

## **The Season for Giving – December 2011**

It's that time of year again! Christmas is a wonderful period of preparing for and celebrating the birth of Jesus Christ. The down side of this glorious season is excessive consumption and purchasing "things" we don't need for those who already have too much. All the television commercials appeal to our *perceived* need. The message is relentless, "Christmas won't be special if you don't get this or that." I wonder how our Advent and Christmas experience might be different this year if we focused on giving to those who don't have the basic necessities of life or those who have yet to hear the Good News?

I realize the counter-cultural nature of what I'm asking us to consider. It flies in the face of the norm, but I'm convinced we'll experience much more joy if we embody the true spirit of Christmas. I have no desire to be a Scrooge with my family or to be prescriptive about how you "do" Christmas, but I have a few suggestions for you to consider: give fewer material things to your loved ones, what they need more is your time and physical presence; give to trusted helping organizations in your community that will help the most needy; give to a trusted organization in honor of someone you love; give to the CBF Offering for Global Missions to help our field personnel be the presence of Christ around the globe...

My prayer for each of us is that we can slow down and relish this Season of Advent. Take time to count your blessings. Out of your gratitude to God, bless others by spending time with them. Remember, it's God's gift to us we celebrate at Christmas. We best honor God by telling others about God's incredible love gift to the world.

## **Advent Devotion: *Drawn to the Light* – December 2011**

The story is told of an eight-year-old girl who lived on a farm with her parents. On a cold, snowy day, Jenny waited at home for her parents to return from a shopping trip. As Jenny sat in the living room, she heard a thumping sound against the big picture window. Jenny went to the window and saw a bird lying in the snow. Soon she heard two more thumps! Two more birds were lying lifeless in the snow. Pretty soon, Jenny figured out that the birds were drawn to the light in her living room. They saw the light and wanted to come in and get warm, Jenny reasoned.

Quickly, Jenny turned off all the lights in the house. Now the birds were whirling around in confusion, not knowing where to go. Jenny had an idea! She could turn on the light in the barn and open the door so the birds could fly in. She got bundled up and made her way to the barn. As she opened the barn door and turned on the light, a few birds flew in, but many were still at the front of the house. In frustration, Jenny cried, "I wish I could become a bird and speak their language. I would tell them where the light is!"

Light and darkness are recurring themes in the Bible. For the Hebrews, the dawn of a new day assured them that darkness or hard times will not last forever.

Light was a symbol of God's presence and blessing. The people felt happy when they sensed God's light shining on them. Light in the Old Testament denotes salvation or deliverance from danger. Darkness disorients; light makes the path clear.

In Isaiah 60:1-3, the Prophet Isaiah envisions a time when Israel walks in darkness, but that isn't the end of the story. A time will come when Messiah is born. He (Jesus) will be a *great light* to the nations. A multitude of people will be drawn to his light. Not only will Jesus *be* the light of the world, those who receive his light will also *become* light-bearers to the world.

As you give thanks for God's redeeming light this Advent, remember you are called to illuminate the world around you. May you become like Jenny in the story, possessing a passionate desire to show people where to find the Light!

### **Gratitude – November 2011**

Thanksgiving Day is this Thursday. This holiday has always been significant for my large family (I have eleven siblings!). As long as my mother was living, we always gathered at home for a huge Thanksgiving feast. The food was always great, but what prompted our gratitude to God was being together as family. Our family has grown so large we now gather in the fellowship of a church on Thanksgiving Day!

For disciples of Jesus Christ, gratitude is a way of looking at the world—a perspective on life. Gratitude sees that everything we have is given to us. Thomas Merton, the monk who lived at the Abbey of Gethsemani in central Kentucky, wrote: "To be grateful is to recognize the love of God in everything he has given to us—and he has given us everything. Every breath we draw is a gift of his love, every moment of existence is a grace, for it brings with it immense graces from him. Gratitude therefore takes nothing for granted, is never unresponsive, is constantly awakening to new wonder and to praise of the goodness of God. For the grateful person knows that God is good, not by hearsay but by experience. And that is what makes all the difference."

Practicing gratitude on Thanksgiving Day is a good and expected thing to do. The greater challenge is daily practicing the discipline of thanksgiving, not because it is commanded, but as a sign we understand the depth of God's love, grace, and blessings.