

A Green Advent

*30 Days' Green Anticipation for
Christmas*

*Based on the four historic Advent themes in the
Scriptures*

*Also including
30 Truths to Celebrate and
30 Advent-Actions*

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The Green Bible Society

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APPROACH

Here are thirty (30) Bible passages related both to Christmas and to God's creation. For each Bible passage there are four thought questions on the meaning of the passage, and three action questions on the present application of the passage. *Whether studying alone or in a group, select from the questions, with no obligations to consider them all.*

Then you will find that in each study the *Truth To Celebrate* and the *Advent-Action* will help focus the light of the Bible, the light of Christmas, into our lives.

Soli Deo Gloria = Only to God be Glory.

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Soli Deo Gloria. = Only to God be Glory.

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Introduction

Green Anticipation ... and the Four Historic Biblical Themes of Advent

In the stream of history, what really matters? What is truly worth our time, energy and resources? Poised as we are at the beginnings of the 21st century with tragic wars raging and reasonable alarms for saving the shrinking natural resources, how do we answer these profound questions?

One splendid time to find the answers is during Advent, which means “arrival,” or as Christians use the word, the *anticipation and preparation* for Christ’s birth, celebrated each of the four Sundays before December 25, his traditionally accepted birthdate. Christians know Jesus Christ is the promised Messiah, the Anointed One, whose coming the prophets foretold centuries before. Thus, it is no wonder that his coming is the pivotal point of history.

Celebrating Jesus Christ’s birth should be no mere exercise in tradition. True Christians know that believing in Jesus Christ changes them in hugely positive ways that affect all facets of life. Whatever aspect of life humans have to deal with is relevant to Jesus Christ. He is also called Immanuel, meaning “God with us.” At the Christmas season, we are perhaps more open to this truth than at any other time of the year, even though the impact of God being with us should draw our vital attention all year long.

So, aside from the gift-giving, the holiday baking, the tree and house decorating, singing of carols and attending special Christmas programs, what else can we do to prepare for the birthday of the King of Kings and Lord of Lords? The Prophet Micah gives us an inkling of the answer: “What does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with your God?” (Micah 6:8) These core principles of justice, love and accountability—as well as the attentiveness to the Lord that shapes that quote—define our relationships to the Lord and his world.

One of the most practical ways of celebrating Advent--the coming of the Lord in human flesh—is by affirming his concern for his own creation. Creation-care is the first responsibility that God gave us humans. “You are stewards over the earth” and “Improve and protect the garden” were the first divine directives human beings heard. (Genesis 1:28 and 2:15) “Going green” started in the original Garden, and the Infant Savior of Christmas redeems that elemental framework, too.

Since Christmas is the time of giving and receiving gifts, examining the creation Care Christmas Gift Box may help us better to understand the meaning of Advent with its four themes of *hope, peace, love* and *joy* and how we can fulfill our responsibility to care for God’s creation.

As we celebrate Advent, the four sides of the Creation Care Christmas Gift Box—as well as its splendid top and bottom—will give us greater insight into the connection between the birth of Jesus Christ and the responsibility we have for God’s creation. Let us take a look at the Creation Care Christmas Gift Box, a handy device for understanding how the *anticipation and preparation* of a Green Advent ties in with all that God wants us to be and do on earth.

A Note to the Reader: This book includes thirty (30) Bible-studies and “*Advent-Actions*”—more than enough for the four weeks of Advent. *Individuals or groups* can start early and experience the seven Bible studies of a particular theme prior to the related Advent Sunday, or use the Bible-studies as follow up meditations after each Advent Sunday. Either way, there will be a surplus of Bible-studies that would be fully appropriate also to some of the “Twelve Days of Christmas,” which extends the holidays until Epiphany, “Magi Day,” on January 6.

However you use this book, may this be *your most joyous and green Advent and Christmas ever.*

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Unpacking the Creation-Care Christmas *Gift Box*

God has given many gifts to his world. One of the most important is conveyed in the Creation Care Christmas Gift Box. What makes this gift box more special than most of the gift boxes we might give or receive at Christmas? Let's find out.

First, take a look at this page, which shows the six sides of the Creation-Care Christmas Gift Box.

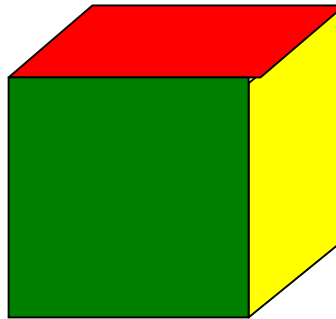
The Top:

We pray in both our will, our witness and our words, "Thy will be done *on earth* as it is in heaven."

Side 2:

PEACE (*SHALOM*)

Jesus, Prince of Peace, desires men and women to be his stewards of the earth, to bring the peace, health, and wholeness of *SHALOM* everywhere.



Side 1:

HOPE

Jesus was born on earth to redeem and restore, so that the restored human opportunity is to do no harm and to do what is right and just.

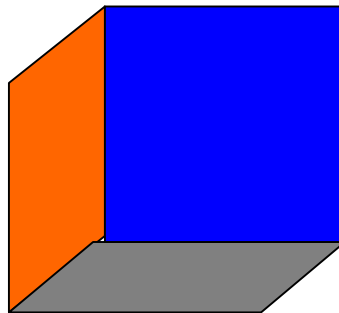
Above: top and front

Below: bottom and back

Side 4:

JOY, awareness of Immanuel,

The Lord Jesus is present in his creation, and he takes personally how we respect and care for it.



Side 3:

LOVE

Jesus' command, "Love your neighbor as yourself," defines our relationships with every person, present and future, near and far.

The Base:

Civic responsibility has one Lord, never only one issue.

There is one Lord, and he has many issues for us.

The Creation-Care Christmas Gift Box

The Top: God's Will. The top of the Creation Care Christmas Gift Box consists of key words from The Lord's Prayer: "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." In other words, when we pray those words, we are saying that we want God's will which is done in heaven to be done on earth—right where are, right now, not sometime in the distant future. Doing God's will includes how we behave, how we believe, what we say, what we think. Pretty comprehensive, to be sure.

The Base: One Lord Jesus Christ. The base of the Creation Care Christmas Gift Box has the words "One Lord—never only one issue." What does this mean? Simply that God reigns supreme. No one is above the Lord and nothing escapes the Lord, who cares about every aspect of human life, including all the issues in society that are in constant debate. He wants us to treat all these issues with special attention. (Please see the Appendix for a roster of seven key contemporary Biblical issues and their relationships with creation-care.)

Not everyone can spend his or her whole life dealing with every issue with the same intensity, but no one should say that God is interested in only one issue versus another—or that we should be interested in only one issue. For example, some groups emphasize protecting the rights of the unborn, while others emphasize protecting the environment. Both of these groups are doing something worthwhile. *They are protecting human life before and after birth.*

If you feel that God has called someone to work on solving one particular social problem or issue, is it fair to condemn other people who feel that God has called them to focus on another of God's issues? While we are saved by God's grace, our good works are the main evidence that his grace has actually done something within us. Issues in all the areas that affect our daily lives such as government, education, health, technology, ecology, arts, entertainment and such like are all important to God. Therefore, why should not all of them matter to us as well?

Side One: HOPE: Jesus Christ was born to redeem and restore. As we experience his redemption and restoration, we have the renewed human opportunity to do no harm and to do what is right and just. This is the enduring hope. In other words, we can participate in *Creation-Justice* which celebrates and protects—in our behavior and belief—the goodness of God's creation. This hopeful perspective is made possible by the birth, life and ministries of Jesus Christ.

Side Two: PEACE (SHALOM): Jesus, Prince of Peace, born on Christmas, desires men and women to be his stewards of the earth, and to bring the peace, health, and wholeness of his *shalom* everywhere. Being stewards means that we are caretakers of the earth. Such *Creation-Accountability* demands that we bring *shalom* into all our relationships. The theme of Jesus' ministry is the Kingdom of God, which includes restored accountability to our Creator and the cessation of the strife caused by self-centered greed, envy and lust. *Surely the Christmas Magi were right to claim him as King from his birth.* To confess "Jesus Christ is Lord" is to recognize his rightful place as ultimate boss in our lives—and to honor and please him in our relationships with him, other people and with his creation. This behavior will bring us true peace—and also honor him, the true Prince of Peace prophesied by Isaiah.

Side Three: LOVE: Jesus Christ's command "Love your neighbor as yourself" defines our relationships with every person, present and future, near and far. *Creation-Love* transforms

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our behavior and belief to be passionate about healthful environments for all our “neighbors,” wherever they are in creation. Behavior that harms our own basic health or the health of other people present and future, on any continent, will not be acceptable. Moving toward healthful water and air for each community can be an active expression of Jesus’ love in us and through us—and a brilliant celebration of the true meaning of Christmas.

Side Four: *JOY (including awareness of Immanuel’s coming)*: The Lord Jesus Christ is present in all his creation, and he takes personally how we care for it. *Creator-awareness* welcomes Immanuel (“God with us”), and recognizes him within all of his creation. We can affirm the Creator’s vibrant presence in every aspect of our behavior and belief. The Creator is *transcendent* in love and power—as amply demonstrated in the birth of Jesus—and yet he is *never distant*. His love draws him always to be close to us; his power is so close that it always sustains us and the whole world around us. The Infant of Christmas upholds all things by his powerful Word.

As we prepare to celebrate Advent—a Green Advent—in anticipation of Christmas Day, keep in mind that the four themes of hope, peace, love and joy are also four sides, or aspects, of care for God’s creation. This truth is graphically conveyed by each of the four sides of the Creation Care Christmas Gift Box.

Starting with the next section, this book provides lessons from the Bible and suggestions for applying those lessons in a way that shows that we understand them.

To start, we have an introductory meditation on the Holy Spirit in Christmas, the divine Spirit who faithfully creates new life—out of “nothing.”

Introductory Meditation #1: The Holy Spirit of Christmas

What does it say? –

STUDY: Genesis 1:1-5 and Matthew 1:18-23

GOLDEN TEXTS: Genesis 1:2 and Matthew 1:18 = *Now the earth was a formless void, and darkness covered the face of the deep, while the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.... This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit.*

What does it mean?

When the earth was formless and empty, the Holy Spirit was moving. God's dramatic divine presence was felt even *before* "day one." Advent lasts only about a month, but when the Holy Spirit started the new creation in Mary's womb, the first Christmas began with nine months' preparation. What did the Spirit see in the formless creation that he came to protect and nurture? Does the Spirit indwell and nurture only perfect things? How did Mary qualify for her special Christmas role?

1. Could the Holy Spirit be present in darkness? Was it still dark over the face of the deep when he was there?
2. Is the Holy Spirit the One who "lit the fuse" for creation's Big Bang? Did the Holy Spirit start the new humanity inside Mary? What does the Holy Spirit do now?
3. How careful were Joseph and Mary to protect the divine-human life they were given? Are they a model for us to protect the life we have today?

What are we going to do about it?

4. What should happen to us when the Holy Spirit moves over us, as he moved over the original waters? Inspired by him, how should we show care for what he creates?
5. Quick action is often wrong-headed, but the Spirit "moved upon the face of the waters." The Savior could have started as a grown human, but he took the time to develop inside Mary for nine months. How can we spend quality time attending to the Spirit's presence and loving his creation?
6. Who moves us more to care for life around us?—the Divine Infant developing or the Divine Infinite decreeing? Is it either one or the other? Why not both?

Truth to Celebrate: The Holy Spirit who led in the original creation also initiated the life of the new humanity—that is, Jesus Christ, in Mary's womb.

Advent-Action: Honor the Spirit who initiated all creation—and continues to initiate new creation. At the same time, save 10-50% on power consumption by choosing only Energy Star appliances, office equipment, cooling and heating in choosing items for yourself and gifts for others.. (www.energystar.gov)








Advent Theme for Week One: HOPE

Hope is a powerful emotion and quality. With it, human beings can endure difficult and seemingly impossible situations. Without it, the human soul withers.

The coming of Jesus Christ brought eternal Hope into a world filled with sadness, despair and death. His birth was the divine gift from our heavenly Father who knew that without his intervention, we would be without ultimate hope and lost. Jesus Christ was born to redeem us and restore us to right relationships—with God, with other people and with the creation. We can be filled with hope, because the Creator is restoring his goodness into his creatures.

Because of Jesus, we also are now free to enjoy and protect the blessings of creation and redemption. We have the *divine opportunity* to participate in God's restoration of the creation by practicing Creation-Justice—sometimes called “eco-justice”—which consists of doing no harm to creation, and also doing what is good and right.

In these next seven meditations, we will explore different aspects of Christmas Hope and its connection to God's goodness, the goodness of his creation, and the meaning of Jesus' coming into this world.

-  Exodus 3:13-22 = Christ Before Christmas
-  Acts 17:22-31 = Birthing a Living Temple
-  Psalm 136 = God's Love in Action
-  Psalm 23 = Shepherd Visitation
-  Matthew 6:24-33 = Earthly Minded
-  Genesis 14:1-24 = Jesus' Model: Melchizedek
-  Philemon = Transforming Human

Creation-Justice in Word, wonder and work

Meditation #2: The Christ Before Christmas

What does it say? –

STUDY: Exodus 3:13-22

GOLDEN TEXT: Exodus 3:14 and 15: *God said to Moses, “I AM who I AM.” He said further, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’” God also said to Moses, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘The LORD, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you: This is my name forever, and this is my title for all generations.’”*

What does it mean?

The first Christmas was not the beginning of Christ. During his ministry, the Lord Jesus said that “before Abraham was, I AM.” (John 8:58) He identified himself as the Lord who introduced himself and his name to Moses and then liberated the nation of Israel from slavery. The deep goodness of all creation is revealed in God’s name. The Hebrew base-word here is *ha-yah*, meaning “to breathe, to exist as life itself.” *Ha-yah* is a very natural word, since it is the very sound of breathing: We make the sound “*ha*” when we breathe in and “*yah*” when we breathe out. The “I AM who I AM” in Hebrew can also be translated “I breathe as I breathe.” What is more basic than breathing? At Christmas, the Lord became a living human baby who was destined to conquer death in his resurrection, *but he has always been the only LIVING God, the one Creator of life*. Only he gives enduring life and HOPE.

1. Biblical names are often intensely meaningful, especially the names God chooses for himself. Why, of all the names of God, did Jesus choose “I AM” to claim for him?
2. The name “I AM” is unique because it embraces no adjectives. It says that God is living being; God is *life, himself*, without limits. Can he become a human baby?
3. God is *life, himself*. Is this why there is always goodness in all he makes, since even to exist, *to be*, is to bear his name “I AM”? Can anything in God’s creation not be good at its very root—even if it becomes polluted or depleted?
4. When we look for the goodness of creation, could we start with its existence? Did it come from the “I AM”? What adjectives help describe creation’s splendor—“vibrant,” “beautiful,” “balanced”—even if it is also “damaged,” “neglected” and “polluted”?

What are we going to do about it?

5. Since Jesus represents the I AM in human form and is the ultimate essence of good—and the ultimate breath of life—is he always with us? Does he always enable us? Is he our HOPE?
6. Is caring for God’s creation an expression of our caring for Jesus himself, the I AM, the I BREATHE of creation? Could there be a better motivation for caring for creation?
7. How are we humans the images of the Lord, the I AM? Since God makes everything exist and we are his images, should not the protection of creation matter to all of us? Since God is the I BREATHE of all of life, in how many ways should we protect life?

Truth To Celebrate: To celebrate Hope, we are called to honor the one God of Life, the one Living God who is life, the I AM (the I breathe) who transformed Moses.

Advent-Action: Make one of your favorite recipes for a meal or a dessert, and invite a neighbor who has never been in your home to enjoy this bit of the Living God’s creation.

Meditation #3: Birthing a Living Temple

What does it say?

STUDY: Acts 17:22-31

GOLDEN TEXT: Acts 17:24 = *The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands.*

What does it mean?

Christmas celebrates an eternal truth: The Creator chooses organic temples over those that are human-made. This truth was especially shown in the body formed by the Holy Spirit in the womb of Mary. Jesus himself referred to his body as God's temple (John 2:18-22). That divine temple was his living body that some of the religious leaders wanted to destroy, and which would also rise victorious and transformed in three days. Similarly, the Holy Spirit also chooses to indwell the bodies of all committed believers as his temples. (I Corinthians 6:19-20 and Meditation #29)

1. Is it surprising that 'the Living God,' who is 'life himself,' chooses living temples (Deuteronomy 30:20; John 11:27 and 14:6)? What was the first place on earth that it was recorded his Spirit entered (Genesis 2:7)?
2. Would some people prefer the Lord to stay in temples made of stone or wood? Do some so-called "houses of worship" feel and smell like museums...or even mausoleums? Why?
3. Was the Lord's choice of living temples a problem for the philosophers the Apostle Paul was addressing in Athens in this Acts 17 report? Does the incarnation of the Lord God in the baby Jesus pose a belief problem for some people today? If so, how do they describe this problem?
4. Later in the same speech, why does the Apostle Paul announce the resurrection of Jesus, too? Is the baby Jesus, living Creator, not confined even by death? Can God's goodness be affirmed everywhere—both in life and in death?

What are we going to do about it?

5. Is there any place on earth where we should not read the Bible out loud, pray in Jesus' name, sing hymns and praise songs, dance with Godly joy, and in other ways celebrate his living presence? Knowing he is present, are we moved to care more for his good earth?
6. Why is the Apostle Paul making this point about humans as living temples to the Greek philosophers? Is he inviting them to come out of the "boxes" of their own religions and mind-sets? How does God becoming flesh in the baby Jesus also shake us from our limiting perspectives?
7. The "God who made the world and everything in it" is obviously greater than any other "god." How does this truth give you hope? How should we honor the Creator in his creation?

Truth To Celebrate: *God is greater than we can ever imagine, and still closer than even our very own breath.*

Advent-Action: *Use ceiling fans to circulate warm air in the winter, so that heat is not wasted or lost due to high ceilings—at home, Church or work.*

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Meditation #4: God's Love in Action

What does it say? –

STUDY: Psalm 136

GOLDEN TEXT: Psalm 136:3-5 = *O give thanks to the LORD of lords, for his steadfast love endures forever, who alone does great wonders, for his steadfast love endures forever; who by understanding made the heavens, for his steadfast love endures forever.*

What does it mean?

Our Christmas HOPE is based upon the love of God in action—past, present and future. The steadfast love of the LORD was shown to us especially in the birth of Jesus Christ—as well as in his life, teaching, death, resurrection and ascension. That steadfast love of our Creator is shown in so many ways in each of our lives—including 26 ways articulated in this splendid Psalm 136.

1. How does the birth of the Lord Jesus also demonstrate God's steadfast love? How does it show that the Creator's love endures forever?
2. How is the Creator the "LORD of lords"? Has he ever stopped being in charge of his world? The apostle John reveals Jesus as the Lord of lords (Rev. 17:14 and 19:16), and Paul states that everyone should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord (Phil. 2:11). Does the Lord's birth give us HOPE? If so, in what ways?
3. When there are environmental problems, should the Lord Jesus just fix them himself? Why would he want us humans to be part of his solution? How does being part of his solution give us HOPE? What gives us more HOPE?
4. What kinds of wonders do you think the writer of Psalm 136 has in mind? How does the birth of the Lord Jesus rank as a great wonder? What gives you HOPE?

What are we going to do about it?

5. Many religions claim that their gods are the bosses of parts of the creation, or lords of spirituality. However, when we say that Jesus is "Lord of lords," how is that belief demonstrated in our behavior? Does it impact how we treat his creation?
6. What "great wonders" have you seen or experienced? Take time today to write a 1- to 2-page description of at least one of the Creator's wonders—whether an "ordinary" or an "exceptional" wonder. Does that divine wonder help give you HOPE? In what ways?
7. Borrow an astronomy book from the library. As you read it and examine the pictures, can you hum or sing *The Hallelujah Chorus*? On a clear evening take field glasses, opera glasses or a telescope to help you look into the heavens. Bring others to share in the experience. How does the greatness of the Lord and his creation strengthen your HOPE?

Truth To Celebrate: *Of all the wonders in creation, the most amazing is the fact that God was in Christ reconciling the world—including you and me—to himself.*

Advent-Action: *Take a walk down the street, or through a park or field, with others or by yourself. As you see and hear the everyday wonders of God's world, softly sing or hum a familiar Christmas carol—even repeat verses from Psalm 136, loudly or softly—and pray specific thanks for each created thing you see. Take some time. Let yourself (1) feel the splendor of God's presence, (2) express the joy of honoring and praising our Creator in the midst of his wonder-filled creation, and (3) let your heart grow in love of him and his world. [And if you are self-conscious about humming, singing, praying or quoting Scripture while you walk when others may be watching, just hold a cell phone to your ear!—but keep it turned off.]*

Meditation #5: Shepherd Visitation

What does it say? –

STUDY: Psalm 23

GOLDEN TEXT: Psalm 23: 2 and 3 = *He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside still waters, and he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake.*

What does it mean?

In the first Christmas, no wonder the angels asked the shepherds to greet the baby Jesus! One of the most memorable texts of the Bible mirrors all of life in the pond and pasture that the Good Shepherd provides. (See John 10:1-18.) The Creator's shepherding provision and protection is powerfully symbolized in Psalm 23 by still waters and green pastures. He loves us, provides for us, and is always with us, in life and in death.

1. Are our souls restored by the green of a lawn, park, or nature preserve? How does being near clean ponds, streams and oceans generally calm us? Has the Creator made us to need nature, especially healthy nature? Why?
2. Where do you go to experience natural restoration—a park, a forest, meditating on a beautiful landscape painting or photo?
3. Have you felt the Lord's presence as the Good Shepherd protecting and providing for you? What difference did it make? Try to describe your Good Shepherd experiences.
4. Urban people may not relate well to the 'shepherd' model. Who are some good urban 'shepherds'? Pastors (literally meaning 'shepherds')? Counselors? Public advocates? Probation officers? Do we need more people to represent Jesus in these caring roles?

What are we going to do about it?

5. Is something missing when the pastures are not so green and the waters are not so good? How are the "pastures" in your life? Are people missing some restoration? What should we do to bring them HOPE? What have you done?
6. Whose responsibility is it to keep the pastures green and the waters calm? Is the Creator still our Good Shepherd? Can we be more responsible than dependent sheep?
7. Do city people need the restorative benefit of nature less than others? Or do they simply have to be more intentional in their nature meditations—and in their work to enjoy and protect the "pastures" and the "ponds"?

Truth to Celebrate: The One who makes all green things green also makes all things new, beginning especially with the first Christmas and the birth of the ultimate Good Shepherd.

Advent-Action: Consider buying a live tree this Christmas, decorate it for inside or outside your home, and after Christmas plant it in your yard, outside your Church or, with permission, at a nearby park or school. Even hold a dedication service with songs and prayers.

Meditation #6: Earthly Minded

What does it say?

STUDY: Matthew 6:24-33

GOLDEN TEXT: Matthew 6:26 = *Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?*

What does it mean?

Christmas contradicts the misguided “religious” people who pride themselves in not caring about the “mere” physical realities of everyday life. The rest of the world wisely sees them as perhaps “so heavenly minded” that they are of “little earthly good.” In contrast, what we see from *the first Christmas*, is that Jesus was so earthly minded that he makes us good for heaven. In this text, Jesus says that the mundane needs of daily life are so important that God himself attends to them—for animals and for us. *What a divine irony that the Lord of all creation was born in a shelter for animals!*

1. Why does Jesus discourage us from *worrying* about earthly matters? What do we lose when we worry? What do we gain when we trust the Creator?
2. Is it a mistake to plan ahead? Could it be wrong when we plant seeds to nourish and protect them for an abundant harvest? Does Jesus ever speak against wise planning, planting, hard work or smart work?
3. Does Jesus mean we should literally “look at the birds of the air”? Does merely thinking about their example help as much? Or does the act of actually watching the birds help calm our anxieties even more?
4. How did the Creator prepare for the Baby Jesus? At Christmastime we look forward to the next year. How does the Creator help us prepare for our upcoming needs and wants?

What are we going to do about it?

5. What are the best ways you have found for avoiding or handling anxiety? Do those methods always work for you? Are there special anxieties that you or others need to overcome this Christmastime? Does Jesus’s teaching help you cope with these anxieties?
6. Does it bother you that some birds and lilies have a difficult time surviving in some polluted and depleted environments? Have we significantly hurt the model patterns by which God cares for them?
7. In the often quoted Matthew 6:33, within this passage, we are told to “seek first the kingdom of God.” “Kingdom” literally means the king’s “authority”—the King’s domain. Does the Creator’s authority help reduce your anxiety? How are you seeking his authority also in caring for the creation?

Truth to Celebrate: *Because he cares for us, we can trust him and let go of worry—while we also embody his care for others around us—especially humans.*

Advent-Action: *Buy some of your food at a farmer’s market or a local food co-op. It saves transportation fuel and expense, and it is a little closer to the original way God provides food. Buy or make a little extra food to share with others, including bird seed for our feathered friends.*

Meditation #7: Jesus' Model: Melchizedek

What does it say? –

STUDY Genesis 14:1-24

GOLDEN TEXT: Genesis 14:19-20 = *Blessed be Abram by God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth, and blessed be God Most High, who delivered your enemies into your hand.*

What does it mean?

At the first Christmas, Jesus was born into a Hebrew family, with a message and ministry for all people. This Gospel universality was there more than two thousand years before Jesus' birth, when there were exactly only two Hebrew people—Abram and Sarah—while Melchizedek and other people also served “God Most High.” After Abram's extraordinary military victory over Kedorlaomer and his allies and his rescuing his nephew Lot, the extraordinary king/priest Melchizedek met Abram on the way home. He brought Abram the first recorded communion, and Abram paid him the first recorded tithe. Whatever else Melchizedek said, only two dozen words were recorded, and they state a potent blessing. Keep in mind that the author of the *Letter to the Hebrews* considers Melchizedek the key ancient model of Jesus (See Hebrews 6:16-7:28).

1. In one sentence Melchizedek strongly praises (blesses) both Abram and God. Whenever the goodness or greatness of God is evident in people, in his creation, is strong praise appropriate for *both* God and his creatures?
2. When we praise something that God created, who takes the credit? Who takes great pleasure in our enjoying his splendid creation?
3. Why is Abram himself praised, rather than his skillful victory over Kedorlaomer's much larger military forces? Is Abram more praiseworthy than his accomplishments?
4. What kind of relationship was necessary for Melchizedek to give this blessing? Why did he say that Abram was praised (blessed) by God Most High? How did he know?

What are we going to do about it?

5. Melchizedek's leadership did not depend upon biological lineage, but only upon divine authority (Hebrews 9). How is that authority exercised in his praising both the Creator and also his creatures? Can we qualify for that authority, too?
6. Would referring to God frequently as the “Creator”—as Melchizedek does twice in this very brief blessing—help focus our thoughts and actions on the goodness of all that the Creator has made?
7. This Christmas, what are some of the ways you could bless (praise) God's good creations—humans, animals, plants, and others—through your words and your works, your affirmations and your actions?

Truth to Celebrate: God blesses and praises us even when we have done nothing worthy of praise, because he loves us primarily for who we are—his images.

Advent-Action: Bless the Creator's world by going around your neighborhood and picking up any trash or rubbish and putting it in proper containers.

Mediation #8: Transforming Human

What does it say? –

STUDY: The whole brief letter to Philemon

GOLDEN TEXT: Philemon 15 and 16 = *Perhaps the reason he [Onesimus] was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back for good—no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a man and as a brother in the Lord.*

What does it mean?

Christmas transforms everything: *If God could become a human, then all humanity is precious.* However, far too often we allow human institutions to define and limit what we see and how we feel. When those human institutions are as perverted as slavery, which continues even today in some places, those institutions can even insidiously help blind us from seeing gross injustices around us. Similarly, ecological injustices are hard to address when we neither recognize the wrongs, nor see what can be done to repair the evils. In this short letter, the Apostle Paul was especially skillful at asking the right questions to help open Philemon's eyes—to see the obvious injustices of the slavery he had endorsed and exploited and to experience Jesus' transformation of all relationships.

1. Crises often are the greatest opportunities to see God and one another anew. Did Philemon have to lose Onesimus, “his slave,” in order to see him in a correct light and, welcome him and treat him as “a dear brother”?
2. How could Philemon believe in Jesus and still have a slave? Is the Creator's light sometimes hidden by our own bad behavior and biases? (See Matthew 5:14-16)
3. Beginning at the first Christmas, was even Jesus rejected by most of the leaders, partly because of his poor socio-economic condition? Does the deep goodness of all God makes help pave the way for Philemon's personal transformations? And ours?
4. Should the Apostle Paul have used stronger words against slavery? Why or why not? Social change regarding slavery was painfully slow. *Must social change be as slow now with respect to our dangerous pollution and depletion of other people's environments?*

What are we going to do about it?

5. What are the justice issues concerning people's lives around you now? Was the Apostle Paul a good model for justice action when he told Philemon to treat Onesimus as a dear brother? How did Paul use subtle persuasion? Is this Jesus' model, too? Why is Christmastime a good time to renew justice action?
6. Transformation comes in the process of recognizing our shared relationship with the Lord. The slave is now the “brother in the Lord.” Will seeing other people as God's children, too, help us to care more about them and their environments?
7. Was the Apostle Paul shy about asking for social change, putting his valuable friendship with Philemon at stake for another child of God—in this case, Onesimus? What lessons can we learn about protecting other people, including their environments?

Truth to Celebrate: *God can do whatever he wants, but he chooses us as his children to join him in making the world a better place.*

Advent-Action: *Time most of your cooking and laundry tasks to when other people use less electricity: evenings and weekends. That way, the power companies will be less likely to expand their own energy production.*

Advent theme for Week Two: PEACE (*SHALOM*):

Peace is more than the absence of war. The Biblical word for *peace*, *Shalom*, embraces reconciled relationships, health, happiness, and wholeness. As the Prince of Peace, Jesus requires men and women to be stewards of the earth—and to take the health, happiness and wholeness of divine *Shalom* everywhere. What a privilege we have to participate in this Creation-Accountability.

In the next seven meditations we will explore aspects of the Creator's Peace and how it relates to our restored Creation-Accountability. As we grasp the meaning of *Shalom*, it is more likely that we will celebrate this great Advent season with greater joy and thanksgiving.

- 📖 Genesis 3:1-17 = First Christmas Promise
- 📖 Romans 8:18-30 = Revealing God's Children
- 📖 Matthew 6:1-15 = Jesus' Model Prayer on Earth
- 📖 Isaiah 9:1-7 = Prophetic Paradox for the Prince of Peace
- 📖 Jeremiah 29:1-12 = Seek *Shalom* (Holistic Peace)
- 📖 I Timothy 2 = The Childbirth That Changes Everything
- 📖 Exodus 9:13-30 = The Lord of Earth Has Come

Creation-Accountability in Word, wonder and work

Meditation #9: First CHRISTMAS Promise

What does it say?

STUDY: Genesis 3:1-17

GOLDEN TEXT: Genesis 3:15 and 17 = *I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.* ... *And to the man he said, "Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten of the tree about which I commanded you, 'You shall not eat of it,' cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life.*

What does it mean?

All but one tree was available for our first ancestors. What an extraordinary ecology God had invited them to enjoy, improve and protect! We are not given very much information about the only tree that was forbidden—but it was tied to the choice of “knowing good and evil,” detached from an obedient personal relationship with God. Of the fruit of perhaps hundreds of trees, the forbidden fruit seemed irresistible, and the disobedient behavior of Adam and Eve had consequences. *Yet here we have the first prophecy of Christmas—that the descendant of the woman will crush the leader of evil...and the woman's descendant would suffer.*

1. On the very first day that our ancestors sinned, the Creator promised the Savior. What does that say about the Creator's kindness and planning?
2. Why is the Savior referred to as the *woman's offspring*—not the human offspring? Was the Creator already planning on a virgin birth for the Savior? Why is that significant to us?
3. Do all people know something of the burdensome toil it takes to bring home “the bread” from fields of work? Has our toil also been increased in part because of environmental stresses, pollution and depletion caused by human failures? What examples can you give?
4. The way to the Tree of Life was blocked because of the first sin (Genesis 3:24). Has our living environment been threatened ever since the Tree of Life was off limits? What has challenged your life? What has threatened the lives of others you know and love?

What are we going to do about it?

5. Is the challenge and privilege of protecting and improving the environment now made more urgent by human sin? How does God's grace encourage us in that type of labor? Does this first promise of Christmas help reconnect us with Creator's purposes?
6. Adam got in trouble because he blindly followed someone else—and then foolishly tried to blame her and the Creator who made them! Is this same blame-game a risk in environmental justice and care now? Do excuses count with God?
7. The Bible may be the only “sacred book” that teaches the splendid creation and the sinful Fall *as separate events*. Even now do we experience both great good and debilitating destruction in the environment at the same time? Please give examples of this ironic mix.

Truth To Celebrate: *The Creator always has a plan for further investing his amazing grace and his best in us, even when we miss his primary plans.*

Advent-Action: *Check the insulation in your home, especially in your attic. By filling gaps and increasing insulation, you save money—and energy—in every season.*

Meditation #10: Revealing God's Children

What does it say? –

STUDY: Romans 8:18-30

GOLDEN TEXT: Romans 8:19-21 = *The creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.*

What does it mean?

Jesus, the Son of God, was born to empower other people to become God's children, too (John 1:12). However, this passage in Romans 8 makes it clear that if we now consider ourselves children of God—and have some evidence that we truly are his children—we will serve God and labor to free creation from its being so badly “*subjected to futility*” (that is, uselessness, partly through pollution) and its being in “*bondage to decay*” (partly through depletion of resources). Ultimately, pollution and depletion are measurable results of our spiritual alienation from the Creator—and our creation-care is evidence that our alienation from God is being overcome.

1. According to the text, Romans 8:18-30, what can we do to reveal that we are God's children? How did Jesus show that he is God's unique Child?
2. Who has subjected creation to its futility and decay? Who are the assigned stewards of creation? Who is supposed to “*protect and improve*” it? (See Genesis 1:26-28 and 2:15.) Who continues to pollute and deplete the creation?
3. In what ways has creation become a victim of human mistakes? Is pollution an example of “*futility*”? Is resource depletion a kind of decay? Are there other issues implied by these key terms “*futility*” and “*decay*”?
4. How does creation feel and express its hope to be set free from its futility and decay? Why is creation in “*eager expectation*” and “*groaning as in the pains of childbirth*” (Romans 8:19 and 22)? What can we do to help “*Mother Nature*”?

What are we going to do about it?

5. How can you help bring the “*freedom of the glory of the children of God*” to those parts of God's creation that you influence? Has the Christmas message penetrated your world? If so, how? If not, why not?
6. When creation is set free from the effects of futility and decay, how will people be benefited? Is there any better way to show our love for other people than to help “*protect and improve*” everyone's environment?
7. Should we wait for Jesus to return to fix everything, or is he waiting for us to do our part as God's stewards now? What steps should we take today to help reveal that we are his children? What behavior helps bring a real “*Merry Christmas*” to his creation?

Truth To Celebrate: Active care for God's creation is a distinguishing mark of those who truly are God's children.

Advent-Action: Make a phone call today to your state or local environmental protection agency or walk around your neighborhood and find out what are the main creation-care issues in your community. Post a note about these local issues on your church's web site and in next Sunday's worship folder. Others in your church or neighborhood could join you in a “*task force*.” Who knows what great good could be accomplished!

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Meditation #11: Jesus' Model Prayer on Earth

What does it say?

STUDY: Matthew 6:1-15

GOLDEN TEXT: Matthew 6:10 = *Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.*

What does it mean?

We pray that God's will—his kingdom and authority—will be done on earth just as it is in heaven. This is how Jesus taught us to pray, in perhaps the most famous prayer model ever. From the beginning of his ministry, Jesus also taught that “the Kingdom of God is here.” At the first Christmas the wise Magi accurately recognized him as the King of the Jews. He is also the king of every ethnicity and of all the earth.

1. At the first Christmas was Mary also praying that the Lord's will be done? Mary said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word” (Luke 1:38). How does Mary's prayer serve as a model of the best ways to celebrate Christmas?
2. How well is God's will followed in heaven? How much hesitation is there after God says what he wants? Do the heavenly beings please and honor the Creator? How often? What does God want us to do for the earth? Does praying “your will be done on earth” require also our fulfilling his requests, including improving and protecting the earth?
3. What does the word “as” mean here? Should God's authority mean one thing in heaven and something else on earth? Is it an honor to serve the Creator? To improve the creation?
4. In Matthew 10:7, after he taught this prayer, Jesus sent the Apostles out preaching that “the kingdom of heaven has come near.” In what sense was the kingdom near then? Is it nearer now? Does the reference to the kingdom imply something close or distant?

What are we going to do about it?

5. The sincerity of a person's requests is especially measured in terms of consistency with the person's behavior. When we pray that we want God's will done on earth, what might God be looking for in the way we relate to the earth the rest of the time?
6. How close does the kingdom have to be for us to act in its authority? How would we act if we believed that the fullness of God's authority was close? That God is watching us and even with us?
7. Some people think that they can continue to pollute and deplete the earth, since they think that Jesus will soon burn it all anyway. Even if they were right, does this avoidance of obeying Jesus please and honor him?

Truth To Celebrate: Jesus preached concerning the Kingdom of God, and he comes back to the “Kingdom” issues repeatedly in his teachings. Obedience to him, as King of kings, always matters.

Advent-Action: With prayer, study your utility bills for the last three months, asking God for wisdom on how you can conserve energy—to save money and to benefit others on earth.

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Meditation #12: Prophetic Paradox for the Prince of Peace

What does it say?

STUDY: Isaiah 9:1-7

GOLDEN TEXT: Isaiah 9:6 and 7 = *For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this.*

What does it mean?

The extraordinary paradox of Jesus' birth—fully human and fully divine—was prophesied dramatically by Isaiah some 400 years earlier. The child also would be Mighty God. The successor on David's throne would establish an eternal kingdom with unending peace. This mysterious prophecy was fulfilled at the first Christmas.

1. How did Isaiah identify the Creator as also the Redeemer? How did he see that the Mighty God is also to be the Prince of Peace?
2. If Jesus is the Prince of Peace and the king of all creation, then are we accountable to him? What can his humble birth in Bethlehem's stable teach us about what matters to him?
3. Why is it crucial that the promised Prince of Peace is a newborn baby? Is creation good enough to receive its Creator? What does the special baby's awesome future depend upon?
4. He is "Wonderful Counselor," meaning that he is *wonderful* at the double role of a "counselor": (1) as personal counselor guiding us and (2) as legal counselor representing us to the Father. How does Jesus (1) guide us in our lives, including the care of creation? How does he (2) represent us to the Creator and to others who care for his world?

What are we going to do about it?

5. Are you focused on pleasing the "Prince of Peace"? If so, how? The powerful Hebrew word for peace (*shalom*) includes our relationships with God, other people, and creation. How does *shalom* shape your service to Jesus now?
6. How do we honor Jesus as "Mighty God"? Do we recognize and respect his power in the creation? Do we do our part as faithful citizens of his kingdom?
7. How is the Infant of Christmas also the "Everlasting Father," the source of all births? What honor and thanks should we express to him? How do we speak of him and relate to him as the Everlasting Father?

Truth To Celebrate: *Isaiah boldly prophesied that the Creator—the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father—would become a human child, and to be called also the Wonderful Counselor and the Prince of Peace, a living part of his splendid but needy creation.*

Advent-Action: *Be accountable to the Mighty God, the Prince of Peace. Conduct a do-it-yourself energy audit for your home, Church, and work. You can learn how at www.eere.energy.gov.*

Meditation #13: Seek *Shalom* (Holistic Peace)

What does it say?

STUDY: Jeremiah 29:1-12

GOLDEN TEXT: Jeremiah 29:7 = ...*Seek the shalom of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord for it, for in its shalom you will find your shalom.*

What does it mean?

The powerful Hebrew word *shalom* is translated “peace,” “wholeness,” “health,” “happiness” and “prosperity.” Through the prophet Jeremiah, the Creator tells the weak, punished, oppressed, enslaved people to become the channel for his gift of health and peace for all, even for their oppressors. *Shalom* can affect all aspects of our environment, others and ourselves. This concept transcends political categories of “liberal” and “conservative” because it affirms both the care of creation and the continuity of society at the same time.

1. *Shalom* is an inclusive word for our peaceful relationships with God, other people, and the creation, and it involves relationships, attitudes and actions. Why is *shalom* used here? Why do you think it became the primary word for Hebrew people greeting one another?
2. In the Christmas prophecies, why was Jesus called the “*Prince of Shalom*”? How did he bring peace? How does the *shalom* of others benefit you? Does *shalom* multiply? When does *shalom* reciprocate back to the giver?
3. Was living as captives in a pagan society a good excuse for the Hebrew people to evade civic and environmental responsibility? How did God want them to seek *shalom*? What should we do? Do we have any good excuses?
4. Why does God tell the people to seek *shalom* and to pray for it? Why seek *shalom* if you can pray for it? Why pray for it if you can seek it? What is the right combination of prayer and seeking? Could both be 100%?

What are we going to do about it?

5. Is Jesus’ *shalom* itself a renewable resource? Would a culture of *shalom* sustain itself in *shalom*? How would you describe a *shalom*-culture in terms of relationships, attitudes and behaviors toward other people and toward the creation?
6. Was Jesus born in an especially friendly world? Does Biblical civic responsibility require starting with a Bible-affirming culture or society?
7. What do you think of those who profess to be the Creator’s representatives on Sunday—but who carelessly pollute and deplete his world the rest of the week? How can God’s instructions through Jeremiah—and also the story of Christmas—change this kind of selfishness?

Truth To Celebrate: *Even in enslavement and captivity, the people of God were to work for peace (shalom) in the oppressor’s capital city—shalom between God and humans, among humans, and between humans and the temporal creation.*

Advent-Action: *Recycle metal, plastic, glass and paper, because producing new products from recycled materials saves 70 to 90% of the energy and dramatically reduces pollution for us all.*

Meditation #14: The CHILDBIRTH that Changes Everything

What does it say?

STUDY: I Timothy 2:1-15

GOLDEN TEXT: I Timothy 2:12-15 = *I permit no woman to teach with tyranny over a man; she is to be calm. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. Yet she will be saved through The Childbirth, provided she continues in faith and love and holiness, with modesty.* [Literal]

What does it mean?

Tragically, subtle male chauvinism has biased many translations of this critical, liberating text. To understand the meaning that the Holy Spirit gave to the Apostle Paul, we must simply go back to the original meanings for four key words, as recorded in all our best ancient texts. The net result will be a liberating perspective for everyone—men and women, and all of creation.

1. Is child-bearing what saves women, or is it “*the birth of the Child,*” or “The Childbirth,” the birth of Jesus, as the original text says (verse 15)? Is it important that the Baby Jesus developed for nine months inside Mary, “the woman”?
2. Why is the same word for “silence” for women in verses 11 and 12 better translated “*calm*” when earlier applied to men in verse 2? Would “calm” men and women be better able to handle the personal and environmental issues we should be addressing?
3. Why is the original word for “authority” here “*tyranny*” (verse 12)—an extreme word that is used nowhere else in the Bible? Is tyranny all that Paul here prohibits for women? Can non-tyrannical women now add needed leadership for creation-care?
4. Does the human birth of our Savior Jesus affirm the creation? Is it significant that the Creator himself chose the normal nine-month process of fetal development? Would any other entrance into humanity have been superior? What differences might alternative means of his coming into humanity have made for the redemption of us humans? And the redemption of creation?

What are we going to do about it?

5. Are we tempted to try to ignore natural processes—and their consequences—and willfully try to push for our preferred “results”? How important is respect for creation and its God-ordained processes? Does Christmas help celebrate God’s creation? Should we also honor the Creator’s chosen processes? How?
6. Since the Apostle Paul lived in a more biased and less informed time, why did he still elevate women and honor all of the creation? What excuses do we have if we silence women or suppress the creation? What should we do instead?
7. When Gabriel first explained the divine plan, why did Mary say, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word” (Luke 1:38)? Is this a great model for following the Lord’s instructions? Should we obey the Creator’s creation-care commands with the same level of commitment? What might be the results?

Truth To Celebrate: Jesus Christ’s birth can cancel all curses and bring peace into all relationships, starting with the relationships among men and women and with the Creator, and his creation.

Advent-Action: Either eat it—or compost it for a garden—your non-meat meal leftovers and food scraps, and reduce your solid waste garbage by 23%.

Meditation #15: The Lord of Earth Has Come

What does it say? –

STUDY: Exodus 9:13-30

GOLDEN TEXT: Exodus 9:29 and 30 = *Moses replied, "When I have gone out of the city, I will spread out my hands in prayer to the LORD. The thunder will stop and there will be no more hail, so you may know that the earth is the Lord's. But I know that you and your officials still do not fear the LORD God."*

What does it mean?

“Joy to the world, the Lord has come.” This great carol reminds us at Christmas that we celebrate an *extraordinary reclaiming* of the Lord’s earthly authority—and the establishment of his means of peace. The angel Gabriel prophesied to Mary that Jesus would restore God’s earthly throne (Luke 1:33). The wise Magi also came to acknowledge that. No wonder the main theme of Jesus’ message was the authority of God on earth (Luke 4:43), but by any measure, the earth has always belonged to the Lord. What King David taught us to sing as an inspiring exclamation of worship in Psalm 24:1 was first used by Moses as part of a dire warning to the arrogant and oppressive Pharaoh of Egypt (Exodus 9:29). So, “*The earth is the Lord’s*” was first a standard for *liberation* and *social transformation*, long before it became an eloquent expression of Godly worship.

1. Because the earth is the Lord’s, is the birth of the Lord Jesus a cosmic event? Did Mary and Joseph know the whole story? Did the myriad of angels know? Did the shepherds know? Did the Magi know? Do we fully recognize the significance of this cosmic event?
2. Are there differences between ownership and stewardship? What do we truly own? What do we steward for the LORD? Why was it crucial for Jesus to demonstrate his mastery over the earth, including his special birth, the fish and the weather?
3. Does God care as much now—as he did in Moses’ time—about how people treat other people and how they handle the rest of his creation? Does he send “plagues” anymore when his Word is ignored? Why or why not?
4. Why was Moses’ message of God’s authority so hard for the Pharaoh and his officials to accept? Do our present government leaders do any better? Please be specific.

What are we going to do about it?

5. If every day you remembered that the earth is the Lord’s and that you are accountable to him, how would your behavior change? How would your life and relationships change? How would your community change?
6. Do governmental leaders need a reminder that the earth belongs to the LORD? Our business leaders? Our education leaders? The leaders of the arts and sciences? Our media and entertainment leaders? How would that change policies and programs? Who will be like Moses and tell them?
7. Since all the earth belongs to the LORD, how should we enjoy it more? How should we celebrate Christmas differently? How should we share earth’s resources more fairly and faithfully? How should we take better care of the creation?

Truth To Celebrate: *The simple fact that “the Earth is the Lord’s” is an enduring truth that transforms all relationships—and redefines all behavior. We are on his Earth.*

Advent-Action: *To save both paper and plastic—and to conserve the energy to produce, transport and recycle paper and plastic bags—buy reusable canvas bags for shopping. While you are at it, ask your Church to order some bags with Scripture verses or the Church’s name on them.*

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Advent Theme for Week Three: LOVE

Jesus' command "Love your neighbor as yourself" defines our relationships with every human person, present and future, near and far. He made that abundantly clear when he related this command to the splendid exemplar, the Good Samaritan. The question changed from "Who is my neighbor?" to "To whom can I be a neighbor?"

Poets and sages have written volumes about love, and scientists have tried to dissect it, but love remains one of life's greatest mysteries and gifts. Love comes in different forms—love of family, love of other people, love of nature, love of things and love of God.

In just five words, Jesus states his great "second command: "Love your neighbor as yourself." In some sense, the *biggest* word here is "as," because it covers everything, and the measuring stick is what we always bring with us: ourselves.

Christmas reminds us of God's gift of love in sending Baby Jesus, who was wrapped in simple swaddling clothes right after his birth, and thirty years later would die on the cruel cross for the sins of the whole world. Such love should move us to love God and his creation wholeheartedly. As we more fully experience this amazing love this Green Advent, we truly will celebrate Jesus with greater love for his creation.

In the next seven meditations we will explore multiple aspects of Love, its connection to God's love for the creation, and how we can participate in Creation-Love:

- 📖 I John 4:1-6 = Spirit-Test: The Christmas Story
- 📖 John 3:1-17 = Creator So Loved the World
- 📖 Isaiah 40:12-31 = Creator: Power for the Powerless
- 📖 Ephesians 2:1-10 = New Creation Standard
- 📖 Romans 8:28-39 = Omnipresent Double-Love
- 📖 Matthew 25:31-46 = Jesus in Need of Love
- 📖 Ephesians 3:14-21 = The Holy Family Today

Creation-Love in Word, wonder and work

Meditation #16: SPIRIT-TEST: The Christmas Story

What does it say? –

STUDY: I John 4:1-6

GOLDEN TEXT: I John 4:2 = *This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God.*

What does it mean?

Love transforms. Outside the Bible, every world religion teaches that there is a great gap, or a deep divide, between God and humans. On the one hand, both Hinduism and Islam teach that the deity is *strictly* transcendent—wholly and utterly other than us. He may represent himself on earth through a human prophet or a spiritual “appearance,” but never in the flesh as a fellow human. Their gods are too special to bridge the gap, *but the living God is bigger yet, because his love even brings him into the flesh to be with us.* On the other hand, in other religions—such as Secular Humanism, Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism and Zen—either there is no god, or else he plays no active role with humans. *Only the Bible teaches that God has become human flesh,* visiting us as a human—as predicted in the Old Testament (such as in Isaiah 7:14; 9:6) and fulfilled at the first Christmas. That is why I John 4:2 is the test of the true, loving Spirit. In spite of the way creation has been perverted, polluted and depleted, the Creator insisted upon loving and embracing the created flesh fully in order to redeem and transform it. *What an awesome God! What great love!*

1. Is there anything more natural than the supernatural? Where would creation be without the Creator? Who else could have lit the fuse for the Big Bang or orchestrated the intensely complicated creation processes?
2. Is there anything more supernatural than nature? Are the “natural phenomena” too “phenomenal” for even the best scientific methods to *completely* comprehend?
3. Why is the Christmas story—that the Word became flesh—so unique? Outside of the Bible, why does no world religion embrace full “Divine Incarnation”? Is the Christmas story the best story?
4. Does it matter that the Bible reveals a uniquely powerful picture of the Creator? Powerful enough to create the whole universe? Powerful enough to become a human infant?

What are we going to do about it?

5. Is the Christmas story a model for us to fully represent the Creator in the daily care of his creation? In the care of fellow “images of God,” images of the Creator?
6. Should the miracle of Christmas impact how we see, touch and care for the creation? In what ways? Does creation-care take on higher meaning and priority since Jesus so intensely identified with his creation?
7. How is God’s act of embracing his created flesh a model for caring for the depleted and polluted creation? Should we wait until Jesus returns before we take responsibility for it? Or should we act now because he has already come?

Truth To Celebrate: Affirming the mind-blowing paradox of “the Infinite becoming the Infant” at Christmas is the ultimate test of our accountability to Truth.

Advent-Action: Use the energy-saving settings for all of your appliances—including refrigerator, washing machine, dryer and dishwasher, and give the money you save to a church or a charity.

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Meditation #17: Creator so Loved the WORLD

What does it say?

STUDY: John 3:1-17

GOLDEN TEXT: John 3:16 = *For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.*

What does it mean?

Because this passage has been used so effectively to communicate simply and powerfully the message of God's love and salvation, Martin Luther, a leader of the Protestant Reformation, called John 3:16 "the Gospel in a nutshell." What is "hidden" in plain view is the extraordinary love God has for his world—literally, Jesus tells Nicodemus, "God so loved the *cosmos*...." We know that the prime recipients of his love are human beings—his children. Still, the saving work of God is explicitly part of his love for all his creation, his cosmos, "the world."

1. What does God's giving us his only Son—our Lord Jesus Christ—reveal about the depth of God's love? In what ways do we reveal our love for him? What is the depth of our love for the Creator's cosmos, his "world"?
2. Are men and women the loving stewards of all his creation? How is creation-care fueled by our love for our Creator and his creation?
3. Is "*he gave his only...*" the first model for Christmas giving? How did God show his abundant love even before Christmas? [Hint: Psalm 89 and other passages]
4. What would be different if God loved people, but not anything else in his creation? Would nature seem different to us? Do we behave sometimes as if he loves only us humans—and not the rest of the creation?

What are we going to do about it?

5. Can we represent Jesus—or be God's images—without loving "the world" that he "so loved"? How is that love for the world demonstrated? How do we teach it?
6. John 3:16 says we can have eternal life by believing in God's only begotten Son, whose birthday we celebrate. Secure in him, can we then risk time and money to "improve and protect" the world that God so loves? With eternity taken care of, can we concentrate on our temporal ways of honoring and pleasing him?
7. How does our love of God's creation help empower and equip our love for people? How does love for people help intensify and direct our love of the creation, and the Creator?

Truth To Celebrate: The greatest Christmas gift ever—the Creator giving his only begotten Son for us—demonstrates his priceless love for all of his world, his creation.

Advent-Action: Find out if your electric utility gives you an option of buying energy from renewable sources, such as wind and solar for home, Church or work. Consider signing up as you weigh the benefits of buying energy that neither depletes natural resources nor pollutes the God's world.

Meditation #18: Creator: POWER for the Powerless

What does it say?

STUDY: Isaiah 40:12-31

GOLDEN TEXT: Isaiah 40:28 through 31 = *Have you not known? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless. Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted; but those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.*

What does it mean?

If there are power shortages, let us certainly conserve power and seek more renewable sources. Let us also turn to the ultimate source, our Creator, as the prophet Isaiah suggests. After all, the most elemental description of the Lord is that he is “*the Creator of the ends of the earth*”—the one who created everything, even in the most remote areas. The Creator himself has no energy shortage; he “*does not faint or grow weary*; and he knows what to do, because “*his understanding is unsearchable*.” Therefore, he gives power to those in need, so we can “*run and not be weary... walk and not faint*.” The prophet’s message is about the Creator’s greatness to supply both the spiritual and the physical energy that we need to fulfill our responsibilities in creation.

1. Now, even 2,000 years after the first Christmas, how many people still do not know the Creator? How do people detach from the one *Living God*, the Creator of everything?
2. Why does the prophet Isaiah especially emphasize the Creator as strong, understanding, and power-giving? What are other primary attributes of the Creator?
3. How can the youth be so exhausted—while those who rely upon the Lord can even run without being weary? Does spiritual energy help *renew* physical energy?
4. How is the Creator’s greatness demonstrated? In this text is the Creator also a model for our caring for those who are fainting and powerless?

What are we going to do about it?

5. Will those who “*wait for the Lord*” more likely find new energy sources? Are we more apt to make timely adjustments to our energy consumption if we are patient and humble?
6. Now, after the first Christmas, how do we “*wait for the LORD*”? Should we sit on the couch, eat potato chips, watch TV and wait for a knock on the door? Is it better to “*wait for the Lord*” by actively reaching out to those in need—imitating the Creator’s own engaged behavior?
7. The last two lines of this text are often used in inspirational talks. Is that use really appropriate for those who are not already honoring the Creator and doing his work? Under what conditions are those two inspiring lines especially appropriate?

Truth To Celebrate: *The Creator’s power and resources never run out, and he helps those in need who turn to him—with ideas, wisdom, patience and energy for the task.*

Advent-Action: *Objectively, there is no energy shortage. There is only a wisdom and knowledge shortage: From a place of safety, watch a lightening storm, consider the force of river rapids or of large waves crashing on the ocean beach, feel the wind of a fierce storm.... and study and pray that we will discover ways to harness and utilize some of that abundant energy more fully.*

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Meditation #19: New CREATION Standard

What does it say?

STUDY: Ephesians 2:1-10

GOLDEN TEXT: Ephesians 2:8 through 10 = *For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.*

What does it mean?

In one of the clearest affirmations of good works, the Apostle Paul declares that we are not saved as a result of good works, but for the very purpose of doing good works. This high role of good works is made possible both (1) because of the loving, grace-filled birth and ministry of our Lord Christ Jesus, and (2) because of the loving behavior Creator-God had prepared for us all along. God is love, and he filled his creation with love.

1. Did the first Christmas happen because of human planning for good works? Not really. Still, how many good works have come as the result of the miracle of Christmas? How does this help demonstrate the truth of Ephesians 2:8-10?
2. What does the gift of God include? Is faith itself “*not of your own doing*” (v.8), but a gift of God? From where else could divine faith come? How did that faith come to you?
3. Are the divine commands for stewardship included in the “*our way of life*” (v.10) that the Savior has prepared for us? Does he still care about his creation? Does he still want us to improve and protect it (Genesis 2:15)?
4. What does “*created in Christ Jesus for good works*” mean? Is this the original creation or a new creation? Or does the Creator continue to create? Is creating a new life in Virgin Mary’s womb a special example of his continuing radical creativity?

What are we going to do about it?

5. In your experience, do verses 8 and 9 seem to be quoted much more than verse 10? Could anyone believe that we could have real dealings with God without being affected? Could we receive God’s grace without experiencing Godly change?
6. Why is salvation “*not of your own doing*”? Could we achieve salvation if we tried hard enough, perhaps over several lifetimes, like some world religions teach? Or are we hopeless apart from Creator’s grace? How grateful to God are we? Does it show?
7. What does it mean if we say we are “*saved*,” but do not show gratitude to the Creator? What if we still fail to improve and protect his creation? Are you saved? To what evidence can you point?

Truth To Celebrate: When we truly receive God’s saving grace, we will try to honor and please the Creator in everything we think, say and do.

Advent-Action: Have a car tuned up. A well-tuned car uses less fuel, creates less pollution, and gets people transported more dependably—and helps make the rest of the world work better, too!

Meditation #20: Omnipresent Double-Love

What does it say? –

STUDY: Romans 8:28-39

GOLDEN TEXT: Romans 8:38 and 39 = *I am convinced that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

What does it mean?

The Apostle Paul makes a verbal twist that is easily missed: his phrase *the love of God* means both God's love for us and our love for him. *The love of God* cannot be diminished or derailed by circumstances of any sort—whatever the condition of our lives or creation around us. He will always *love us* with his transforming embrace—and we should be committed to *love him* regardless of what happens to us or around us.

1. How does the Creator love us through Jesus' birth, the point of the first Christmas? How does God love us through his splendid creation? How does he love us also within daily stresses and even natural disasters?
2. How do we love God in every aspect of our lives? In every context of creation? How do we love him in the midst of resource depletion? In polluted environments? How does our love of the Creator show in our compassion for all other humans?
3. Does the Creator love us when he allows the depletion and pollution of the creation? What is he teaching us? How should we look for evidences of the Creator's love today?
4. Is this text realistic? Can we really love God in all circumstances? What gives us the focus, the power, the strength to do so? How do we express that love in his creation?

What are we going to do about it?

5. Reexamine Romans 8:28. Does the promise “all things work together for good” help motivate our deep commitment to love God, regardless of our situation and the conditions in the creation? Is this part of being “called according to his purpose”?
6. How do we love God when environmental stresses increase? What would be an especially difficult environment in which to love God?
7. Can you think of an environmental situation in which you would find it easiest to love God? What can you do to make that circumstance more likely for yourself? For others? What did Jesus do to make your love of God easier? How does Christmas help?

Truth To Celebrate: The “love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord”—both his love for us and our love for him—is so strong that nothing can block it anywhere, and all earth is transformed by it.

Advent-Action: If you feel cold, add a sweater or blanket, rather than turning up the thermostat. You will also feel the warmth of satisfaction that you are benefitting the future generations among your family and friends—and among people far away. While you are saving money, make an extra donation to a mission or charity that helps other people use resources lovingly and efficiently.

Meditation #21: Jesus in “Need” of Love and Care

What does it say?

STUDY: Matthew 25:31-46

GOLDEN TEXT: Matthew 25:37-40 = *Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these people, you did it to me.’*

What does it mean?

Christmas is the definitive coming of Jesus. He also comes wherever there is need. If most scientists are right, future ecological disasters will leave more and more people without sufficient food, with severely damaged housing and other tragic suffering. Many of these disasters will occur on other continents far from the behavior that contributed partially to the ravages of these ecological imbalances. All the while, many of us may feel secure many miles from the worst disasters. However, if we listen to Jesus’ teaching here, the people enduring disasters are not faceless or nameless. It is his face we see among “the least of these.” It is his name we serve, whether or not the victims have heard of him.

1. Does this teaching stretch your imagination? In the Gospel records, what did Jesus do to identify with the suffering victims?
2. Did Jesus life, death and resurrection provide the rescue we needed from the ravages of sin? What led Jesus to serve us in our need? Did Jesus also see “his image” in us?
3. Why did Jesus assume that the opportunity of doing good works for him would make all the difference to us? Was he right?
4. Does Jesus have the right to exclude us from his kingdom just because we miss opportunities of helping those in need? Why is this a defining issue? Can we be truly grateful for Jesus’ saving help without being eager to help others in need?

What are we going to do about it?

5. What can we do to see the presence of Jesus more clearly in the people that are in need now? What will help our moral imagination to act more effectively?
6. When we ourselves are victims—of ecological disasters, white-collar crimes, street crimes, domestic violence, or terrorism—do others see Jesus in us? How can we help them to see Jesus in us?
7. Should *proactive assistance* for potential victims count as helping Jesus? What if we dig the well before the drought? What if we help improve the levy before the flood? What if we give clothes even before people are utterly destitute and naked? What if we provide the fertilizer and agricultural know-how to help a community to avoid a famine in the first place? Would Jesus be pleased?

Truth To Celebrate: *Creation-care especially benefits the least advantaged people on every continent, and whatever benefits them also benefits Jesus, too, because it is a gift to him.*

Advent-Action: *Try to seal-up all air-leaks at home, at Church and at work with caulk and weather-stripping, to waste less heat in the winter... and at the same time you will feel warmer toward all of humanity, whose resources you are protecting.*

Meditation #22: The Holy Family Today

What does it say?

STUDY: Ephesians 3:14-21

GOLDEN TEXT: Ephesians 3:14 through 16 = *For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. I pray that according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit.*

What does it mean?

The Holy Family at Christmas was only the beginning of renewed relationships. The Apostle Paul is especially eloquent here concerning the enduring presence of the Father and our empowerment from the Holy Spirit to sustain the continuing work of our Lord Jesus Christ. The presence of God the Father and his love in us are totally beyond measure. Therefore, we have limitless, renewable resources of love to care for God's creation—including especially other people and ourselves. (See Ephesians 3:17-21.)

1. How does every family have one Father? Is this truth hard to believe? Is the human family healthy or dysfunctional? Why? What part do you play?
2. “*For this reason*” goes back to Ephesians 3:1, and is based on the end of Ephesians 2 where the Apostle Paul describes the fact that the fellowship of believers is being “*built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.*” Is this dwelling place for Sunday meetings only? Are we God's dwelling place other days of the week, too?
3. Why does the Apostle Paul want us to “*know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge*”? (Ephesians 3:19) Is that intellectual knowledge or active knowledge? Is the “love of Christ” his love for us or our love for him? Or both?
4. How can we be “*filled with all the fullness of God*”? (Ephesians 3:19) Is no aspect of God missing? Is this full “family” membership? Can this presence truly fill every part of us? Is this how he can “*accomplish in us more than we are able to ask or think*”? (Ephesians 3:20) Does our heavenly Father's inspiration include responsible creation-care?

What are we going to do about it?

5. If we all have one Father, what is our relationship with people in the more ecologically stressed areas of the world? What should we do to show that we get the point of the Family? Can we deplete and pollute less? Can we encourage and empower more?
6. How is the Father honored when so many of his children are in danger? What if the way we pollute and deplete the creation makes other children of his suffer more? What does the Father expect us to do? Must we wait for him to tell us?
7. How does the fullness of God inside of us (Ephesians 3:19) want us to take care of his other children? And take responsibility for his creation? Could our loving care for other people and for the creation reach beyond what we can now ask or think? (Ephesians 3:20)

Truth To Celebrate: *The human family is real, through the active leadership and presence of the Father, the Creator of all, who cares that we treat one another and his creation, with love.*

Advent-Action: *Water is precious and “the world is waiting,” so take shorter showers. Get wet; suds up; rinse off. When you use less water and energy, the rest of your human family benefits.*

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Advent Theme for Week Four: JOY, Awareness of Immanuel

Three levels of positive “feelings” are available to us humans:

- 📖 *pleasurable experiences*, like singing a Christmas carol or eating Christmas chocolates... pleasant but fleeting moments
- 📖 *enjoyable activities*, like playing a game with friends or family, helping other people, caroling at the hospital or prison, or being with those we love... great but lasting only for a while
- 📖 *joyful states*, like trusting the Savior, introducing him to others or affirming his loving presence... enduring delight, even under hostile circumstances

Joy, the deepest level, is the most satisfying because in our heart of hearts we especially long for our Creator. We each have a God-shaped vacuum inside of each of us that only the Creator can fill. As Augustine wisely stated in a prayer at the beginning of his famous *Confessions*: “Our hearts are restless until they find rest in you, O Lord.”

The Divine presence not only gives us Joy, but also transforms everything. For example, the Lord Jesus is present in us and in his creation, and so he takes seriously how we treat his work. If we say we love God and desire his presence, but trash his creation, we are behaving very foolishly. How can we experience deep Joy in the Lord Jesus, and thrill at the celebration of his birth, and still ignore the needs of the world he created? The Lord Jesus is present in his creation, and he takes personally how we respect and care for it.

This is the point of the name “*Immanuel*,” which literally means “God with us.” God the Father transcends above us, God the Spirit seeks to fill us with his wisdom and power, and God the Son is Immanuel, God with us in the flesh and in his creation. Christmas is the celebration of the fullest historic expression of Immanuel, the Divine presence in Jesus. *Joy to the world, the Lord has come!*

In these concluding eight meditations, we will explore different aspects of Joy and the interdependence of that Joy and our Creator-Awareness—the vibrant consciousness of Immanuel, who is the Creator’s presence in us and within his creation.

- 📖 Psalm 139 = The Presence Before Christmas
- 📖 Isaiah 7:1-14 = Miracle Immanuel
- 📖 Luke 2:1-20 = ‘Stable’ Thinking
- 📖 Matthew 2:1-11 = Marvelous Magi
- 📖 John 1:1-14 = Word Becomes Flesh
- 📖 John 14:1-10 = The New Life = the Life
- 📖 I Corinthians 6:12-20 = The Body-Temple
- 📖 Colossians 1:11-20 = Celebrating the Cosmic Glue

Creator-awareness in Word, wonder and work

Meditation #23: The Presence Before Christmas

What does it say?

STUDY: Psalm 139

GOLDEN TEXT: Psalm 139:13 and 14 = *It was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well.*

What does it mean?

Even before the first Christmas, the Lord knew “a thing or two” about the joy in birthing. Psalm 139 is an especially powerful statement of the Creator’s wonderful works and constant presence with us—in birth, life and in death. The utterly complex, splendid formation of each of us in our mothers’ wombs is certainly a prime example of the marvel of creation—and the powerful presence of the Creator. His presence is also an objective and firm motivation for loving and caring for other people of any age—and altering any behavior that may make their surroundings unhealthy and dangerous. The joy of the Lord’s presence guides us do helpful and healthful things that benefit other people’s environments.

1. In this Psalm, does the presence of the Creator everywhere motivate us to engage his living presence? How can we become more attuned to the *wonder* of the Creator and his world?
2. Does the Lord’s presence throughout the creation motivate us to do what is right? Does the Creator’s presence empower us to “improve and protect” his world?
3. Why is our individual development as human beings a special focus of the psalmist’s divine marvel? How can we best express our sincere wonder at God’s work?
4. Please read the prayer in the last two verses of Psalm 139. Will God search us, whether we ask him to or not? What is the “way everlasting”? Does that start now or only after death? Does that “way everlasting” value all that the Creator made?

What are we going to do about it?

5. “Only God can make a tree,” the poet Kilmer once wrote, when he wished he could write a poem “as lovely as a tree.” How does our awe and wonder at the Creator’s splendid “works of natural art” motivate action for protecting babies, other people, as well as trees and other living things?
6. Are you awed at the marvel of your own spirit, mind, soul and body? Do you extend that awe to the spirits, minds, souls, and bodies of other people? Does this awe lead you to have respect for your health and the good health and environments of other people?
7. Read Psalm 139 aloud the next time you go to the park or take a walk in the woods or along the shore. Does reading Psalm 139 heighten your senses? Do you see the created things with more love? Does taking someone with you deepen the experience?

Truth To Celebrate: “God-is-with-us,” Immanuel, is a relentless truth—an absolute universal constant—that we can celebrate especially at Christmas.

Advent-Action: Recycle plastics, metal and paper—as well as used clothing, computers, cars, eyeglasses and cell-phones for those in need. Be creative, and you yourself will be energized.

Meditation #24: Miracle Immanuel

What does it say? –

STUDY: Isaiah 7:1-14

GOLDEN TEXT: Isaiah 7:13 and 14 = *Then Isaiah said, "Hear now, you house of David! Is it not enough to try the patience of men? Will you try the patience of my God also? Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.*

What does it mean?

For numerous reasons, a Godly leader's patience—and God's patience—could certainly be tried hourly by the failures of billions of people all over the earth. What Isaiah claimed in his day (verse 13) still applies today. How does the Creator respond? He gives us a miracle "sign" that he is with us, pouring out his life, grace and personal presence for us. That sign was something that happened only once, starting nine months before Christmas: *The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.* Angels speaking individually with Mary and with Joseph made direct connections between Isaiah 7:14 and the special birth of Jesus. (See Luke 1:26-38 and Matthew 1:20-25.) The Creator is able to create new life, giving us a fresh start.

1. Do we ever try God's patience? How? Do we ever honor and please him? How? Does he care how we treat his creation? How much does it matter to him?
2. Why did the Creator choose a *very fresh start* with the virgin birth for the Infant of Christmas? Was it important that no man was involved? (See also John 1:12 and 13)
3. Can the Creator create new life when he chooses? Can he design and create an embryo inside Mary without a human father?
4. Is naming the special Child "*Immanuel*" (God with us) a powerful affirmation of the Creator's choice to be present in his creation? When is the Creator with us?

What are we going to do about it?

5. Should we say that God "was the Creator" or that he "*is the Creator*"? Are we, his images, ever also his co-creators? What is his ongoing work for the creation? What is ours?
6. Is the Creator "*Immanuel*" still with us? How is his presence felt or affirmed in your life? If he can design and create a new humanity inside Mary, can he give us fresh starts? Can he add the true Christmas joy of knowing his wonderful presence?
7. Is the repeated use of Isaiah 7:14 by the Christmas angels a way of giving an especially strong emphasis to the message? Is "*God with us*" this Green Advent?

Truth To Celebrate: *Already centuries before the first Christmas, the Creator revealed to his prophet Isaiah his unique sign: a miracle creating new life, a new humanity within a young virgin.*

Advent-Action: *Make house-cleaning even more special this Christmas. Use all-natural and safe cleaning products for a healthier environment in the home and everywhere else—as our actions affect people at home and even thousands of miles away.*

Meditation #25: ‘Stable’ Thinking

What does it say? –

STUDY: Luke 2:1-20

GOLDEN TEXT: Luke 2:11 and 12 = *To you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.*

What does it mean?

For the first Christmas, Jesus began his earthly life housed in a stable with a few animals, as well as Mary and Joseph. The Almighty Lord of the universe could have selected any place, and it was not mere coincidence that there was no room at the inn. *The Creator does advance-planning.*

1. Do you think that the stable owner cleaned things up especially for Mary, Joseph and Jesus? What was the stable like? How did it look, smell, feel, sound?
2. Why was it an extraordinary sign that the Christmas Infant was born in a stable? How does Jesus’ ministry improve the lives of animals as well as people?
3. Would the humble shepherds have been more comfortable visiting the stable to greet the Infant than if he were born in a fancy inn? Could Jesus have been born in a place where poor shepherds—and animals—were not welcomed?
4. Did other people overhear the angel of the Lord speaking to the shepherds? Did others hear the multitude of angles praising God? Was the message of God-with-the-goats—the-Lord-with-the-lambs—just too weird to be believed? How did the shepherds believe?

What are we going to do about it?

5. Does the Lord see the stable animals as mere economic units, or does he recognize them as his splendid creations? Should we respect animals, not just as pets or food?
6. When does care for the animals matter to God? What would you say to someone whose behavior unnecessarily endangered some of these splendid creations?
7. Why did two of the most effective leaders of all time—Moses and David—spend years as unnoticed shepherds? What did they learn from the sheep, the rest of creation and the Creator those days and nights in the pastures? Are we non-shepherds missing something?

Truth To Celebrate: *The first Christmas was celebrated in very humble circumstances where creation was well represented: people and animals greeted the Infant Savior.*

Advent-Action: *Creation-care is for humans first, and then for the animals. Do the birds or other animals in your neighborhood need some creation-care at this time of year? Some birds will even sing for food. Consider also volunteering your time at a pet shelter.*

Meditation #26: Marvelous MAGI

What does it say? –

STUDY Matthew 2:1-11.

GOLDEN TEXT: Matthew 2:1 and 2 = *After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him."*

What does it mean?

We do not know how much Bible knowledge these wise Magi had that first Christmas. Nevertheless, they set a stunning example in their ability to respect, understand, and respond to what they “read” from a revealing part of the “book of nature”—the other book that the Lord gave to all of us. *It is with Divine irony* that to these highly *literate* leaders, God chose to announce the birth of the Lord Jesus through his non-verbal creation, a special star, while to the *earthy* shepherds the angels spoke in clear words (Luke 2).

1. Why does the Lord draw us beyond our “comfort zone”? Could we as readers benefit by “reading” non-verbal creation more attentively—as the Magi did?
2. Have you ever been “moved”—moved to new ideas, emotions, actions, or even an extended pilgrimage—because of some marvel in nature? What phenomena of the creation have already affected your behavior?
3. How much did the Magi need to know to interpret the astral marvel they saw? Did they understand that the infinite Creator became “God with us” as an infant?
4. Thousands of other people must have looked up at the stars during that time of the Lord Jesus’ birth. How many even noticed the special star? Does the Lord want us to pay better attention to his creation?

What are we going to do about it?

5. Does the Creator speak in the “ordinary” events and phenomena—such as the myriads of stars, flowers, sunsets, birds singing, squirrels playing, and such like? What does he say? How can we read his messages better?
6. Have you heard from the Lord in an extraordinary moment? An answered prayer? An amazing “coincidence”? A significant dream? A distinctive feeling? What did you learn?
7. Should we pay better attention to the “ordinary” and “extraordinary” events in our experiences? Why not keep a journal of such events? *Like the famous Magi who came to worship the Baby Jesus, the more we pay attention, the more we may notice.*

Truth To Celebrate: Whenever we pay great and humble attention to God’s creation, we will experience his awesome presence more fully.

Advent-Action: Loosely store food in the refrigerator, so that the cool air can circulate around the food and keep the food longer and fresher. Treat all good food for what it is: a gift from the Creator. “Waste not,” and you and others will more likely “want not,” as the old saying goes.

Meditation #27: WORD Becomes Flesh

What does it say?

STUDY: John 1:1-14

GOLDEN TEXT: John 1:14 = *And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.*

What does it mean?

Other than at Christmas, no religious teaching crosses this line—the broad line between the natural and the supernatural. The Hindu “avatars” are claimed as brief appearances of the divine, but not real human flesh. Islam directly denies that anyone can be both God and human. Taoism focuses on nature, but denies the supernatural altogether. Buddhism, Confucianism and secular humanism generally avoid the Creator. *Only through the Bible* do we learn of the One who was all human and all divine—fully natural and fully supernatural—at the same time. Although to us this may seem contradictory, from the Biblical point of view this momentous event is not impossible. On the one hand, nature itself is not a denial of the supernatural, because nature thoroughly depends on the Creator, and is full of his power and presence. On the other hand, the supernatural does not deny nature; instead the Creator designs, creates, and uses all of nature for his purposes and glory. A God this big can engage nature in ways no one else could even consider.

1. When the Creator chooses to be born and “live among us,” how does that transform the “neighborhood”? How should we honor his continuing presence on earth?
2. Of all the names for the Creator, why call him “the Word”? Is Jesus the “first Word” about life? Is he the “last Word,” too? Does the Word make things happen?
3. The verb “*became*” is a very strong word. Why did the Creator suspend standard religious and rational expectations? What would our lives be like if the Word had not become flesh?
4. What is the extra benefit of the Creator living, teaching, suffering, overcoming and communicating in human flesh for a whole life, his thirty-three years? Could any other divine communication be so “full of grace and truth”? Does the Christmas event teach the value of a human life?

What are we going to do about it?

5. Since the Word became flesh as a fertilized human egg developing in Mary, could there be any barriers to his coming into our lives? Do our bodies or behavior provide any limits to his presence, purpose and power? Are we eager to welcome him? (See Luke 1:38.)
6. Does the Word still live “among us”? Does the Word live as one of us? Will he stand with us in facing all our issues, including the ecological issues—and helping resolve them?
7. In the Gospel records, what happened when Jesus showed up at places of need or crisis? What if we brought Jesus along to our environmental discussions? Could he help us get perspective? Create solutions? Commit to action?

Truth To Celebrate: *In the greatest and truest story ever told, the Creator loves his creation so much that he chooses to dwell in it himself.*

Advent-Action: *Use free natural light by opening the window blinds at or after sunrise—more on the sunny side of your building on cool days, and more on the shady side on hot days. Honor the Creator by increasing use of his free direct energy for light and temperature control.*

Meditation #28: The New Life = the Life

What does it say?

STUDY: John 14:1-10

GOLDEN TEXT: John 14:6 = *Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."*

What does it mean?

Years after the first Christmas, Jesus is alerting his followers to his imminent departure. He puts it in terms of preparing the eternal place, and he engages their minds and curiosity by saying that they "know the way." When Thomas—already a doubting Thomas—questions whether they really know the way, Jesus responds that he, Jesus himself, is the way—as well as "the truth and the life." The birth we celebrate at Christmas is "the life" himself.

1. In what ways is the Christmas Infant "the life"? How many ways can you list—and share with others? How can we remember this "fact of life" at Christmas time?
2. One of the reasons he is the *only way* to "come to the Father" is that, as he already claimed, "I am in the Father and the Father is in me" (John 10:38). What does this mean? Do we divide the Son and the Father too much?
3. Being "the life," how is Jesus related to the life of the creation? What do we learn about the creation by watching Jesus' birth and life? What do we learn about Jesus by watching birth and life in the creation?
4. What do we learn from Jesus becoming "the way" and "the truth" along with "the life"? Is Creator-awareness part of our "way" of life? Is Creator-awareness part of the "truth" in our lives? How else are the way, the truth, and the life interrelated?

What are we going to do about it?

5. Does "the life" include your life? From whom did your life come? Where is your life going? Does your life respect other life? Including other people's lives? Including animals' lives? Plant lives? Including what helps sustain these—water, air, soil?
6. If it is "the life" himself (alias: "the Lord Jesus") we are truly attending to in "Creator-awareness," should we do it better? If we were more attentive to "the life" of the creation, would we love Jesus more?
7. The Lord's presence as *life himself* is a consistent teaching of Scripture. For example, he is the "breath of life" in Genesis 2:7, the I AM of Exodus 3:14 and John 8:58, and the "bread of life" of John 6:48-51. Could these truths be taught better? How could we help develop a culture committed to Creator-awareness?

Truth To Celebrate: It always matters that we do things that protect human life—whether that life is close by or on another continent. Any life we benefit and protect also belongs to another image of God and to our Creator-Savior.

Advent-Action: Use timers on indoor and outdoor lighting to help reduce the minutes of electricity use according to your needs—and to protect creation for others and yourself.

Meditation #29: The Body-Temple

What does it say?

STUDY: I Corinthians 6:12-20

GOLDEN TEXT: I Corinthians 6:19 and 20 = *Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body.*

What does it mean?

Nine months before the first Christmas, the Holy Spirit miraculously conceived Jesus' embryo and attached him inside Mary's womb. In the context of I Corinthians 6, the Apostle Paul reminds us that all of our bodies are temples of the same Holy Spirit. He is concerned about moral pollution and the need for sexual holiness and wholeness. The general truth is two-fold: *First*, the Holy Spirit lives within us, and as good hosts we should make his dwelling clean and healthful. *Second*, none of us operates in a bubble, so that all our relationships and environments impact the "place" where the Spirit dwells. In short, decisions and environments matter to the Holy Spirit—and therefore should matter deeply to us. Some people refer to the entire creation as "God's Temple," and so it is. Individually, each of our bodies is his temple, too.

1. Does it matter that we take good care of the creation and our bodies—places where the Holy Spirit dwells? Who is affected?
2. Why did the Holy Spirit start the new humanity in Mary's womb? Why not start completely fresh? Why does he dwell in our bodies? What does he seek to accomplish?
3. How does the health of the rest of the creation impact the health of our bodies, the Spirit's temples? Can you mention five or more ways? Do these ways matter to the Holy Spirit, alive within his body-temples?
4. Is the Spirit within us the same as the Spirit that moved in the beginning, prior to the original steps of creation (Genesis 1:2)? Is he the same Holy Spirit who initiated the new life in the womb of Mary? What are the purposes of the Spirit's presence?

What are we going to do about it?

5. How should we honor the Holy Spirit, the source of Jesus' life, this Christmas? Is the way we treat our bodies—and the creation around us—the way we treat the Holy Spirit who lives in our body-temples? Can you mention four ways we can treat the Holy Spirit better?
6. Should there be worship where the Spirit is present? Do you say a prayer every time you eat? Do you sing a hymn or spiritual song as you walk down the street? Are there CDs or tapes of Bible-readings and praise songs in your car? What else honors the Spirit in our body-temples?
7. Where do you sense the Spirit's presence and power the most—at home, on a busy street, in a park, at church, with friends at a restaurant? Or all these places? Will you take time this week in one of those places to renew your commitments to the Holy Spirit?

Truth To Celebrate: The same Holy Spirit that worked a timeless miracle inside Mary's body, starting nine months before the first Christmas, desires to dwell in our bodies as well.

Advent-Action: Keep the Spirit's body-temple in good shape—and save energy and reduce CO2 at the same time—by walking or biking more to get to Church, school, visiting friends or family, work, shopping, and such like. Give the car a rest... and give the environment a break.

Meditation #30: Celebrating the Cosmic Glue

What does it say? –

STUDY: Colossians 1:11-20

GOLDEN TEXT: Colossians 1:16-17 = *For in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers; all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together.*

What does it mean?

For too long, contemporary culture, and scientific/technological pursuits, have denatured nature, treating animals and plants—and the Lord’s earth itself—as simply *things, objects*, mere measurable *commodities*. Tragically, otherwise Godly people, who should know better, have adopted this *secularizing* perspective. However, earth is our home, plants and animals are fellow creatures of God, and the Lord Jesus Christ is the *Cosmic Glue* that holds it all together—and gives creation its meaning and purpose. We have heard of the “unified field theory.” In a deeper sense there is a “*unified person theory*.” The way we treat his world is how we are treating Jesus, because he is the *Cosmic Glue*. What we do in his creation definitely matters to him, because he is always there holding it all together. Christmas is the special day we celebrate his birth on earth, while his cosmic work was initiated long before, from the earliest moment of creation.

1. As you meditate on the Lord Jesus Christ as the *Cosmic Glue* who holds it all together, look outside. Do things look different now? Can you hold that awareness together?
2. Now look around you in the place you are in. Do things look different? Can you hold that awareness in your mind? In your imagination let it all fall apart. What happens?
3. All things were created through and for Jesus Christ. Does the creation know that fact in some way? Do we have a responsibility to make that truth known and felt?
4. If we do not submit to Jesus our behavior in our spheres of influence, who is to blame? What will be the results in environmental pollution and depletion of resources?

What are we going to do about it?

5. The word “Christian” was first introduced in Antioch (Acts 11:26), and means “little Christ.” Since Christ holds the whole world together, what opportunities do you have to participate with him—within your ability, within your spheres of influence?
6. When the creation that he is holding together is being polluted and depleted by irresponsible behavior, how does Jesus feel? How should we feel? What should we do?
7. Can non-believers see Jesus as the *Cosmic Glue* of creation? What should be done to make their recognition of Jesus far more likely?

Truth To Celebrate: The Infant of Christmas is also the ultimate “Cosmic Glue” of all the creation, so there could not be a greater birthday to celebrate. Celebrate the divine, personal, Cosmic Glue today.

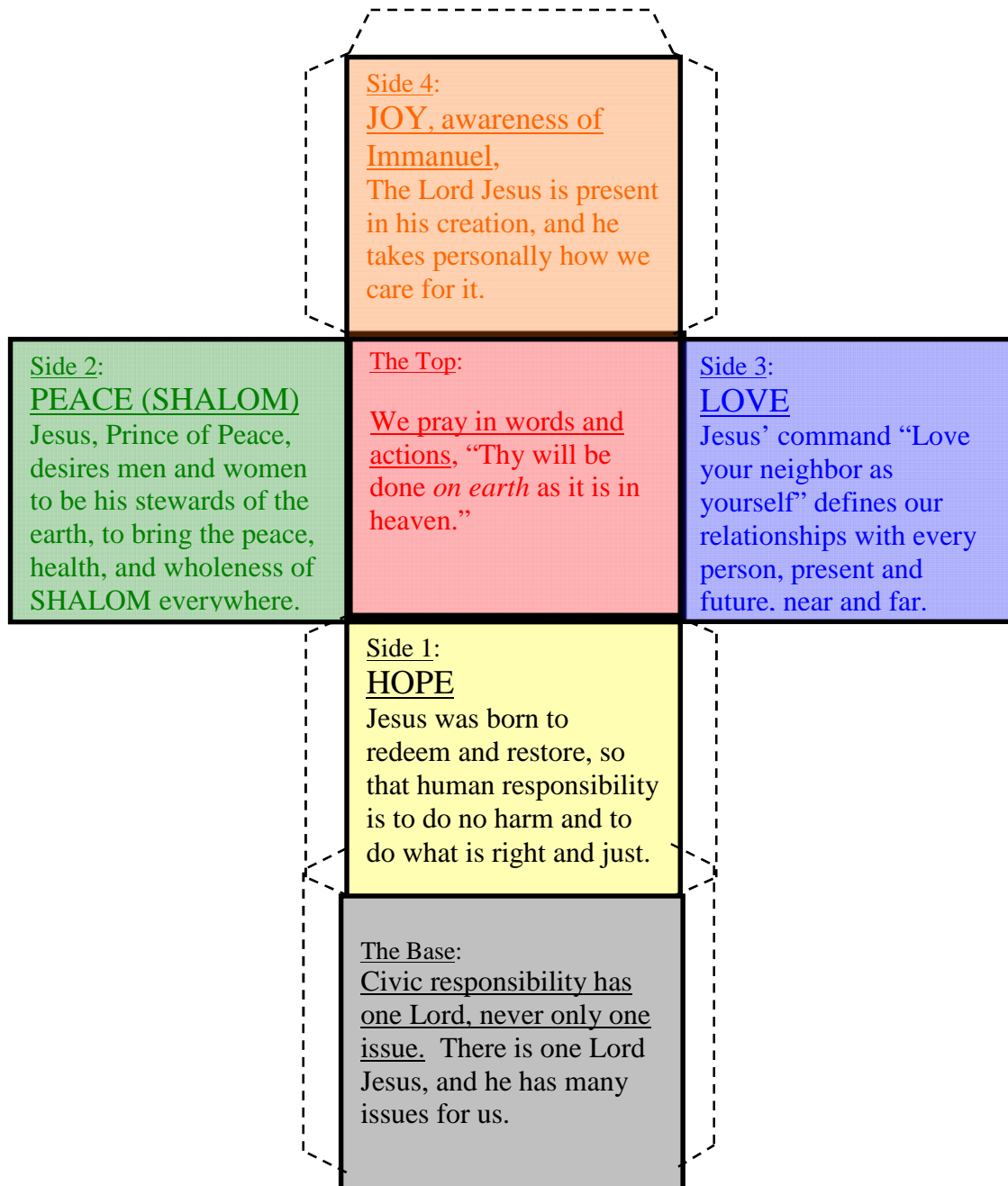
Advent-Action: A positive relationship with the Lord Jesus, the Infant of Christmas, must lead to positive responsibility for the creation that he “holds together.” How does that responsibility now show in your behavior? Make a list of the behavioral changes you have made within this Advent season to reflect your commitment to honor and please him. What additional changes are still needed? What is your plan to progress on those changes in the coming months?

Answer to the puzzle: One Lord—Never Merely One Issue

The solution to unpacking the Creation-Care Christmas Gift-Box on page 6 above:

One Life, One Shalom, One Earth, One Humanity

The Four Sides of Creation-Care



Creation-Care Is Interconnected with the Seven Other Top Biblical Priorities for Civic Engagement

Creation-care is one of an eight-fold intertwined bundle of Biblical behavioral principles for civic engagement, most of which are advocated by the National Association of Evangelicals. Creation-care interfaces with the other seven principles:

- 1. Seek reconciliation between all people and the Creator, between each human person and group, and between all people and creation.* By God's grace, redeem local Church, friendships, communities, and national activities to create affirmation, understanding and collaboration—to celebrate sincerely the truths that all people come from one Creator, one blood, one set of original parents—and that all can be for one Kingdom of God and one Church, the fully functional Body of Christ. Too often ecological policy has divided races, favoring one over another. It is time for ecological policy to favor the whole human race.
- 2. Protect religious freedom and liberty of conscience.* God has ordained the two co-existing institutions of church and state as distinct and independent of each other with each having its own areas of responsibility. We affirm the principles of religious freedom and liberty of conscience. The church has the right to promote care of God's creation. "The earth is the LORD's" was first a motto for God-based social transformation (Exodus 9:29). Alternatively, if we do not protect and improve the creation, we leave more opportunity for political tyranny and the abuse of religious liberty—witness the strength of the Islamic fundamentalists and the religious intolerance they propagate as they exploit petroleum monopolies.
- 3. Nurture family life and protect children.* From Genesis onward, the Bible tells us that the family is central to God's vision for human society. Marriage is the covenant relationship between one man, one woman and One God—and it is the basic building block of society. It is in the family (whether intact or not) that we learn mutual responsibility: we learn to live in an ordered society with complementary and distinct roles. Shortages of resources and ecological disasters put at risk the sacredness and vitality of family life, so that creation-care is measurably pro-family for every continent.
- 4. Protect the sanctity of human life and safeguard its nature.* Because God created human beings in his image, all people share in the divine dignity. In the Bible, God sometimes reveals his calling and care of persons before they are born, so the pre-born share in this dignity. Abortion, euthanasia, and unethical human experimentation can violate this God-given dignity of all human beings. The active care for every human life must not stop at birth, but merges into active, holistic creation-care. After all, the ecology of humans that have been born is *at least as important* as the ecology of the unborn.
- 5. Promote economic justice and support protections for the poor.* Since the poor of our country and the world are the first to be hurt by pollution, resource depletion, global warming and rising sea-levels, creation-care will help to reduce some of the harmful effects of poverty and provide fair resources access.
- 6. Recognize and protect human rights.* Curiously, the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) did not include safe environment, clean air, fair share of well-managed resources, or any other environmental rights in any of its 30 articles. However, environmental rights are basic to the rights that are claimed in the Declaration. For example, without a healthy and safe environment, the basic right to life is compromised, the basic right to liberty is severely limited, and the basic right to the "security of person" is meaningless. By any measure, creation-care is increasingly central to the protection of human rights.
- 7. Reduce violence and the motivations for violence, and promote non-violent conflict resolution.* Wars and violence in the future will more likely be related to creation-care issues, especially if the environment is increasingly polluted and resources become more dramatically depleted. Peace-loving people must be proactive for creation-care deliberately to reduce the temptations for war and the disruptions of civil life caused by a harmed ecology.

*Meet the author of these Green Advent Bible Studies,
the founder of the Green Bible Society*

Paul de Vries, PhD

Dr. Paul de Vries has long advocated and exemplified partnerships between people, *with particular emphasis on evangelical people collaborating with other Christians*. He has been especially active ecumenically, having worked extensively on substantial projects with Episcopalians, Jesuits (for which his team received the 1990 Catholic book award, second place), American Baptists, Charismatic groups, Pentecostals, National Baptists, Southern Baptists, Baptist World Alliance, Evangelical Assembly of Presbyterian Churches, the National Association of Evangelicals. He also initiated and guides the round-table dialogues between Jewish and Evangelical leaders in New York.

He is the Climate Justice Chairman for the Eco-Justice Project of the Interfaith Center in New York City. In February 2006, Dr. de Vries was one of the original 86 signers of *Climate Change: An Evangelical Call to Action*, as a result of which he was interviewed or personally quoted on the NBC evening news, Fox News, Reuters, Yahoo, Ave Maria, Air America and other venues. He is both a contributing writer and a consultant for the *Green Bible* (HarperOne, 2008)—a full Bible with ecological passages marked in green.



Dr. de Vries also is lead author of four books, *The Taming of the Shrewd* (1992, Thomas Nelson) *Ethics Applied* (1999, Simon and Schuster) and *Business Ethics Applied* (2000, Pearson Education), and *Manufacturer's Manual* (Stonehaven, 2007), and the author of dozens of published articles. His writings especially embrace Biblical Hermeneutics and Applied Ethics, but also the philosophy of science—for which in 1983 he created the now widely used term “methodological naturalism.”

Dr. de Vries earned the Ph.D. (1978) from the University of Virginia, and has served more than 25 years in Christian higher education administration, designing and leading innovative programs to incarnate Biblical Truth in people's learning, living, loving and leading. Dr. de Vries founded and directed the Center for Applied Christian Ethics at Wheaton College (Illinois) in 1983, the first ethics center at an evangelical college. He also founded the Office of Volunteer Community Service (1969) at the University of Virginia and an affordable housing network in Illinois (1988)—which remain thriving programs. In 1990 he founded the International Research Institute on Values Changes, which has led in timely research projects in Moscow, Beijing and New York.

Dr. de Vries is a follower of the Lord Jesus Christ, whom he loves and seeks to please and honor in everything. He is the president of New York Divinity School (NYDS) that offers *Christ-centered, Bible-based, Spirit-led* ministry training for pastors and lay people on the Master's level, in seven locations. He is also Senior Pastor of the Immanuel Community Church in Lower Manhattan. Many of his sermons are available at <http://www.immanueli.org/page/sermons/30/>. A perpetual theme in the ministry and leadership of Dr. de Vries is his commitment to bring the light of the eternal Truth within each temporal setting.

Green Bible Society

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