



Middlesettlements UMC 2020 Advent Devotional

Contributors:

Cindy Alloway
Mary Blanche Brown (1989)
Mable Love Brown (1991)
Nancy Brown (1988)
Brenda Clemens
Brenda Crisp
Rodger Davis (1988)
Jason Gattis
Jim Gregg
Dora Hooks
Chris Keylon
Julia Keylon
Kate Keylon
Karen Lewis
Luanne Lovin
Leslie McAmis
Leona Mote
Joyce Overton
Kathy Puckett
Neil Rhodes
Rex Rogers
Jason Roe
June Love Shaw
Frank R. Snavelly (1988)
Magan Stubblefield
Jake Turnmire
Robin Turnmire
David Wells

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I always thank my God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus. For in him you have been enriched in every way—with all kinds of speech and with all knowledge—God thus confirming our testimony about Christ among you. Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed. He will also keep you firm to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, who has called you into fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

1 Corinthians 1:3–9

Cover Art:

Epiphany by John August Swanson, 1988

November 29

1st Sunday in Advent

"Wait for the LORD; be strong and take heart and wait for the LORD"

Psalms 27:14

Prayer for Illumination:¹ Make us to know your ways, O Lord; teach us your paths. Lead us in your truth, for you are the God of our salvation; for you we wait all day long. Amen.²

Read Jeremiah 33:14-16

"The days are coming," declares the LORD, "when I will fulfill the good promise I made to the people of Israel and Judah. In those days and at that time I will make a righteous Branch sprout from David's line; he will do what is just and right in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. This is the name by which it will be called: The LORD Our Righteous Savior."

Read 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have in the presence of our God because of you? Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith. Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus clear the way for us to come to you. May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you. May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones.

Read Luke 1:5-6, 57-60, 67-79

In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly. When it was time for Elizabeth to have her baby, she gave birth to a son. Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy, and they shared her joy. On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him after his father Zechariah, but his mother spoke up and said, "No! He is to be called John." His father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied: "Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come to his people and redeemed them. He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago), salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us—to show mercy to our ancestors and to remember his holy covenant, the oath he swore to our father Abraham: to rescue us from the hand of our enemies, and to enable us to serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace."

Closing Prayer: Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness, and put on the armor of light, now in the time of this mortal life in which your Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the living and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal; through him who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.³

¹ Prayers of Illumination are prayers offered to help us pay attention to what God has said in scripture. May God bless your reading of His word!

² From Psalm 25:4-5

³ Collect for the First Sunday in Advent, Book of Common Prayer (1979)

Living Liturgically

✿ the first week of Advent ✿

The Advent Wreath

During the time of year when we experience the darkest days of the year, the Church lights candles to remember and take comfort in the Light that is coming to bring light to the entire world. The wreath gets brighter and brighter each week as we anticipate Jesus, the Light of the world, who has come and will come again.

Usually, 3 candles are purple, symbolizing the royalty of the coming Messiah. The “rose” candle, lit on the 3rd Sunday, represents the joy we feel as Christmas draws near. And a 5th candle, the white Christ Candle, is lit on Christmas to represent Jesus.

Observing at home:

- *Set up your Advent wreath in a central location, like the dinner table or the coffee table. Light candles while gathered for meals or your devotions.*
- *Cheap advent wreaths can be made and/or found, but the wreath can also be as simple as 4 tea lights in a circle, with an extra tea light in the middle.*
- *Alone or as a family, use the liturgy to the right (->) as you light the candles.*

Lighting of the First Advent Candle

Jesus said, “I am the light of the world; the one who follows me will not walk in darkness but have the light of life.”

We light this candle as a sign of the coming light of Christ.

Praise be to the Lord, for he has looked favorably on his people. By the tender mercy of our God, the rising sun will come to us from heaven, to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace. —Luke 1:68, 78-79

Come, Lord Jesus, our light and our salvation.
Let us walk in the light of the Lord.

Musical Response

to the tune of “O Come All Ye Faithful”

True God of true God,
Light from Light Eternal,
lo, He shuns not the Virgin’s womb;
Son of the Father, begotten, not created;
O come, let us adore him,
O come, let us adore him,
O come let us adore him, Christ the Lord.

Feasting & Festivities in honor of Jolly Old St. Nick

The feast day of St. Nick, one of our most famous saints, falls this week on December 6th. Consider celebrating his day by reciting the Nicene Creed, giving secret gifts/blessings to others, and eating or decorating with candy canes (which are associated with St. Nick’s Bishop staff).

Meal Blessing

for the 1st Week of Advent

Optional Reading: Romans 13:11-12

Blessing: O Lord, Our God, help us to prepare for the coming of Christ, your Son. When he comes, may he find us eagerly awaiting him. Send your blessing upon this table and all those who share in this meal. This we ask through Christ, our Lord. Amen.⁴

Cracker’s Holiday Punch

Lynn Love, Middlesettlements UMC’s UIMW Cookbook

- 1 package unsweetened Cherry Kool-Aid
- 1 (6 ounce) can frozen orange juice
- 1 (6 ounce) can frozen lemonade
- 1 (18 ounce) can pineapple juice
- 13 cups water
- 1 cup sugar
- 1 quart ginger ale

This may be made without the ginger ale and kept in the fridge for everyday use.

For a party punch, add the ginger ale and serve with ice; makes about 50 servings.

⁴ Taken from “Advent: Week One” in *Blessings of the Table: Mealtime Prayers Throughout the Year* by Brother Victor-Antoine d’Avilea-Latourrette.

November 30

Magan Stubblefield

Read Titus 2:11-14

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly, while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ. He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds.

The Church has its own calendar—its own way of organizing time around the stories of scripture. There are holy days (holi-days) and seasons, times of remembering and celebrating, days of feasting or fasting and repenting. Each of those days and seasons helps us tell the story of God, helping us love Him with all our heart and soul and mind and strength. These days and seasons of remembering God's story are called the Liturgical Year and it begins every year with the season of Advent—the time we're in now. The word Advent means "coming" or "arrival"—and the season of Advent is a time of looking forward to the advent of Jesus. The time of Advent invites us to remember how Jesus has come to us before—how as a baby "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us"—and how Jesus will someday come again in glory.

Advent for an Easter people is a strange season. Having not grown up with the season of Advent, I remember the first time I attended a church where month-long waiting and hoping led to Christmas Day. It was beautiful, but also strange. Am I pretending I don't know Jesus has already come, both to the manger and the cross? Am I supposed to be reliving the hopes of Israel for a Messiah? What am I meant to do during Advent?

Over time I have realized I am waiting and hoping for more than Christmas. In commemorating a season that celebrates God-with-us, I am also remembering that God does come to us. Jesus has dwelt among us and the Spirit currently dwells in us, joining us to the Father and to one another. But even this presence is a foreshadowing, a taste, of what is to come. We await "the blessed hope" and "manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ."

While we wait and hope, there is much to be done. Jesus came, bringing salvation, and training us how to live now. We are to live in a certain way: the way of the people of God. We live in gratefulness, remembering our salvation as a gift from God. We remember that Christ has made us his own and that we are to live like him. It can sound a little boring at first, especially during the holiday-frenzy of December. But these are ways of life that not only help us be free, but also offer us joy, peace, hope, love, patience, kindness, and more. We have been given a life that is more than the allure of the mall and commercials or anything else this world can offer.

MUMC's 2020 Advent Devotional reflects on all these things and more—(many thanks to all who contributed, edited, produced, and distributed!). In perhaps the most isolated Advent/Christmas most of us have experienced, I'm grateful for this devotion that

encourages me in my personal prayer time, challenges me in my discipleship journey, and binds me together with my church family.

A few notes about MUMC's 2020 Advent Devotional that you might find helpful as you begin:

- Daily readings include scripture, reflections, and a prayer. Take time to read these each day, if possible at around the same time. If you don't already have a daily quiet time, this can give you the "kick-start" you need to make it a regular practice. You may want to have a pen and/or paper to journal your own prayer/response to the daily scriptures/ reflections.
- Every Sunday has readings for the day as well as ways to observe the season at home. This may be new to you—but surrounding your home, ways, and even meals with discipleship can only be a good thing! These practices are especially good if you find yourself lonely or grieving your "normal" December.
- Tomorrow's entry is by Sally-Lloyd Jones, author of *The Jesus Storybook Bible*. At the end of this devotional booklet is a reading plan that follows these stories, as well as paper ornaments that can be colored, cut out, and hung. On the reverse of each ornament is the related bible story that looks forward to the coming of Jesus (we'll have each of these stories uploaded as videos on our Youtube page and shared to our church facebook group). As you add ornaments to the tree, trace God's hand through all the stories, and tell the one big story of God's "Great Rescue Plan" through every day of Advent—starting with creation and leading up to Jesus' birth.

May this strange Advent & Christmas be a blessing to you, teaching you to follow and desire Jesus in every corner of your life and home.

Prayer: *Come, thou long-expected Jesus, born to set thy people free; from our fears and sins release us, let us find our rest in thee. Israel's strength and consolation, hope of all the earth thou art; dear desire of every nation, joy of every longing heart.*⁵

⁵ Prayer taken from "Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus" by Charles Wesley, 1744

December 1

Sally Lloyd-Jones⁶

Read John 3:16

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.

What do you love about Christmas?

Most of us say, PRESENTS! And probably all the grown-ups will laugh and want us to say something more spiritual.

But actually, do you know what? You're right. That IS the best, most important thing about Christmas. Because, you see, Christmas is all about a present—a gift. The greatest, most magnificent gift there has ever been...

Christmas is very hard to wait for, isn't it? Waiting to open all those presents—it's so difficult. Especially when you're little. We count down the days. We can't wait.

But do you know how long God's people had to wait for Christmas? How long they had to wait for the gift God promised them?

Weeks?

No.

Months?

Um. Longer.

Years, then?

Even longer than that.

They had to wait for centuries and centuries! Can you imagine how excited they were when at last Christmas came?

When do you think Christmas begins? Does it begin in Bethlehem? Or with the Angel Gabriel visiting Mary? Or does it begin with a bright star shining on a little stable?

Actually, the story of Christmas begins long, long ago—before there were even any stars in the sky at all.

Christmas begins in the heart of God.

Back in the very beginning, God had a magnificent dream inside his heart.

He made his children to share in his Forever Happiness and the world to be our perfect home. But we lost it all when we decided we didn't need him, when we decided we could be happy without him. And everything broke—in our hearts and in his world when sin and sadness and tears came in.

⁶ Excerpt by Sally Lloyd-Jones from *The Jesus Storybook Bible Advent Guide*, a free resource by Zonderkidz.

But God had a plan—a magnificent dream. One day, he would get his children back. One day, he himself would come to rescue them and heal their broken hearts. One day, he promised, Christmas would come!

All through the Bible, all through the long years, God has been waiting for exactly the right time to send his great gift. He has been waiting for Christmas!

From the moment Adam and Eve left the garden he whispered the promise, “it will not always be so.” To Abraham, he promised one day a child will come to bring laughter to the whole world. He promised Joseph, David, Isaiah. One day, he will send us a Good Shepherd. A Brave Hero. A Young Prince. A Mighty King. A Great Rescuer.

A Child.

And every story whispers His name.

Christmas is when, at last, everything is ready. The time has come, at last, for God to give us his great gift.

The days leading up to Christmas are called “Advent.” Advent means the “arrival.” It means the long waiting is almost over...

As we wait for Christmas, we’ll go on a journey together. We’ll [hear] a story every day, decorate the tree, and tell the story of God’s Secret Rescue plan—from the very beginning...and wait, along with God’s people...

And on Christmas morning? PRESENTS!

And there is the greatest, most magnificent gift there has ever been—wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.

The baby who would rescue the world is born!

Pray: God, thank you for never abandoning your creation. This season, may I rejoice in Jesus and the rescue that is found in Him. Amen.

Hope

Read Luke 1:26-33

In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you." Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."

The other day, I read a post by someone on Facebook who said that she wasn't celebrating Christmas this year. "After all," she said, "Christmas is just for children." This bothered me greatly. I assume she meant that she was not decorating, giving gifts, or having huge family celebrations this year. But how can we as Christians not rejoice in the birth of our Savior? Christmas is bigger than our traditions. It is the answer of God's promise for the human race—a promise for us all, old and young.

The year 2020 has been hard: record hurricanes with great destruction, racial unrest, a divisive election, a pandemic which has caused sickness, death, and loss of income, and sadly serious illnesses and deaths in our own congregation. At times, we have felt swept away in the turbulence. But our faith is not one of despair. It is a faith of hope. This hope was given to Abraham in a promise centuries before the birth of Christ. In Genesis 12:2-3, God said, "I will bless you...and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you." Through centuries of darkness and discouragement, the Jews held on to the hope for this promised Messiah.

This hope was fulfilled when the angel Gabriel appeared to a young woman named Mary. The angel gave her the promise that she would give birth to a son and "The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David and he will reign over the house of Jacob; his kingdom will never end." Jesus is the promised gift made to an aged Abraham long ago and to a young Mary centuries later. As we approach Advent, it is a time for old and young (not just children!) to rejoice and look to the future with hope. As the old hymn said so well:

*O God our help in ages past,
Our hope for years to come,
Our shelter from the stormy blast,
And our eternal home.*

We have hope, no matter the trouble around us. We can celebrate! We have Jesus!

Pray: Our Dear Lord and Savior, in these troubled times, teach us how to reach for the hope you brought to generations past and still offer to each of us now and forever. Amen.

Getting Ready

Read Mark 1:1-8

The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God, as it is written in Isaiah the prophet: "I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way"—"a voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'" And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. And this was his message: "After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

The Gospel of Mark is like a highlight film covering the life of Jesus. Matthew and Luke fill their Gospels with more of Jesus' teachings and John is filled with writings and imagery but Mark is all about action. What does the Gospel of Mark tell us about Jesus' birth? Mark tells us absolutely nothing. It might seem odd that for an event as significant in human history as the Incarnation of God's own Son, the earliest Gospel narrative doesn't even mention Jesus' birth. There are no angels, no shepherds, no mention of Mary or Joseph, no star and no manger, instead, when we meet Jesus he is already a grown man.

The first thing Mark does is introduce us to John the Baptist by highlighting the baptizer's message through the prophecy of Isaiah (40:3), which contains the word "prepare" two times. The word, "prepare," translated from Greek is actually two different words. The first word means to construct or create. The New Testament also uses this definition to describe the preparations that are associated with God's deliverance and presence. The second word translated "prepare" means to get ready for a big event.

As we enter the Advent Season, Mark uses these definitions of the word "prepare" to tell each of us to prepare for the Messiah, for Jesus Christ, to "Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him." But how do we do that, how do we prepare, how do we make a straight path for the Lord?

Scientific research has shown that there is only one way we, as human beings, can walk in a straight line. We have to focus on something ahead of us. That's pretty good advice for Advent, to walk a straight line, stop focusing on ourselves, stop looking at the distractions on our right and left, and don't turn around and go back. If we can fix our eyes on Jesus, then we can stay on course and keep from turning away from God.

The holiday season is usually a crazy, busy time and we get so caught up in checking off our Christmas list that we forget the best and most effective way to prepare for Christmas starts in our hearts. This is the central message of Mark's opening to his Gospel. No angel, no shepherds, no mention of Mary and Joseph, instead, there's a voice crying in the wilderness, "Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him." This may not sound like Christmas, but it's what Advent is all about.

Pray: Heavenly Father, we thank you for the words of John the Baptist reminding us that it's time for us to prepare for Advent & your Son's return. Hear us Father, as we once again seek forgiveness of our sins and strength of faith as we prepare to celebrate the birth of the baby born in a manger, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Help us get ready Father because we know he is coming again. In Jesus name we pray. Amen.

The Three Kings Were Wise Men

Read 1 Corinthians 2:3-5

And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.

With this upcoming Advent Season, I can't look forward without looking back. I recall this time last year—weren't we carefree, looking forward to the holidays with excitement & anticipation? We humans have pushed on in adversity & overcome more than we ever thought possible.

The Three Kings must have been amazed in the beginning, then becoming tired, weary, dusty, and, dare I say, maybe kinda "over it" as the time wore on. When the Baby Jesus was born, the possibilities were boundless, but how could Mary & Joseph look around the stable & see the animals, a manger filled with straw as a bed for their newborn son, plus they'd come to town to be counted for a tax! Not to mention having to run for their lives from Herod!

The Christmas carols, the Christmas story, Nativity replicas, gifts, & gatherings all mean something special to each of us. But the reality of the stable smells, scratchy hay, visitors in & out, being worn out from riding a donkey for miles while about to give birth, then...giving birth—all this makes me wonder at our own ability to maintain our faith. Romanticizing and picturing the conditions and circumstances surrounding our Savior's birth as ethereal and awe-inspiring are founded in our faith, how we want them to be. But in reality, it was a hard, dangerous, fear-inspiring time in which the humble parents of Jesus were facing.

The Wise Men were searching for truth and light, and in their own way, facing hardships in their long and arduous journey. Following the star was their "pressing on to win the race," to "obtain the goal" of seeing the real King face-to-face and presenting their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

Would it have been easier for us to follow a star this year? Something to give us direction in our search for wisdom and light? God is pointing the way, we only have to look up as we hit our knees to pray for our country, our church, our family, our friends, & our souls.

Pray: Dear Lord, give us wisdom during this Advent Season to look for your "Star" guiding us in our daily lives, to give to those who need faith in their lives, and to be followers of Your light and hope as a beacon for others. Touch our hearts and make us loving, caring disciples for You.

In your Name I pray, Amen.

December 5

The Feast of Saint Nicholas⁷

Magan Stubblefield

Read Matthew 6:2-4

So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

There was once a little boy whose mother and father died when he was only a child. He had great faith and great love for God and he took very seriously Jesus' words to "sell what you own and give the money to the poor." He wanted to give a present to Jesus, so when he was old enough to receive his inheritance, he gave it all to "the least of these" and helped the poor, the sick, and the suffering.

Nicholas became a priest, and eventually a Bishop, in a country we now call Turkey. He did not have an easy life: he was persecuted, exiled, and imprisoned for his faith. When he was released, he went to the council of Nicea in 325 AD and was among the orthodox bishops who defended the divinity of Jesus against the Arian heresy. Stories say that Nicholas, unable to bear the blasphemy of those who spoke against Jesus' divinity, walked up the leader of the heretics and punched him in the nose (a fun story to think of every time you recite the Nicene Creed, which was the result of the council).

Of all the stories of Nicholas, became most known for his generosity and love for the helpless. He loved to bless other people, but he was shy. He would try to work in secret so that no one would know. One story tells of St. Nicholas helping a family by tossing gold in through an open window. Another tells of him saving innocent soldiers from execution. Still another story tells of him saving children from a murderer (...who liked to murder by pickling).

The stories that we might know best about Nicholas are the stories of how he gave gifts to the needy on Christmas Eve to celebrate the birthday of Jesus. He did this in secret too. Sometimes the gifts were dropped in through an open window. Sometimes they were left by the door. Sometimes they came down the chimney. Nicholas would tiptoe away in the night, leaving the delight of the gift to be enjoyed in the morning. Of course, eventually, word got out and St. Nicholas became known as a gift-giver.

When Nicholas died, something amazing happened. The gifts that people had found in their homes on Christmas Day continued to appear. His generosity had inspired others to be generous too.

One day the Emperor of Russia heard the story of St. Nicholas. He decided to make Nicholas the patron saint of Russia. Far in the north of Russia, where there was nothing but snow, gifts continued to appear. The story traveled west to Finland, and Sweden, and Norway, and Holland. When Dutch people came to this country, they brought the story with them. Presents began to appear in celebration of Jesus' birth here too, and they still do to this day.

This all began with the gifts of Bishop Nicholas for the children of his town, given because he loved Jesus so much. We remember Nicholas because he gave gifts for God.

Pray: *God of joy and cheer, we thank you for your servant, St. Nick. May we, like him, defend the faith and bless the needy. Make us thoughtful without need of reward so that we, too, may be good followers of Jesus. Amen.*

⁷ Tomorrow, Sunday, December 6, marks the church holiday of the Feast of Saint Nicholas (270-345 AD).

December 6

2nd Sunday in Advent

"Prepare the way for the LORD and the glory of the LORD will be revealed"

from Isaiah 40:3, 5

Prayer for Illumination:⁸ God of the universe, revealed to us in Holy Scripture through the writings of the prophets and the preaching of John the Baptist, you have called us to prepare our hearts for your visitation. Ready us now to hear your Word and to respond as faithful servants, to the glory of Christ. Amen.

Read Malachi 3:1–4

"I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come," says the LORD Almighty. But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver. Then the LORD will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness, and the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be acceptable to the LORD, as in days gone by, as in former years.

Read James 5:7–11

Be patient, then, brothers and sisters, until the Lord's coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop, patiently waiting for the autumn and spring rains. You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near. Don't grumble against one another, brothers and sisters, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door! Brothers and sisters, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. As you know, we count as blessed those who have persevered. You have heard of Job's perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy.

Read Luke 3:1–6

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar—when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene—during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet: "A voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him. Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth. And all people will see God's salvation.'"

Closing Prayer: Merciful God, who sent your messengers the prophets to preach repentance and prepare the way for our salvation: Give us grace to heed their warnings and forsake our sins, that we may greet with joy the coming of Jesus Christ our Redeemer; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*⁹

⁸ Prayers of Illumination are prayers offered to help us pay attention to what God has said in scripture. May God bless your reading of His word!

⁹ Collect for the Second Sunday in Advent, Book of Common Prayer (1979)

Living Liturgically

the second week of Advent

Meal Blessing for the 2nd Week of Advent

A voice cries out in the desert:
“Prepare the way of the Lord.”

Make straight the paths for our God.

Praise be to you, God of salvation, for you have sent John the Baptist and the prophets to prepare the way for Christ. Open our hearts to the joy of Christ’s coming, and may this meal be eaten in anticipation of the heavenly banquet as we await with hope the blessed coming of our Savior, our Lord Jesus Christ, Amen.¹⁰

Festivities for the 2nd Week of Advent

If you’ve set out your manger scenes, consider 1) putting back the baby Jesus until 12/25 and 2) placing the Wise Men somewhere else in the house. In anticipation of the Epiphany (January 6th, when the Wise Men finally do meet Jesus), tradition has the Wise Men “journeying” through the house to meet Jesus. Have fun moving the Wise Men all over the place until they finally are able to present their gifts in January. If you’ve got children, it can be a game to “find” the Wise Men on their journey each day.

Knowing that gifts might be soon making your way into the house, consider making room! Advent is a great time to clean out closets, toy boxes, pantries, and shelves. It’s a symbolic action of clearing out and making room for the new things God is bringing and doing—as well as putting off and away the old.

Lighting of the Second Advent Candle

Jesus said, “I am the light of the world; the one who follows me will not walk in darkness but have the light of life.”

We light this candle as a sign of the coming light of Christ.

By the tender mercy of our God, the rising sun will come to us from heaven, to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death. Strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give way; say to those with fearful hearts, “Be strong, do not fear; your God will come, he will come to save you.”

—Luke 1:78-79, Isaiah 35:3-4

Come, Lord Jesus,
our light and our salvation.

Let us walk in the light of the Lord.

Musical Response

to the tune of “O Come All Ye Faithful”

True God of true God,
Light from Light Eternal,
lo, He shuns not the Virgin’s womb;
Son of the Father, begotten, not created;
O come, let us adore him,
O come, let us adore him,
O come let us adore him, Christ the Lord.

“Every tree of the field shall know that I am the Lord”

Ezekiel 17:24

Traditionally, Christmas trees were set up on Christmas Eve and left up until Epiphany (January 6th): setting up early was considered bad luck! But “fake” trees and changing customs have the Christmas tree appearing in homes any day after Thanksgiving. The trees have a lot of symbolism: the lights represent the light of Christ shining in the darkness, the ornaments represent joy (some still wait until the Rose/Joy Sunday to add the ornaments), and the evergreen boughs represent the life and growth found in Christ. A star or angel is often placed on top of the tree in remembrance of the first Christmas. As you gaze at your tree this week, remember Jesus, the light of the world, through whom everything was made, even the star and singing angels at his incarnation.

“Christmas is the time for joy.
Christmas is Jesus’ birthday.
Jesus’ birth was from God.
Jesus, I love you.
Happy birthday Jesus!”
Jenny Carpenter (Haynes), 1991

“Christmas is the season of the heart.
A time for counting blessings
great and small,
Christmas is the season of the heart,
And Jesus is the heart of it all.”

¹⁰ Adapted from “Advent: Week Two” in *Blessings of the Table: Mealtime Prayers Throughout the Year* by Brother Victor-Antoine d’Avilea-Latourrette.

December 7

Jim Gregg

Read James 5:7-11

Be patient, then, brothers and sisters, until the Lord's coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop, patiently waiting for the autumn and spring rains. You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near. Don't grumble against one another, brothers and sisters, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door! Brothers and sisters, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. As you know, we count as blessed those who have persevered. You have heard of Job's perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy.

As we begin the celebration of the birth of Jesus, we observe a period of time we call Advent. The waiting for the return of Jesus Christ requires patience. The book of James instructs us to be patient, while waiting. Patience is not just waiting, it is living our lives in harmony and love with others around us. Sometimes we get upset if things or people are not moving fast enough or reacting as we want them to. Jesus taught us to put the needs of others before our needs, to love those we would rather not love, to listen to others instead of wanting others to listen to our problems. It isn't easy to be patient today, to stop and take time to be still and listen to what God has to say to us.

Pray: Gracious Lord, in you is compassion, mercy, and wisdom. Your judgments are ever true. Grant us patience and courage, that we may persevere in all seasons and be blessed. Amen.

December 8

Leona Mote

Read Isaiah 2:2-5

In the last days the mountain of the LORD's temple will be established as the highest of the mountains; it will be exalted above the hills, and all nations will stream to it. Many peoples will come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the temple of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths." The law will go out from Zion, the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. He will judge between the nations and will settle disputes for many peoples. They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore. Come, descendants of Jacob, let us walk in the light of the LORD.

Read Colossians 1:11-14

May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light. He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

As we come into the Advent Season, I'm reminded of a sermon I heard at the National Cathedral in Washington DC. It was delivered by a cosmologist. This scientist began by talking about our world, how as we near the end of December, we enter the darkest period of our year. Days are short and nights are long. We have an absence of light which effects each of us both from a physical and emotional standpoint. It also affects us from a Christian standpoint. Immediately prior to Jesus the Jewish nation was in one of its darkest periods.

We need light, the light of Jesus. He came into the world in Israel at one of their lowest points, he provided light. He still provides light to each of us. His birth, Christmas, blesses each of us, it gives us joy and light hearted moments. His life teaches us how to live, that enables our faith. His death and resurrection gives us eternal hope even in the darkest hours.

I'm also reminded of one of my school math teachers, who was also one of my Sunday School teachers, Mrs. Claunch was diagnosed with cancer as she was approaching her retirement years. One Sunday morning after receiving some disappointing health news she said to us at church, "Well, we are going to see if I can live by the Christianity that I've preached all these years." Well, she could live that Christ centered life, even in the most trying circumstances. She was a blessing to all of us.

As each of us live and worship during the dark and trying times of the ending of the year 2020; May we feel Christ presence in our lives as we live each day. May we demonstrate Christ presence in our lives to others as we go about our preparations for Christmas.

My favorite Christmas carol speaks to our need to find peace, to show good will, to know God is always there for us. May we be able to praise and worship our God regardless of our situation.

*I heard the bells on Christmas day, their old familiar carols play,
And mild and sweet, the words repeat, Of peace on earth good will to men.
Then rang the bells more loud and clear, God is not dead nor does he sleep,
The wrong shall fail, the right prevail, With peace on earth good will to men.*

Pray: Come, Lord Jesus, our light and our salvation.

Read Isaiah 35:1-10

The desert and the parched land will be glad; the wilderness will rejoice and blossom. Like the crocus, it will burst into bloom; it will rejoice greatly and shout for joy. The glory of Lebanon will be given to it, the splendor of Carmel and Sharon; they will see the glory of the LORD, the splendor of our God. Strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give way; say to those with fearful hearts, "Be strong, do not fear; your God will come, he will come with vengeance; with divine retribution he will come to save you." Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy. Water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert. The burning sand will become a pool, the thirsty ground bubbling springs. In the haunts where jackals once lay, grass and reeds and papyrus will grow. And a highway will be there; it will be called the Way of Holiness; it will be for those who walk on that Way. The unclean will not journey on it; wicked fools will not go about on it. No lion will be there, nor any ravenous beast; they will not be found there. But only the redeemed will walk there, and those the LORD has rescued will return. They will enter Zion with singing; everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away.

Is it possible to put our minds in the place of those who were still waiting for the Messiah to come? Raw faith that God will deliver on His promise to send a deliverer. One who is so awesome it is worth all the waiting in the world for. Do we have the capacity to think pre-baby Jesus?

It reminds me of meeting someone for lunch that I have never met before in person. Likely we have spoken on the phone but never have we met. Arriving at the restaurant, I realize I have no idea who I am looking for. I forgot to check social media for at least a clue or ask them what type of car they drive. At least something that might make it far less of an awkward scanning of every individual that arrives. Looking at each person to determine if they seem to be searching for someone themselves and could that be me. What a weird feeling that is. Then it happens. Somehow you catch them scanning and you approach them to ask, "are you ___?" and they say yes. Wow! What a relief! Now you know what they look like, sound like, and many other identifying characteristics. How can you ever go back to not knowing them again?

Regarding the idea of being able to have a pre-Jesus feeling, honestly I just can't get there nor do I really want to. We know all about him and even read his words in a book he left for us. We are in such a blessed position to be on the other side of Christ's coming. There is not that scene of sitting with the awkward weird feeling wondering who the Messiah will be or where he will come from. Emmanuel, He has come. We celebrate!

But now we wait and wonder don't we? When will he come back as promised, where and how? We do our best to learn the answers but there's no way to know for sure. So to some degree we now have a somewhat similar sense of wonder and anticipation as those in the pre-Jesus days.

There's a wonderful song that we will sing this advent sometime titled "**Even So Come**". In it you hear the words:

*Call back the sinner
Wake up the saint
Let every nation shout of Your fame
Jesus is coming soon*

*Like a bride waiting for her groom
We'll be a Church ready for You
Every heart longing for our King
We sing "even so come"
Lord Jesus, come*

That line, "We'll be a Church ready for You" is what started this advent devotion for me. The pre-Jesus "church", his people, were not exactly ready but he came nonetheless in a powerful yet strange way. We know He is coming again but this time it's final. Will the post-Jesus "church" be ready? **Even So Come!**

Pray: Lord Jesus, our light and our salvation, we long for you, our King. Come, O Come, Emmanuel!

December 10

Brenda Crisp

Read Luke 1:14–15

He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born.

These words were written about John the Baptist. We all know the story of how Zechariah and Elizabeth were given a child in their old age. Well, my family's newest member was born on February 10, 2020. His name is Henry, and I have never seen him even though he and his family live less than ten miles from me. He is my great nephew and Annie Mae's cousin. Thanks to his mom and grandmother, I have pictures of him on my refrigerator and I get to see him on Facebook. That is just how it has been this year, but I look forward to the day when I get to see him in person. That to me is how it is at Christmas. We sing about Christ's birth, we read stories about his birth, we give gifts to others honoring his birth, we put up lights and decorate trees, and fix good things to eat, all to honor Christ's birth. We may not get to see this Baby, but as Christians we know that He is with us even in this strange year. We have faith that no matter what life gives us, He and His words will guide us through it all. And one day we will be with Him for eternity. (My sister Koky even has faith that we may see Henry before he graduates.)

Pray: Dear Great and Merciful God, thank you for sending your Son and His Words to help us get through this trying time. May we be reassured that you keep your promises. Amen.

December 11

Joyce Overton

Read Psalm 24:1

The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it

As we get into a mindset to truly focus on the advent season we think about Christ's arrival. He is always showing up in our lives, not just at Christmas time.

I was recently thinking about two "God Moments" in my life that were very similar. In February 2003, Jim and I took a cruise to celebrate our 36th Wedding Anniversary. If you have ever been on a cruise you know that there are thousands of people. The cruise line matches you with people to sit at your table each evening. On this cruise, there were 5 couples of which 4 were about our age. One of the couples was newlywed and probably 28 to 30 years of age. The first night I thought and wondered why this couple is sitting at our table. The young bride sat next to me. The second night she was sharing about their wedding and courtship. She also shared that they had to postpone the big wedding they had planned for a year because her future husband was diagnosed with Leukemia. He had to take treatment which consisted of chemo and radiation. I shared with her and encouraged her because my husband also had Leukemia and he had postponed his treatment so we could come on this dream vacation. We each shared how our faith had brought us to that point in our lives.

The second "God Moment" was on a cruise in March of 2006 (a little over a year after I lost Jim – the love of my life). My mother passed away the month before Jim died. My sister and I decided we would wait a year after our mother's and Jim's deaths, and then we would take a vacation together. My sister and I had not spent any time together in years. At our table were 8 women (two older ladies, two ladies that had been friends all their lives and were celebrating their 40th birthday, a mother and her college-age daughter, and my sister and I). Each evening we shared about our day – what excursion we had taken, etc. The mother and daughter would always take all these high adventure excursions and we were always interested in hearing about their day. The mother would always say how tired she was (trying to keep up with her teenage daughter). One evening when she came to the table, she looked especially tired and weary. She was sitting next to me and had all week. I inquired about her day and gently tried to find out what was wrong. She burst into tears and said she had bad news from home. Her husband had been struggling with cancer for several years and had become worse right before they had left on the trip. The family encouraged them to go ahead on the trip, and they would handle things while they were gone. She had found out that he was worse, and hospice had been called in. I told her that I had lost my husband, and I knew some of what she was going through. I told her I would pray for her and we shared.

Now of all the people on these two ships that I could have sat next to - coincidence – I doubt it – I know that God orchestrated these meetings.

Pray: Lord, I am aware of Your love every day - and I am grateful. Give me ears, dear Lord, that I recognize Your voice and a trusting heart that in Your will I will rejoice. Amen.

December 12

Kate Keylon

Read Isaiah 41:8-10

But you, Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, you descendants of Abraham my friend, I took you from the ends of the earth, from its farthest corners I called you. I said, 'You are my servant'; I have chosen you and have not rejected you. 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.

Read Matthew 4:18-22

As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. "Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will send you out to fish for people." At once they left their nets and followed him. Going on from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John. They were in a boat with their father Zebedee, preparing their nets. Jesus called them, and immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.

Read Matthew 19:28-30

Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first."

Read Mark 8:34-36

Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?"

Read John 14:15-20

If you love me, keep my commands. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever—the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. Before long, the world will not see me anymore, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live. On that day you will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you.

The opposite of faith is not disbelief but disobedience. In a season of heartache and challenge, this is a comforting truth.

Because we are in the dark we can recognize and see the light. I often want to skip ahead and only know the joyful delight of the Lord. In a season where it can hurt to keep hoping, it is important to reflect on what our hope is anchored in. Through scripture, we can keep close to Christ, even while we sit in hurt. In the brokenness of this world, we know disappointment and heartache. We may have disbelief that our hurt will be healed; doubt that we can persevere in the wait healing and hopes to fulfill. If we are honest, in our sorrow & impatience, we can doubt that Christ is enough. God meets us where we are.

When my fears are many and my faith is weak, rather than trying to will a change in my heart which only Christ can do, I focus on what I CAN do. I can show up. I can obey God's commands. When we rightly see God's commands as laws of compassion that anchor us to him, we can set our feelings aside and obey anyway. Obedience strengthens my faith and allows God to meet me where I am. This is not a call to "go through the motions" but it is a call to come before the Lord. To remember who He is and all He has done. To lay before Him our fears, doubts & heartbreak. The truth is that perseverance is hard, uncomfortable and not always wanted. In the midst of the brokenness our obedience is an act of faith. God's grace will unfold in his perfect time over our lives making perseverance possible in Christ.

I have participated in an ecumenical bible study for the last several years known as Bible Study Fellowship. Every week we have bible study "homework" to help us know and love God's word better. A recent lesson asked us to reference the verses listed above and share what God's Word says about His call to live by faith in Him. Here are mine: I wrote them out on a note card and have been referencing them this whole month. I encourage you to do the same.

- *Isaiah 41:8-10 Because we are chosen by God from the ends of the earth we do not need to fear. God will help & strengthen us.*
- *Matthew 4:18-22 God's call to live by faith in Him involves sacrifice but not seclusion from Him. He is our father and is with us always.*
- *Matthew 19:28-30 We will experience the renewal of all things, abundant blessings and eternal life. People are our purpose when we live by faith.*
- *Mark 8:34-36 Living by faith means giving my life 100% to God for safe keeping of my life and soul.*
- *John 14:15-20 My obedience & faithful living is an act of love. It offers me the forever presence of the Holy Spirit who shows me truth.*

Scripture encourages us to follow God's call to live by faith in Him. His loving truths encourage our obedience and show us where we can rightly anchor our hope.

Pray: Heavenly Father, I lay before you all of my fears, doubts, and heartbreaks. You have proven your love and faithfulness time and again; may I trust that your will be done in your timing. Amen.

December 13

3rd Sunday in Advent

"Do not be anxious about anything, but present your requests to God"
Philippians 4:6

Prayer for Illumination: God of love and power, you are revealed to us in your Word, in accounts of prophecy and fulfillment that direct our attention to Jesus Christ. Illumine us now as we hear your Word proclaimed, that we may open our hearts to him, yearn for his coming in glory, and serve him with joy. Amen.

Read Zephaniah 3:14–20

Sing, Daughter Zion; shout aloud, Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, Daughter Jerusalem! The LORD has taken away your punishment, he has turned back your enemy. The LORD, the King of Israel, is with you; never again will you fear any harm. On that day they will say to Jerusalem, "Do not fear, Zion; do not let your hands hang limp. The LORD your God is with you, the Mighty Warrior who saves. He will take great delight in you; in his love he will no longer rebuke you, but will rejoice over you with singing." "I will remove from you all who mourn over the loss of your appointed festivals, which is a burden and reproach for you. At that time I will deal with all who oppressed you. I will rescue the lame; I will gather the exiles. I will give them praise and honor in every land where they have suffered shame. At that time I will gather you; at that time I will bring you home. I will give you honor and praise among all the peoples of the earth when I restore your fortunes before your very eyes," says the LORD.

Read Philippians 4:4–7

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Read Luke 3:7–18

John said to the crowds coming out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire." "What should we do then?" the crowd asked. John answered, "Anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same." Even tax collectors came to be baptized. "Teacher," they asked, "what should we do?" "Don't collect any more than you are required to," he told them. Then some soldiers asked him, "And what should we do?" He replied, "Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely—be content with your pay." The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Messiah. John answered them all, "I baptize you with water. But one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire." And with many other words John exhorted the people and proclaimed the good news to them.

Closing Prayer: Stir up your power, O Lord, and with great might come among us; and, because we are sorely hindered by our sins, let your bountiful grace and mercy speedily help and deliver us; through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom, with you and the Holy Spirit, be honor and glory, now and for ever. *Amen.*¹¹

¹¹ Collect for the Third Sunday in Advent, Book of Common Prayer (1979)

Living Liturgically

~ the third week of Advent ~

Lighting of the Third Advent Candle

Jesus said, "I am the light of the world; the one who follows me will not walk in darkness but have the light of life."

We light this candle as a sign of the coming light of Christ.

By the tender mercy of our God, the rising sun will come to us from heaven, to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death. Strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give way; say to those with fearful hearts, "Be strong, do not fear; your God will come, he will come to save you." Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel. He will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they will live securely, for then his greatness will reach to the ends of the earth. And he will be our peace.

—Luke 1:68, 78-79; Isaiah 35:3-4, 7:14; Micah 4:4-5a

Come, Lord Jesus, our light and our salvation.

Let us walk in the light of the Lord.

Musical Response

to the tune of "O Come All Ye Faithful"

True God of true God, Light from Light Eternal,

lo, He shuns not the Virgin's womb;

Son of the Father, begotten, not created;

O come, let us adore him, O come, let us adore him,

O come let us adore him, Christ the Lord.

A Christmas Memory

from MUMC's 1991 Christmas Devotional

"I was about 5 years old and Mother took me to Eagles 5 & 10 Store Christmas shopping. I saw the prettiest red shiny pocketbook. I told Mother I hoped Santa would bring it to me for Christmas. Christmas morning, I found it under the tree. I tried to carry it but it was too big for me and dragged the floor. I wasn't too happy with my present. I knew better than to let anyone know I had asked for something I didn't want because money was tight and I had received what I had asked for. It was the shiny red color that had made me want it so bad. I learned at an early age don't ask for something unless you are sure that is what you want and don't be deceived by the outside looks and bright shiny colors. You might get and have to live with it for awhile."

—Elaine Butcher

Feasting & Festivities

December 21st was the traditional feast day for St. Thomas, before it was moved to July in 1969. On December 21st, the poor would go "gooding" door to door. Gooding is a little like trick-or-treating, in which homes were presented with the chance to do "good" to those who knocked. Gooding on St. Thomas day was called "Thomassing" and it usually involved singing. A-Thomassing, a-wassailing, and a-caroling aren't exactly the same, but all three involve going singing door to door near Christmas, so we'll call it "close enough." In the spirit of St. Thomas' day this week, find the chance to give to the poor, sing someone some carols, and enjoy a cup of Wassail!

Meal Blessing, 3rd Week of Advent

Lord, Jesus Christ, Son of David,
and radiant star of morning, come and
dispel the darkness of our night. Look with
mercy upon us who await your coming.
Give us our daily bread and grant us the
grace to share in the eternal banquet of
your kingdom. Amen.¹²

Wassail

Joyce Overton, Middlesettlements UMC's UIMW Cookbook

- 2 quarts apple cider
- 1 tsp allspice berries
- 2-3 sticks cinnamon
- 12 whole cloves
- 2/3 cup brown sugar
- Ground nutmeg to taste

Tie allspice, cinnamon, and cloves
in a bag. Combine cider and brown
sugar; heat, stirring until sugar
dissolves. Add spice bag; simmer
15-20 minutes. Remove bag. Serve
piping hot. Sprinkle with nutmeg.

¹² Adapted from "Advent: Week Two" in *Blessings of the Table: Mealtime Prayers Throughout the Year* by Brother Victor-Antoine d'Avilea-Latourrette.

Read Philippians 4:4-9¹³

*Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. **The Lord is near!!!!** Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. **And the God of peace will be with you!!!!***

Read

Peacemaking calls for courage, much more so than warfare... 'only the tenacious'... say yes to encounter & no to conflict; yes to negotiations & no to hostilities; yes to respect for agreements & no to acts of provocation.¹⁴

As we step, perhaps heavily, day by day towards Christmas 2020, this idea of purposeful peace-making seems especially important. I do not remember another year during my life in which everything felt like such turmoil. Even after 9/11, there was not this same sense of people being at odds with one another. Within families and between close friends, peace seems far away, whether because of the worries or differences of opinion about COVID or politics or any other thing of this world that stirs us up in fear, anger, mistrust, or division. And yet, still we are called to be a people who seek out peace, who trust in the LORD as the Prince of Peace. From His coming as a Baby in the manger, through surrendering as the Redeeming Lamb, to the yet-to-be-fulfillment of a new Heaven and a new Earth that thankfully will not be broken like this one, we CAN trust in Him as the center of peace that passes our ability to understand – even in 2020, just like other Christians have throughout history and around the world when facing times much more troubled than this one.

Thankfully, this Scripture reminds us how to do that. Here's the recipe according to Paul in writing to the church at Philippi on how to RE-JOY ourselves:

1. Pre-set your mind on the things above instead of the things of this world.
2. Mix together thoughts that are true, noble, right, pure, admirable, lovely, excellent, and praiseworthy.
3. Present each and every situation to God with prayer and thanksgiving, but be sure to clean away and toss all that unnecessary anxiety. It just gets in the way.
4. Be GENTLE. With your neighbors and even with yourself because it helps the peace to develop and spread out to everyone.
5. Now DO what we saw God do and use what He taught us. To be sure you are doing it right, draw up really close to Him as often as possible – marinate in His peace because He IS near.

¹³ *Emphasis mine*

¹⁴ Pope Francis, June 2014, at Vatican when he hosted his first peace conference with presidents of Israel (Shimon Peres) & Palestine (Mahmoud Abbas), as quoted in *The Francis Miracle* by John Allen, Jr, pg 83.

If we all do these things, we will again be able to REJOICE together as One Body of Christ, to truly be at peace with our brothers and sisters, and within our own hearts and minds.

Pray the words of a song that is often played at Christmas, even though it isn't a traditional Christmas carol¹⁵:

*Let there be peace on earth
And let it begin with me;
Let there be peace on earth,
The peace that was meant to be.*

*With God as our Father
Brothers all are we,
Let me walk with my brother
In perfect harmony.*

*Let peace begin with me,
Let this be the moment now;
With every step I take,
Let this be my solemn vow:*

*To take each moment and live each moment
In peace eternally.
Let there be peace on earth
And let it begin with me.*

¹⁵ "Let There Be Peace on Earth" by Jill Jackson and Sy Miller ©1955, 1983.

December 15

from MUMC's 1991 Advent Devotional
Mable Love Brown (1936 - 2018)

Read Matthew 6:19-21

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

This past year, I've spent hours and hours sorting through box after box filled with cards, letters, newspaper clippings, and mementoes collected and saved by my mother for over half a century.

Mounds of fabric, quilt pieces, draws full of craft items, a closet full of clothes; cabinets full of dishes, pots, pans, silver; appliances, recipe books, pictures, important papers, jewelry, quilts, hundreds of skeins of yarn for afghans never made...and hundreds of keepsakes...all collected during her lifetime...representing an immeasurable amount of time, resources, effort...and love.

She kept EVERYTHING...not for its own sake...but to use to make or give to someone else. What she reserved for herself were only the basic essentials and keepsakes from her friends and family. The rest she gave away...or was prepared to do so.

I couldn't begin to count the quilts, afghans, pillows, nor the hundreds of other items she made and gave away...nor the many times she boxed up clothing, linens, food, whatever she had...and gave liberally to folks in need...to families whose homes had burned...when there was a death in the family...or illness...she gave to newlyweds...to children...to other widows...to college students...whenever or whatever the need arose.

As I tenderly sorted through all that she left behind, I was reminded again and again of her love...her devotion...and her sacrifice...for her family, her friends, and for many whom she didn't even know...and I realized that, in spite of how many things she left HERE, how very much bigger and greater the mound of treasures must be that she had "laid up for herself in heaven."

As we look forward to Christmas this year, and ponder the subject of "gift-giving", may we remember the words of Jesus, and through the giving of ourselves AND our gifts to others, after His example and in His name, may we also "lay up for ourselves treasures in Heaven."

Pray: Heavenly Father, may my treasure be you and you alone. Grant me a spirit of generosity and selflessness, that all I have and do may be for your work and glory. Amen.

December 16

Rev. Jason Gattis,
Smoky Mountain District Superintendent

Read Romans 5:1-5

Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.

In a book titled *Different Seasons*, the master at crafting a hair raising story of fear, Stephen King, steps away from his defining genre and sets before the reader a collection of four novellas each tied to a season of the year. The first of the four stories presents Hope Springs Eternal through the telling of *Rita Hayworth and Shawshank Redemption*. Most people know the story as a result of the 1994 film adaptation titled *The Shawshank Redemption*.

The protagonist, Andy DuFresne, is serving a double life prison sentence. He has befriended a man named Red (who, in the book, is a fiery red haired irishman) and one day over lunch broaches the subject of Hope. Red (who also is serving a life sentence) reveals he has long ago given up on Hope when he says to his friend, "Hope is a dangerous thing. Hope can drive a man insane."

The year 2020 feels like a year that Hope has driven us insane. The pandemic couldn't seem to be enough, so life through some extra doses of hurricanes and wild fires in addition to the most polarizing Presidential Election of our lifetime. And COVID-19 does not seem to want to ease down at year end so we're having to face the probability of celebrating the holidays without traditional annual events and gatherings with friends and family.

If there is ever a time we need a reminder of the Hope found in Romans, it is now. Be sure to notice in verses three and four that Hope is produced at the end; which leads us to see that our previous life experiences have produced the Hope that is needed today. Knowing that God has ushered us through previous setbacks gives us Hope. God will because God has before.

Red is released on parole and as he faces a very different world from what he had known forty years before, he comes to a crossroads where he has to decide if he is going to "get busy living or get busy dying." Red remembers words from his friend, Andy, and chooses his path: "Remember, hope is a good thing, maybe the best of things, and no good thing ever dies." - Andy DuFresne

Prayer: Gracious God, on a harsh and difficult night over two thousand years ago you provided Hope to a young couple awaiting the arrival of a special baby. May that same Hope be with us now during the harsh and difficult times of today. Amen

The Joy of Light

Read 2 Corinthians 4:6

*For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness',
made His light shine in our hearts
to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God
in the face of Christ.*

Have you experienced a darkness in which you actually felt fearful? Years ago, when our son Kirk was only 1, we spent a few nights in a cabin in the mountains near Prescott, Arizona. We decided to take a walk to enjoy the moon and stars, (not realizing the night was both moonless and starless!) We had walked only a few yards from our cabin when the darkness was so great that we literally could not see each other; Kirk began crying, and we headed back for the blessing of light!

The coming of Jesus is equated with the coming of light. Isaiah told of a "great light" yet to come (Is. 9:1-2), for "The people who walk in darkness"; promising "Those who live in a dark land, the light will shine on them". John's gospel (1:1-9) assures us Jesus is "The true light, who gives light to everyone". Jesus is "That Light (which) shines in the darkness, yet the darkness did not overcome it."

Jesus Himself boldly stated, "I am the light of the world. Anyone who follows Me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (John 8:12). We are aware of the darkness surrounding us, but we can take heart: "For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light" (Ephesians 5:8).

We celebrate the coming of light into this dark and weary world. Whether we combine Advent devotions with an early Christmas tree and carols (as we do!) or observe the Advent practice of patient waiting with self-preparation (as do many others), we are Light in the Lord!! That is truly worth celebrating!

Pray: *God of light and glory, thank you for shining light in our hearts through Jesus. We rejoice in your work and goodness. May we walk as your children, shining your light to our world. Amen.*

○ come, thou Wisdom from on high, and order all things far and nigh;
to us the path of knowledge show and cause us in her ways to go.

○ come, ○ Come, great Lord of might¹⁶, who to thy tribes on Sinai's height
in ancient times once gave the law in cloud and majesty and awe.

○ come, thou Root of Jesse's tree, and ensign of thy people be;
before Thee rulers silent fall; all peoples on thy mercy call.

○ come, thou Key of David, come, and open wide our heavenly home.
The captives from their prison free, and conquer death's deep misery.

○ come, thou Dayspring, come and cheer our spirit by thy justice here;
disperse the gloomy clouds of night, and death's dark shadows put to flight.

○ come, Desire of nations¹⁷ bind all peoples in one heart and mind.
From dust thou brought us forth to life; deliver us from earthly strife.

○ come, ○ come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel,
that mourns in lonely exile here until the Son of God appear.

If you have ever wondered about the inspiration behind the hymn "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel," wonder no more. The answer is the Great Antiphons, also called the O Antiphons, which have been recited in the Church during the last seven days of Advent since the 6th century.

Antiphons (from the Greek words for "opposite" and "voice") are short Church chants sung as refrains, almost like a call and response. Generally, they are sung or said in response to a sung/said scripture. The church has sung antiphons for thousands of years, influenced by the ancient synagogue's practice of chanting the psalms.

Beginning on December 17 and ending on December 23, each day's special antiphon was recited before and after the nightly reading of Luke 1:46-55. There are seven total, each calling upon Jesus under a different title: "O Wisdom," "O Adonai," "O Root of Jesse," "O Key of David," "O Dayspring," "O King of the Gentiles," and "O Emmanuel." Together these titles retrace the influence of the Son of God on sacred history even before He became Incarnate.

In their different ways, all the O Antiphons pray for Jesus to return. And in a lovely twist, the O Antiphons have a "secret message" answer to the prayers. Take the first letter of these Latin titles from each antiphon (Sapientia, Adonai, Radix, Clavis, Oriens, Rex, Emmanuel), and you will see that they form an acrostic that, when read backward, spells ERO CRAS—Latin for "I will be [there] tomorrow!"

¹⁶ Adonai is Hebrew for "the LORD"

¹⁷ A literal translation of the Latin Gentium is "Gentiles" but is understood scripturally to mean "nations."

December 18

Karen Lewis

Read James 1:17

Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning.

2020....where do I start...I could easily list ways that this year has been rough and undesirable. That wouldn't be a very uplifting devotion and I would never be asked to write a devotion again! I don't know anyone that can say 2020 is their best year yet. Some days, I get into conversations with friends and family about how God has still shown up in so many ways this year and many of us will be changed forever.

I have spent some time thinking about the changes we have made due to Covid and how not all of them are bad. It would be a shame to go through all of this and not reflect on what God is teaching us. I mean seriously:

- Does Walmart really need to be opened 24-7?
- Do I really need to be so busy?
- If I need to stay home for a few days, weeks, or months with my family I should make the best of it.
- Some people are alone for many reasons and need to be checked on and showed love.
- Fear can make people say and do things they normally would never do.

We have to focus on how God continues to be faithful. Now that we are in the Advent season, more than ever we need to seek him and know that he will show up!

Pray: Dear Lord, please help me to stay focused on Christ during Advent and always. Help me to reflect and grow as I go through challenges and fear. Help me to show faith and love in all situations!

But Only Say the Word

Read Matthew 8:5-10, 13

When he entered Capernaum, a centurion came forward to him, appealing to him, "Lord, my servant is lying paralyzed at home, suffering terribly." And he said to him, "I will come and heal him." But the centurion replied, "Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof, but only say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I too am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. And I say to one, 'Go,' and he goes, and to another, 'Come,' and he comes, and to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it." When Jesus heard this, he marveled and said to those who followed him, "Truly, I tell you, with no one in Israel have I found such faith. And to the centurion Jesus said, "Go; let it be done for you as you have believed." And the servant was healed at that very moment.

We live in crazy times. Worldwide pandemic, protests and riots, a contentious election and when we needed unity most, even the United Methodist Church is not so united. It's hard not to think the world is unraveling in a way that it hasn't ever before, only it's not. History shows us that all the above is just a continuous cycle of mankind.

The centurion was used to commanding men. He understood the power of the spoken word and the authority given to him to speak it. He was in the military and commanded men to do things physically possible. But somehow, he understood and had faith, that Jesus had the authority and power to command things physically impossible. He believed that Jesus had so much power and authority that His **word** would be sufficient for the healing. When Jesus spoke diseases were cured, blind people saw, and dead people were brought back to life. The centurion knew that all Jesus had to do was say the **word** and his servant would be healed, and because of this Jesus affords him one of the highest praises in the New Testament.

In this Advent Season we look back on Jesus's coming in celebration, while at the same time looking forward in eager anticipation for when he will "but only say the **word**" and return in glory to consummate his eternal kingdom.

Pray: Almighty God, who was, and is, and is to come, you are worthy to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being. Remind me of your power and faithfulness, that I may trust your word, now and always.

December 20

4th Sunday in Advent

"No word from God will ever fail"

Luke 1:37

Prayer for Illumination: Emmanuel, as we wait for your return, help us to see your glory and love through the reading of your Word. Amen.

Read Micah 5:2-5a

But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times." Therefore Israel will be abandoned until the time when she who is in labor bears a son, and the rest of his brothers return to join the Israelites. He will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the *LORD*, in the majesty of the name of the *LORD* his God. And they will live securely, for then his greatness will reach to the ends of the earth. And he will be our peace.

Read Philippians 1:3-11

I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus. It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart and, whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God's grace with me. God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus. And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God.

Read Luke 1:26-35, 37-38, 46-55

In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you." Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end." "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?" The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. For no word from God will ever fail." "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled." Then the angel left her. And Mary said: "My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me—holy is his name. His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation. He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as he promised our ancestors."

Closing Prayer: Purify our conscience, Almighty God, by your daily visitation, that your Son Jesus Christ, at his coming, may find in us a mansion prepared for himself; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*¹⁸

¹⁸ Collect for the Fourth Sunday in Advent, *Book of Common Prayer* (1979)

Living Liturgically

✿ the fourth week of Advent ✿

Lighting of the Fourth Advent Candle

Jesus said, "I am the light of the world; the one who follows me will not walk in darkness but have the light of life."

We light this candle as a sign of the coming light of Christ.

By the tender mercy of our God, the rising sun will come to us from heaven, to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death. Strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give way; say to those with fearful hearts, "Be strong, do not fear; your God will come, he will come to save you." Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel. He will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they will live securely, for then his greatness will reach to the ends of the earth. He will be our peace. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the greatness 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.

—Luke 1:68, 78-79; Isaiah 35:3-4, 7:14, 9:6b-7; Micah 4:4-5a

Come, Lord Jesus,
our light and our salvation.

Let us walk in the light of the Lord.

Musical Response

to the tune of "O Come All Ye Faithful"

True God of true God, Light from Light Eternal,
lo, He shuns not the Virgin's womb;
Son of the Father, begotten, not created;
O come, let us adore him,
O come, let us adore him,
O come let us adore him, Christ the Lord.

Meal Blessing for the 4th Week of Advent

Behold, the time of our salvation is at hand, for the Virgin approaches to give birth to her Son. Be glad and rejoice, O Bethlehem, for from you the Lord shall shine forth as the dawn. Blessed be you, Lord Jesus Christ, you see the need we have of your saving help. You come to visit us to heal all our wounds. Grant your blessings on this food prepared for our nourishment, and may we find consolation in your forthcoming visitation. Amen.

Christmastide Feasting & Festivities

Finally, Christmas is almost here! Christmas Day begins the 12 Days of Christmas and is followed by 11 more days of rejoicing. If you've been rushed and harried this Advent with all of the "getting ready" you've been doing for Christmas, give yourself a breather. You've been doing exactly what Advent is about ("getting ready") and now it's time to rest and rejoice. If Christmas Day isn't perfect (schedules, in-laws, exhaustion, family can't make it in until later, presents seem to win over a focus on Jesus, etc.), take a big breath: there are 11 more days to do what helps you rejoice in the coming of Jesus. Plan for ways to rest, rejoice, and make merry for the next 12 Days that are what you've not yet had time to do. After all, we're celebrating that, "for us and our salvation," God would come down from heaven & become incarnate.

If you're looking for ideas:

- Try singing the 12 Days of Christmas at least 1x!
- Attend a Christmas Eve and/or Christmas Day Service. If you can't make it out, read the Christmas story at home and sing a few hymns.
- 12/26 is St. Stephen's, remembering the Servant Martyr of Acts 6 & 7. Traditionally, it's the day on which the abundance of Christmas is shared with the less fortunate and the "poor boxes" of the church were emptied and distributed to the needy (hence the term "Boxing Day" that you see on your calendars). In honor of Stephen, read his story in scripture and pray for or donate to the poor. If you've received nice gifts that you didn't need, consider passing them onto charity, as well as any items you need to clear out to make more room. You might also want to sing with gusto the hymn "Good King Wenceslaus," which is about St. Wenceslaus' actions "on the feast of Stephen."
- 12/28 marks Holy Innocents Day, which remembers the part of the Christmas story we'd probably rather forget: the deaths of the baby boys in Bethlehem at the hand of King Herod. It's a day to remember how others suffer when we act selfishly, and traditionally, a day to pray for children.

A Prayer for Christmas Eve

O God, you have caused this holy night to shine with the brightness of the true Light: Grant that we, who have known the mystery of that Light on earth, may also enjoy him perfectly in heaven; where with you and the Holy Spirit he lives and reigns, one God, in glory everlasting. *Amen.*

Thankfulness and Prayer

Read Philippians 1:3-11

I thank my God upon every remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine making request for you all with joy, for your fellowship in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ; just as it is right for me to think this of you all, because I have you in my heart, inasmuch as both in my chains and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel, you all are partakers with me of grace. For God is my witness, how greatly I long for you all with the affection of Jesus Christ. And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in knowledge and all discernment, that you may approve the things that are excellent, that you may be sincere and without offense till the day of Christ, being filled with the fruits of righteousness which are by Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.

Three Meanings of Advent:

1. The coming or foretelling of Jesus birth
 2. Jesus coming into our hearts through the Holy Spirit
 3. Thankfulness and preparing our hearts and celebrating the future for the return of Jesus.
- Paul's letter to the Philippians correlates with the third meaning of Advent.

In this passage, Paul is seated on the floor of a dingy room in Rome.

Chains are on his hands and feet, and a guard from the Roman army is chained to him. Paul has every right to be in a bad mood, to gripe, wail, and feel nothing but despair. He could complain and make his petition to God, but instead he writes (dictates to Timothy) a letter to the saints in Philippi which today is still known as the treatise on joy. In his letter, Paul tells the disciples of Philippi how thankful he is for them and their love offering, which makes them participants in his work. However, the overriding theme of his letter is their devotion to Jesus Christ and their continued ministry of the gospel. Likewise, Paul's unwavering love of Christ and the saints of Philippi are also an example for us today. As we navigate through our daily lives and its barriers, we would do well to keep Paul and his strength, devotion, and perseverance in our thoughts. "Coming to Rome as a prisoner had turned out to be a help rather than a hindrance in making Christ known in the Imperial City. In prison or in Paradise, Christ was Paul's life and joy" (Halley).

When I began looking for the scripture that I would use for this devotional, I read through 5-6 really good Advent verses that our pastor supplied. Many were ones that I had heard before and loved, but I chose this scripture from Philippians because it reminded me of how important it is to keep God in the forefront of your life even in trying times. For me as a teacher and parent, I have found this year to be extremely stressful and full of uncertainties. Many of my colleagues and students have been out of school for COVID. The school year as a whole for me and my daughter has been everything but normal. The fun trips and car shows that my husband and I usually attend have been cancelled. Everything is now virtual- on Zoom or Google Meet, and forget having a relaxing few days laughing and shopping with a group of your friends from other parts of the country. I have not been imprisoned like Paul, but like all of you, many limitations have been placed on me and my family due to the pandemic, and the list continues to grow. As we observe this Advent season, Paul's lessons of joy and encouragement keep us centered with hope and thankfulness. They help us to know that in all circumstances, God is with us and guiding us.

Pray: Great and Merciful God, thank you for your constant presence and faithful guidance. Strengthen me, that my love and discernment may "abound" and that I will be found faithful on the day of Christ's return.

December 22

Jason Roe

Read Luke 1:30-38

But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."

"How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"

The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. For no word from God will ever fail."

"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled."

Then the angel left her.

Do you remember the moment when Christ came alive in you? During this time of year I often stop and think about Mary, especially when the angel visits her with a powerful invitation from God. I like to imagine that this young woman of deep faith, sitting quietly in her room, becomes aware of a radiant divine light of joy encompassing her. A deep feeling of God's unconditional love enfolds her, offering hope and reassurance that "all will be well" despite her "earthly" concerns. Light and love fills her soul, giving her courage to say "yes" to the mystery of the unknown; "yes" to the birth of God's Son within her; "yes" to sharing in the joy of God's plan of salvation.

How can we, too, say "yes" to God so that we can be more alive and aware of that same divine light and limitless love growing within us as we journey deeper in relationship with God?

When I take time to practice patience and "wait" in silence and stillness I realize God is born anew in me each day:

I listen for and hear God's "music" within me and others;

I let go of being in control and open myself completely to God, warts and all, knowing that I am always precious in God's sight;

I learn to trust without asking "why" knowing that God is always with me despite my fears;

May we each find time daily to be still, to wait, to delight with God and, like Mary, to say "yes" to God's birth in us.

Pray: Thank you Lord for sending your Son and coming alive inside of Mary. Lord please come alive inside of me so that I may truly be the light of Christ!! Amen.

December 23

Robin Turnmire

Read Luke 1:46-55

And Mary said: "My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me—holy is his name. His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation. He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as he promised our ancestors."

Many of you may be quite familiar with Mary's joyful prayer that burst forth from her lips after her cousin Elizabeth acknowledged that her own son, John, recognized coming into the presence of the King of all creation and leapt in her womb. This year, I realized that these poetic words reached further back in the history of God's people. Recently I have started listening to the Bible as a way of studying His Word differently. I was finishing up Ruth, which then led right into Samuel, and I was able to let it keep playing. As I heard these words, I paused and replayed them about 3-4 times because they sounded so familiar. Eventually, I realized it was a lot like Mary's Song (the "Magnificat") but these were words of Samuel's mother after making a sacrifice to sanctify her little boy for lifelong service with the priests. Then when I found the passage in Luke and glanced at a Bible commentary, I realized that Mary certainly would have known Hannah's story, and that her praise was inspired by Hannah, the mother of one of Israel's great prophets.

Hannah's Triumphant Prayer (1 Samuel 2:1-10):

And Hannah prayed and said: "My heart rejoices in the LORD; my horn is exalted in the LORD. I smile at my enemies, because I rejoice in Your salvation. No one is holy like the LORD, for there is none besides You, nor is there any rock like our God. Do not boast so proudly, or let arrogant words come out of your mouth, for the LORD is a God of knowledge, and actions are weighed by him. The bows of the warriors are broken, but the feeble are clothed with strength. Those who are full hire themselves out for food, but those who are starving hunger no more. The woman who is childless gives birth to seven, but the woman with many sons pines away. The LORD brings death and gives life; he sends some down to Sheol, and He raises others up. The LORD brings poverty and gives wealth; he humbles and he exalts. He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the beggar from the ash heap, to set them among princes and make them inherit the throne of glory. For the pillars of the earth are the LORD's, And He has set the world upon them. He guards the steps of his faithful ones, but the wicked perish in darkness, for a person does not prevail by his own strength. Those who oppose the LORD will be shattered; he will thunder in the heavens against them. The LORD will judge the ends of the earth. He will give power to his king; he will lift up the horn of his anointed."

We know God chose Mary for her faithfulness, and we see that faithfulness in a new way by studying these two separate mothers' prayers. We can see the Spirit leading her to weave these ancient words into a spontaneous, eloquent declaration of God's new miracle.

Hannah spoke these words when her son was being completely set apart to live a holy life, when he was just old enough to be away from her. She, who had spent many long years praying for him, took him promptly to live with the priests as soon as realistic because she trusted God with the gift of this son He had entrusted to her. Mary then used her words to help begin to make sense of carrying the Holy Son. She didn't just recite them, which in itself would demonstrate faithful knowledge of the Lord's provision for His people. Mary listened to the Spirit and spoke aloud an exclamation of praise that integrated God's heart of love from generations before with this new and wondrous revelation that God was about to make to His people after centuries without direct communication. These passages highlight that God is always the same and also always reaching further and further to close the gap and bring His people back into His arms.

As we journey together towards our annual celebration of God's Humble Incarnation, let us search out the Scripture and look with fresh eyes to remind ourselves that:

God was... [faithful, just, true, good, powerful, merciful, all of it] in the past

and is... [faithful, just, true, good, powerful, merciful, all of it] RIGHT NOW

& is to come [faithful, just, true, good, powerful, merciful, all of it] forever.

God is good, all the time. And all the time, God is good!

Pray: Holy Lord, may we all prepare for your coming as faithfully as Mary. May we also wait as patiently as Hannah and respond to Your Goodness just as promptly as she did. Help us these season to remember that You are timeless. Your truths are absolutely still relevant and can help us make sense of our world because You are our Living Word. Let us listen to Your Spirit blowing fresh new revelations into our world-weary hearts. Amen.

December 24

Jake Turnmire

Read Isaiah 1:1-4

The vision of Isaiah the son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah. Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth! For the Lord has spoken: "I have nourished and brought up children, and they have rebelled against me; the ox knows its owner and the donkey its master's manger; but Israel does not know, my people do not consider." Alas, sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, a brood of evildoers, children who are corrupters! They have forsaken the Lord, they have provoked to anger the Holy One of Israel, they have turned away backward.

As we prepare our hearts for the coming of the Messiah we are drawn into the familiar. It is the time of lights, joyous music, warm spiced scents and holiday movies that melt our hearts. Images of snowmen, Christmas Trees, and red garments trimmed in white become commonplace; and for the majority of the world the familiar nativity scene. For those of faith we are stirred with thoughts of that night that would forever change the world. Songs tell us of the angels singing, shepherds visit, the animals and the small child...the living breathing incarnate of the Alpha and Omega. The ocean compressed into a thimble. Yet with all these things, something is missing.

On this night as all creation strained with labored pause the world was introduced to hope as the voice of the Almighty broke through the night constrained by human limitation. Rejoice! Rejoice! All of creation would feel his presence. The promise made to his parents, the awe in the shepherds' eyes and in their stories, the beasts, and even the very rock and earth...but missing here are the righteous and faithful. I speak not of Mary and Joseph or the Shepherds, but of the proclaimed keepers of the Law. In the story of the Magi we confirm that the coming of the Messiah was not new to the keepers of the Law. Far from it, the story of the Messiah, the longing for a new Deliverer had been with them for hundreds of years. They knew the location...did they not see the star? Did they not hear the stories of the shepherds? Did they not give pause to the miracle that was on their doorstep...or had they simply become complacent with life as it was?

It's easy for us to become like these Law-keepers. To become so settled in the day to day of the new normal that we are blind to the promises before us. The rush of gift buying, mastering Grammy's pie crust, or simply seeing how much of that crust we can consume with various fillings...we can all become comfortable with where things are and content with our surroundings. We become comfortable with the poverty, the hungry, the aching brokenness around us and we can easily stop looking for the fulfillment that is only found through God. We must remain diligent and ever watchful for his signs, his presence, and his blessings. The Alpha and Omega is coming. Creation yearns for his fulfillment. Are we listening for his voice to split the sky once more? Are we longing for it? Look to the sky and seek him for the Messiah is coming.

Pray: Mighty One, Creator of all...hear us. Keep our eyes ever watchful, our ears ever open, and our hearts ever longing for fulfillment that only you can provide. Create in us a new heart, one that does not get lost in distraction. Forge in us a devotion such as yours that we may ever be faithful.

December 25

Kathy Puckett

Read Luke 2:1-20

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to their own town to register. So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them. And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests." When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about." So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

I remember Christmases where childish excitement in anticipation of gifts overrode the meaning of Christmas.

I remember the Christmas I got a Tiny Tears doll at the age of four. I still have her and she now looks like one of those dolls from a scary movie because she has shriveled up with age. I remember the Christmas I got a red ballerina outfit. Or maybe I remember the 8mm film my Daddy made of me modeling it.

I remember the Christmas I walked by the Christmas tree on my way to the bathroom in the middle of the night and hiding my eyes so I could not see the gifts because I did not want to ruin the surprise and joy of seeing all the gifts for the first time on Christmas morning.

I remember the Christmas we had a play at church. I was around 8 and played the part of a poverty-stricken little girl. I remember laying my head in the lap of the girl who played my mother and saying some sweet lines about what Christmas was really all about.

I remember the Christmas that every gift I received was a book. I got lots and lots of books the year that I turned 12. I received copies of the classics like Little Women and mysteries

and books about dogs and horses. I loved it because that's exactly what I asked for. I still have the classics and the pages look old – that was a long time ago.

I remember all the Christmases that I sang in Christmas cantatas at church. The cantatas have always been a highlight of Christmas for me as an adult. I have the true meaning of Christmas in my heart with each word sung.

I remember each Christmas Eve service and how special it is to light a candle and sing Silent Night at the end.

I remember the Christmas my Daddy and Mama were not present for the first time in my life. We changed how we did everything that year because we could not bear to do things our traditional way without them.

I remember just last Christmas, celebrating Christmas two times, first with my family on Christmas Eve and then with Joel's family on Christmas Day. Lots of little new faces in our family that are enjoying Christmas time much the same way I did as a child, only with a modern twist.

What do you remember about each Christmas? This year may be the most different Christmas ever for all of us because of the Covid-19 pandemic. We love our traditions, our special church services, our family time. But don't mourn for the things we might not be able to do this year. Instead, search for the things that mean the most, the things of the heart, the things we receive from Jesus Christ. Although our church and family traditions are valuable, what is best and most important about Christmas is still that tiny baby in a manger at the beginning of his earthly journey to bring us salvation. That's what we should remember and celebrate most about Christmas.

Blessings to your family this Christmas.

***Pray:** Dear Father, whatever our circumstances this year, fill our hearts with the true meaning of Christmas. Help us to not mourn what is not happening this year, but to embrace and enjoy the good in what is happening. Help us to put our focus on that tiny baby in the manger. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

December 26

from MUMC's 1989 Advent Devotional
Mary Blanche Brown (1920 - 2017)

Read Matthew 2:10

When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy.

For years I had taken this family of two sisters and a brother coconut cakes, but as the years went by, one of the sisters died. On this Christmas, it was very cold. Snow was around five to six inches deep, but I had baked my cakes as usual, wondering all the time if I would be able to get it delivered. Christmas morning we put chains on the car and drove to their house. I had to walk almost a fourth of a mile from the road. When I got to the house, I was very cold, my feet were wet. I knocked on the door and the brother welcomed me with a big smile and the words, "I knew you would come."

What a joy I would have missed if I had not gone.

On our Savior's birthday, we can think, pray, and give gifts to those from whom we expect nothing in return. Then Christmas will become more joyful and meaningful.

Pray: *God, thank you for Jesus, your redemptive gift of love.*

December 27

Sunday, the Third Day of Christmas

"Sing to the Lord, for He has done marvelous things"

Psalm 98:1

Prayer for Illumination: Mighty God, the shepherds of old were full of your praises, saying that all they saw was mirrored by what they had been told. Move among us now with your Holy Spirit, that we too might hear and experience the wonder and joy of the living Word in our lives. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Read Isaiah 52:7-10

How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, "Your God reigns!" Listen! Your watchmen lift up their voices; together they shout for joy. When the LORD returns to Zion, they will see it with their own eyes. Burst into songs of joy together, you ruins of Jerusalem, for the LORD has comforted his people, he has redeemed Jerusalem. The LORD will lay bare his holy arm in the sight of all the nations, and all the ends of the earth will see the salvation of our God.

Read Psalm 98

Sing to the LORD a new song, for he has done marvelous things; his right hand and his holy arm have worked salvation for him. The LORD has made his salvation known and revealed his righteousness to the nations. He has remembered his love and his faithfulness to Israel; all the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God. Shout for joy to the LORD, all the earth, burst into jubilant song with music; make music to the LORD with the harp, with the harp and the sound of singing, with trumpets and the blast of the ram's horn—shout for joy before the LORD, the King. Let the sea resound, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it. Let the rivers clap their hands, let the mountains sing together for joy; let them sing before the LORD, for he comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world in righteousness and the peoples with equity.

Read Hebrews 1:1-12

In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven. So he became as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs. For to which of the angels did God ever say, "You are my Son; today I have become your Father" (Psalm 2:7)? Or again, "I will be his Father, and he will be my Son" (2 Sam. 7:14, 1 Chron. 17:13)? And again, when God brings his firstborn into the world, he says, "Let all God's angels worship him" (Deut. 32:43). In speaking of the angels he says, "He makes his angels spirits, and his servants flames of fire" (Psalm 104:4). But about the Son he says, "Your throne, O God, will last forever and ever; a scepter of justice will be the scepter of your kingdom. You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; therefore God, your God, has set you above your companions by anointing you with the oil of joy" (Psalm 45:6, 7). He also says, "In the beginning, Lord, you laid the foundations of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands. They will perish, but you remain; they will all wear out like a garment. You will roll them up like a robe; like a garment they will be changed. But you remain the same, and your years will never end" (Psalm 102:25-27).

Closing Prayer: Almighty God, you have given your only-begotten Son to take our nature upon him, and to be born of a virgin: Grant that we, who have been born again and made your children by adoption and grace, may daily be renewed by your Holy Spirit; through our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom with you and the same Spirit be honor and glory, now and for ever. *Amen.*¹⁹

¹⁹ Collect for Christmas, *Book of Common Prayer* (1979)

Living Liturgically

✿ Christmastide ✿

Meal Blessing for Christmastide

God, our Father, we bless you. You so loved the world that you have sent your Son to us, Jesus, the Word made flesh and the Light that dispels all darkness. As we rejoice in you, we ask you to bless this table and the food we share until that day when we all shall feast at your eternal banquet. Amen.²⁰

Children's Christmas Punch

Maria Von Trapp

(yes, the real Maria Von Trapp)

1 quart grape juice

2 quarts water

2 cups sugar

½ tsp whole cloves

1 stick cinnamon

Rind & juice of 2 lemons

Rind & juice of 2 oranges

Boil sugar, water, lemon rind, and spices until flavored.

Mix with the rest of the ingredients, boil 5 minutes, and serve hot in punch glasses.

Christmastide Feasting & Festivities

1. Your "Advent" part of the Advent Wreath is done, but starting on 12/25 the white center candle is lit as you remember Jesus, the Light of the World, who dispels our darkness. Keep lighting your Christ Candle through 1/5, the 12th Day of Christmas.
2. December 31st, New Year's Eve, is also known as "Watchnight"—a night to offer prayers of confession and renew commitments to God as the New Year turns over. If you're someone who makes resolutions at the New Year, accompany them with your prayers and consider setting a new spiritual discipline or habit.
3. If you didn't go a-Wassailing before (not to be confused with a-Thomassing, ha!), New Year's was the traditional time to go from house to house singing, offering God's blessing on the occupants for the forthcoming year, and being treated to bowls of spiced ale. Wassail (from "Waes Hael!") means "Good health!" and is probably still a good thing to shout to someone. If you don't physically go a-Wassailing this New Year, consider wishing good health upon people in your prayers.
4. January 1st marks a strange but important day: the day of the circumcision and naming of Jesus (Luke 2:22-40). 8 days after his birth, Jesus' parents took him to the Temple to be circumcised as required by Old Testament Law. The church has continued to remember this day as the "nameday" of Jesus, celebrating how there is "no other name but the name of Jesus" for our salvation. Sing one of the hymns about the Name of Jesus and give thanks!

"What is Christmas?"

"Giving things" – Brad Love; "Getting things" – Ben Love; "Presents like Tombstone tackle" – Dale Love; "Giving presents" – Katie Cox; "Santa Claus" – Emily Hooks; "Santa Claus" – Kirby Jenkins

"What is your favorite thing to do at Christmas?"

"Play in the snow" – Brad; "Play in the snow" – Ben; "Play with Tombstone tackle (guess what Dale is getting for Christmas)" – Dale; "Sing" – Katie; "Play with my cat" – Emily; "See what Santa brought" – Kirby

"If you had 1 wish for Christmas - not a toy- what would you wish?"

"I wish I was bigger" – Brad; "Don't know" – Ben; "I wish I could whip somebody" – Dale; "Santa could go see all the children" – Katie; "Everyone could have a sandwich" – Emily; "A Genie in a lamp" – Kirby

1988 Children's Choir, from MUMC's 1988 Advent Devotional

Here we come a-wassailing
Among the leaves so green;
Here we come a-wandering
So fair to be seen.

Love and joy come to you,
And to you your wassail too;
And God bless you and send
you a Happy New Year.
And God send you a Happy
New Year!

²⁰ Adapted from the Christmas Season Blessings found in *Blessings of the Table: Mealtime Prayers Throughout the Year* by Brother Victor-Antoine d'Avilea-Latourrette.

The Smell of a Real Christmas Tree²¹

Read ¹ John 5:1–5, 19–20

Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and everyone who loves the father loves his child as well. This is how we know that we love the children of God: by loving God and carrying out his commands. In fact, this is love for God: to keep his commands. And his commands are not burdensome, for everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world? Only the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God. We know that we are children of God, and that the whole world is under the control of the evil one. We know also that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true. And we are in him who is true by being in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life.

I grew up on artificial.

Whenever it was time to put up the Christmas tree, we would march down to the garage and pull out the huge worn and torn cardboard box that looked like it had been through a battle. Inside was a thicket of pointy branches with color coded metal spokes. They were green for the longest ones, red for medium and white for short brushy ones for the top part.

My mother, sister and I would begin sorting out branches before stabbing and twisting them into the long central trunk. The result was a spindly Sears special that looked like a cross between Charlie Brown's tree and one that was half dead after a forest fire. It was not beautiful, but by the time we covered it with tinsel icicles, glass ornaments that we got in Germany, and those big lights with reflectors behind them, it sure looked beautiful to us.

Yes, fake was easier, fake was free, fake was the only way our tree could be.

When I grew up and got married the decision was made that real was the way to go. Nothing was better than smelling that fresh pine from the freshly sawed tree standing in the great room. And yes, I know real trees cost more, leave needles everywhere, require watering and are chopping down nature. But they sure smell a lot like Christmas.

In a world of artificial Christmas trees, we can be thankful that Jesus is the real thing!

Pray: Dear God, thank you for Jesus, who reveals to us what is real and true. In him is eternal life, and through him all who believe overcome the world. May we never find your commands burdensome, but rely on your victory and strength to love your ways. Amen.

²¹ Adapted from the Book of (Holiday) Awesome by Neil Pasricha (2011)

Read Matthew 1:21

And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name Jesus: for he shall save his people from their sins.

My family had many Christmas traditions growing up. My dad would go to the woods to cut down a real Christmas tree. We did not have a lot of decorations, but we thought it was the most beautiful tree ever. As I got older traditions changed. The death of a parent, death of grandparents, getting married, having children, children getting married, death of my spouse, and then best part the grandchildren were born. There is one thing about all the traditions over the years – we always celebrated the birth of Jesus in many ways.

One of my most prized possessions is a framed picture I have of what Anna wrote for a project at school in 2012:

Christmas Plans

First, my family goes to my Nana's mom's house for Christmas Eve in Chattanooga. At Nonnie's house, We open presents and eat. I get to see my cousins. I play with them and have a lot of fun!

We leave
10 o'clock Christmas Eve
wear Pjs and light
songs and sometimes
the manger scene.

On Christmas
presents from Santa.
my Daddy and Mommy

Grandma's house. We eat breakfast and open presents. We play in the house and sometimes we end up breaking something.

Then I go to my Mom's Aunt and Uncle's house in Norris. We eat candy and open presents. I get to see my cousin that lives in Georgia too!

After that I go to my Grandpa and Nana's house in Knoxville. We eat dinner and play. It is so much fun. I like to have fun. One time we played softball in the cold, it was so much fun!

December 2012 By: Anna Lewis



Nonnie's house to go to the
service at my church. We
candles. We sing a lot of
they put on a play and build

morning, we get our
We open the presents from
too. Next, I go to my

Pray: God, thank You that because of Jesus we can celebrate Christmas. As we do all the fun things that come with Christmas, help us remember Jesus most of all. Thank You for loving us so much that You sent Your very own Son to earth as a baby so that we could be saved from our sin and can spend forever with You. We love You! Amen.

December 30

Dora Hooks

Read Philippians 3:7-14

But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith. I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection & participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

Over the years (can't believe I've been at MUMC more than 40 years!!!), I've shared with several people that a particular Elvis recording could easily be a song of worship. What do you think?

*All that I am or ever hope to be, lies in Your hands, You are my destiny.
When I'm in Your arms, I rule the world but when we're far apart, how cruel the world.
All that I want is to be near to You, to spend my life making it clear to You:
You are my heart, my soul, my dream come true. All that I am I am because of You.*

Merry Christmas 2020. May we cling to the only One who has everything we need or will ever need; the answers, the solutions, the power to make sense of our world. We look toward a new year without fear because we have the Light in our souls and our lives.

Pray: Almighty God, you have poured upon us the new light of your incarnate Word: Grant that this light, enkindled in our hearts, may shine forth in our lives; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*²²

²² Collect for Christmas, *Book of Common Prayer* (1979)

December 31

from MUMC's 1988 Advent Devotional
Rodger Neyland Davis (1944 - 1998)

Read Matthew 1:18-23

Now the birth of Jesus Christ was in this way: When His mother Mary was espoused to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Ghost. And Joseph her husband, being a just man and not willing to make her a public example, was minded to put her away privily. But while he thought on these things, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost. And she shall bring forth a Son, and thou shalt call His name JESUS, for He shall save His people from their sins." Now all this was done, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying, "Behold, a virgin shall be with child and shall bring forth a Son, and they shall call His name Emmanuel" (which being interpreted is, "God with us").

Read Matthew 28:20b

"And lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world." Amen.

In December of 1962, I was at the Recruit Training Center of the U.S. Naval Base in San Diego, California. I had been there since mid-October, and with Christmas just around the corner, I was ready to come home. Even with seventy or eighty men around, I still felt very much alone.

The night before I was to start my two weeks of Christmas leave, I attended a Christmas Service at a small chapel there on base. I don't recall the message, but I remember before the service was over, we all stood and sang "Silent Night" without music. There must have been some other lonely people there that night. I never saw a dry eye in the house.

We all have our memories of Christmas, and I will never forget the night I realized I would never be alone again.

Pray: Heavenly Father, thank you for Jesus, God-with-us, who is with us always. Amen.

January 1

from MUMC's 1988 Advent Devotional
Frank R. Snavely (1920 - 2006)

How to Build A Manger

Read Luke 2:10, 12

Stop being afraid, for now I bring you good tidings of great joy...and this is proof for you: you will find a baby wrapped up and lying in a manger.

Read Galatians 4:19

O my dear children, I am suffering a mother's birth pains for you again, until Christ is formed in you.

What is it that makes Christmas personally meaningful?

Some people would reply that Christmas is all about giving and receiving gifts, just as the Wise Men brought gifts to the baby Jesus.

That's one way of perceiving Christmas, but it's only a lower perception. It's like stepping into an elevator and punching the button to go to the garage level of the building. On that same elevator you can punch buttons and the elevator will take you to the highest levels of the building. IT IS HERE THAT WE FIND THE MOST RELEVANT MEANING OF CHRISTMAS WHICH IS THAT THE ADVENT OF GOD IN CHRIST IS TO MEET OUR DEEPEST SPIRITUAL NEED.

And what is that need? G.K. Chesterton used to say, "Whatever man is, he is not what he was meant to be." Christmas is the answer to our plea: "HELP ME TO BECOME WHAT I SHOULD BE!"

The God who made possible the birth of a Savior in a manger is also the God of new birth in the lives of people. The human soul is the place of birth, new in each man and woman who receives God. At Christmas we celebrate the coming of Christ; at a deeper level we should celebrate the virgin birth of Christ born within the manger of our hearts.

Pray: O Holy Child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray; cast out our sin, and enter in, be born in us, today. Amen.

Read 2 Corinthians 5:8-9

We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord. So we make it our goal to please Him whether we are at home in the body or away from it.

Read Philippians 1:23b

I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far.

My friend is now with Christ.

I have a friend who passed away this last week in her sleep. Our last conversation was about her going to be with Jesus. She had said over the last year that she sensed her time to go to Jesus was near and she would point up and smile. She never said “die” or “death”, she said she would be going to be with Jesus. I never thought about it until now that we never called it death.

Our conversations were full of laughter and memories. We quoted scripture and sang hymns (not always getting the words right, ha!). We shared the comforts of what we know of Christ and our future because of Him; these were all a part of our regular conversations. Looking around her room, she would say how grateful she was to God for such a wonderful place and people to care for her. She said she had all she needed. Her face showed her inner peace and joy. She would say to me that we understood each other because we both knew Jesus. How true. It was a wonderful time of fellowship, worship and openness. I will miss that. It is hard to find that with another person.

I know where she is. She is in heaven with Jesus. I will miss her and her example of faith. I will miss her calmness about death, her surety of her future after death, her beautiful peaceful face and her laughter.

We always ended our conversations with “I love you”.

At Christmas, we give thanks that God did not abandon us in darkness and death, but chose to rescue us. Because Jesus humbled himself to be born of human flesh, light and life are offered to all who would receive it. Thank you Jesus!

Pray: Hail the heaven-born Prince of Peace! Hail the Sun of Righteousness! Light and life to all He brings, risen with healing in His wings, mild He lays his glory by, born that man no more may die, born to raise the sons of earth, born to give them second birth. Amen.²³

²³ Prayer from verse 3 of “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing”

January 3

Sunday, the 10th Day of Christmas

"The Sovereign Lord will make righteousness and praise spring up before all nations"

Isaiah 61:11

Prayer for Illumination: O Christ, the prophets foretold your coming, the poor longed to see you, the heavens celebrated your birth; the apostles, the martyrs, and the faithful down through the ages repeated the song of the angels. Your Church praises you in every human language, for she has seen your salvation. Son of God, enlighten our hearts and minds to hear your Word, and produce in us abundant fruit. Amen.

Read Isaiah 61:10–62:3

I delight greatly in the LORD; my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of his righteousness, as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. For as the soil makes the sprout come up and a garden causes seeds to grow, so the Sovereign LORD will make righteousness and praise spring up before all nations. For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, for Jerusalem's sake I will not remain quiet, till her vindication shines out like the dawn, her salvation like a blazing torch. The nations will see your vindication, and all kings your glory; you will be called by a new name that the mouth of the LORD will bestow. You will be a crown of splendor in the LORD's hand, a royal diadem in the hand of your God.

Read Galatians 4:4–7

But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, ⁵ to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship. Because you are his sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "Abba, Father." So you are no longer a slave, but God's child; and since you are his child, God has made you also an heir.

Read Luke 2:22–35

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 (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord"), and to offer a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord: "a pair of doves or two young pigeons." Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying: "Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all nations: a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel." The child's father and mother marveled at what was said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too."

Closing Prayer: Lord, you now have set your servant free, to go in peace as you have promised. For these eyes of mine have seen the Savior, whom you have prepared for all the world to see; a Light to enlighten the nations, and the glory of your people Israel. Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit: as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, Amen.

Living Liturgically

✿ Epiphany ✿

The following statement was taken from an old Middlesettlements Methodist-Episcopal Church Sunday School book from 1904:

December 4, 1904

Today it is wet and rainy. We had no Sunday school. But I trust next Sabbath will be a fine day. This quarter will soon be out and we sill start a new year. I hope everybody will start the New Year with new resolutions and turn over a new page in the history of their lives. I think every body should set out on the New Year with a new spirit, new resolutions, fresh courage, and make the best of it while they live, for life is short and death is certain.

Hoping everybody will start out on the New Year, I still remain and wish everyone a Happy New Year.

I am your faithful secretary,
Effie M. Milligan

Meal Blessing for Epiphany

Mighty God, you made manifest the mystery of your Word made flesh with the witness of a blazing star. And seeing it, the Magi came from afar and offered you gifts. Grant that the star of your holiness may shine forever within our hearts, and that we may find our treasure in offering you our praise and thanksgiving. Amen.²⁴

An Epiphany House Blessing

Visit, O blessed Lord, this home with the gladness of your presence. Bless all who live here with the gift of your love; and grant that they may manifest your love [to each other and] to all whose lives they touch. May they grow in grace and in the knowledge and love of you; guide, comfort, and strengthen them; and preserve them in peace, O Jesus Christ, now and for ever. Amen.

Epiphany

Feasting & Festivities

1. January 5th is also known as “Twelfth Night”: the final day of the twelve days of Christmas celebration. Alternating traditions have it as a good day to throw a party or a good day to take down decorations. If you throw a (2020 version) party, traditional 12th Night fare includes the King’s Cake, which somehow got drafted into New Orlean’s Mardi Gras celebrations but originated here. If you want to go all out baking your own King’s Cake, hide a dried bean in the cake: whoever finds it is “King” (or Queen) for the night.
2. January 6th marks Epiphany, the day when the Wise Men finally make it to Jesus and the Christmas season draws to a close. If you’ve kept a nativity out, now’s the time to add the Wise Men. If they’ve been wandering through the house, find something star-shaped and have them “follow” the star to the manger (kiddos love leading the star, although it might feel more like a 40-years-in-the-wilderness kind of journey).
3. The way to end Epiphany is to bless your house. You can invite Pastor Magan over (she’d love it!) or you can try this traditional blessing yourself. With chalk, write the initials of the 3 Wise Men above the main door of the house, together with the year and a cross: “20 K + M + B 21” (Scripture doesn’t have the names for the Wise Men, but tradition holds that the names are Caspar, Melchior, and Balthasar). The crosses stand for Christ, and the letters have a double meaning: in addition to the Wise Men’s names, they’re also an abbreviation of an ancient blessing that means “May Christ bless this house.” Along with the chalk marks, take time to invite God’s presence and blessings into your home.

²⁴ Adapted from the Christmas Season Blessings found in *Blessings of the Table: Mealtime Prayers Throughout the Year* by Brother Victor-Antoine d’Avilea-Latourrette.

The One True Light!

Read Isaiah 9:2, 6

The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned. 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.

Read John 1:9, 8:12, & 9:4-5

The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." As long as it is day, we must do the works of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work. While I am in the world, I am the light of the world."

I loved Christmas as a 5-year-old child; I love Christmas as a 65-year-old child!

I am fortunate to have been born into a strong Christian family. We were members of First Baptist Church Maryville. My parents were heavily involved in service at the church: teaching Sunday school, working in the nursery, and serving on numerous committees. Thankfully they saw to it that I was heavily involved in the church, also. Christmas was always a joyous, sacred celebration in our church and in our home. Of course, like all other children, my sister Judy and I looked forward all year to the arrival of Santa Claus on Christmas Eve. Thankfully my parents made sure, through a number of church and family traditions, that Christmas was much, much more than Santa Claus.

One of those traditions I remember most fondly was our neighborhood luminary project on Christmas Eve. We lived on West Hunt Road in Alcoa, and some of you may remember our annual neighborhood project of placing luminaries on both sides of the road all the way from the intersection of Hunt Road and Louisville Road to the bridge over Alcoa Highway – almost 1.5 miles! And, a walkway of luminaries was put in each yard from the street to the front door of the homes. The theme for this annual Christmas Eve event was "Lighting the Way for the Christ Child into our Homes and into our Hearts". Each year in our family Christmas devotionals my parents made sure that my sister and I understood that Christmas is a sacred celebration in the Church – the birth of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, the one true light of the world!

Pray: All glory to you, great God, for the gift of your Son, light in darkness and hope of the world, whom you sent to save us. With singing angels, let us praise your name and tell the earth his story, that all may believe, rejoice, and bow down, acknowledging your love through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.²⁵

²⁵ Prayer from *The Worship Sourcebook*, Christmas Prayers

January 5

from MUMC's 1988 Advent Devotional

Nancy Brown (1939 - 2020)

Read Titus 3:3-7

At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another. But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.

Read Proverbs 3:5

Trust in the LORD with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding.

We were living in Raleigh, NC, when my mother's health began to fail several years ago. I wanted to be near her and I began to pray for God to move us closer home, maybe to Ashville, NC, so I would be only a few hours drive from her.

However, God had a better plan and moved me all the way back home so we could be together during her last years. God's plans are always so much better than ours.

It occurred to me recently that in the next move, I will again be going to be with my mother in our heavenly home. I will trust God completely with these plans.

Pray: Be near me, Lord Jesus, I ask thee to stay close by me forever, and love me, I pray; bless all the dear children in thy tender care, and fit us for heaven to live with thee there.²⁶

²⁶ Prayer from "Away in a Manger"

The Jesus Storybook Bible

Advent Reading Plan



The Story
and the Song



The Song
of Creation



The Terrible Lie



A New Beginning



A Giant Staircase
to Heaven



Son of Laughter



The Present



The Girl
No One Wanted



The Forgiving
Prince



God to the
Rescue!



God Makes a Way



Ten Ways to
be Perfect



The Warrior
Leader



The Teeny
Weenie...
True King



The Young Hero
and the
Horrible Giant



The Good
Shepherd



Little Servant Girl
and the Proud
General



Operation 'No
More Tears'!



Daniel and the
Scary Sleepover



God's Messenger



Get Ready!



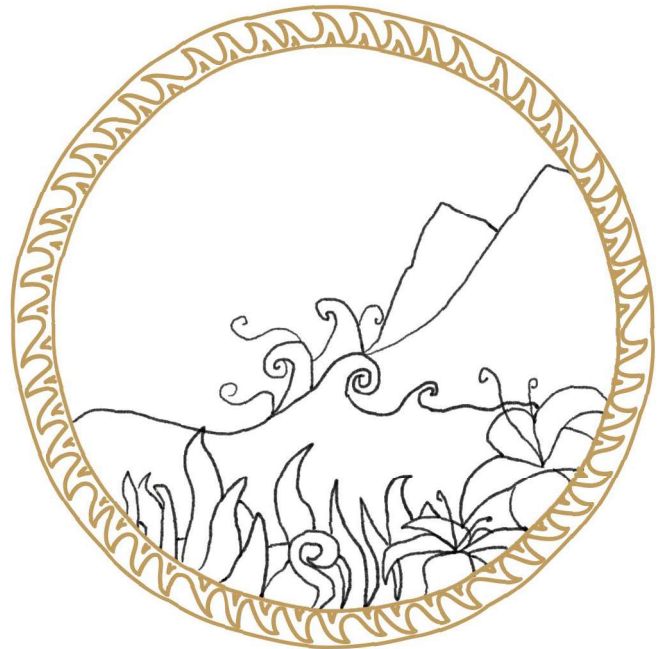
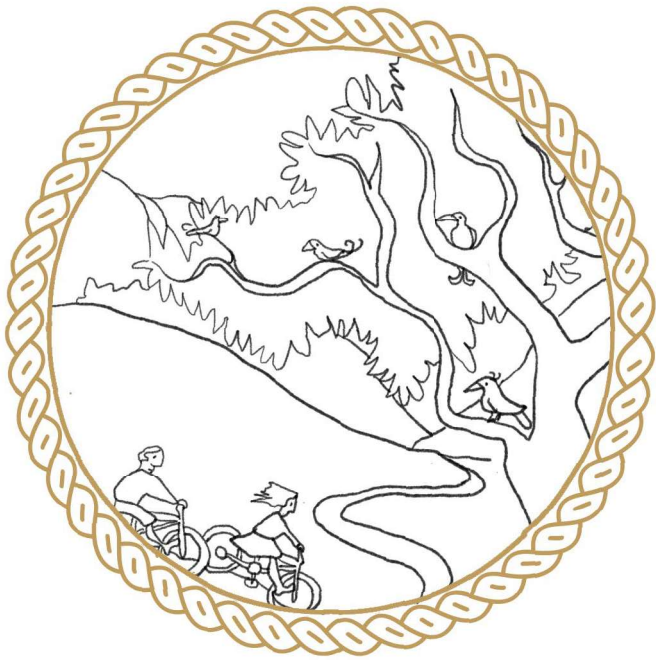
He's Here!



The Light of the
Whole World



The King
of All Kings



Dec 2

Genesis 1-2

Read along in the Jesus
Storybook Bible “The Beginning:
A Perfect Home” (pg.18-27)

Dec 1

Psalms 19 and Hebrews 1

Read along in the Jesus Storybook
Bible “The Story and The Song”
(pg.12-17)

Dec 4

Genesis 6-9

Read along in the Jesus Storybook
Bible “A New Beginning”
(pg.38-47)

Dec 3

Genesis 3

Read along in the Jesus Storybook
Bible “The Terrible Lie”
(pg.28-37)

Dec 6

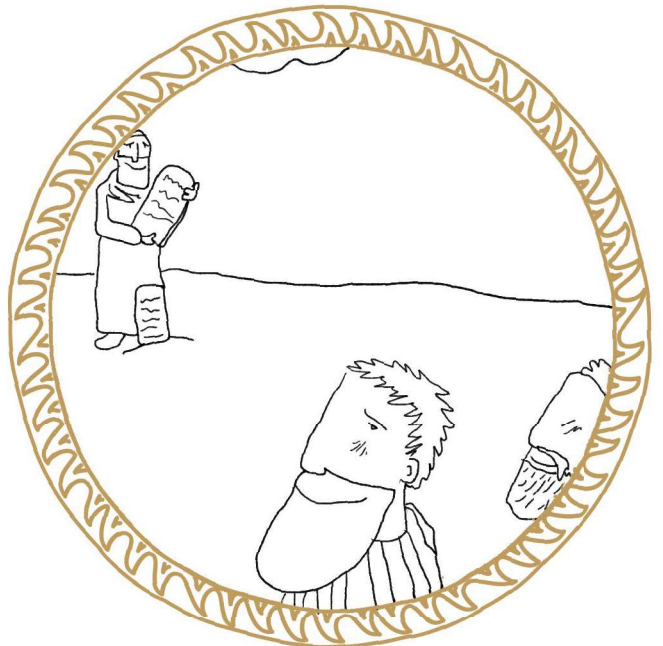
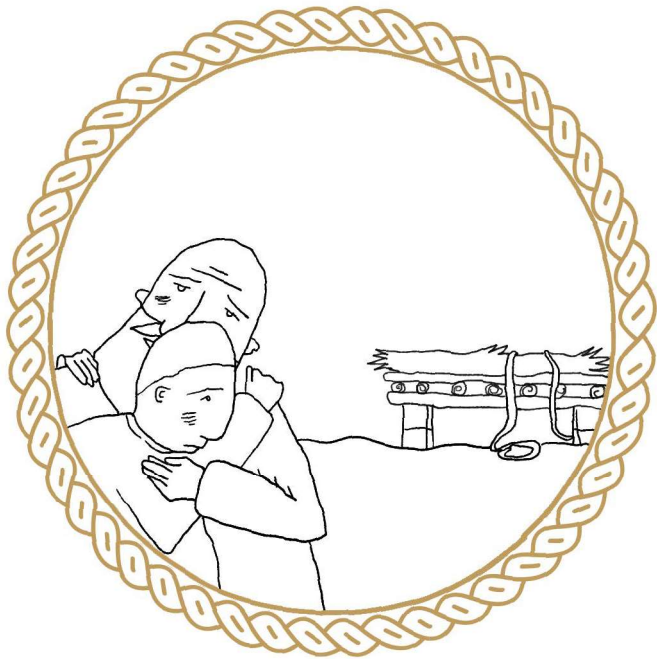
Genesis 12-21

Read along in the Jesus Storybook
Bible “Son of Laughter”
(pg.56-61)

Dec 5

Genesis 11

Read along in the Jesus Storybook
Bible “A Giant Staircase to Heaven”
(pg.56-61)



Dec 8

Genesis 29-30

Read along in the Jesus
Storybook Bible "The Girl No
One Wanted" (pg.70-75)

Dec 7

Genesis 22

Read along in the Jesus Storybook
Bible "The Present" (pg.62-69)

Dec 10

Exodus 3-13

Read along in the Jesus Storybook
Bible "God to the Rescue!"
(pg.84-91)

Dec 9

Genesis 37-46

Read along in the Jesus Storybook
Bible "The Forgiving Prince"
(pg.76-83)

Dec 12

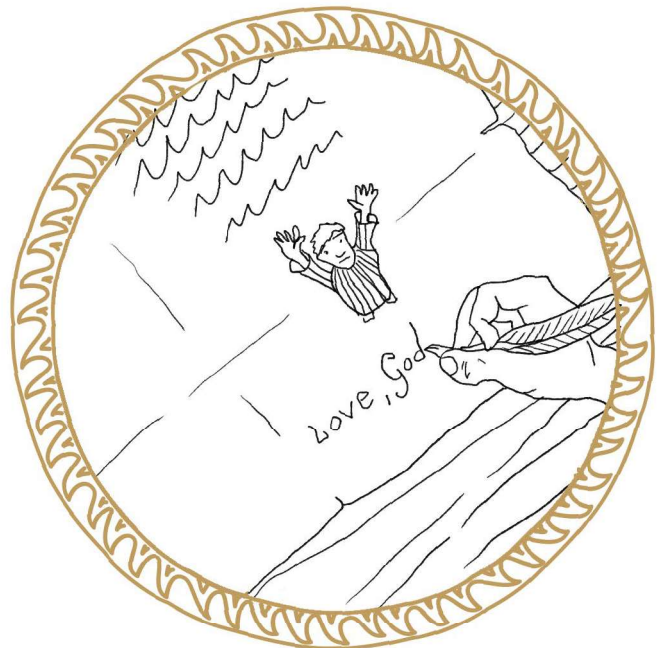
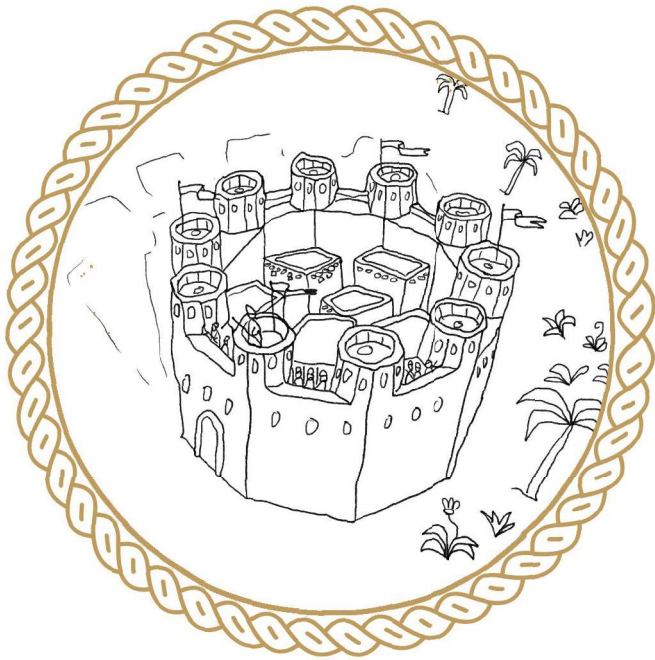
Exodus 16-17, 19-40

Read along in the Jesus
Storybook Bible "Ten Ways to be
Perfect" (pg.100-107)

Dec 11

Exodus 14-15

Read along in the Jesus Storybook
Bible "God Makes a Way"
(pg.92-99)



Dec 14

1 Samuel 16

Read along in the Jesus Storybook
Bible "The Teeny Weenie... True King"
(pg.116-121)

Dec 13

Joshua 3 and 6

Read along in the Jesus Storybook
Bible "The Warrior Leader"
(pg.108-115)

Dec 16

Psalms 51, 2 Samuel 7; paraphrase of Psalm 23

Read along in the Jesus Storybook
Bible "The Good Shepherd"
(pg.130-135)

Dec 15

1 Samuel 17

Read along in the Jesus Storybook
Bible "The Young Hero and the
Horrible Giant"
(pg.122-129)

Dec 18

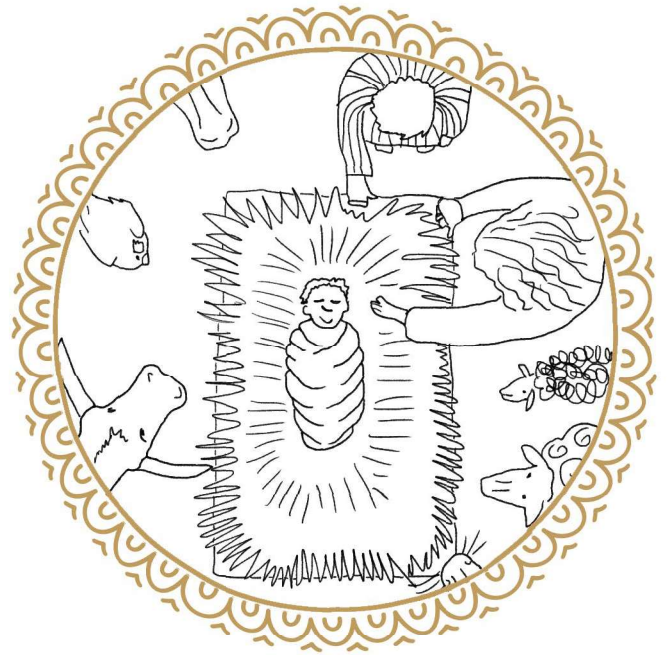
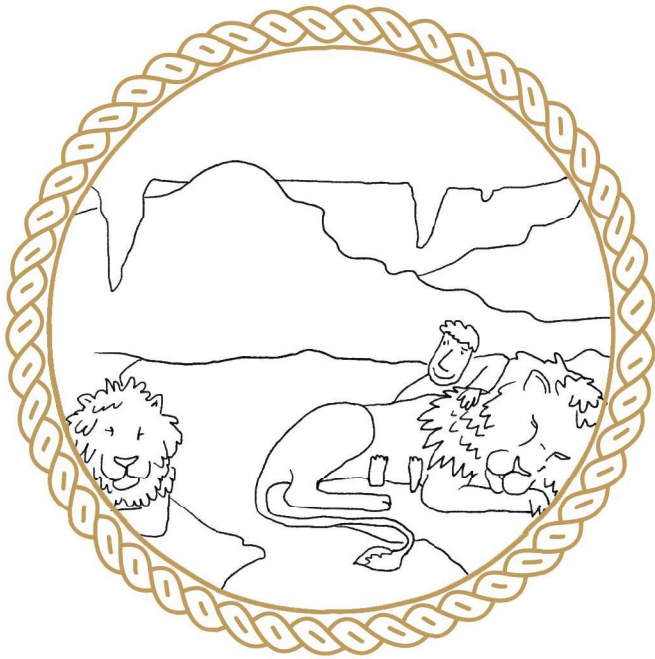
Isaiah 9, 11, 40, 50, 53, 55, 60

Read along in the Jesus Storybook
Bible "Operation 'No More Tears!'"
(pg.144-151)

Dec 17

2 Kings 5

Read along in the Jesus Storybook
Bible "A little Servant Girl and the
Proud General"
(pg.136-143)



Dec 20

Jonah 1-4; Hebrews 1:1-2

Read along in the Jesus Storybook
Bible "God's Messenger"
(pg.160-169)

Dec 19

Daniel 6

Read along in the Jesus Storybook
Bible "Daniel and the Scary Sleepover"
(pg.152-159)

Dec 22

Luke 1-2

Read along in the Jesus Storybook
Bible "He's Here!"
(pg.176-183)

Dec 21

Nehemiah 8-10, Malachi 1, 3 and 4, Ezra 7

Read along in the Jesus Storybook
Bible "Get Ready!"
(pg.170-175)

Dec 24

Matthew 2

Read along in the Jesus Storybook
Bible "The King of all Kings"
(pg.192-199)

Dec 23

Luke 2

Read along in the Jesus Storybook
Bible "The Light of the Whole
World" (pg.184-191)

