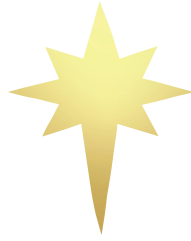




READINGS FOR THE SEASON

A Daily Advent Devotional

*Reflections and prayers written
by our church family to inspire
hope and joy this Advent season.*



Dear Church Family,

As we enter this sacred season of Advent, we are reminded of the deep significance it holds in our Christian journey. Advent is a time of expectant waiting, a time when we prepare our hearts and minds for the coming of Christ — both in the celebration of His birth and in His eventual return. It is a season filled with hope, peace, joy, and love.

In the busyness of our everyday lives, it is easy to lose sight of the stillness that Advent invites us into. This devotional is an opportunity to pause, reflect, and draw nearer to God. Each day, through scripture, prayer, and thoughtful reflection, we can rediscover the beauty and wonder of Christ's arrival in the world.

Let this be a time when we open our hearts to God's promises. May we be reminded that the light of Christ shines in the darkness and that His love is our true guide. As we journey together through these weeks of Advent, may the words and reflections within this devotional strengthen your faith, inspire hope, and fill your soul with the peace that only Christ can bring.

I pray that this devotional will be a blessing to you and your family as we prepare to celebrate the birth of our Savior. Let us walk this path of anticipation and joy with grateful hearts, knowing that the greatest gift has already been given to us — the gift of Jesus Christ.

Bob Blagg

Director of Discipleship



Picture by: Cole Valerius

REMEMBER

Written by: Pastor Ricc Conner



1

“But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.” -Luke 2:19 NIV

I remember the day our daughter Emma was born like it was yesterday. She was crying and the nurse told me to talk to her because she would recognize my voice. As soon as I started talking to her, she quieted right down. It was such a magical experience, and it was the only time in her life that it actually worked. A moment I have treasured in my heart for 22 years. In today’s scripture Mary was in a similar situation. She had just given birth to Jesus, I’m sure the baby Jesus was crying, the shepherds had stopped by to worship the baby and then spread out to tell anyone and everyone who would listen and the bible says, “all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them.” But Mary, it says, took a moment. She took a moment to treasure up all that had happened. She took it all in. The journey to Bethlehem. The search for a place to stay. The birth of her first born who was to be the Son of God, and then visit by the shepherds. She took it all in so that she might remember this very precious moment.

Advent is a special time in the life of the church for us to remember and celebrate the birth of Jesus. It’s a time where we remember God’s promises to send a Messiah and a time for us to remember how Jesus fulfilled all those promises. As we enter the season of Advent today let us take time to pause and remember the beauty of that first Christmas. The wonder of God coming from up there to down here in the form a baby that would eventually grow up into a man that would forever change the world and prepare the way for us to be reconciled with God. Let’s be like Mary and take it all in! Let’s remember.

Prayer: *Holy God, we take time today to remember how you loved us so much that you gave us Jesus on that first Christmas morning. During this season of Advent may we take time to daily remember all that you did through Jesus so that we might be reconciled with you. Thank you for Jesus! Amen.*



Picture by: Zoey Speroni

IMAGINE

Written by: Heather & Spencer Anderson



*“That is what the Scriptures mean when they say,
‘No eye has seen, no ear has heard, and no mind has
imagined what God has prepared for those who love him.’”
-1 Corinthians 2:9 (NLT)*

The imagination is a beautiful facet of human experience. We all at some point imagine the possibilities for our future lives. While we are students in school, we imagine the perfect career that will open doors to amazing new life experiences. When we are unwed, we imagine the perfect partner and the incredible life we will create together. When our children are born, we imagine who they will become and the extraordinary things they will accomplish. As we go through life, we learn that these expectations can be limited based on our circumstances, experiences, or the challenges we face rather than trusting God for his blessings.

This Advent season we are invited to imagine the possibilities that God holds for us. In this scripture, Paul reminds us that God can do far beyond what we can even conceive, and it calls us to expand our vision, dream bigger and trust in God’s power- no matter what wonderful things you can conceive, His provision for you is even better (Ephesians 3:20). During this season of preparation, consider what God might be calling you to imagine when you focus on the Father’s faithfulness, creativity, power, and wisdom. Rest in knowing that what He’s creating for you is beyond what you can imagine.

Brightest blessings.

PEACE

Written by: Myles Kosto



For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.

-Colossians 1:19-20

This time of the year is special in so many ways. The Advent season reminds us of so much leading up to Jesus' coming into the world. We reflect on all he has done for us, though the world around us seems to be getting a little more chaotic. From the anxiousness to buy gifts or cook the perfect dinner in the days leading up to Christmas, celebrating Jesus may get lost.

This is okay, it happens, it is so key to remember that God sending Jesus into this world is to be celebrated. We should not be anxious or frustrated. We should help those remember that God's great plan should bring us peace. Knowing God sent Jesus to ultimately bring peace back into the world should help us to spread his love to those anxious about the season. Peace is something that we all strive to achieve but true peace only comes from putting your faith in Jesus. This season reminds us that just as Jesus came as a baby; he brought peace with him knowing the ultimate goal for us (to save us).

So, whatever this season brings remember that God's plan brought peace to the world through Jesus. If something is stressing you out or you forgot something this season it's okay. The verse I will leave you with is Colossians 1:19-20. God's plan was fulfilled and through his son we can have peace.



WATCH

Written by: Patti Dubose

And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn. And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord. -Luke 2:7-11 (KJV)

I'm not patient. I once complained to my friend Louise that life wasn't going according to plan, suggesting I should pray for patience. She warned me against it, saying that if you pray for patience, God will teach you patience, which may end up involving more waiting than you really wanted to do to start with!

Consequently, I've always had active jobs. As an attorney, it was mental action. As a teacher, it's mental AND physical – there's never a dull moment, herding cats. So, I struggle to relate to careers involving waiting and watching. Shepherds, for example. Yes, they tend sheep, and occasionally must pursue wanderers. But much of the job is watching. And it's not like they are scrolling Facebook to pass time. They are engaged in watching – even if there's nothing to watch.

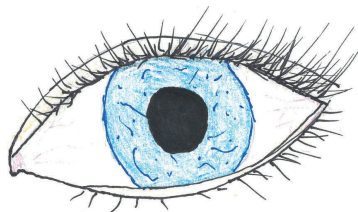
Imagine you are one of the shepherds in Luke. You have no idea what just happened to Mary in the previous verse. She is settling down baby Jesus - the main event. But you shepherds are just in the field, keeping watch. Another night out in the pasture. You might be bored, tired, or wondering why your lives aren't going according to plan. But you are there, watching sheep. Suddenly, the angel of the Lord appears, alight with God's glory.

What would you do? Personally, I'd probably react like the Biblical shepherds did. They freaked out! They were so afraid. Some translators even say they were terrified.

But the angel reassured them, sharing miraculous news with the watching shepherds. The very next thing that happened after Jesus was born, according to Luke. The shepherds were told FIRST. They went to see the new family for themselves AND spread the news to others. From being watchers on the sidelines, not even mentioned in the main story, they become the first witnesses, the first reporters, the first to spread the good news.

Clearly, God has a plan for watchers. Whether shepherds abiding in the fields, or you and me, God has a plan for us. Even when we can't see it. Even when we think someone else is the main character. Even when we're tired of watching.

As we watch and wait for the coming King, may we remember that although things may not be going according to our plan, if we trust in God, things will always go according to His plan. And so, we watch.



Picture by: Emma Hoffman



ABIDE

Written by: Adam & Lindsay Griffin

Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. . . . By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. -John 15:4-10 (ESV)

The Bible expresses the commandments and the law, but we're sometimes puzzled about how to best serve God's will during the struggle, the busyness, and, even, the comfort of modern life. During the Advent season, we can follow the example of the three wise men in Matthew Chapter 2. The story evokes a quiet and dark night with three shepherds patiently watching their flocks without distraction. Looking to the heavens, the shepherds "saw [Jesus's] star when it rose" (Matthew 2:2). The shepherds recalled a teaching of the prophet (possibly) Micah, which directed them to continue to look for the star over Bethlehem. So, the shepherds reported to Herod, King of Judea, the birth of the Messiah, the King of the Jews (Matthew 2:2, 6, 9; Micah 5:2).

We know that Herod was concerned about preserving his power as a client King of Rome. Herod directed the shepherds to return to him and identify the location of the Messiah so, as Herod dishonestly said, he "too may come and worship him." (Matthew 2:8). But after finding the baby Jesus and worshipping him, the shepherds were warned in a dream not to return to Herod (Matthew 2:12). The shepherds obeyed, which delayed Herod's effort to find the perceived threat and allowed Mary, Joseph, and baby Jesus to flee to Egypt (Matthew 2:13-15). Ultimately, the wise men's faithfulness, learning, and obedience enabled Jesus to grow in peace, begin his ministry, return to Jerusalem, and change the course of history.

Although our day-to-day decisions may seem trivial in context, “Good and evil both increase at compound interest. That is why the little decisions you and I make every day are of such infinite importance. The smallest good act today is the capture of a strategic point from which, a few months later, you may be able to go on to victories you never dreamed of.” (C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*.) In other words, “Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit.” (John 15:5). When the confusion sets in, remember the wise men. Forsake the distractions of the world—pray, listen, be still, draw on your knowledge of the law, and look to heaven for guidance.



PRESENT

Written by: Carol & Stan Orr

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

The word “present” can be used as a noun or as a verb. In the scripture verse above God has given us the greatest “present” (gift) that we have ever been given. This is the word used as a noun. The greatest gift, came to us as a baby, born among the animals, lying in a bed of straw. Would we have recognized this “gift” that was sent from God? Would we have been searching like the shepherds did? Would we have brought gifts to honor the greatest gift? Or...would we have just gone on with our lives, busy as ever and not paid any attention to this gift from God?

What about now, in 2024, are we living our lives by embracing God’s greatest gift to us? Are we showing others God’s greatest gift through the way we live our lives? In other words, are we living the Jesus-centered life? Are we being the hands and feet that show the love of Jesus to those in need? During this time of Advent, let us all examine how we are accepting God’s greatest gift and sharing it with the world.

When the time came for the purification rites required by the Law of Moses, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord...Luke 2:22

This is “present” used as a verb. Mary and Joseph knew that Jesus was God, but they obeyed the law by taking Jesus to the Temple; they presented God to God. Simeon knew that he had seen “the Lord’s Christ” (Luke 2:26b). How powerful that is! The Greatest Gift that God had given the world was presented to Him. How are we presenting ourselves to others? Are we able to show the light of Jesus by our words and our actions? How are we presenting ourselves in church, at work, with our family and friends? Are we walking the walk, or just talking the talk?

During this Advent Season, let us all take the time to search our hearts so that we might become the present God wants us to be for others. Let us present ourselves as the salt and light of Jesus Christ. May this Advent Season be a blessing to each of you.



Picture by: Julia Bodle



RESPOND

Written by: Tammy & Brad Cochran

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. -John 3:16-17 (ESV)

As we started thinking about what we should write for our devotional with the word “Respond”, it made us reflect on the past 3 weeks with the hurricanes and flooding. Some people have lost everything they owned. We as Christians are called to respond to the calls of the needy and the less fortunate. Sometimes when these storms come through our lives, we might be tempted to blame God. The devil will push us in that direction, but as Christians we need to not respond with blaming God. We need to use this opportunity to respond with Christian love. We need to use this to help each other and show good that can come out of helping others. It also shows us that material things will come and go, and we are not in control of things on this earth. Disasters give us the opportunity to meet neighbors and people that we did not know. It gives us the opportunity to talk about Jesus and his love and to open our hearts to hurting neighbors. It gives us the opportunity to demonstrate what is a Christian. What the devil uses for evil, GOD can use for good. We as Christians are called to respond with kindness and compassion. We know that things of this earth are just temporary, and we should respond to others as Christ would have responded to us.

Jesus came to fulfill the prophesy that he would suffer for our sins and would rise from the dead after three days. This gives testimony that there is one true god that can save us from our sins. He has promised us everlasting life if we believe in him. This shows us the way to live our lives by following his teachings.

Prayer: Dear Lord, Thank you again for sending your Son, Jesus to cleanse our sins. Help us to be the people that you want us to be here on this earth. We should not cling to our worldly possessions but to cling to you. We should look back on this year and reflect to always respond as you would have responded. You never held on to earthly possessions because you knew that there was a greater reward in heaven with our heavenly Father. Help us to live our lives the way that you want us to. Amen.



Picture by: Corinne Rothman



ENCOURAGE

Written by: Micheal & Michelle Kosto

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

The Christmas season is such a beautiful time of year. It is a time to be reminded of God's love for us and get even more excited about the gift we receive every day of the year in Jesus Christ.

We would love to share a personal story that was an encouragement for us from God at just the right moment. On October 9, 2024, our area experienced Hurricane Milton. We were so grateful that when we returned home safely and soundly the next day to our home, our house was thankfully intact with no damage. However, we did have a large tree that had fallen in our driveway along with a dock that had washed up in our yard. This was minimal compared to so many others who had extreme losses and damage, but for us it would still be a major expense to have removed and taken care of as machinery was needed to move them. This would have been an expense that we could not incur at the time.

Almost immediately upon discovering our situation, a neighbor that lives a couple of houses away showed up with his bobcat and offered to help us. Yes, he had a bobcat! We have lived in our home for 27 years and had never met him before. He was so kind and did not hesitate to help us clear our driveway and move the tree and dock for us. He was there in an instant during our time of need. Praise The Lord!

We knew in that moment that God was giving us encouragement in the form of our kind and generous neighbor.

We were so grateful and want to encourage others that God is always there for you. It may be in different ways, some more subtle than others, but He is there, a constant encouragement in our lives as Christians and we are so thankful to Him every day of the year. His many gifts come in all shapes and sizes.

Please let this verse encourage you today and every day as you reflect on Jesus's love for you.

Merry Christmas!



Picture by: Andrew Lewerenz

AWAKE



9

Written by: Corey & Michael McKeown

And do this, understanding the present time: The hour has already come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light.

-Romans 13:11-12

During Advent, the word "AWAKE" resonates within the context of preparation and anticipation. Advent is not just a countdown to Christmas; it is a spiritual awakening, a time to stir our hearts and minds in preparation for the coming of Christ.

In Scripture, the call to "awaken" is an invitation to recognize God's presence and to respond to His plan. In Romans 13:11-12, Paul writes, "It is now the time to awake out of sleep; for now, is our salvation nearer than when we first believed." This verse encourages us to shake off spiritual drowsiness and become more aware of our need for Christ, especially as we reflect on our lives and the world around us.

Advent is a time for us to be alert! When we awaken spiritually, we start to see the light of Christ shining in our darkness, bringing hope and joy to our hearts. We realize that our waiting is not just sitting around; it's actively engaging with God's promises.

Being awake during this season also means expecting great things. Each time we light a candle on the Advent wreath, we remember that each flame represents hope, peace, joy, and love. These aren't just ideas; they are gifts from the One who comes to change our hearts.

Let's pray for the grace to notice His presence in our everyday lives. May we open our eyes to how He is working around and within us, allowing His love to inspire us as we look forward to the joyful celebration of His birth. This Advent, let's truly be awake, anticipating the miracle of Christmas with refreshed hearts and minds.



BREATHE

Written by: Diana & Ron Nunez

*Cast all your anxiety on God, because he cares for you.
-1 Peter 5:7*

In the summer of 2003, our family was blessed with an opportunity to foster a 2-year-old boy named Isaiah. We immediately fell in love with him and quickly changed our goal from “fostering” to “fostering to adopt.” Isaiah seamlessly integrated into our family, and he was thriving. During this time, we discovered he had a younger brother, whom we were also willing to adopt. We maintained weekly sibling visits to keep the boys acquainted with one another.

After nearly two years of navigating the adoption process, we were told that the boy’s biological mother wished to reunify with her sons. It was revealed that her parental rights had been wrongfully terminated during her incarceration. Our caseworker reminded us that reunification of children with their biological parents is always the primary goal for children in foster care. We were heartbroken. How could we return this precious boy to a mother we believed was neither capable nor equipped to care for him? How could God allow this innocent child to be taken from a family that loved him so dearly? In our pain, we turned to our faith and trusted God’s plan, even when we could not understand it. We found solace in Scriptures, clinging to one verse after another as we prepared for the transition. This all occurred in December, a time that should have been full of joy, but instead became a season of sorrow for us. Isaiah would be taking his presents under our tree to his new home and our family would profoundly miss his presence on Christmas morning.

Shortly after reunification, their mother illegally turned the boys over to their biological father. She later passed away from a drug overdose. The boys remained with their father until adulthood. Over the years, we gathered that Isaiah appeared to be well cared for and loved. He finished high school and became a correctional officer. His brother became a pastor and started his own family. Tragically, we recently learned that Isaiah lost his life in a car accident. While we are deeply saddened by his loss, we find comfort in knowing that Isaiah was a Christian and is now with our Heavenly Father. Through this experience, we learned to “breathe” and rest in the assurance that God takes care of His children, and He is always good.



Picture by: Lana Griffin

JOY

Written by: Jocelyn Harris



Now the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that ye may abound in hope, through the power of the Holy Ghost. -Romans 15:13 (KJV)

The celebration of Christmas is very special to me. I'm sure it is to plenty of people for various reasons. It is so easy to get distracted and focus on the aesthetics or the novelties of Christmas such as decorations, presents, discounts, etc. Jesus Christ chose to come to earth in the form of a human baby through a virgin birth to redeem people from their sins. Therefore, when they pass on, they can go to heaven through accepting and following Jesus as their savior.

Knowing and believing this gives me great joy that God truly loves the world. He tells us this through his words and actions that there is hope to hold on to while living so we Christians can help spread the powerful gospel throughout the world. The real one and only reason to appreciate the joy of Christmas is Jesus's redeeming love and sacrifice. We get to choose an eternity with him in heaven after our work on Earth is done. We do not have to spend an eternity in hell even though we deserve it. I am Joyful every day for what was done for us sinners. God Almighty is a God of hope and as His followers, that is what we Christians ought to give the world because He gave hope to us all.



12

ACT

Written by: Matt & Christy Lawson

"For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."

-Ephesians 2:10

Several years ago, our small group read "When Helping Hurts: How to Alleviate Poverty Without Hurting the Poor...and Yourself." This book transformed our understanding of poverty and taught us to respond as the church should - with relief, rehabilitation, and transformation. One choice at a time, in both large and small ways, we've learned to see needs and act to meet them in Jesus' name. Staying rooted in the present and stepping out of our comfort zone has allowed us to meaningfully connect with others.

In one of Pastor Ricc's sermons, he emphasized getting to know the people around us, like the cashier at the grocery store. We've cultivated the same habit as well. A few months ago, we noticed the cashier's car was banged up. Having known her for two years, we asked about her accident, learned she was OK, but struggling to save for repairs, and couldn't afford dinner that night. We ordered her pizza and prayed for her. When we did that it wasn't just an act of kindness; it was a tangible expression of the good works God has prepared for us, allowing us to provide the necessity of daily bread (sauce and cheese).

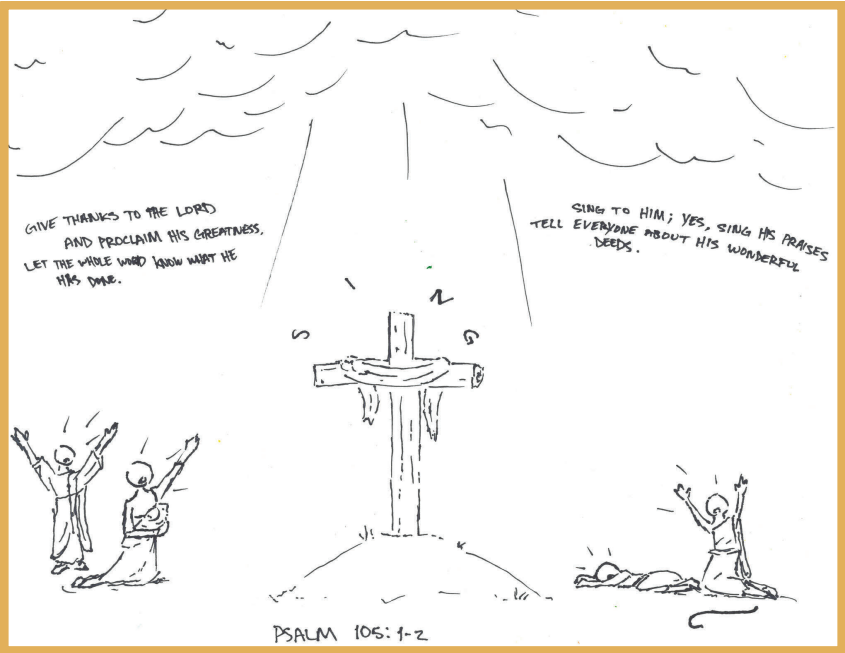
Beyond awareness and readiness, we find it important to be prepared ahead of time. When I commuted regularly, I kept a case of bottled water, jumper cables, and a stack of gospel tracts in my trunk. When the moment comes there may be no time to go grab something, you may have to make do in the situation. Of course, the Lord provides, but when you're aware and prepared He might provide you.

Advent has grown in meaning for us over the years. It's not only about remembering Christ's first coming but also preparing for His return. Scripture urges us to stay mission-focused and ready. This Advent, we're refocusing on being prepared - staying attuned to our surroundings and meeting needs, material and spiritual, in His name.

Reflection:

1. How can you encourage others to act in response to Christ's first and second Advent?
2. What are one or two ways you can show God's love in our community? What are you going to do about that?

Prayer: *Lord, as we enter this season of Advent, help us to act with intention and love. Guide our steps as we engage in the good works You have prepared for us. Let our actions reflect Your grace and draw others closer to You. Amen.*



GIVE THANKS TO THE LORD
AND PROCLAIM HIS GREATNESS.
LET THE WHOLE WORLD KNOW WHAT HE
HAS DONE.

SING TO HIM; YES, SING HIS PRAISES
TELL EVERYONE ABOUT HIS WONDERFUL
DEEDS.

PSALM 106: 1-2

SING

13

Written by: Bob & Marion Brookover

God has a strange sense of humor. After agreeing to compose an Advent devotional, I received an email with the assigned title: SING. Neither Marion nor I can. We're not kidding. I may be the only clergyman in the history of Methodism devoid of a singing voice. Marion will attest to my vocal handicap as will our friends who sit near us during worship.

However, we love Christmas Carols and the Christmas choral programs our choir presents. For us, singing "Silent Night" at the Christmas Eve service with candles held high proclaims the truest meaning of our Savior's birth - Immanuel - God is with us.

Have you ever sung the descant to "The First Noel"? I mean really sung it; raised your voices to new heights that only a descant can reach. "No-el, No-el, No-el, No-el. Born is the king of Israel." Can you imagine Samuel leading us in the descant? Or, maybe that is unimaginable.

Of course, that is what God accomplished that first Christmas: the unimaginable! God accomplished that which is too joyous, too loving, and too wondrous. Sing out this Christmas. Sing the glory of our faith. "For unto us a child is born."

God does have a sense of humor. If you happen to sit near Marion and I during worship this Christmas, please don't laugh when you hear us sing - when you hear us belt out the carols. For you are hearing the true joy of our faith. "God does not love us because we are good. God loves us because God is good."

FOCUS

Written by: Don & Linda Kuder

And it came to pass in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. And all went to be registered, each to his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David. To be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. And it came to pass, while they were there, the days were fulfilled for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.”

-Luke 2:1-7

In the hustle and bustle of the Advent season, it can be easy to get caught up in the flurry of activity. The decorations, the gifts, the parties – all of these things can distract us from the true meaning of the season. But as we approach the birth of Jesus, the Light of the World, it's essential to refocus our attention on what truly matters.

A few years ago, as we rushed around before Christmas trying to find the right gifts for all our family we realized that we hadn't gotten a gift for each other. We realized that through all the hustle and bustle of the Christmas season, that we had lost focus. We didn't need to give each other gifts, we already had the greatest gift of all. Jesus!

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, as we approach the celebration of Your birth, help us to focus on You. May our hearts be filled with wonder and awe as we contemplate the love and grace You have shown us. Help us to live our lives in a way that reflects Your light and brings hope to others. In Your name, we pray. Amen.*

Reflection:

Focus on the Birth: The focus of Advent is on the birth of Jesus Christ. The simplicity of the event is astounding. A humble manger, a young couple, and a divine child. The focus is not on the grandeur but on the humility.

Focus on the Light: Jesus is the Light of the World. In the darkness of sin and despair, He shines brightly. As we focus on Him, we are filled with hope and joy.

Focus on the Hope: The birth of Jesus brings hope to humanity. It is a promise of redemption, forgiveness, and eternal life. As we focus on this hope, we can find peace and joy even in the midst of trials.



Picture by: Jacob Bauman



EXPERIENCE

Written by: Brittany & Josh Cooper

*"Therefore, the Lord himself will give you a sign:
The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and
will call him Immanuel." -Isaiah 7:14*

Advent is a season of anticipation, a time when we await the profound experience central to our Christian faith. In these weeks, we quiet our hearts to remember the birth of Jesus Christ, the second person of the Holy Trinity. December often brings a flurry of activities—Christmas performances, parties, gift shopping, decorating, traveling—and it can feel like the season is brimming with joy and excitement. Yet even these good things can sometimes distract us from the true reason for the season.

For some, however, Christmas brings sorrow—a reminder of loss, financial pressures, or separation from loved ones.

Where is your focus this season? Is it centered on the most transformative experience of all—the birth of our Savior, Jesus Christ? During Advent, we are called to wait, but not in passivity. As believers, we wait with hearts intentionally focused on Jesus. Today, pause and meditate on who He is.

Jesus is:

The King of Kings

The Lord of Lords

Trustworthy

The Alpha and the Omega

The Savior of the World

Immanuel—God with us.

Reflect on what He has done for you. Where has He provided, healed, comforted, forgiven, or guided you?

Isaiah 7:14 foretells the coming of Immanuel, God with us. This prophecy is fulfilled in Matthew 1:23: "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" (which means 'God with us'). The fulfillment of prophecy strengthens our faith and encourages us to share the good news with others.

Who do you know that needs to hear about the birth of our Savior this Christmas season? Is it a family member, a neighbor, or perhaps a colleague? How can we share the gift of Jesus this Christmas? Let us use the talents and opportunities God has given us to do so.

Take heart. He is with us, and He desires to walk through life with us. Immanuel—God with us.

NOTICE

Written by: Joel & Cathy Ellis

“Take care not to practice your righteousness in the sight of people to be noticed by them; otherwise, you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven.” -Matthew 6:1

A writer for the New York Times wrote a marvelous editorial some time ago...

It happened to me the other day on the train as it pulled out of Times Square on its way to Queens. As the passengers sat there, two beggars appeared at each end of the car. Almost simultaneously, they started moving towards the center of the train, holding tin cups as they went along. The older man, who was blind, wore a sandwich board that seemed to be covered with news stories of his unsuccessful attempts to get a seeing eye dog. He disclaimed loudly and clearly that he, once a promising composer, was now reduced to begging. We could see that the younger man, making his way silently between the poles, was a double amputee. For some reason, and maybe it's easy to explain, the passengers were being unusually generous to the younger man. As I heard the sound of the coins dropping into his tin cup, I wondered what would happen when the two men met at the center of the car. As they approached, the younger man deftly moved aside, and as they passed, he took a coin from the cup on his lap and dropped it into the blind man's outstretched container, receiving a response of "Thank You. God Bless you."

And then the editorial writer went on to say that in the midst of all of the homeless and those who are called derelicts of our city New York, it was a beautiful thing to see a young man, obviously without anything, willing to share his pittance, for someone else who essentially had nothing.

Sometimes we are in our own little bubble and don't notice the needs of others, especially around Advent season. In this case it was obvious that both men had next to nothing. The people on the train had to notice because it happened in front of everyone, but God says we should help those in need and expect nothing in return.

We are so blessed for what God has given to us, kids, grandkids, friends and family and sometimes don't notice the needs of others.

With the loss of electricity for 5 days we see now we were underestimating what this would do to our household, and we now appreciate it even more than ever. And now we understand what it means for others who might not have the resources to have everything we have in our lives.

When we do good deeds for others we feel so invigorated just like when we work out, but we get tied up with our day-to-day activities and don't do enough to help others. So, during this Advent season let us try to notice the needs of others and take action to help remedy them without professing it to the world. We should all strive to make the world a better place. So, let's get it done!



Picture by: Delaney Kane



Picture by: Lexi Hartley

HOPE

Written by: Becky Ennis



17

I pray that God, the source of hope, will fill you completely with joy and peace because you trust in him. Then you will overflow with confident hope through the power of the Holy Spirit. -Romans 15:13

Advent is one of my favorite times of the year. Our beautiful church is decorated with the giant Christmas tree filled with angels and the Advent banners of Hope, Peace, Love and Joy displayed for all to see as they enter into the sanctuary. The altar has the Advent wreath with the three purple candles and the one pink candle which are lit each week by different families of the church. The Advent season gives us the hope of the birth of Jesus. We live in a world full of sin and rebellion against God. It is sometimes hard not to be discouraged by the devastation we see all around us. But the Holy Scriptures remind us there is a different way to see, that if the Holy Spirit enlightens our heart, we can know an eternal hope –the hope of God in the birth of Jesus.

I love to attend the 11pm service on Christmas Eve and enjoy the music and serving of communion. All the hustle and bustle of the season is done while we wait for Christmas morning to arrive. The room is filled with people from the community along with those who are home visiting for the holiday. There is a peaceful calmness in the room as the candles are lit before closing the night while singing Silent Night. I leave feeling hopeful for what the next year will bring.

BEAUTIFUL

Written by: Phyllis Pruitt

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who bring good tidings, who publishes peace, who brings good tidings of good, who publishes salvation, who says to Zion, "Your God reigns." -Isaiah 52:7 (RSV)

With one week until Christmas, I doubt I'm alone in rushing to finish the all-important "to-do list". Final touches to the carefully displayed decorations. Tweaking the family dinner menu. Wrapping all the gifts and placing them under the tree.

It's done and it's indeed beautiful. It's time to step back, breathe and consider what's behind this preparation. It's so much more than a Hallmark Holiday. It's Christmas. Advent isn't just twenty-four days of eating a piece of chocolate tucked away in a box on a holiday calendar or looking for the newest hiding spot for the Elf on the Shelf. It's a time to really think about what it all means.

Christmas, to me, means the birth of Jesus Christ, Emanuel (God With Us). Jesus is the greatest gift man has ever received. A gift, undeserved, freely given by our loving Father God to all who would believe and accept it. It's God's long-awaited promise that He would save His children from sin and despair.

I was not an eyewitness to my Savior's birth two-thousand-plus years ago. But I have been blessed by those faithful ones who were witnesses and who shared the Good News with their families and friends. Also, for the ensuing faithful who, through the generations, have continued to share their witness so that, today, so many years later, I can know The Truth.

I say we should not wait until Christmas morning to receive God's gift, Jesus. We, as followers of Christ should open our heavenly gift and share Jesus with a lost and longing world, letting the beauty of God's promise be evident in us. We are the blessed recipients of the Good News.

We need to share this gift with every soul we encounter and pray for more souls to come our way.

So back to "beautiful feet"... I don't need pretty new shoes for Christmas this year. I need to put beautiful feet into my old shoes. I need to tell of God's love for me and for the world. I need to share how Jesus has saved me from sin and death and provided a way to life everlasting. I need to share how this wonderfully radical gift is available to all who would believe!

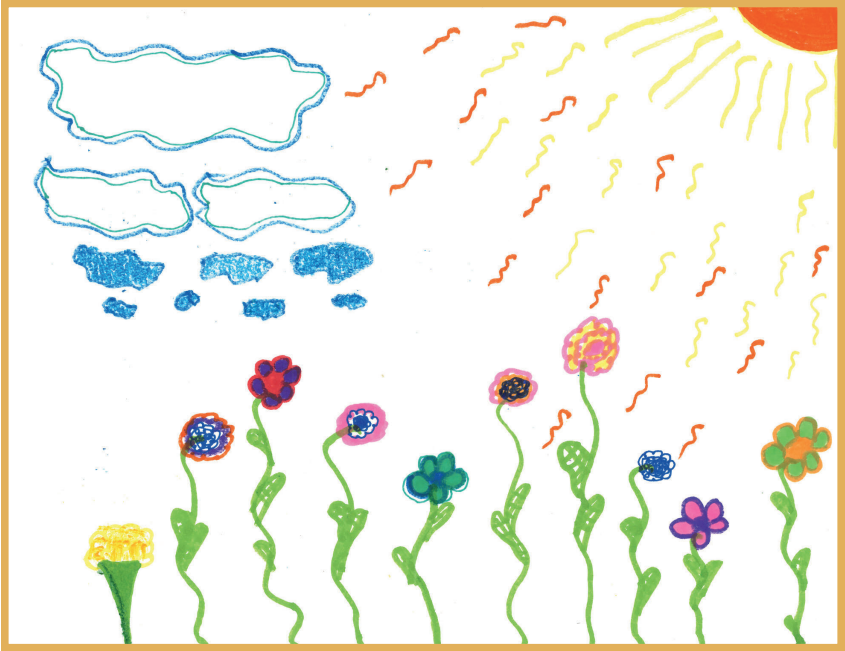
Yes, there's a story here. A Truth that brings Good News. I want to be among those who bring the Good News.

Lord, I don't ask for new shoes this Christmas. Please give me "beautiful feet".

In Jesus' most precious name!



Picture by: Henry Lawson



Picture by: Lily Hoffman

DELIGHT

Written by: Ann & David McIntosh



Take delight in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart. -Psalm 37:4

We have been with the youth group for about 12 years now. When we started, I was afraid of what we were going to do. But since we started, I have had a chance to see so many students show the love of God through all kinds of ways. (Feeding Tampa Bay, Trinity Cafe, helping with the shoe boxes for other countries, the Christmas plays, and many other ways the students have shown their love) not only mission trips.

I know Christmas is about giving but it delights me when I see others giving to people who need the help, all year. We all have a busy schedule but when it comes to advent, (the Christmas season) people change, sometimes for the better but sometimes for the worse.

Our tradition at our house is no matter where we all are we talk to each other and spend some time together. Matt and his family live here so we either spend Christmas Eve with them or sometimes Christmas Day. Davey's family lives in Virginia so we don't always get to see them, but we make it a point to see the girls open all their presents.

I guess I never thought of it as a delight to see them open their presents, but it does. We don't know where we would be if it was not for the love of Jesus that he allows us to get to spend time with our families no matter how far they live from us. One of the other things we do no matter where we are is to go to the Christmas Eve service, we have been in North Carolina where we asked around for a church to go to for Christmas Eve service.



THANKFUL

Written by: Diane & Michael Burge

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. -Colossians 3:16 (ESV)

*Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving; let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise!!
-Psalm 95:2 (ESV)*

Nothing says Christmas like the sounds of Christmas carols and Salvation Army bells ringing as we approach the Advent season. Everywhere we go we hear people making a joyful noise, but are they making it to the Lord? Are they expressing thankfulness for the upcoming season and for the blessings we enjoy in abundance?

Christmas should be a time for fun, joy and celebration with family and friends, but it should also be a time of expressing deep thankfulness as we wait and prepare for the coming of Christ. Each day we need to express our gratitude to God for his many blessings.

One of our favorite ways to do this is by singing hymns. Those like “O Come, All Ye Faithful”, which reminds us to be thankful not only for the gift of Jesus but for the ability to worship him freely. “Joy to the World” gives us a chance to praise Him loudly and remember the salvation He offers. And “Silent Night” reminds us of the peace that comes through knowing Christ and the joy that we can find in our quiet time with Him. Throughout history, hymns have been one of the most powerful ways for God’s people to offer their thanks. Hymns are more than just songs; they are prayers set to music, allowing us to voice our gratitude and adoration.

As we sing these hymns during Advent this year, let's remember that every note, every word, is an opportunity to thank God for His amazing love. As you sing, thank God for sending His Son to bring light into this dark world. Thank Him for always being faithful and keeping His promises. Remember that each song we sing is a gift of gratitude to the One who has given us everything.

May our hearts be filled with thankfulness this Advent season as we prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus, our Savior and King. Alleluia!!!



Picture by: Olivia Diaz

STILLNESS

Written by: Becky Pruitt



*Be still, and know that I am God;
I will be exalted among the nations,
I will be exalted in the earth.”
-Psalms 46:10 (NIV)*

Psalm 46 is a favorite scripture of mine during Advent. It always helps to center me in the midst of the craziness that erupts during the Christmas season.

The phrase “be still” in this Old Testament scripture means “surrender” in Hebrew. During Advent I will read this Scripture and make a conscious effort to “surrender” to my God and let go of my worldly focus on shopping and decorating and parties with friends.

Instead, I focus on the birth of Jesus, on His wonderful gift of salvation. And I give thanks that my God, the triune God who came to earth as a baby, born in a humble, simple stable and laid in a manger, calls me to “be still” and spend time with Him.

That is the best gift anyone can receive. The God who rules the earth, the God who commands the wind and the rain wants us to know Him. He wants to have a personal, intimate relationship with each and every person who calls on His name. He wants to walk with us through the sunny days and through the worst storms.

So, this Advent season I will be celebrating the birth of Jesus. I will attend services and sing carols, I will decorate my home and give gifts to loved ones. But, I will also be on my knees in humble adoration of my great and powerful God who is always with me, who calls me to be still and know that He is God, to exalt Him in all my life.



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RELATE

Written by: David & Janet Ashmore

“But when the right time came, God sent His Son who was born of a woman and lived under the law”

-Galatians 4:4 (NCV)

The story of Jesus Christ begins with the Incarnation. This event, when the Divine took on human form, holds immense significance for us as we celebrate the unimaginable step that God took to relate to His creation: Christmas.

The Incarnation refers to the Son of God, Jesus Christ, willingly taking on human nature and becoming fully God and fully human at the same time. (John 1:1, 14)

In becoming human, Jesus could relate to the human experience, including suffering and temptation. This allowed Him to offer Himself as a perfect and sinless sacrifice for the sins of humanity. The apostle Paul eloquently expressed this in his letter to the Romans: “For while we were still weak, at the right time, Christ died for the ungodly” Romans 5:6 (ESV). The Incarnation paved the way for Jesus’ crucifixion and, ultimately, the redemption of mankind.

The most profound significance of the Incarnation for mankind is the opportunity for reconciliation with God. Through Jesus’ sacrificial death on the cross, humanity’s sins are forgiven, and the barrier between God and people is removed. (Matthew 27:51a, Luke 23:45)

The Incarnation enables believers to experience a restored relationship with God, marked by forgiveness, grace, and the hope for eternal life. This reconciliation brings peace to troubled hearts and assures believers of God’s unfailing love. (John 14:1-3, 2 Corinthians 5:18)

Related Scriptures:

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” John 1:1 (KJV).

“And the Word became human and lived among us. We saw His glory, the glory that belongs to the only Son of the Father, and He was full of grace and truth” John 1:14 (NCV).

“God has freed us from the power of darkness, and He brought us into the kingdom of His dear Son” Colossians 1:13 (NCV).

Prayer: *Dear Father, Thank you for sending your Son, Jesus, who became one of us, relating to our conflicts, pain, and sorrows. Then He reconciled us to You. We magnify your Name through Christ! Amen.*



Picture by: James Bauman

LOVE

Written by: Lisa Gray



23

As a child, I was fortunate to grow up in the same town with my Grandparents. My brothers and I spent many fun-filled days, fishing in the pond, sewing with grandmom, picking figs, feeding the ducks and just having fun all wrapped in the love of our grandparents. A love that I fondly remember and treasure today. An evening constant after dinner was reading the Upper Room. All participated whether reading a paragraph or the Bible verse and always ending in prayer. I share this tradition as it continues to influence my life today. When first asked to participate in the Advent Devotion, I was paralyzed. I knew it was God's way of nudging me and Bob was the messenger. I waited several days and then answered – "honored". I called my mom immediately and shared that I had accepted and wasn't sure where to go from there. She assured me God would give me the words. The next morning, she texted – "Read the Upper Room". You see this is how my mom starts her day and for many years has sent me my subscription. I opened it and there it was - a story that could have my name written on the page. The message – If God calls us to do something outside of our comfort zone, the Holy Spirit will help us. We are vessels for God's glory. We can trust in the power of the Spirit and step out in faith. As I reflect on the timing of the message, lighting the candle of Love is a time to experience and share the Love of Christ. As we celebrate the coming of Jesus, hear his words:

"A new command. I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

-John 13:34-35

CALM

Written by: Chad & Joanna Johnson



"Be still, and know that I am God!" -Psalm 46:10a

When I think of the word calm, I am taken to a mountain lake that is completely still. With no ripples or waves, the water acts as a mirror. You can see the beauty of the surrounding landscape reflecting off the surface. When you throw in a rock, you create ripples and waves disturbing the beauty.

This is how it is with us. When we are calm, it is easy to see and hear God in our lives. We aren't allowing outside influences to distract us. When a "rock" is thrown in and life events happen, they can cause a ripple within our lives, making it harder to see Him. Sometimes those events are such that they cause mighty waves almost completely blocking Him out. However, when we step back and allow ourselves to calm down, the waves subside and the ripples slow. We get ourselves back to that mirror lake, able to see God's beauty in our lives.

God is always there with us carrying us through our storms in life. Whether we feel His presence or not, He is there. But it is when we bring ourselves down, allowing calm to take over, that we can truly focus on Him.

Take time to be still. Take time away from your daily activities and devote it to Him. Allow your calm to envelop you and be with God!



25

RECEIVE

Written by: Pastor Ricc Conner

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. -John 1:1-4 (NIV)

He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God— children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God. -John 1:11-13 (NIV)

Today you will spend time with family and friends giving and receiving gifts. You may even find yourself saying or remind others, "It's better to give than receive!" But today I want to tell you that when it comes to Jesus it's way better to receive. You see, Jesus is our greatest gift to meet our greatest need. He is the best gift we could ever freely receive and on this Christmas day we celebrate this amazing gift. We receive the gift of Jesus!

Sadly, our passage tells us that some didn't receive Jesus – they didn't believe He was Messiah. But those who did receive Him were "given the right to become children of God." They were given the greatest gift – adoption into the family of God. When we believe that Jesus is the Son of God, we also become children of the living God.

I don't know about you, but I'm not always good at receiving gifts. Sometimes, I catch myself wondering, what's the catch? Or I feel like my gift to them was not as good. I even find myself feeling like I owe them something after receiving their gift. I struggle to receive. Maybe you can relate. It's like we'd rather work for it or earn it in some way – then at least we feel like we deserve it. Here's what I'm learning, receiving involves humility (accepting a gift you didn't earn) and receiving involves trust (believing that somehow you don't need to make up for it). It doesn't come naturally.

The truth is receiving is the only way to experience freedom in Christ. Receiving God's free gift (no strings attached) of Jesus is the only way we can be forgiven of our sin. Receiving is the only way we can be reconciled to God. Receiving is the only way we find eternal life. You see, today is all about God's love and light. It's the pinnacle of what we've been preparing for all month. My prayer for all of us is that we all have freely received the greatest gift ever given – the gift of Jesus. Merry Christmas!

Prayer: *Dear God, thank you for giving us Jesus. Your generosity is extravagant and beyond anything we could ever imagine. Today, we freely receive the gift of Jesus so that we might love as the You have loved us. Today We join with the angels and declare, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests. Amen.*

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