Advent through seeing who Jesus is and why He has come into the world. Live in the light of Jesus!

Prayer: Thank you Father for filling my life with your light. Through this light may I be able to see and understand your love and grace that comes to me every day. Amen.





SEEING Humility Seen

1st Monday in Advent

Read: Luke 1:26-38

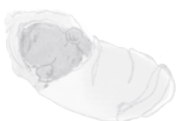
"Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that He may lift you up in due time." 1 Peter 5:6 (NIV)

Humility is not considered the most important quality these days. To get anywhere we must put ourselves forward and be open and brash about declaring our own greatness. Greatness is not found in sitting in a corner. However, there are some who have made it to greatness through being humble. Mahatma Gandhi embraced humility. Even though he was a lawyer and extremely learned, he spent his life serving the poorest of the poor. He carried human soil on his head, cleaned his own rooms, fasted weekly and spun his own cloth for clothes. He served others in a spirit of giving. He said that 'one must become as humble as the dust before you can discover the truth.'

Mary was chosen by God to be the mother of the Saviour of the world. She wasn't very old, about 14 and she was already engaged to Joseph. Jewish law demanded that the woman must be a virgin to marry; otherwise, the woman will be known as a harlot -- a prostitute and despised -- and possibly even stoned. For Mary to hear the words from the angel that she would become pregnant by the Holy Spirit would have been incredibly hard to hear, but we see her humility and acceptance of the facts.

Mary rejoiced at this news and called herself blessed by God and in her song (Luke 1:46-55) she praised God for bestowing on her this honour of being the mother of the Son of God. She didn't go around telling people that she was bearing God's Son, rather in humility we see her acceptance: *"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. 'May it be to me as you have said.'"* (Luke 1:38a NIV). Mary's example can be one for us also. Her acceptance and humility in hearing God and knowing what He wanted of her, produced an incredible strength and love. May we also accept God's mission for our lives with much humility and strength so that others may be drawn to knowing God for themselves. In humility we see greatness!

Prayer: Heavenly Father, you have charged me with the mission to share your love and grace with others. Help me to serve you and others with humility. Amen.



SEEING Lamp Light

1st Tuesday in Advent

Read: Luke 11:33-36



“Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house.” Matthew 5:15 (NIV)

I was recently talking to my mother (born 1928 in the Barossa) about her childhood and only having candles, lamps and lanterns to see in the evening. She told me of a story of her childhood in the 1930’s when she had to bring the cows in to be milked every night. It was winter and it got dark early and the cows, to keep warm, used to gather in a dry creek bed away from the wind. She told me that she and her sister used to take a lantern, crunch through the frozen grass, and swing the lantern side to side as they went to the creek to find the cows. When the cows saw the light they would follow it, with the other sister chasing to get home. They saw the light to lead them to safety and a warm shed.

After dinner, a lamp would be lit in the middle of the dining room table. At this table the younger children (mum and her sister) would do their homework, the older sisters would do mending and darning, granny would be reading her Sunday school lesson or doing crochet work and grandpa would be reading the paper. One lamp allowed all to see (read Matthew 5:15 above). At bedtime, this would be extinguished, and each would take a candle to their rooms.

In John 1, we read a couple days ago that Jesus is the light that has come into the world to help everyone see their need for forgiveness and a Saviour. In Psalm 119:105, God’s Word, the Bible is likened to a lamp which guides us wherever we go and helps us to see. We don’t have the same sort of darkness as they did years ago, due to electricity and everything giving off little bits of light – charging phones, clocks, modems, streetlights - but remember that darkness is the absence of light. To not have the light of Jesus means to be in total darkness. Shine your light into people’s darkness this Advent and share the light of Jesus.

Prayer: Lord, your light gives encouragement and purpose for me. Guide me as I talk with others and share your light and love with those around me to help them see you. Amen.





SEEING Unable to See

1st Wednesday in Advent

Read: Isaiah 35

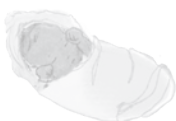
"... the Lord gives sight to the blind, the Lord lifts up those who are bowed down, the Lord loves the righteous." Psalm 146:8 (NIV)

When I was a student at Immanuel College in Novar Gardens, I had the privilege of being a friend and helper to a blind student. I sat with Colleen during lessons and read to her and helped her with research. Colleen taught me some of the elementaries of braille and sometimes during lessons we would write notes rather than listen, but the teachers could never read what we wrote – the ultimate of note passing! Walking to classes she would take my arm and I would help lead her through the student throng. In PE lessons I would help her with sport and run for her or have her hold my arm and we would run together. Even though she had been blind from birth, she never had the attitude of indebtedness. Rather she accepted her lot and tried harder than anyone.

I often wondered how it would have been for her to be healed and be able to see as in the Bible when Jesus healed some who had been born blind. What would it have been like for her? Even though she was unable to see physically, she could see spiritually. She knew and loved her Saviour. Although blind she could 'see' her Lord. This Advent season can we truly 'see' the love of God in sending His only Son to be a human? This love is truly evident in the birth of Jesus. God had prepared loving parents to see His love in a baby. He had prepared the shepherds (ordinary people like you and me) to see this little baby. They were also the first to know by seeing angels in the sky. God prepared the wise men to see the star from countries far away, and journey to a lowly stable offering incredible gifts to a baby.

Can we open our eyes to see the wonderous gift that God has placed before us? Maybe some of our eyes are needing glasses or extra help to see physically. But open your hearts to see Jesus this Christmas and experience the unlimited love of a loving God!

Prayer: Thank you Lord, for showing me your love in a baby and allowing me to see in my heart this incredible gift. Open my eyes to all around me needing help with seeing. Amen.



SEEING Seeing Angels

1st Thursday in Advent

Read: Matthew 1:18-25



"...when God brings his first-born into the world, he says, 'Let all God's angels worship him.'" Hebrews 1:6 (NIV)

Angels are spiritual beings created by God to serve Him. They are powerful beings who function as God's messengers. An angel (Gabriel) appeared to Zechariah – Luke 1:5-25 telling him of the birth of John who would prepare the way for God's Son. Gabriel appeared to Mary (Luke 1:26-38), he appeared to Joseph (Matthew 1:18-25), then to the shepherds telling them of Jesus' birth (Luke 2:8-15). The wise men were warned in a dream, some say by angels (Matthew 2:12). Then, Joseph was warned by angels, telling him to take Jesus and Mary and flee to Egypt (Matthew 2:13). In Matthew 2:19-20, the angel told Joseph to return to Nazareth.

Reading through all these appearances of an angel, it is obvious that God was in control. He sent His messengers to warn, to tell and to go see – they were the ones bringing the news of God to humans on Earth. These appearances of an angel were all designed to tell of the birth of a Saviour and to protect Him from any harm. In the Bible, there are 273 occurrences of angels being referenced in 34 different books of the Bible. Are angels real? Absolutely. God has said that *"He will command His angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways"* (Psalm 91:11 NIV).

Whenever my children have to travel distances, I always pray that God's angels will guard them as they travel and protect them from all harm. Does he send His angels when we ask? I can see that He does for my prayers are answered. Martin Luther in his 'morning and evening prayers' prays: *'Let your holy angel be with me, so that the evil one may have no power over me.'* This Advent season I pray for you that you will see God in His love and goodness in caring for and guiding you in all you do. God's angels watch over you!

Prayer: Heavenly Father, send your angels to protect and guide my family in all we do this Christmas. Keep me from all harm and danger and bring me to see you more clearly. Amen.





SEEING

The God who Sees

1st Friday in Advent

Read: Luke 1:46-55

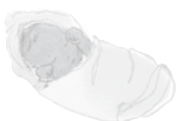
"She gave this name to the Lord who spoke to her: 'You are the God who sees me,' for she said, 'I have now seen the One who sees me.'" Genesis 16:13 (NIV)

Have you ever felt invisible? That you are looked over and your opinions and thoughts not valid. As the sixth child in a large family, I often felt invisible and overlooked which made me withdraw and become quite shy. I did not like to put myself or my opinions forward for fear of being shot down. As I finished high school, a new life of university was opening to me, and I made a conscious effort that I would no longer be unseen but change my introverted nature to an extrovert... which is how people today know me. We all have a need to be seen and recognised and to be truly known.

Hagar was the maidservant of Sarai, who became pregnant by Abram when Sarai couldn't have children. Even though God had promised Sarai a child, she believed that they had to do it some other way than rely on God. But once Hagar was pregnant, Sarai made her life miserable, so she planned to run away. She tried and an angel came to her and said that God had seen her pain and he understood. Hagar called God 'El Roi' - the God who sees (read the verse above in Genesis). It isn't that God just sees, but God saw her. This reveals something about God and his character. He is omnipresent, everywhere all at once, and He is omniscient, knowing everything all the time. So, God, by His very nature, cannot overlook us.

We also read the song of Mary, who herself was invisible, being a woman and so young. But she praises God for revealing Himself to her and remembering her and giving her the joy and honour of being the Lord's mother. Mary was seen by God and her life was never the same. You also are seen by God. Even when we may feel invisible to the world around us, we never go unnoticed by our Heavenly Father. God sees every heartache, every unspoken word, every sacrifice and every longing. God sees you! Praise God this Advent for revealing Himself to us in a tiny baby.

Prayer: El Roi, you are the God who sees me. You know me and love me just the same. Surround me and bless me with your presence and love. Amen.



SEEING

Seeing God's Provisions

1st Saturday in Advent

Read: Luke 2:1-7



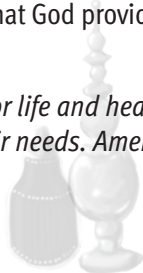
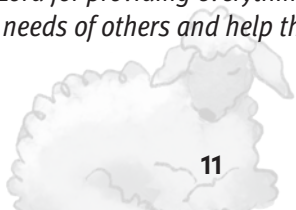
"He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy." Acts 14:17b (NIV)

Travelling on the musical ministry team from Lutheran Youth Encounter in the 1990's was truly a faith building experience. We were provided with an honorarium of US\$50 a month and left to being provided for everyday through the kindness of churches and their members. Each night we performed a concert in a church along with having a potluck dinner beforehand. Then we were taken home by wonderful people who offered us a bed and breakfast and supplied us with any other need – a tube of toothpaste, soap, haircut, stamps, and lunch the following day. This continued day after day for a year and sometimes we still had the US\$50 in our wallet at the end of the month. We relied on God for providing for our needs through His people and we saw His goodness every day.

God had planned for the coming of His Son to earth from the beginning of time. We read many references leading up to His birth and the way Jesus would then suffer and die. We read in Luke 2 all the references to Jesus being born at a particular time and place. These were documented, so that later in history we can see the proof (God knew about our unbelief). God knew that Mary and Joseph would have to travel to Bethlehem due to a census and that Bethlehem would be bustling with people. He also knew of a safe and secure place (a humble place) where the Son of a mighty God would be born. He was born without a king's fanfare but was given the heavenly angels' fanfare.

All this was foretold in the Scriptures. God had also seen how this tiny baby was to die 33 years later, Jesus' whole life had been seen by His watchful Father. God had provided amazing earthly parents for Jesus who would teach Him and love Him. Our God also sees our needs before we even know we have a need and places people around us to provide for these needs. Today, take note of all that God provides for you and give thanks to Him.

Prayer: Thank you dear Lord for providing everything I need for life and health. Help me to see also the needs of others and help them in their needs. Amen.





SMELLING

A Memory Trigger

2nd Sunday in Advent

Read: Luke 1:1-4

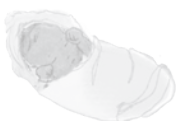
"Perfume and incense bring joy to the heart" Proverbs 27:9a (NIV)

There are certain foods and smells which trigger childhood memories. Whenever I bake honey biscuits the smell of cinnamon and spices fill the house, and my husband immediately is transported back to childhood Christmases. On a Sunday, arriving home from church and smelling the roast in the oven brings me back to my own family's Sunday roast when growing up. There are also smells that we associate with our loved ones. My husband's cologne brings a smile to my heart when I smell it bringing with it the safety and security I feel with him. Others smell my Giorgio perfume and immediately know I have been there.

I have been told that smells are a powerful sense that can bring memories both good and bad. The sense of smell has many functions which include detecting desirable foods, danger, attraction to others and also plays a role in taste. We can know what something is – whether good or bad without even seeing it. We can walk into a room and decide if we want to stay there or leave according to the smell. A musty room makes you want to leave, whereas a room smelling fresh and clean makes one want to linger and stay.

In the beginning of Luke, the author Luke, sets the scene, like a room, to be appealing and make people want to linger longer and read more. He makes it attractive, logical and factual, an appealing smell for us all to read more about the birth of Jesus. Luke figuratively puts on the Sunday roast so that all may want to know more about God's love through Jesus. We are also to smell good for Jesus. *"For we are to God the pleasing aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing."* (2 Corinthians 2:15 NIV) The way we talk and behave also is a reminder for others. Whether knowingly or unknowingly people will be attracted to Jesus, just through who you are. Be a witness and scent to the world for Jesus!

Prayer: Lord, help me to be a pleasing aroma for you. You are incredible and allow me to show others this through who I am and how I act. Amen.



SMELLING

A Smelly Stable?

2nd Monday in Advent

Read: 2 Corinthians 2:14-17



“While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.” Luke 2:6-7 (NIV)

My uncle was a dairy farmer in Eden Valley, SA. He used to milk cows, morning and evening, every day, winter or summer. I never heard my uncle complain about the hours or the hard work. During holidays or when our family came to visit, I do remember going up to the dairy to watch the cows being brought in and then being attached to the milking apparatus. The sheds were kept sparkling clean and even though the cows had been standing in mud and manure, they and the floors were always clean. I used to think that this shed would smell of cow and manure, but the memories I have is the smell of wonderful warm milk.

In Scripture the place where Jesus was born and laid was in a manger, an eating trough for the animals. We are not actually told if Jesus was born in a stable, but this is assumed from the above verses. I like to picture it as a clean place with the smell of fresh hay and that ‘new baby’ smell. We imagine and depict this scene with animals – if that was the case, there would definitely be animal and manure smells as I know they wouldn’t have kept it as clean as my uncle’s shed.

But no matter the place that Jesus was born or the smelly stable that it possibly was, we know that Jesus was a gift to the world from our Heavenly Father. Gifts TO God back in those times were called offerings and many times in the Old Testament we hear of fragrant offerings being pleasing to God. What about when it was a gift FROM God? The gift of a baby is one of the greatest gifts and blessings for a family – this gift of Jesus for the world cannot be any better. Close your eyes and breathe deeply to experience this incredible gift, this fragrant offering to us!

Prayer: Loving Father, you gave me the fragrant gift of a baby born to save the world. Guide my thoughts and actions to be pleasing always to you. Amen.





SMELLING Shepherds

2nd Tuesday in Advent

Read: Luke 2:8-20

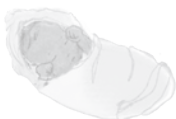
***"Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood."
Acts 20:28 (NIV)***

In Jesus time I think shepherds got a bad rap. We are told that they were smelly and dirty and the outcasts of society. They had to sleep outside to take care of the sheep against wild animals and robbers who could steal the sheep. They had to make sure the sheep had water and grass to eat, that their wool didn't get them stuck on brambles, and watch that the sheep didn't get fly blown. Were they really the outcasts of society, as they had an incredibly important role looking after the 'money' of the landowners at that time?

The first people who were told about the birth of Jesus were these important, yet unimportant people of society. Why did God choose some shepherds to send His messenger angels to herald the birth of His one and only Son? Throughout the Old Testament we see God choosing many shepherds to lead His chosen people – Abraham, Moses, Jacob, King David, and others... see if you can think of more! Shepherds had to put the care and welfare of the sheep above their own needs and cares which made them great leaders. Maybe that is why Jesus refers to himself as the Good Shepherd – His coming to the world was to care and shepherd all His sheep. *"The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." (John 10:11b NIV)*

Let's not stereotype these shepherds as smelly and unimportant. God saw fit to have the angels appear to them for they then went out proclaiming the Good News of Jesus' birth and God's gift to the world. If they were such outcasts, people would not have listened to these smelly shepherds. Instead, we are told in verse 18 of Luke 2, that all who heard it from the shepherds were amazed at all that they had been told. These shepherds heralded in the birth of Jesus with the glorious angels. Let us not forget that God comes to all to share with them His love and goodness and for us in turn to share it with others!

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you came to the lowly of society to share the magnificent news of your Son. Guide me to see all people as worthy of your love and grace. Amen.



SMELLING Traditions

2nd Wednesday in Advent

Read: Luke 1:5-10



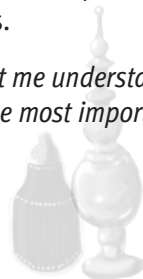
"Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense." Luke 1:8-9 (NIV)

Traditions are important. Growing up we always had turkey with all the trimmings on Christmas day lunch (in both our families), and we have continued it with our family. A Christmas pudding has evolved into the tradition of our eldest son making a Christmas dessert – baked Bombe Alaska, homemade ice cream or something else incredible. But our family has the tradition of a baked dressed ham on Christmas eve. The dressing of the ham varies each year, but what is exciting is all the taste and smell sensations in the house over Christmas. Last Christmas added to it was the mulled wine cooking on the stove.

Traditions can provide a sense of wellbeing and belonging and create peace that all is well. Traditions are also important to a church and congregation: receiving the Word and Sacrament, celebrating the church festivals, the time of fellowship, the constancy of someone to care for the church and the people. When these are missing, it is upsetting, and all the familiar things are thrown awry. It would be like Christmas day not smelling good – everything would be wrong. God can send us these times to be patient and to keep on with His work through other means to keep the church smelling appealing and bringing peace.

There were many things that threw that first Christmas into disarray. Zechariah, who went to the temple as usual to make a fragrant offering to God on behalf of the people, found himself in the presence of an angel. Mary was heavily pregnant when she had to go to Bethlehem for a census. Instead of finding a nice clean place to have her baby, there was 'no room in the inn.' I am sure that Joseph and Mary had a birth plan, but God had other plans. God's plans are not always known to us. The important thing is that family is still family and God can work through any issues.

Prayer: Dear God, you give me constancy in your presence. Let me understand the importance of traditions, but to see your love and grace as the most important of all. Amen.





SMELLING

An Incense Offering

2nd Thursday in Advent

Read: Exodus 30:1-10

"May my prayer be set before you like incense; may the lifting up of my hands be like the evening sacrifice." Psalm 141:2 (NIV)

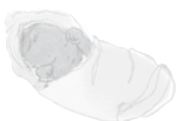
The burning of incense was a pleasing sacrifice to God. As you will have read in Exodus, there was even an 'Altar of Incense' made to put before the Ark of the Covenant. Incense is a combination of aromatic spices, herbs, and oils that produces its strongest fragrance when warmed or burned. The incense used in the Jewish Temple was made of stacte, onycha, galbanum and frankincense. The aroma of incense was a physical picture of the prayers of God's people wafting up to heaven; as in Psalm 121 above. The scent of incense mingled with the smell of burning sacrifices symbolises the mingling of prayers of repentance and devotion.

Some churches still use incense in worship as a symbol of our prayers rising to God. In Old Testament times it was important to the people and to God, but with Jesus came the new covenant and the new decrees from God. We don't need others to pray on our behalf like the priests who burned incense and offered sacrifices. We can pray to God directly and He has promised that He will always hear our prayers. Paul, in the New Testament, uses the image of incense to illustrate the Christian life:

"But thanks be to God! For through what Christ has done, he has triumphed over us so that now wherever we go he uses us to tell others about the Lord and to spread the Gospel like a sweet perfume. As far as God is concerned there is a sweet, wholesome fragrance in our lives. It is the fragrance of Christ within us, an aroma to both the saved and the unsaved all around us." 2 Corinthians 2:14-15 (TLB)

Our lives are to point others to Jesus. We must be as the sweet fragrance of incense that tells of the birth of a Saviour and a loving God who sent His only Son to be the ultimate sacrifice for all our sins. Our aroma may not be pleasing to all, but that shouldn't matter, for, in all we do, our lives are given to God for His purpose.

Prayer: Loving God, make my life a living sacrifice telling others of your love through who I am and what I do. May I be a sweet-smelling sacrifice to you. Amen.



SMELLING

The Incredible Nose

2nd Friday in Advent

Read: 1 Corinthians 12:12-20



*"If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? But in fact God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be."
1 Corinthians 12:17b-18 (NIV)*

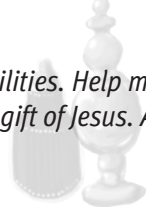
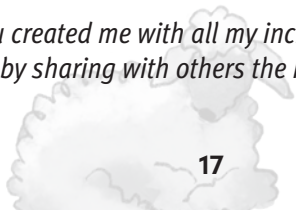
The humble nose that sits in the middle of all faces, whether large or small, plays an important part to the human body and life. Your nose helps you make scents of the world. There are about 10 million receptors in the nasal cavity that the brain deciphers as something good or bad. I did some research and found some important facts about the nose:

- Your nose contains your breath which leads to your lungs.
- Your nose humidifies the air you breathe.
- Your nose cleans the air you breathe through tiny hairs.
- Your nose regulates the temperature of your breath.
- Your nose protects you through smelling danger.
- Your nose protects your brain from infection.

I find that facts about the body are rather incredible. When a child is in the womb it gets its oxygen from the mother. Once born it needs to breathe on its own, so when a child is born without a cry to empty the immature lungs of the oxygenated fluid, the doctors work through the child's nose to bring air - carbon dioxide to the lungs. The child will eventually learn to breathe on its own naturally. Thinking about all these little steps, God is truly an amazing God in creating all the different parts to work individually as well as working together.

Your taste is connected to your nose. Try to eat something that smells delicious. Then try it again while holding your nose. Each part is created with the other parts in mind. We celebrate the birth of Jesus as a family of Christ, keeping in mind all the other members. When bringing Jesus into the world God didn't keep it quiet, He shared it with everyone – shepherds and wise men, people from all parts of society. Share the birth of Jesus and His incredible love for us with others and maybe invite someone to share it with your family this year.

Prayer: Creator God, you created me with all my incredible abilities. Help me to be an ambassador for you by sharing with others the incredible gift of Jesus. Amen.





SMELLING Gifts for Jesus

2nd Saturday in Advent

Read: Matthew 2:1-12

“On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.” Matthew 2:11 (NIV)

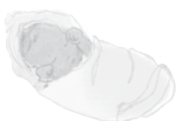
‘The three wise men came to the manger with gifts for baby Jesus. They brought gold and frankincense... But wait, there’s myrrh!’

Have you often wondered why the wise men from the east would bring such strange gifts to a baby? I just read another joke about when the three wise men had left baby Jesus, the three wise women arrived bringing fresh nappies, casseroles for the week and lots of formula. Wouldn’t these sorts of things be more appropriate and helpful - as we women tend to be.

But gold, frankincense and myrrh were brought to honour God’s Son. Do you think the wise men were told by God beforehand what to bring? Maybe the Holy Spirit had given them insight as to who this special baby was to be and what He was going to do in His life. Frankincense and myrrh are saps that are extracted from trees. Frankincense is predominantly burned as an incense, while myrrh is more commonly used in medicines and perfumes – but both are known for their enticing fragrances. In ancient times, frankincense and myrrh were as valuable as gold and these valuable items were standard gifts to honour a king or deity in the ancient world: gold as a precious metal, frankincense as perfume or incense, and myrrh as anointing oil.

Which brings me to the question: What would you bring to baby Jesus? A better question: What do you bring to baby Jesus? The gifts of the wise men symbolised that He was a King and had a special life set before Him. We know that Jesus came at Christmas to save the world and bring eternal life. I personally don’t know what I could bring except myself and lay myself at the foot of the manger as a person ready to do whatever He wants. I give Jesus my life... what about you?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, take my life to do your will. Help me to be of service to you and others that I meet and gather with. May my life be a fragrant offering to reach others. Amen.



TOUCHING God's Hands

3rd Sunday in Advent

Read: Psalm 139:1-10



"Yet you, Lord, are our Father. We are the clay, you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand." Isaiah 64:8 (NIV)

Today is in God's Hands and so are you.

His hands are strong and will uphold you

His hands are great and will enfold you

His hands are gentle and will embrace you

His hands are protective and will cover you

His hands are reassuring and will quiet you

His hands are powerful and will defend you

His hands are parental and will train you

His hands are masterful and will conform you

His hands are compassionate and will care for you

His hands are healing and will renew you

His hands are calming and will comfort you

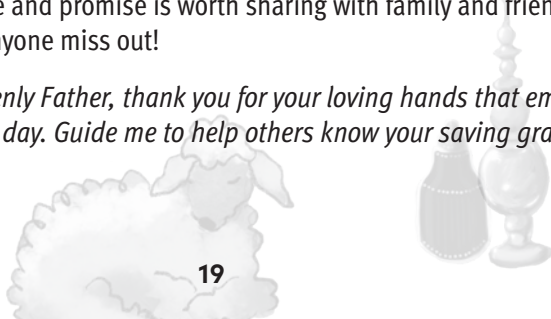
His hands are giving and will bless you

The hands that hold you will never let you down.

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At this time of Advent, we are reminded that God gave His all by sending His only Son into the world. He reached down in love from His Heavenly Kingdom to us in humanity, to save us in our sinfulness and death. God has promised that all who believe in Him will have eternal life with Him in heaven forever. I sure want that for myself and my loved ones. This love and promise is worth sharing with family and friends this Christmas – don't let anyone miss out!

Prayer: My loving Heavenly Father, thank you for your loving hands that embrace me in love and mercy every day. Guide me to help others know your saving grace. Amen.





TOUCHING

Touch of Jesus

3rd Monday in Advent

Read: Psalm 139:13-14

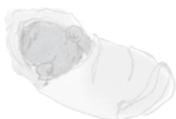
"That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life." 1 John 1:1 (NIV)

The sense of touch is truly incredible. Our sense of touch is controlled by a huge network of nerve endings and touch receptors in the skin known as the somatosensory system. Our skin acts as the protective barrier between our internal body systems and the outside world. It's not only the body's largest sensory organ, but it's also the largest organ! 'The skin's sense of touch is what gives our brain a wealth of information about the natural environment, including temperature, humidity, and air pressure.' (Wikipedia) Most importantly, this sense of touch lets us feel physical pain – a necessity for avoiding injury, disease and danger.

There are many laws in the Old Testament which mentions touching as a bad thing. There were laws about touching women, touching lepers and the sick, touching food and many other things. When Jesus came, he abolished these laws by doing the opposite of what the laws demanded. He touched and healed on the Sabbath, he touched 'unclean' women, he brought love and acceptance with His touch. Many of the leaders of the Jewish law rejected what Jesus did and condemned Him. But we know that through Jesus' touch and love our sins are forgiven on the cross.

When Jesus was born, He was not only touched by loving parents who caressed and held Him through His growing and developing, but we also hear how Mary was touched by the Holy Spirit and became pregnant. The word 'touch' can be used metaphysically as well as physically. Jesus was touched by the Word of God as He grew and developed and He knew that God was His true Father. The Word also comes to us today and every day and I pray that each day you may be touched by all that it tells us. The touch of Jesus is healing and brings life. I pray that you will touch others with the love, grace and mercy of a loving God and Saviour.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, thank you for sending your Son Jesus to Earth to save me and touch me with His love and grace. Help me to also touch others through my words and actions. Amen.



TOUCHING Holding Hands

3rd Tuesday in Advent

Read: Psalm 73:23-26



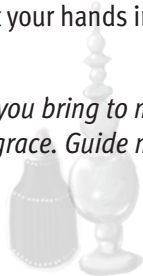
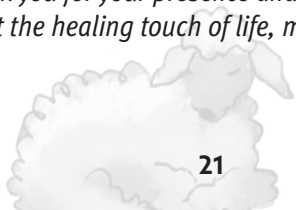
***"He reached down from on high and took hold of me; he drew me out of deep waters."
Psalm 18:16 (NIV)***

Do you remember the first time you held hands with someone other than members of your family? Like me it was probably a person who became a significant other (well for a time anyway). Holding hands with someone else brings a closeness and a sign of caring and telling others that she/he is with me! Holding someone else's hand when they are in pain or in sadness or grief can show that you also share in that emotion. There is also something called 'Healing Touch Therapy'. This is where the sense of touch is used to get people through treatment. A nurse tells the following story about: *'...a patient who became extremely anxious (to the point of getting sick) when she was administered the pre-meds prior to cancer treatment. She held the patient's hands throughout her treatment session and the patient did not get sick, nor did she realize when the treatment was finished.'*

When babies are born premature and put into a humidicrib, parents are encouraged to hold the baby's hand, stroke their skin and if possible, hold them. This touch can bring about a healing and growth that cannot be explained, except that all of God's family and creatures need touch to survive and thrive. I can imagine Joseph holding his wife, Mary's hand through the labour and birth of baby Jesus. The care that he would have shown his young wife would have comforted and reassured her of his love and presence.

The little hands of newborn baby Jesus would have been held and marvelled at by his loving mother Mary. As He grew, she would have held these hands when possible danger arose or when she needed to guide Him safely. Then as a grown man He would have held His mother's hands in times of grief, sickness and in comfort. Jesus holds yours and my hands today. He is there in our times of trouble, sickness, joy, grief and even in our day-to-day life guiding and directing us. Reach out your hands in love to our Saviour who is always there to hold you.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, thank you for your presence and love that you bring to my life. I cannot survive without the healing touch of life, mercy and grace. Guide me and hold my hand. Amen.





TOUCHING Giving Hands

3rd Wednesday in Advent

Read: Psalm 19:7-10

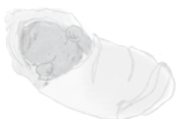
"We have different gifts... if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully." Romans 12:6a, 7-8 (NIV)

An old woman came limping into the church and sat herself down at the very back not wanting to be seen by others. This was a wealthy congregation, and all the other members were dressed well and looked well fed. A small girl saw the old woman walk in, and after the service when everyone was walking out, she slid into the pew next to the woman and placed her \$2 coin into the woman's hand. As the little girl walked away, she said, "Today I think Jesus can do without this \$2, you need it more."

On many occasions Jesus when talking to the crowds, told them to give generously to the poor and to help those who are in need. I have heard a saying: 'Jesus doesn't need your gifts of service - your neighbour does.' Jesus encourages us to be generous with our time and our wealth and to help those who are in need. Unfortunately, today there are so many people who take advantage of other's generosity scamming people into believing they are giving to someone in need when it is actually someone robbing them through false means. It is so hard to be generous when you have these thoughts in the back of your mind.

However, Christmas is seen as a time of giving not just financially but through other means: helping the elderly, giving a meal, bringing groceries for the Salvation Army to distribute, donating to a child or family through ALWS, putting together a Samaritan's box for a child, putting a gift under the tree at Target. Jesus teaches us to have gift-giving hands and to do it with a cheerful heart. *"Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver."* 2 Corinthians 9:7 (NIV)

Prayer: Lord God, thank you for your gift of baby Jesus to me at Christmas. You gave so much. Help me to give and to help others cheerfully and out of gratitude of what you have done for me. Amen.



TOUCHING Weary & Tired?

3rd Thursday in Advent

Read: Isaiah 40:28-31



"He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak." Isaiah 40:29 (NIV)

I really enjoy gardening and when I get into the garden I struggle to stop. I keep seeing just one more weed to pull out, one more branch to trim, one more pot to refill with soil. I find it therapeutic being able to be amongst the plants and do my best to keep them all growing and thriving. Usually, the time I spend in the garden is more than an hour or two – I can spend hours on my hands and knees, but then by the end of the day I come inside feeling satisfied with what I have done, but also totally weary.

Joseph and Mary had to be tired. They had been walking all the way from Nazareth to Bethlehem only to find no place for them to stay for the night. Joseph would have been very worried with his tired wife also very close to the time for giving birth. But his weariness would have been forgotten when hearing the cries of his new son Jesus. You can imagine the joy! Have you noticed that sometimes when you feel you can do no more God gives you the strength to continue? (see Isaiah 40:29 above) When walking the 26km for the Walk my Way, at 24km I felt I could go no further and then with the climb to Luther Heights at Coolum... impossible! But God did give me the strength through the help of a woman from our congregation who walked down to me only to walk and talk me up the hill.

God helps the weary and tired and brings them rest and the strength they need through others. This Christmas with all the hustle and bustle of getting the presents, cleaning the house, washing windows, gardening, cooking and baking, may God grant you the strength you need to see the tiny baby held in the weary arms of his parents. Rest in knowing the love of God for you to send this baby into the world. Find time to rest in His loving arms.

Prayer: Dear Lord, thank you that you hold me when I am tired and can do no more. Give me strength to help and see the needs of others. Amen.





TOUCHING Blessing Hands

3rd Friday in Advent

Read: Mark 10:13-16

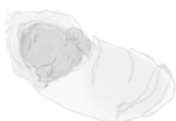
***"And Jesus took the children in his arms, put his hands on them blessed them."
Mark 10:16 (NIV)***

Jesus set us quite the example to follow in pretty much every area of life. There is a lot of responsibility in being a follower and disciple of Jesus. He asks us to welcome and bless those who need it most: the low in society and those overlooked. In Mark, Matthew and Luke it is recorded that Jesus welcomed and blessed all the little children – at the time they were overlooked, but not by Jesus. We as adults and parents are asked to bless our children. A parental blessing is a simple but profound reminder to the child that they are loved, and that their true identity comes from God. It is like a shield. The act of blessing one's child also reminds the parents of their awesome responsibility and allows them to pause for a moment and ask for God's grace.

In the © Faith Inkubator programme, as families we are to do the Faith 5: Share, Read, Talk, Pray and Bless. If, as families, we do this every night and in every home, can you imagine what the impact that it will be on the world. If every child was blessed with a blessing telling them that they are loved unconditionally by God, what a revolution could occur. My husband and myself did this with our family every night – I think the biggest impact on me is when my own child not just gets blessed but blesses me! Our hands bring the heart of Jesus to our homes.

If this is something you would like to do with your family, it is never too late to start. Bring the love of Jesus to your family and let them know the love of God in sending His only Son to be a part of the world to bring blessing to all He met in His time on earth. Family time at Christmas can bring the love of God and showing His grace and mercy. Bless your family today with your time to share, read, talk, pray and bless.

Prayer: Thank you Lord Jesus for your example for me to follow. Help me to spend time with my family and children and teach them and bless them with your love every day. Amen.



TOUCHING Uphold Me!

3rd Saturday in Advent

Read: Luke 1:66-79



***"So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand."
Isaiah 41:10 (NIV)***

When learning to swim, it is interesting that some seem to find it easier to float than others. As a child, floating was something I could do. Swimming distances and when out of my depth led to some panic, but as long as I remembered that I could float and know that the water will hold me up, my panic level seeped away. As long as the water that my body displaces weighs more than I do, I will float, and this is known as Archimedes' Law. A person who is submerged in water weighs less than the water due to the lungs being full of air, which lifts the body to the surface naturally.

To be a confident swimmer means to be sure that the water will uphold you. Zechariah in the above reading had no doubts to the essence of his salvation and that his son was born to prepare the way for the Saviour of the world. Through the Holy Spirit he was able to prophesy that God was coming into the world to redeem and save His people – he had total confidence that the Saviour coming from God was going to save and uphold His people. I looked up the word 'uphold', and it means to 'maintain, defend, advocate, support, sustain, endorse, encourage and espouse.' Jesus was coming to do all of this.

Before the 'song of Zechariah', there is a little sentence: *"For the Lord's hand was with him."* (Verse 66c) With the Lord's hand with us and upholding us in all situations we need never feel that we are going to 'sink' or get out of our depth as we deal with everyday situations. All that we need to remember (and not to panic) is that God is there upholding us, not allowing us to sink, guiding, caring and loving us through each day of our lives. Archimedes' Law applies to God in our lives – His love is greater than anything so we will always float!

Prayer: Dear God, you uphold me with your righteous hand through each day of my life, thank you. May I remember this love when things get hard to bear and know you will hold me up. Amen.





TASTING/SPEAKING

Silenced

Christmas Eve

Read: Luke 1:11-22

"The angel answered, 'I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their proper time.'" Luke 1:19-20 (NIV)

The gift of speech is something many of us take for granted. But losing your voice or being unable to talk can really help us to appreciate this wondrous gift. Once when teaching year 5, I lost my voice for a couple days. Not being ill I continued teaching, but with a difference – all the children had to read my directions for the day and had to keep their eye on me for visual signs. With a whisper I could share some things, but I couldn't talk above them, they had to listen. I found with the sense of speech gone, the other senses were heightened in the children. We had a very quiet and well-behaved class and were extremely productive as the children responded with compassion.

Zechariah was struck mute by an angel when he expressed his doubt about the angel's message. He really had a right to question this due to the age of him and his wife Elizabeth. *"But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren; and they were both well along in years."* (Luke 1:7 NIV) This is a fair question from Zechariah to put a stranger who promises to fulfill the deepest desires of his heart. So why is Zechariah punished with no speech for nine months? Maybe this silence is not a punishment but rather a gift. Just as my class responded so amazingly with my silence, so Zechariah now had nine months to reflect on this visit from the angel and God's message to him through the angel. This led to his incredible song of adoration and praise to a loving Heavenly Father (Luke 1:67-79).

As the child grew in Elizabeth's womb, so Zechariah's understanding could grow. He was saved from bragging, from crowding out the Spirit with his chatter and from broadcasting his scepticism. As we enter Christmas Day, maybe try to find some time through the busyness to be silent, to reflect on the gift of God as a baby who is born to be King of the World. Find some time to just listen and to use your other senses to experience Christmas.

Prayer: Help me Lord to listen to you speaking to me. Help me see the amazing gift and love of you in a tiny baby and then share this with others. Amen.



'Taste and See'

Christmas Day

Read: Isaiah 7:14; 9:6-7



***"Taste and see that the Lord is good. Blessed is the person who goes to him for safety."
Psalm 34:8 (NIRV)***

For Christmas lunch I like to cook traditional fare with our family. We have turkey, roast potatoes, vegetables, cranberry sauce, gravy, creamed corn casserole (Hansen family recipe) and I bring out the good cutlery and china plates. It is a special family time to chat, enjoy a glass and then also celebrate with an amazing dessert cooked by my son. There are so many smells and the taste buds tingle with the scintillating flavours. During the cooking, I have many hovering taste-testers, just to make sure that everything is as good as it could be! They get just a little foretaste of the feast that is to come.

In the two Bible readings from Isaiah, chapters 7 and 9, Isaiah is giving the people of Israel a taste of what is to come to bring them hope. He specifically mentions in 7:14 that the Lord himself will give a sign to all the people through a virgin becoming pregnant by the Holy Spirit and this child will be called 'Immanuel' – God with us! In 9:6-7, Isaiah expands on his first taste of what is to come by sharing more about this child and the future that will be coming for all God's people.

Today is Christmas Day and all that Isaiah spoke about came true over 2,000 years ago in a little town called Bethlehem. A virgin, named Mary did become pregnant and then she did have a child who brought with him the forgiveness of sins and life eternal in heaven forever with our Heavenly Father. The taste which the people of Israel got in Isaiah's time has now been fulfilled and we are enjoying the grace and mercy of our loving Saviour – our Immanuel. With the peace and joy of this little baby Jesus that we celebrate being born today, we also get a brief taste of what God has in store for us in heaven one day: the peace, the joy and the living presence of a loving God.

Prayer: Loving Saviour, thank for the taste you give me of life with a loving Saviour. Thank you for sending your Son at Christmas to be the promise for my future with you. Amen.





TASTING/SPEAKING

Storytelling

26th December

Read: Deuteronomy 11:18-21

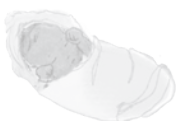
"Let those who have been set free by the Lord tell their story. He set them free from the power of the enemy." Psalm 107:2 (NIRV)

Storytelling is an art. It is a way to share the past, thoughts and wisdom by engaging the listener to become involved in what is being shared. As a classroom teacher, I used to love to tell the children the stories in the Bible. Putting the story in my own words brought these stories to life engaging the imagination and mind-pictures. I also like to share my life stories, the times when I know that God has guided and blessed me on my journeys and through all adventures. There have also been times when I have felt directed by God in a different way to that which I wanted to go.

God asks us to share our stories of His love and faithfulness with our children and others. Yesterday we heard again the story of the birth of Jesus. How many times have you heard this story? At least every Christmas, because the Christmas carols we sing tell of the birth of Jesus. This story sure is a good one with drama, intrigue and miracles from God. All the events of this story declare God's goodness and love to the world. From the humble birth in a manger, to angels sharing the Good News, to wise men following a star from hundreds of kilometres away.

The extraordinary birth of the Son of God is nothing short of a miracle, telling the world that God loves each person so much that He sent His one and only Son to be born in a sinful and corrupt world. He did this to have His Son share and tell stories about what heaven and the kingdom of God is like and that He has prepared a place for us. Jesus' ministry on earth was about telling the stories of God's love in ways that people could understand. Read them for yourself in Matthew, Mark, Luke or John. Then tell your story. Impact someone for God's glory and share your story!

Prayer: Heavenly Father, thank you for sharing with me the stories of Jesus and your love for me. Help me to be brave to also share my God story with others. Amen.



FASTING/SPEAKING

Sweetness of Honey

27th December

Read: Deuteronomy 6:3-6 (NIV)



"How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!"
Psalm 119:103 (NIV)

Honeybees are the only insects that produce a food that is consumed by humans – honey. A colony of bees includes a queen, drones and workers. There is only one queen per hive. She is the largest bee in the colony and may live up to five years. She will lay up to 2,500 eggs per day and has the ability to control whether she lays male or female eggs. A colony can have 50,000 – 60,000 workers who collect nectar to make honey. An average worker bee (only females) produces about 1/12th of a teaspoon of honey in her lifetime. A hive of bees will fly about 145,000km and visit an average of four million flowers to collect 1kg of honey. A bee visits between 50 and 100 flowers during one collection from the hive.

Honey is mentioned 56 times in the Bible. Honey was often mentioned as a sign of God's favour and often represented 'His Word'. King Solomon in the book of Proverbs encourages the eating of honey: *"Eat honey, for it is good; honey from the comb is sweet to your taste. Know also that wisdom is sweet to your soul; if you find it, there is a future hope for you". (Proverbs 24:13-14a NIV)* So why are we talking about bees and honey around Christmas? Honey cannot really be recreated synthetically – some have tried, but it is easy to taste the difference. So it is with God's Word. There may be others who try to tell us differently from the Bible, but only God's Word brings sweet life to our hearts and souls.

Above, King Solomon likens God's Word to the sweetness of honey. It brings life and wisdom to the soul. God has promised in the Old Testament that He will bring His children to a 'land flowing with milk and honey'. In the New Testament we can liken this to God's Heavenly Kingdom prepared for us. The story of Jesus' birth was the beginning of God's plan for the salvation of the world, His life and death secured our future. Sweeten your life with God's Word!

Prayer: Your Word brings life to my heart and soul. Help me to savour your story of Jesus' birth and to share the sweetness of the story with others. Amen.





TASTING/SPEAKING

Speaking in Love

28th December

Read: Matthew 2:3-8, 12-13

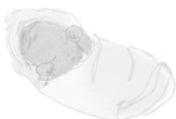
"Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into Him who is the Head, that is, Christ." Ephesians 4:15 (NIV)

Herod was hearing about a promised King, and he felt threatened. So, the best way to get information and discover what he needed to know was to pretend to be interested in worshipping the baby Jesus. He took the wise men aside and proceeded to deceive and lie to find out the truth. I remember being hurt countless times throughout my schooling by girls who pretended to be my friend to get something for themselves, only to find they were lying, and I got hurt. I am sure that most people can relate to this scenario at least one time through their childhood and even in adulthood. It is a feeling of betrayal, of falseness and deception. Not a nice feeling at all.

Jesus asks us to speak the truth in love at all times. We are not to lie or deceive or knowingly hurt others. Sometimes the truth can hurt, which is why many decide to not exactly tell the truth, maybe spin a little lie. But, when the truth is eventually found out, and it naturally does happen, more hurt and even broken friendships ensue. I remember during my travels, taking my eyes off the speedometer and going faster than I should. And a ticket ultimately came. I thought of hiding it, but instead confessed to my husband and all was forgiven, though the bank account was emptied a bit. What could have been hidden, I kept in the light to strengthen our relationship in always speaking truth to each other.

In the Bible God always tells us truth. Sometimes it is eye-opening and harsh truths, but ultimately the truths that we hear are to bring us closer to Him and His love. Herod did not speak the truth to the wise men and God knew it and He warned the wise men of Herod's deception so that they left secretly, not telling Herod what He wanted. The Bible tells us God's truth and with this wisdom we grow in love towards each other. Practise speaking only truth in love and reading God's truth!

Prayer: Loving Father, thank you for your Word to give me your truth. Guide me in my speech and actions that all I do and say may be pleasing to you. Amen.



FASTING/SPEAKING

Words and Actions

29th December

Read: James 2:14-17, 22



***"Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth."
1 John 3:18 (NIV)***

AUSLAN is the sign language taught to the hearing impaired in Australia. In school chapels and in BibleSong, I teach primary school children AUSLAN to Bible verses. In the programme of BibleSong the Bible verses are put to music which we then all sing and sign together. The way the brain works, if we can put actions to words, there will be a greater retention and more engagement in the learning. There is a love for learning the Bible verses and each time I try to have the children remember some of the signs used previously for other verses. Delight results from their remembering.

In various verses in the Bible and in the two above we read that both John and James have come to the conclusion that to just tell people that 'Jesus loves them' is one thing, but to show them that 'Jesus loves them' is even more powerful. To say 'Hi' and shake hands with a new family at church is one thing, but to then greet them with a cuppa, hospitality and caring makes an even greater impact. All people yearn for a place to belong and feel accepted. Jesus knew that too, which is why in many of His miracles through His ministry He didn't just tell of God's love but showed it through His healings, love and actions.

Children thrive on love and having security and a place to belong. As adults this is also true. God sent Jesus to Earth as a baby to show His immense love for the world, then had His Son tell and show this love through His ministry. Jesus told us that we all belong to the Kingdom of Heaven, that we are all loved and can be secure in this knowledge. Let us also by our actions show others this love and find a place for them to belong. Be a person to bless others through your words, actions and life.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, you have shown me how to truly love, not just through words but also with what I do. Help me to be a witness to others through both my words and actions. Amen.





TASTING/SPEAKING

S'more Tasty

30th December

Read: Ephesians 3:14-21

"We are S'more than conquerors through [Christ] who loved us." Romans 8:37b (NIV)

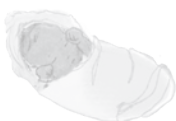
I remember the first time I had a S'more! I was staying at a youth camp for a church in New York. I had only just started out on my team ministry with Lutheran Youth Encounter in 1991. I was told to toast a marshmallow and then to put it on two graham crackers with a piece of Hershey's chocolate. The hot marshmallow melted the chocolate, and it all became a gooey mess while eating it, but oh so good!

In 2010, returning to the US with our children and travelling in an RV, my husband and I decided to introduce S'mores to our children – a real hit! We blogged back to their classes telling of this delectable delight and S'mores were born in our family and amongst our friends.

S'mores are a great example of God's love. We are heated up with the power of the Holy Spirit to be sandwiched into fellowship with others, where the love of God is able to stick onto others. To grow in faith, we need to have S'more and S'more of Jesus in our lives. God sent Jesus at Christmas to enter our hearts and lives through His incredible love. This little baby grew up to be S'more than we could ever imagine, the Saviour of the world! He was God's Son who was sent to our world to be the means for us to be able to enter God's presence. S'more love and grace than we ever thought possible!

So, try making a S'more. Our family had trouble in Australia with the biscuits and thin chocolate so instead we used a chocolate digestive biscuit with chocolate on one side. This works well and still tastes incredibly yummy. As you eat it think of S'more ways to share Jesus' love, S'more ways to share your faith, S'more ways to serve others and S'more opportunities to grow personally in your faith. S'mores are tasty and leave you wanting S'more. ***"We ought always to thank God for you, because your faith is growing **S'more** and **S'more**, and the love everyone has for each other is increasing."*** (2 Thessalonians 1:3 NIV)

Prayer: Thank you Jesus that you have come into the world to bring me S'more love to share with others. May my actions and life bring S'more people to know you. Amen.



HEARING

Sounds of the Town

New Year's Eve (31st December)

Read: Luke 2:1-4



"But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times." Micah 5:2 (NIV)

What would Bethlehem town have sounded like 2,000 years ago? I imagine a lot of animal noises, calling out of voices in the markets, people yelling, clanging of the blacksmith shop, children's voices and other noises I can't even consider. Added to this would have been the influx of Roman guards and extra people who had arrived in Bethlehem for the census. At the time of Jesus' birth, google estimated that there would have been between 2,000 and 3,000 people living there. It could have been classed a small city rather than a town. Bethlehem was a place first mentioned back in the Old Testament by Jacob when Rachel died in 1685 BC ... *"she was buried by the road leading to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem)"* (Genesis 35:19b NIV)

Bethlehem was an ancient town, and it was here that most of the book of Ruth is set. Naomi's family was from Bethlehem, so when her husband and sons all died, she packed up with her daughter-in-law Ruth and travelled to her hometown. Ruth met Boaz and they were married in Bethlehem. King David, Ruth's descendant was born in Bethlehem, and it was here that he was anointed King by the prophet Samuel. This little town was well known by the Jewish culture of the day, and so it is really no surprise that the Son of God, Jesus, a direct descendant of King David, was born here.

It is New Year's Eve today. Do we have a quiet place to celebrate the birth of a King this advent season? No, we now herald him in to our lives with shouts and oohs and aahs and fireworks and celebrating the New Year. As the old year ends, let us not forget what we have just celebrated – the birth of the King of the World, born in a manger in a little town of Bethlehem. He was heralded in by the singing of angels so let us also celebrate, with shouts and loud noises, that Jesus is our Saviour, Lord and Redeemer come to bring peace and love to the world.

Prayer: Dear Lord, as I end another year, the birth of your Son heralds a new beginning. Let me bring Him with me into the New Year to be a part of my life. Amen.





HEARING Too Loud?

New Year's Day (1st January)

Read: Psalm 150

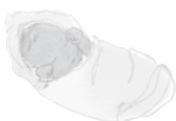
"Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests." Luke 2:14 (NIV)

Last year, my family got together with our neighbours and celebrated the bringing in of the New Year on the banks of the Noosa River. Fireworks exploded over the waters and shouts were heard from adults and children as they expressed delight at the light exhibition. Dogs weren't quiet as they howled and cowered into the most secure areas away from the noises and bright lights and booms. Everything seemed so loud, as if that is the way to start the New Year – with a BANG!

What are we actually celebrating though? Is it the joy of finishing a year or the joy of welcoming a new start? Too much noise and loudness can stop the thought process, to the extent that we just go along with the crowd. Our society today seems to be very loud with the cost-of-living pains, with protests about one thing or another or just noise to drown out thinking too hard about what to do. In Psalm 150 we are told to celebrate and to praise God with loud noises and songs and music. But in contrast, Jesus came as a tiny baby not with noise and fireworks, but with peace and joy, kindness and gentleness, love and grace. God wants us to find times of quiet to think about all He did for us in the sending of His Son.

Now what did I do after being at a very loud Noosa River with thousands of people? I walked home quietly with my family as we contemplated all that we had seen and heard. After the noise has died down, spend some time quietly asking God what it is that he wants from you this New Year. Maybe it is just spending time with Him and His Word regularly, maybe it is spending some time helping your church and community by volunteering, or maybe it is just introducing family and friends to the love of God. Celebrate loud and hard but find peace and quiet later to listen.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, thank you for coming quietly into the world to bring your peace and love to a noisy world. Bring a purpose and a peace to my life this year. Amen.



HEARING

A Loud Supporter

2nd January

Read: Mark 1:1-8



"A voice of one calling: 'In the desert prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God.'" Isaiah 40:3 (NIV)

John the Baptist, son of Zechariah and Elizabeth, and cousin to Jesus, was born about the same time as Jesus – some say he was born about 6 months before Jesus. John's purpose and ministry was very different to Jesus'. The Gospel of Mark doesn't begin with the birth of Jesus as both Matthew and Luke do, instead it begins with John telling others about Jesus. It was foretold in Isaiah that John was going to make a noise in telling others to repent and to be baptised. He told people to prepare themselves for the coming Saviour who would also bring the Holy Spirit. So even before Jesus' ministry began, his cousin John was causing a stir and shaking them out of their complacency. John was Jesus' loudest supporter.

The Gerhardy family has always been loud at supporting. When my brothers were playing for Adelaide Lutheran Football Club (AFL), all the family was out at most football games barracking and telling them what to do, even sometimes pointing out offenses to the umpire. We were vocal, loud supporters and everyone knew with whom we were affiliated. John was this loud supporter of Jesus – telling others who was coming and to wait for what they will see him do and the miracles that He will perform in the name of God.

Christmas is now over for another year. New Year's Day is also over (only just), and we are getting close to Epiphany. This is the time when Jesus is revealed to the human race as a Saviour for all the world. This should be something we get excited about, that we get loud about and share with others about. It is a time to state which team we are affiliated with – Team Jesus – and barrack for Him with all our heart, soul and mind. May God open Himself up to you this New Year for you to stand up for Him against all odds. Become the loudest Jesus supporter!

Prayer: Jesus, help me to become your greatest supporter. Give me the courage to share who you are and what you have done for the world in dying for our sins. Amen.





HEARING

The Incredible Ear

3rd January

Read: 2 Chronicles 6:36-40

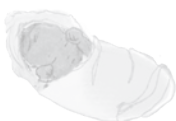
Jesus says, "Whoever has ears, let them hear." Matthew 11:15 (NIV)

Three main bones make up the ear, with the smallest bones in the body being found in the middle ear (the stapes, incus and malleus). The inner ear is responsible for sound detection as well as balance. There are around 15,000 tiny hair cells inside our cochlear (inner ear) and they are the sensory receptors - without them we couldn't hear. Our ears never sleep, they are always actively listening – although the brain learns to ignore the sounds around us as we sleep. The outer ear never stops growing through your life.

Throughout the Old Testament, God calls His people to listen to Him through His prophets and those He called to speak for Him. There seems to be a pattern. God's people sin, God punishes them to make them see their wrongs, God sends someone to tell them what they are doing wrong and to repent (turn around), God hears their prayers and cries for mercy and God then forgives and brings them back to Him. This pattern happened again and again. But then God sent His Son Jesus, to break this cycle once and for all. At Christmas we heard of His miraculous birth and the joy Jesus brought to the world. God gave His Son to be the person to break the cycle of our punishment and our having to show our sorrow (as in the Old Testament).

At Easter, Jesus died and paid for our sins, once and for all. God heard all the people's cries and prayers throughout the centuries and sent His Son to atone for all our sins. No longer do we have to plead with God to hear and forgive us, for we know that when we pray, He does hear us, and He does forgive us every time we do wrong. God's incredible listening ear is always open to our pain and hurts and brings us His grace and peace.

Prayer: Dear God, you do hear me every time I pray to you. Forgive me for not listening to your words and obeying. Help me to open my ears better to your guiding. Amen.



HEARING

Listening or Hearing

4th January

Read: James 1:22-25



"While he was still speaking, a bright cloud covered them, and a voice from the cloud said, 'This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!'"
Matthew 17:5 (NIV)

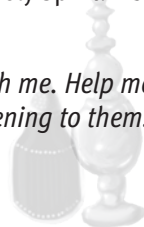
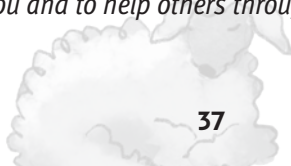
Once upon a time, there was a shepherd who bought a flock of sheep, but when he got to know them a little better, he realised that these sheep just would not stop bleating. All day long, it was -"Baaah baaah," what a deafening racket; and they just ignored the shepherd's commands. He used all the means at his disposal to get the sheep to listen to him and to his dogs, but it was hopeless.

Finally, seeing as the sheep wouldn't stop talking, the shepherd decided to at least have some fun with them. He bought an enormous ear and transported it out to his fields on the back of his wagon. Surprisingly, on seeing the ear, the sheep all stopped bleating to each other, and began telling the ear all their woes and complaints. When the shepherd drove his wagon, the sheep would even follow him about, just so that they could carry on talking to the ear. And so it was that the shepherd understood that even sheep have something to say, and just want to be listened to.

There is a difference between 'listening' and 'hearing'. *The definition of hearing revolves around the physiological act of hearing sounds. The definition of listening revolves around actively paying attention to the words and sounds that you hear to absorb their meaning [google].* Hearing is simply the physical process of perceiving sound, while listening involves understanding and responding to what you have heard. In the book of James, listening is described as not just hearing, but doing what it says and likens it to looking in a mirror and then forgetting what you look like when you leave the mirror. Listening means retention and responding. It is active, not just passive and takes work.

We all need to be listened to, even the sheep in the above story, but God commands us to "Listen to Jesus!" Listen to the words He shares through the Gospels, Listen to Him through the Pastor at church, Listen to Him through the Holy Spirit. Listen, take to heart, and respond! Don't just hear, truly listen!

Prayer: Dear God, thank you for sharing your words of life with me. Help me to actively listen and respond to you and to help others through my listening to them. Amen.





HEARING A Good Story

5th January

Read: John 3:11-17

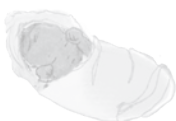
"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." John 3:16 (NIV)

I love a good story. One of my favourite things to do is sit and read a good book. To me a good story needs to have some great characters, descriptive pieces about the setting and then some sort of plot that happens to the characters – oftentimes you have a villain, so that there is someone to dislike in the book. A good story can also be read aloud for others to hear and imagine with you. As a teacher I used to find some time every day – even ten minutes - to read to the children. During those times the children would listen intently to what was going to happen next. One year I read the C.S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia* to my year five class. The story came alive to them, with the figure Aslan creating an impact as he guided the children through their adventures.

The Bible is a book that I read and hear from regularly, whether in church, studies or personal devotions... even when reading I 'hear' what I am reading. We have just heard and read the Christmas story over and over through these devotions and throughout the season of Advent. It is a story we have heard many times and we like to think we know how it all ends – we all go to be with Jesus in Heaven forever. But what happens in the middle parts of our lives? We don't really know what will happen in the middle, until it actually happens. We could imagine and plan what will occur in our lives, but only God knows each of our stories and guides us through our lives.

Through God sending Jesus as a baby to be the Saviour of the World for us, right through to His death on a cross at Easter, rising from death and then ascending to Heaven, God was sharing a story of salvation. We read all about Jesus and His story and how He came to bring life. Jesus shares how He wants us to live: to love God and love each other and the rest of our stories then unfolds!

Prayer: Lord God, you know my story. I trust that you know what is best for me and I thank you that you have assured me of my salvation through your story. Amen.



HEARING

Our Commission

Epiphany (6th January)

Read: Matthew 28:16-20



"[Jesus] said to them, 'Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation.'"
Mark 16:15 (NIV)

I probably have about 200 souvenir pins. Whenever I go to a new place, whether in Australia or overseas I collect a souvenir pin of that place and when I come home, I pin them on two different rugs that I have hanging on the wall. This last holiday to the USA in May, I came home with nine new pins from different states and towns. Some wonder why I do this, but my response is to not forget the stories that the pin evokes in my memory. I have so many fun and exciting stories to tell others of my travels, but unless I have something to remind me, these stories can be forgotten.

God gave us a souvenir pin rug to remind us constantly of His love and faithfulness to His people through all time. It is the Bible and the countless stories of God's faithful people that are contained in it. Over Christmas we heard of Jesus' birth and all those who came to see, hear, smell, touch and then tell of God's amazing love for the world. The last to visit Jesus as a baby, that we are told, were the wise men who came from countries far away to see what God was showing them through a star appearing in the sky. They had heard and read and then followed. These wise men were unofficially commissioned after seeing Jesus to go and tell the world of this baby who was God's Son; and they did!

We know of God's love through others sharing God's story with us. We hear the stories but cannot keep them to ourselves and so tell them to anyone who will listen. For those who hear the stories of my travels, I hope they are inspired to also see some of the places I have seen. So also, we hear of God's love, listen and read the stories for ourselves and find that we can do nothing else but share them with others and pray that they are inspired by the Holy Spirit. The disciples were commissioned with that task – tell the world! That is our commission too!

Prayer: Lord Jesus, help me to share your story with others that they will hear of your love for them. You have commissioned me to be your disciple, guide my words and actions. Amen.





Prayer

Heavenly Father, thank you for the senses that you have given me to be able to worship you with my whole being – sight, smell, touch, hearing and tasting/talking. You have given me so much, help me to be thankful for all your goodness and blessings to me each and every day. I have ‘Experienced Jesus’ this last Advent Season, help me to carry these experiences with me each day through the coming year and be willing to share and tell others of your incredible love, faithfulness and forgiveness.

Guide me through the coming year, bless my family, friends and those I meet. Give me courage and strength of purpose to fulfill the commission you have for my life.

We praise you daily for your goodness and love.

In your Son’s precious name I pray, Amen.





Lord's Prayer

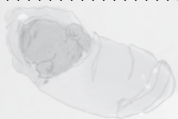
Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours, now and for ever. Amen.





Luther's Morning Prayer

I thank you heavenly Father, through your dear Son Jesus Christ, that you have protected me through the night from all harm and danger. I ask you to keep me this day too, from all sin and evil, so that in all my thoughts, words and deeds I may please you. In your hands I place my body and soul and all that is mine. Let your holy angel be with me, so that the evil one may have no power over me. Amen





Luther's Evening Prayer

I thank you, heavenly Father, through your dear Son Jesus Christ, that you have graciously protected me today. I ask you to forgive all my sin and the wrong which I have done, and graciously keep me this night. In your hands I place my body and soul and all that is mine. Let your holy angel be with me, so that the evil one may have no power over me. Amen.





An outreach
ministry of the LLL

Lutheran Tract Mission

175 Archer Street North Adelaide SA 5006

Phone: (08) 8360 7222

Web: www.ltm.org.au

Written: Anne Hansen

Edited: Bethany Jedlicka

Cover: Anna Spilsbury



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