

# FIRST UNITED PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH



*Into the stillness,  
a Savior*

2023

Daily Advent Devotionals





The First United Presbyterian Church Communications Ministry team would like to thank everyone who contributed to this project. We would also like to thank Leigh Woodruff for allowing the use of her beautiful artwork on our cover.

This booklet will be made available to church family and visitors in several ways:

- As a printed booklet which you can pick up at the church
- As a PDF on the website, which you can download and print for your household
- As a series of posts at the website, with appropriate hymns
- As links at the Facebook page and group so you can easily find the posts at the website

Please consider joining in at our Facebook group to share your devotional insights and pondering. We hope to share insights and questions there throughout Advent as we read these meditations together. Please search for *A Light on the Hill* Facebook group to join, use the QR code below, or type: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/112641492101599> into your browser window.

You will find space at the end of the booklet for your notes.

We look forward to connecting with everyone more this season as we prepare for the coming of our Lord!



## Sunday, December 3

### Isaiah 2: 1-5

*The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.<sup>2</sup> In days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. <sup>3</sup>Many peoples shall come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. <sup>4</sup> He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!*

Advent is a season of waiting. Waiting for God to step into the world again in a way that helps us hear the simple story of Christ's birth in new ways that make us marvel and believe.

The prophet Isaiah saw something beyond anything that the people of his day could imagine: a time when *all* the nations, Jews and Gentiles alike, would stream to the top of God's high mountain to learn God's ways and walk in God's paths. The *whole world* would be turned to God. And peace would come. This kind of peace felt as impossible to them then as it does to us now. Sometimes our world seems anything but peaceful.

Daily, we are drawn into the hustle and bustle of this season, thinking about presents, decorated cookies, Christmas letters, tree trimming, holiday tables, and overnight guests. We're caught up in worry, grief, and stress. The nightly news shouts war, violence, hunger, poverty, estrangement, and murder. When will peace come? When will peace become greater than our lengthy lists and pervasive perfectionism? When will peace dispel our sadness? When will peace overcome needless aggression unleashed on innocent victims?

Isaiah encourages us to see beyond the world as it is and hope for more. To recognize that God is always up to something : bringing light when much around us feels like darkness, and calling us to walk in that light.

Watch and see! Who knows? God might even redeem the world through a tiny Baby! Or restore the world as Isaiah predicted: ending wars and bringing peace forever when Christ comes again.

*Lord our God, we pray for peace in our lives and in every corner of the world. Help us walk in your light. We wait with eager expectation for all you will do. Amen.*

Contributed by Rev. Jan Butin.



## Monday, December 4

### **Psalm 122**

*<sup>1</sup> I rejoiced with those who said to me, "Let us go to the house of the Lord." <sup>2</sup> Our feet are standing in your gates, Jerusalem. <sup>3</sup> Jerusalem is built like a city that is closely compacted together. <sup>4</sup> That is where the tribes go up—the tribes of the Lord—to praise the name of the Lord according to the statute given to Israel <sup>5</sup> There stand the thrones for judgment, the thrones of the house of David. <sup>6</sup> Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: "May those who love you be secure. <sup>7</sup> May there be peace within your walls and security within your citadels." <sup>8</sup> For the sake of my family and friends, I will say, "Peace be within you." <sup>9</sup> For the sake of the house of the Lord our God. I will seek your prosperity.*

Peace is one of the central themes of Advent, and many of the songs and scriptures for Advent refer to peace in Jerusalem. In this passage, we are told to pray for the peace of Jerusalem, where the tribes of the Lord go up to praise God's name. These are the tribes who lived in ancient Israel.

Today, there is no peace in Jerusalem. The idea of tribes runs counter to our modern ideas about unity. How can we pray for peace and unity in a world torn by war? How can we look forward to Christmas when people are suffering?

The hint is in this passage: "Peace be within you." Just as the house of the Lord can mean our church, the peace of Jerusalem can be peace and unity within our church, our homes, our hearts.

We are not in charge of what happens in the outside world; God is in charge. We can't understand, in our human understanding, why war rages in Jerusalem again. But we should not give up on the peace of Christ, which can always be with us, regardless of the troubles of this world.

This Advent, we should pray for peace in Jerusalem as they did centuries ago. We should also pray for peace in our own hearts, confident that God is always in charge.

*Contributed by Rosie Haden-Chomphosy*



## Tuesday, December 5

### **Romans 13:11-14**

*<sup>11</sup> Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; <sup>12</sup> the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; <sup>13</sup> let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. <sup>14</sup> Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.*

Some years squash bugs ravage our squash vines. The seeds germinate, leaves burst from strong stems, all looks hopeful and thriving, and then the bugs arrive. We squish them, they scamper, they hide. War is waged. The leaves wilt, the vines turn yellow, we get a runty squash or two. We sigh and pick okra.

This year we had a marvelous squash harvest. The bugs didn't come, the borers stayed away. Squash vines sprawled across the garden, heaving out blooms. Baby squashes plumped in the sun, turning golden, fat and stripey. Along their vines, squashes basked like walruses on a beach, contented, expansive, lovely. The more I admired them, the more I felt they carried a message to me.

For thirteen years I'd had a spiritual practice that provided regular contemplative time and a sure sense that I was intimately connected to God – my beloved vine. When Covid came and the Healing Touch ministry shut down, I lost that discipline, and truthfully, I felt like I'd lost my way. I guess this was my spiritual squash borer moment when my connection to Christ was wobbling.

In the garden, my squash were saying to me—"Look at us! We're flourishing, nourished by our vine. You need to find a way to recover that abiding sense of connection to your Creator. You know what time it is. Paul is right—the night is far gone, and the day is near. Now is the time to deepen your relationship with God. Now is the time to bask again in the love of the true vine, and to grow fruitful." So, after some trial and error, I took up again an ancient practice of centering prayer, and it has brought me back into communion with my vine. The present is always the moment for us to wake from spiritual slumber. Each journey into communion with God is different. Each path requires discipline, commitment, and love. Nothing in life is more important.

*Lord, let the pattern of my life, the course of my days, be inexplicable apart from the intervention of the Risen One. Let Jesus Christ be the sole justification for my life. — Michel Bouttier*

Contributed by Jane Steinkraus



## Wednesday, December 6

### **Matthew 24:36-44**

<sup>36</sup>“But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son,<sup>[a]</sup> but only the Father. <sup>37</sup>For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man.<sup>38</sup> For as in the days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, <sup>39</sup>and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so, too, will be the coming of the Son of Man. <sup>40</sup>Then two will be in the field; one will be taken, and one will be left. <sup>41</sup>Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken, and one will be left. <sup>42</sup>Keep awake, therefore, for you do not know on what day<sup>[b]</sup> your Lord is coming. <sup>43</sup>But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into.<sup>44</sup> Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.

How do we wait? How do we wait for the return of our loved one serving overseas? How do we wait for test results that might reveal a potentially life-threatening disease? How do we wait for the birth of our much-anticipated first child? Can pondering these frequently experienced situations give us some insight into how we personally wait?

In reading and studying Matthew 24, I had the recurring question how do we wait for the second advent of our Lord. Scripture promises that the Son of Man is coming and that our future belongs to and is safe with the Messiah. We are told in no uncertain terms that no one knows the time or the hour of His coming. So how do we wait and prepare for this mysterious promise? Directions like “Stay awake” or “Be watchful” come to mind, but what does that really mean? Perhaps we are called to develop and practice a higher sense of awareness. Try to see the extraordinary presence of God in the ordinary routines of life.

Pray for the knowledge and ability to be the hands and feet of Christ in a hurting world. Watch for the opportunity to share the good news with someone in need of hope. During this Advent season, imagine God’s love taking hold of our lives and directing us into the promise.

Contributed by Pam Gilbreath



## Thursday, December 7

### **John 16:21-22**

*<sup>21</sup> When a woman is in labor, she has pain, because her hour has come. But when her child is born, she no longer remembers the anguish because of the joy of having brought a human being into the world. <sup>22</sup> So you have pain now; but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you.*

When Hurt comes to us and knocks on our door, he doesn't give us the opportunity to let him in gracefully. He knocks, he enters, and he tears apart our sacred place. All of our preparation and our comfort-making, he invades. He resides, until that day when it is his time to leave.

Think of these moments: We lose a child; we lose a parent; we become estranged from a once-tender friend; our sense of calling turns into a fearful questioning of why we are no longer content; we become accused, thrown out, and left on our own.

As a woman knows that her hour has come,  
We cry out.

O God, my God, why have You forsaken me?  
We see not past our moment of pain.

We, for a moment, see hell's writhing terror.  
And Yet,

Yet,

Christ is birthing us anew.

Birthing us to see the sun, newly informed by what has come.

Newly prepared by Christ's vision of the cross.

It is not without suffering that we see Christ rightly. We *must* create an inner theology of suffering. <sup>1</sup> James 1:2-4 says, "Consider it all joy, my brothers and sisters, when you encounter trials of various kinds, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing." The stiff and seemingly unkind challenge of James is that you should *dare* to be excited when Hurt knocks on your door because, in the holy and sacred words of Christ himself, "Truly, truly I say to you that you will weep and mourn, but the world will rejoice; you will grieve, but your grief will be turned into joy!"

Contributed by Jeffrey Kerst





## Friday, December 8

### Isaiah 62:11

*Behold, the Lord has proclaimed to the end of the earth: Say to the daughter of Zion, "Behold, your salvation comes; behold, his reward is with him, and his recompense before him."*

The phrase "daughter of Zion" (*bat tziyon* in Hebrew) is one that appears numerous times throughout the Bible. "Zion" refers to the "City of David"—Jerusalem—and it later came to represent Israel. "Daughter of Zion" serves as metaphor for Israel.

This passage is often used during Lent *and* Advent. In the season of Lent, we often cite Zechariah 9:9: "Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold your King comes to you; He is righteous and having salvation, lowly and riding on a donkey, a colt, the foal of a donkey." What I love here is how beautifully these passages from Isaiah and Zechariah stand together as pillars for two of the most powerful seasons of the church, and their message (whether during Lent or Advent) is one of hope!

I cannot help but feel the *excitement* around the coming of the Messiah! Both passages immediately grab our attention with energetic verbs: Behold, rejoice, shout! We are told that the King's reward is with him—salvation. This is a gift that is impossible to measure, but it is *proclaimed* to the ends of the earth.

Every year, we get an entire season to imagine what it was like:

the people living in great darkness needing God's light,  
an angelic annunciation,  
a long journey to Bethlehem by Mary and Joseph,  
shepherds watching over their flocks by night,  
a host of angels appearing,  
a star shining bright,  
a baby in a manger bringing hope, joy, peace, and love.

It makes my heart full. This is the advent of Jesus Christ!

Contributed by Isaac Thomas



## Saturday, December 9

### **2 Corinthians 3:5-6**

*<sup>5</sup>Not that we are competent of ourselves to claim anything as coming from us; our competence is from God. <sup>6</sup>He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant—not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.*

This time of year, we anticipate together the coming of Christ Jesus coming fresh into our lives again. I quickly discovered these verses raise the question *How do we become better ministers of the New Covenant?* My research quickly led me to realize I was taking a deep dive contrasting the Old and New Covenant.

The NIV New International Version led me to verses and notes from Exodus, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel and Romans, Colossians, Hebrews, and Titus as well as 2 Corinthians. Then in William Barclay's commentary, my favorite, I found his take comparing Old and New Covenant:

Old	New
External, written document	Internal, bringing the power of life-giving Spirit
Legal relationship between God and humans	Relationship of love, we are sons and daughters of God
Rigid in practice	Changes hearts and minds, and brings the power to become ministers of the New Covenant

My story includes the responsibility to "seek through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understand God." This is a daily responsibility in pursuit of God's will in everything I *say and do*. This often means ignoring those voices in my head that are **NOT** in my interest. This is my take on becoming a better minister of the New Covenant.

Contributed by Dennis Nelson



## Sunday, December 10

### ***Isaiah 11:1-10***

*A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. <sup>2</sup>The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. <sup>3</sup>His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; <sup>4</sup>but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. <sup>5</sup>Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins. <sup>6</sup>The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. <sup>7</sup>The cow and bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. <sup>8</sup>The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. <sup>9</sup>They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. <sup>10</sup>On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwellings shall be glorious.*

As we enter the Advent season, the scripture from Isaiah offers a rich tapestry of hope and divine promise. At a time when Israel felt cut down, Isaiah prophesied about a shoot—a new life, a fresh start emerging from what seemed dead and finished.

This "shoot" is not just any growth, but one divinely appointed and empowered. The spirit of the Lord rests on him, giving him wisdom, understanding, counsel, might, knowledge, and a deep reverence for God. As we reflect on this, our minds naturally shift to Jesus, the promised Messiah, born in a humble setting, a shoot from the lineage of Jesse.

In our own lives, when all seems lost, barren, and cut down, Advent promises that God can bring forth new life from our stumps. Our Savior's coming is a testament to God's renewing power, making a way where there seemed to be none.

Isaiah also paints a scene of perfect peace—a world where natural enemies coexist, innocence leads the wild, and danger is absent. This picture shows God's kingdom on earth, a realm marked by peace, equity, and righteousness. In these most troubling times in the Middle East, and as we await the second coming of Christ, we look forward to this complete restoration, where creation itself will be in harmonious balance.

This Advent, may we remember the baby in a manger and the mighty Prince of Peace Jesus grew to be. Let us be inspired to live in the light of His justice, righteousness, and love. As the earth waits in eager expectation, so should our hearts for the full realization of God's promise: a world filled with peace.

Contributed by Mary Mann



## Monday, December 11

### Matthew 2:13-23

<sup>13</sup>Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." <sup>14</sup> Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, <sup>15</sup> and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, "Out of Egypt I have called my son." <sup>16</sup> When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. <sup>17</sup> Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah: <sup>18</sup> "A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more." <sup>19</sup> When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, <sup>20</sup> "Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child's life are dead." <sup>21</sup> Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. <sup>22</sup> But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee. <sup>23</sup> There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, "He will be called a Nazarean."

The story repeats throughout history. Pharaoh is the most powerful individual in the ancient world, but he feels threatened by the people of Israel so he orders the drowning of every male child. Only Moses is saved, through his family's relentless love and the compassion of Pharaoh's daughter. Moses will grow up to challenge the power of Pharaoh and lead his people to freedom. Thousands of years later, Herod is the most powerful individual in his small corner of the Roman empire, and he too feels threatened by the people he governs. He too orders the death of children to protect himself. He too fails, for the child born in his reign will outlive him and bring a new hope to the world that will outlive the Roman empire. Thousands of years later, we hear daily stories of communities weeping for their children because they are no more, and we still see families fleeing their homes to seek safety for their children in distant lands.

This is the dark side of the Christmas story. It is easy to ignore the gathering threat outside the stable in Bethlehem and focus on the cozy scene at the manger. Matthew reminds us not to look away from the stories that break our hearts. Matthew teaches us that the baby in the manger will grow to a man who will call all children to come to him. As his followers, we are called to hold all of God's children in our hearts. In this Advent season, may we mourn with those who refuse to be consoled, and may we see the face of the infant Christ in every child fleeing from oppression. Matthew reminds us to expect great things from these children, for this is also part of God's story in our world.

Contributed by Phil Harrington



**Tuesday, December 12****Psalm 72:18-19**

*<sup>18</sup> Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, who alone does wondrous things.<sup>19</sup> Blessed be his glorious name forever; may his glory fill the whole earth. Amen and Amen*

The verses from this Psalm remind us of the great majesty and wonder of our God, the One who performs marvelous deeds beyond our comprehension. As we prepare our hearts and minds for the celebration of Christ's birth, it is important to praise God, who in their infinite wisdom, sent Jesus to dwell among us.

As we place our hope in God for today and the future, the psalmist echoes our prayer and longing for all of creation to be filled with the Glory of God. While struggling through our human challenges, busy lives, and societal expectations, take a few moments today to pause and reflect on the greatness of God. Look around for a moment and notice the light around you. Each flicker of a Christmas light, a candle, a fireplace, or a lamp is bringing God's light and warmth directly to us. This is a reminder that God's glory is not a distant past or an invisible mystery, but a symbol of God's presence with us here today. In the midst of the darkness, God's light shines brightly for us.

Today, may our hearts be overflowing with praise for God who is always working in marvelous ways. When we are in the darkness, God is working to bring light. May our lives reflect God's light into the world, and may we bring hope and joy to those around us.

*Creator and Creating God, help us to slow down and look around for your majesty and marvelous deeds in the world. Let us carry praise for you in our hearts and actions, sharing the good news of your amazing work in a world so in need of your light, love, and grace. Amen and Amen.*

Contributed by Amanda McDonald



## Wednesday, December 13

### **Isaiah 52:7-10**

*<sup>7</sup> How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, "Your God reigns." <sup>8</sup> Listen! Your sentinels lift up their voices, together they sing for joy; for in plain sight they see the return of the Lord to Zion. <sup>9</sup> Break forth together into singing, you ruins of Jerusalem; for the Lord has comforted his people, he has redeemed Jerusalem. <sup>10</sup> The Lord has bared his holy arm before the eyes of all the nations; and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God.*

The words of Isaiah go to a people in captivity who have suffered defeat and have seen their beloved Jerusalem destroyed. The survivors have suffered a lengthy exile in Babylonia and fear that God has abandoned them. The text reminds them that even in a sinful and dark world, God is with them. Their redemption will come not by physical goods, but by the blood of Jesus Christ. These words call on them to shake off the bonds of captivity and share God's news of victory with the world.

Don't ignore the Good News when dealing with today's news. Do not allow God's promises to be overshadowed by life's challenges. Rejoice in this simple truth: you woke up this morning!

Your heart beats in your chest because He has a purpose for you. He has not forgotten you, and He will never abandon you. He loves you deeply and unconditionally. He has a plan for you. Even when life is difficult, be assured that a good God still sits on His throne. He is faithful to fulfill all His promises to you. He will provide everything that you need according to His riches in glory. In a world filled with sin, darkness, and oppression, the news of salvation and God's reign brings great relief and joy. It is far better to be proclaiming what is right than to be a persecutor or slanderer.

Blessing:

May the Lord bless you and keep you. May the Lord make His face to shine upon you and be gracious unto you and give you His peace. Praises to the One who has brought us the Good News, who has proclaimed peace and salvation to us! May you rejoice in the God of your salvation. Your God reigns!

Contributed by Ron Warren



**Thursday, December 14****Titus 3:4-7**

*<sup>4</sup>But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared,<sup>5</sup> he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit. <sup>6</sup>This Spirit he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior; <sup>7</sup>so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become his heirs according to the hope of eternal life.*

Today's passage is embedded in a strongly worded letter from Paul to Titus, who at the time was in Crete. Paul was exhorting him to get the Cretans to abandon their rebellious apostasies and return to the Way. These verses hark back to ancient baptismal liturgy which asserts that our salvation is not of our own making, but is freely given us by the gift of the Son. Paul reminds us that in the harshness of our hardscrabble lives, we must look to Christ and rejoice in this gift. Within the thorny context of the letter, these verses provide a gentle, almost pastoral underpinning for purposeful ministry.

For us, in this Advent, we are reminded that the Way is not necessarily easy, and our waiting is often filled with anxiety and uncertainty: our anticipation of great joy tempered by the (seemingly) many trials of the world which confront us every day.

Let us remember: the joy of our Salvation was given to us on that night. It was poured out in love, given freely, asking only that we love in return and share freely with those we encounter on the Path.

*Contributed by Jim Gilbreath*



## Friday, December 15

### **Hebrews 1:1-4**

*Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, <sup>2</sup>but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. <sup>3</sup>He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, <sup>4</sup>having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs*

I grew up in a small town as a PK (preacher's kid). Ironically, PKs had a reputation in that town of being particularly delinquent. Among my transgressions was throwing a snowball through a stained-glass window of our church. I often had to ask for forgiveness.

In Jesus' day only the High Priest could enter the innermost room of the Temple, the Holy of Holies, on the Day of Atonement. There he would ask forgiveness for the sins of the people. The High Priest was by Hebrew law a descendent of Aaron, Moses' brother, and a member of the priestly tribe of Levi. Today, devout Catholics bring their confessions to their parish priest.

The Book of Hebrews was written to convince a Jewish audience that Jesus has made atonement, once and for all, by his death on the cross. Jesus by human birthright was not a descendent of Aaron of the tribe of Levi, but of King David of the tribe of Judah. How could Jesus be both king and priest? The answer is in Jesus' spiritual birthright as the Son of God—bearing the exact imprint of God's nature. We read that at Jesus' death the curtain of the Holy of Holies was torn in two. (Matt 27:51)

As Reformed Christians we embrace the "priesthood of all believers." We believe that through Christ's sacrifice we have been sanctified – transformed by grace to bring our confessions directly to God and be assured of forgiveness. Through this assurance we are set upon a path of justification, or growing into a right relationship with God. Resolve to live your life as a forgiven child of God!

*Contributed by Dennis Brewer*





**Saturday, December 16****Psalm 80**

*<sup>1</sup>Give ear, Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock. You, who sit enthroned between the cherubim, shine forth. <sup>2</sup>Before Ephraim, Benjamin and Manasseh, awaken your might; come and save us. <sup>3</sup>Restore us, O God; make your face shine on us, that we may be saved. <sup>4</sup>How long, Lord God Almighty, will your anger smolder against the prayers of your people? <sup>5</sup>You have fed them with the bread of tears; you have made them drink tears by the bowlful. <sup>6</sup>You have made us an object of derision to our neighbors, and our enemies mock us. <sup>7</sup>Restore us, God Almighty; make your face shine on us, that we may be saved.*

When I read this passage in Psalms the Israelites were begging God to save them from their enemies. After all, they were the chosen people of God, but they have not always lived up to God's promises for them. They are promising never to sin again.

It makes me wonder how the people of Israel are feeling at this time with the war with Hamas. They must feel much as they did in this passage from Psalms. So many of them and the Palestinians have been killed. Has God finally turned his back on his people?

I do not think God turns his back on his people no matter how they behave. That is what gives me faith in God. He is always ready to help those who come to him and ask for forgiveness and for his help in saving their souls. He is our help in time of trouble.

*Contributed by Sharon James*



## Sunday, December 17

### ***Isaiah 35:1-10***

*The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus <sup>2</sup> it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing. The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon. They shall see the glory of the Lord, the majesty of our God. <sup>3</sup> Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. <sup>4</sup> Say to those who are of a fearful heart, "Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you." <sup>5</sup> Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped <sup>6</sup> then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; <sup>7</sup> the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water; the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp, the grass shall become reeds and rushes. <sup>8</sup> A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way; the unclean shall not travel on it, but it shall be for God's people; no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray. <sup>9</sup> No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it; they shall not be found there, but the redeemed shall walk there. <sup>10</sup> And the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.*

The wilderness and the solitary place shall be glad ..." Isaiah 35 begins in the King James Version. "And the desert shall rejoice, and blossom as the rose."

If it ended there, this would be a wonderful promise. For the arid wasteland to be filled with the opulent beauty of the rose is a prophesy beyond human expectations. But Isaiah goes on to talk about vengeance and retribution, jackals, and ravenous beasts. The whole thing gets out of hand.

The deserts where I grew up are beautiful, scented with sage and manzanita. Visitors don't have to be fearful of jackals or lions. The first people to read Isaiah experienced a different kind of desert. Even if they found it beautiful, it wasn't a place they could visit and enjoy before returning to homes with running water. When they ventured out, they needed to watch for ravenous beasts. Their relationships with their neighbors might have moved them to desire vengeance.

We live in a different time. But we can still feel fear and anger. We may be frightened of violence, hard times, or a challenging diagnosis. We could feel helpless in the face of climate change, injustice, or someone bullying our child. We might meet difficult people at work, hard choices in relationships, or disappointment in ourselves. We may struggle with limitations that make us feel blind, deaf, or lame, figuratively if not literally.

Whatever the nature of the jackals or lions we fear, we can take comfort in the knowledge that in the end, "the ransomed of the Lord ... will enter Zion with singing; everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away."

*Lord, during this Advent season, may we look forward to the everlasting joy your Son can bring us.*

Contributed by Rebecca Haden



## Monday, December 18

### ***Isaiah 7:10-16***

*<sup>10</sup> Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz, saying, <sup>11</sup> Ask a sign of the Lord your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven. <sup>12</sup> But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test. <sup>13</sup> Then Isaiah said: "Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? <sup>14</sup> Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel. <sup>15</sup> He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. <sup>16</sup> For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted.*

Here's a quick version of the back story, a tale of war in the Mideast with perplexing characters and shifting alliances that sounds too familiar. But this one is set in 734 B.C. Ahaz in Jerusalem is the king of Judah, which had been united with Israel until Solomon's death, but which in this passage is facing an attack from Israel and Aram because it wants to attempt making a treaty with Assyria, the enemy of Israel and Aram. Isaiah enters this tangled picture to consult Ahaz.

"Then God names the issue here – faith," explains scholar [Stan Mast](#) in summarizing Isaiah's message to Ahaz. "In whom will you trust in this time of international strife and domestic danger? Will it be the walls of Jerusalem, your tenuous alliance with Assyria, your political skills, and military might? Or will it be Yahweh, your covenant God who has shown himself faithful for centuries and now promises to save you?"

But Ahaz says in verse 12 that he won't be asking for a sign from God. Isaiah is undeterred and tells Ahaz that God will give him a sign anyway; it's spelled out in verses 14 to 16.

"In a time of war and fear, God gave his Old Testament people a simple sign to assure them that their God was with them even though the northern coalition seemed invincible," Mast writes.

"In another time of international turmoil and internal danger, God gave his New Testament people a grand sign to assure them that God was with them, even though Rome seemed almighty. That sign still stands for us today, in a time of war and fear when leaders jockey for power and enemies are at the gates and we don't know whom to trust. ... Advent is a call to faith when Christmas seems a long way off. We don't have to ask for a sign to help us believe. He has already been born."

Contributed by Dave Edmark



## Tuesday, December 19

### Luke 1:46-55

*<sup>46</sup> And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord,<sup>47</sup> and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,<sup>48</sup> for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;<sup>49</sup> for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.<sup>50</sup> His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.<sup>51</sup> He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.<sup>52</sup> He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly;<sup>53</sup> he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.<sup>54</sup> He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy,<sup>55</sup> according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever."*

To 23-year-old Allie's enthusiastic excitement (to be read with all the sarcasm one can muster), I signed us up to do a mother/daughter devotional. I gently suggested she start, Allie being a creative writing major and having a day off when I didn't.

She texted me shortly thereafter to say "I know this verse! I sang it!" She goes on ..."it was for a church service at a camp at least 10 years ago. I still remember the tune and how beautiful the song is and what it was like in that moment. It's a piece I hadn't thought about in years, yet it was there in my mind with astonishing clarity thanks to this randomly assigned Bible verse."

But the interesting thing is that the same thing happened for me when I read the verse. For me it was Sandi Patty's "Oh Magnify the Lord," from WAY more than 10 years ago – a song I knew well when I was Allie's age. Music is powerful. Many of us find music as a way to glorify God. Both Allie and I feel that for ourselves, but it also made us think about the intentionality of Mary's Song and the call to make glorifying God not about special events, but about daily practice.

Glorifying God isn't just about the big choirs and magnificent instruments on Christmas Eve. It doesn't require grand acts or extraordinary deeds and it isn't meant for just every now and then. Rather, it calls us to ongoing moments of appreciation and praise. Every day God is in music, God is in sunlight, God is in congregations of those who love and serve each other. God is in a baby.

This Advent season and beyond, we can work toward moments of glorifying God throughout each day.

*Contributed by Terri Trotter and Allie Trotter-Wright*



## Wednesday, December 20

### **James 5:7-10**

*<sup>7</sup> Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. <sup>8</sup> You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near. <sup>9</sup> Beloved, do not grumble against one another, so that you may not be judged. See, the Judge is standing at the doors! <sup>10</sup> As an example of suffering and patience, beloved, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord*

Reading these verses out of context, I recall the Old Testament promises fulfilled in the coming of Jesus Christ. But James writes post-crucifixion. Christ has come into the world. The world, greedy tenants of God's creation, killed Him for wealth and power.

Preceding verses promise judgment on those who put wealth over humanity. Christ has come, but the world is still dominated by those who covet the riches of God's creation and would kill even God to secure their desires. The crucifixion revealed the truth of human sacrifice, that humanity kills for gain, not for God. Christ forgave those who blindly joined the mass murder. But we must see the truth now.

We have witnessed the evil of seeking power through condemning others, scapegoating as diversion from the truth. Judging is the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. We know too well how belief in the rightness of a cause can quickly be turned to the service of greed, murder, and warfare. This is the world we live in, as hard as the world of the prophets. But there is another tree, with another fruit: the tree Christ hung and died upon to show us the fruits of the Spirit. We are promised God's mercy here, now, if we persevere. Seeds planted in the hearts of believers will grow and spread. Though suffering remains, we are warned again not to 'grumble' or judge one another. The chapter ends urging us to prayer, taking our suffering to God and offering help to those who lose the Way.

As we celebrate the birth of the Prince of Peace, we see blame, judgment, and war throughout the world. We must stay the course. Those whose strength is in condemnation and murder will never bring the peace we long for. Christ forgave the mob that cheered His murder, knowing they were blind. Doing so He opens our eyes and offers His peace. We nourish ourselves by following His example. The fruit of His spirit is the only way to the peace we long for.

Contributed by Claudia Driver



## Thursday, December 21

### Matthew 1:18-25

<sup>18</sup> Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. <sup>19</sup> Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. <sup>20</sup> But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. <sup>21</sup> She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." <sup>22</sup> All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: <sup>23</sup> "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us." <sup>24</sup> When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, <sup>25</sup> but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

It is difficult to imagine how far reaching our day-to-day decisions can be. They can change one's future and, perhaps, the world. Think of Joseph, living the normal life of a young Jewish man of his time. He is excited to be marrying. Then shock comes when he finds out about his soon-to-be-wife's pregnancy. The custom in such circumstances would be to divorce her. This would disgrace her, and she would be stoned to death.

But an angel appears to him in a dream. After hearing God's words through the angel, Joseph goes against custom and makes the decision to take Mary as his wife. He **saves** Mary, and Mary's child comes to **save his people from their sins**. Joseph's decision is life altering ... not just for Mary, but for all generations since.

Listening to and for God's word and making decisions based on it, can and will save one from making wrong decisions. And, who knows, those God-directed decisions may change the course of the world. In the future it may be said of those decisions as it can surely be said of Joseph's, "And that has made all the difference."\*

\*Borrowed from Robert Frost's poem *The Road Not Taken*.

Contributed by Liz Fulton



## Friday, December 22

### Isaiah 9:2-7

*The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness-on them light has shined. <sup>3</sup>You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as people exult when dividing plunder. <sup>4</sup>For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian. <sup>5</sup>For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire. <sup>6</sup>For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor; Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. <sup>7</sup>His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.*

In historical context, the leader named by Isaiah was coming to bring hope to the people in that moment. Thought to be Hezekiah, who ruled the Kingdom of Judah from 715 to 687 BCE, the anticipation of his rule cast a vision for them of hope, a light shining into their deep darkness.

We hear these words, particularly verse 6, as an echo of Handel's Messiah. Familiarity with scripture often sends us into a place of comfort. After all, we as a people long for the hope and promise of the Christmas story each year, in all the ways the light of the baby Jesus shines into our lives and all the joy we often associate with this season.

It is also good to see how the scripture comes alive in our own context. The text references a communal longing in a time of extreme oppression. We can ask ourselves where do we see darkness in our world? Where do we see oppression? The answers we give are varied, and there will be new examples between the day I write this and the day you read it. New things cast darkness every day. We can become overwhelmed by the atrocities and injustice in our world. Yet there is an invitation in the vision of light and hope in this passage. Where do we see God breaking through? Take a deep breath and begin to name out loud or write down where you see the light of God breaking through. Where have you seen God at work in our world? Where do you see God's light shining through the actions of others?

Isaiah paints a picture of a perfect ruler whose kingdom will sustain the people. What images come to mind for you when you think what endless peace and justice would look like?

In these words, the foretelling of a savior who came to live among us, as one of us, echoes through into our season of anticipation. We hear these words as hope and promise in a time of darkness.

Contributed by Kristi Button



## Saturday, December 23

### 1 John 1:1-4

<sup>1</sup> We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life— <sup>2</sup> this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us— <sup>3</sup> we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. <sup>4</sup>We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.

As we read this passage, it's important to note that we are reading the words of an old man writing a letter to followers of Jesus. About six decades have passed since John lived alongside Jesus. Now he is writing to a group of believers who are hurting because some of their church members have recently left, and questioning if Jesus was even real.

This helps explain how John begins his first letter, diving in with a description of something tangible. As odd as the translated grammar may feel, it pushes us to notice the senses he is describing—heard, seen, touched. What is he referring to? Or better yet, who is he referring to?

He is writing about his personal experience of “the Word of life”—Jesus Christ.

John wanted the readers of his letter to know Jesus really did exist physically. He actually came, really died, and literally rose from the dead. Why? Because He was on a mission to create personal relationships with us.

John was so thrilled by the good news “God so loved the world that He gave us His Son” that he wrote about it in hopes his readers would share in it. The good news is so good it simply has to be shared. When it is, your joy will only grow!

**Reflection:** As Presbyterians, we often struggle to share the message of Jesus with others. Instead of awkwardly feeling pressured to proclaim the gospel, change your thinking to growing more and more thrilled with the gospel so that it overflows from you to others. Pray that this will be true for you.

Contributed by Leigh Woodruff





## Sunday, December 24

### Luke 2:1-14

*In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. <sup>2</sup> This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. <sup>3</sup> All went to their own towns to be registered. <sup>4</sup> Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. <sup>5</sup> He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. <sup>6</sup> While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. <sup>7</sup> And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. <sup>8</sup> In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. <sup>9</sup> Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. <sup>10</sup> But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: <sup>11</sup> to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. <sup>12</sup> This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." <sup>13</sup> And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, <sup>14</sup> "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"*

The humility of Christ is what spoke to me as I reflected on Luke's account of the birth of Jesus; humility that Professor Anna K. Schaffner explains has nothing to do with meekness or weakness, or being self-effacing or submissive, but rather is an attitude of spiritual modesty that comes from understanding our place in the larger order of things.

Jesus was not born into a family of wealth or power. He was born to an unwed mother under difficult circumstances. Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken and everyone was to go to their own town to register. Joseph went from Nazareth to Judea—a distance of a hundred miles. Mary went with him, 9-months pregnant, on foot. Well, they might have had a donkey. Think about that. The government told Joseph to travel a hundred miles to be counted. Without compensation. Without consideration of the disruption that would cause to his livelihood or family. And he went. With his pregnant wife.

And then the time came for the baby to be born. Mary and Joseph, a long way from home, tired, in a barn giving birth to their first child. Mary wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger. An angel appeared and announced the good news, a Savior had been born; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This is the Savior, born with nothing but the love of his family and God, swaddled in rags.

Jesus, our Savior. Help us to be thankful for the sufficiency of the day and know that we are a small part of your big world. Forgive us when we think we deserve more and help us show grace to others who have less. Help us to act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with you. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory.

Contributed by Diane Warren



## Monday, December 25

### **Psalm 96**

<sup>1</sup> O sing to the Lord a new song; sing to the Lord, all the earth. <sup>2</sup> Sing to the Lord, bless his name; tell of his salvation from day to day. <sup>3</sup> Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous works among all peoples. <sup>4</sup> For great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised; he is to be revered above all gods. <sup>5</sup> For all the gods of the peoples are idols, but the Lord made the heavens. <sup>6</sup> Honor and majesty are before him; strength and beauty are in his sanctuary. <sup>7</sup> Ascribe to the Lord, O families of the people, ascribe to the Lord glory and strength. <sup>8</sup> Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name; bring and offering and come into his courts. <sup>9</sup> Worship the Lord in holy splendor; tremble before him, all the earth. <sup>10</sup> Say among the nations, "The Lord is king! The world is firmly established; it shall never be moved. He will judge the peoples with equity." <sup>11</sup> Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice; let the sea roar, and all that fills it; <sup>12</sup> let the field exult, and everything in it. Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy <sup>13</sup> before the Lord; for he is coming, for he is coming to judge the earth. He will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with his truth. '

In the season of Advent, we focus on the coming of the Lord into the world in person. God coming to us in the person of the baby Jesus, God with us. The birth of Jesus to Mary and Joseph is the coming of the long-awaited Messiah; the ruler anticipated throughout the Old Testament; the king who will establish God's kingdom of righteousness and truth.

The writer of Psalm 96 sees God's coming into the world as an occasion for celebration and joy throughout the creation. The heavens are glad. The earth rejoices. The sea and everything in it roars. The fields and everything in them exult. The trees of the forest sing for joy. They sing a new song. And we sing it with them. Why? *Because the Lord is coming.* But this is not just the humble coming of God into the world that we've been hearing about all through Advent. This is something more. Something earth-shattering.

Over the centuries, Christians everywhere have come to think of God's coming into the world in two stages. There is God's humble coming in the baby in the manger. Then there is God's second coming in glory. The word "glory" appears three times in this short Psalm: in verses 3, 7, and 8. In this second coming, we believe God is coming into the world to set everything right. To overcome sin and evil. To conquer death. To judge the world with complete fairness.

How are we to respond? First, the coming of God into the world—both in humility and in glory—calls us to *worship*. "Worship the Lord in holy splendor." "Bring an offering, and come into his courts." And second, it also calls us to *witness*. "Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous works among all the peoples." And finally, it calls for singing. "O sing to the Lord a new song. Sing to the Lord, all the earth. Tell of his salvation from day to day!"

*Lord, may I welcome you with open arms at your coming in humility, and at your coming in glory!*

Contributed by Rev. Phil Butin



Notes



First United Presbyterian Church  
695 E. Calvin St  
Fayetteville AR, 72703  
[www.fupcfay.org](http://www.fupcfay.org)