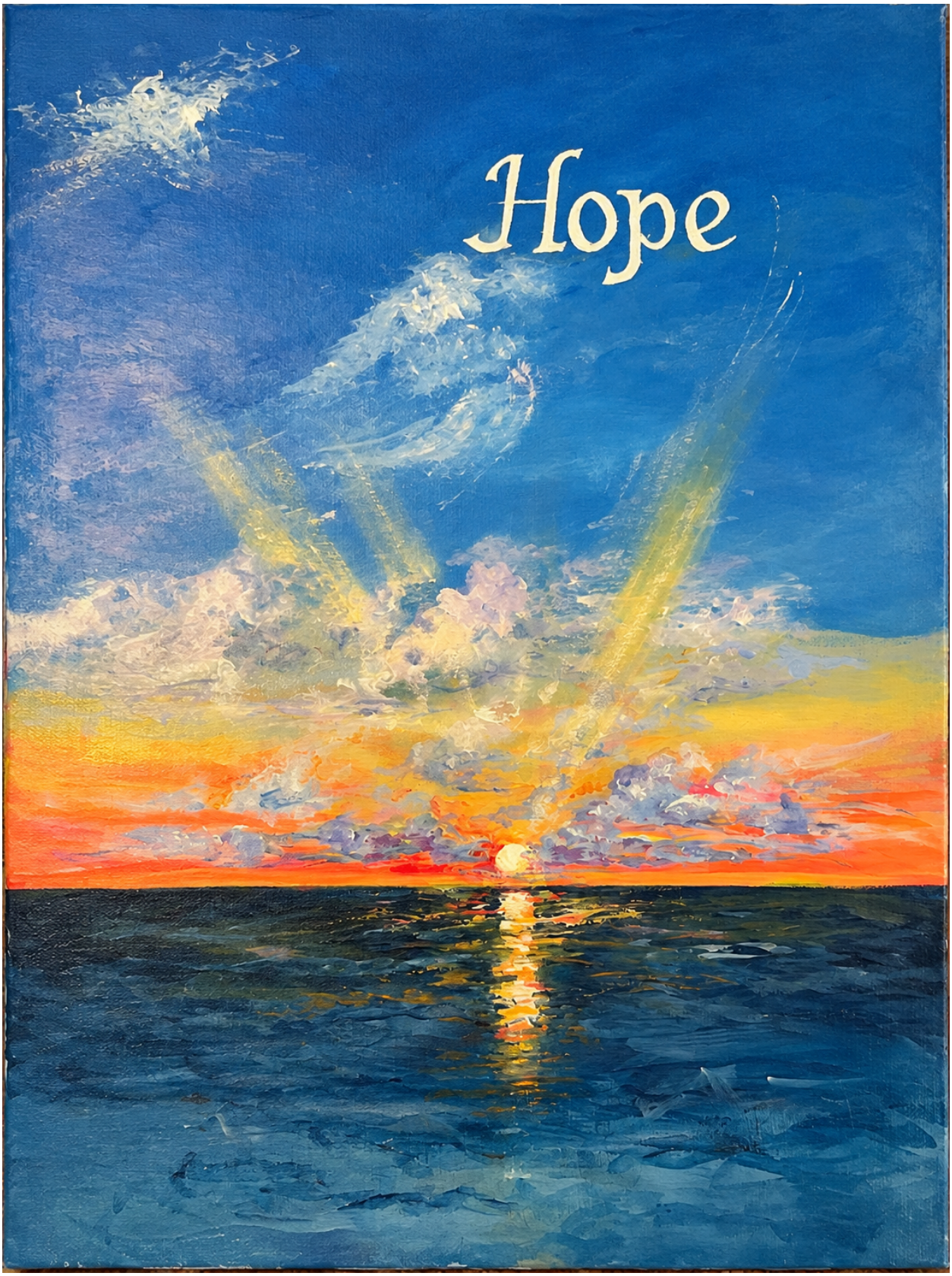

Hope

Advent Devotional 2026

First United Presbyterian Church would like to thank everyone who contributed to this project. We would also like to thank Carol Hart for allowing the use of her beautiful artwork on our cover.

This booklet is 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 out for your household
• As a series of posts at the website, with videos of the hymns
• As links at the Facebook page so you can visit the posts at the website, where the day's devotion will be posted each morning

FUPC's website: www.fupcfay.org

Please consider joining in at Facebook to share your devotional insights and pondering. We hope to share insights and questions there throughout Advent as we read these meditations together.

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

Sunday, November 29

John 1:1-5
[1]In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. [2] He was in the beginning with God. [3]All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being [4] in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. [5]The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

Before having children, I never knew how much time I would spend in artificial darkness. Both of my kids prefer to fall asleep in pitch black, can't-see-my-hand-in-front-of-my-face rooms. They have not yet learned to fear the night.

When our family travels, creating darkness is the first order of business toward a restful stay. We busy ourselves vanquishing light: closing the gap between curtain and window, covering the crack under the door, dimming the illuminated phone screen.

I've come to recognize the darkness that greets me at the end of each day as friendly and cajoling, inviting quietude. With a child in my arms, the inky black is a weighted blanket, stilling the frenetic energy of a small body constantly in motion. Interrupting, for a moment, the endless spiraling of my overactive mind.

Void of sound and movement, this darkness is a reminder of the beginning. Before creation, there was merely darkness, a prelude to everything. Darkness can be holy, a place to wonder at what might be and become. The Word was with God, even in the darkness, joining the Creator in the miracle of creating all that was and is and will be. Life emerges from darkness, slowly but surely, just as the sun rises one beam at a time over the horizon.

Advent is the season in which we name and honor the darkness we inhabit even as we wait for the light to come. God invites us to dwell in the night—not as punishment but as preparation. Before we awaken to new life, we must be acquainted with the world as it is. We must rest in the sure knowledge that the light is coming to be with us by no power of our own.

And so, hear this invitation to a holy Advent: don't rush too quickly to the light. Let your eyes adjust to the darkness and find that it too is sacred and necessary. And when the light dawns, may you receive it as a gift, a new beginning.

Contributed by Rev. Jessie Light-Wells

Monday, November 30

Jeremiah 29:11
"For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope."

Jeremiah is not the only one to point out that God has plans for us. Thomas à Kempis wrote, "Man proposes, God disposes." A Yiddish proverb says, "Man plans, God laughs." These and similar sayings tell us that there is no point in making plans, because God will probably scuttle them for us with cruel twists in our carefully constructed plots.

That's not what Jeremiah was saying. He doesn't mention human plans, but we all make them — and they don't always come to fruition as we expect. We can feel fairly sure that Joseph didn't plan to marry a pregnant woman and Mary didn't plan to be a pregnant bride. They surely didn't intend to begin their life together by trudging across the desert, struggling to find lodging, and bringing a baby into the world in a rough shelter.

They probably weren't planning to have their infant greeted by angels and kings with gifts, either.

That was God's plan, though, and Christmas reminds us of the amazing outcome of that wondrous plan. It gave all humanity a future with hope.

Advent is a good time to make plans for celebrations, gifts, fun times with our families and exciting events at church and in the community. It's also a good time to remind ourselves that when our plans go astray, it's not a signal for despair. It's time to trust that God's plans are not yet visible to us.

> *Heavenly Lord, help us to remember that your plans for us will be revealed in time. Help us to be like Mary, who accepted Your plans wholeheartedly in place of her own.*

Contributed by Rebecca Haden

Tuesday, December 1

Isaiah 52:7

How beautiful upon 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!"

I have all the letters written by my father to his future wife, my mother, during WWII. Dad was an officer on the USS Puffer, a submarine in the Pacific theater, while Mom was serving in the American Red Cross on a bomber base in England. On August 14th, 1945, a Subic Bay Radio broadcast announced the surrender of Japan. Dad wrote to Mom the following day, "The war is over, but it refuses to soak in. My reaction is to be suddenly tired—dead tired—and maybe the sensation of a heavy weight removed . . . The ship is tense tonight . . . We're missing one boat in our area and they keep asking him to report in, the most ominous silence you can experience." The boat they were trying to contact was the USS Bullhead, the last US submarine lost in the war.

Isn't that the way good news comes? In the midst of our busyness, our fears, our sorrows, good news arrives. We receive it and a weight is lifted from our hearts, but the thousand complications that make up our lives remain. I would have expected Dad's response to VJ Day to have been unadulterated joy, but no, life was still happening and he was enduring the imaginative horror of companions depth charged and lost at sea.

We all long for lasting peace, for good tidings that erase all strife and fear. As we embark on our Advent journey, we have God's love letter to us in the form of a baby, born in a livestock stall in a small town in an occupied country. That baby will grow into a man who walks with us, teaches us, heals us, and reconciles us with his father, our holy and merciful Creator. That is the best news this side of heaven, but it doesn't cure cancer, or end wars (although it should), or avert cruelty or greed or senseless violence.

I have read that one of the distinctive features of Christian hope is that is does not require the absence of suffering. Hope springs from the well of faith. It is a discipline, a virtue, and a choice that we can make each day. I have a beautiful healthy granddaughter. That is good news. At night I cry when I contemplate the world we have brought her into—plenty of bad news. In the morning I ask God to help me do my best to love her, to do the small, good things that I can do, to fill the bird bath, to check on a neighbor, to volunteer in some capacity, to cook a healthy meal for people who are hungry.

In The Fellowship of the Ring, Frodo says to Gandalf, "I wish it need not have happened in my time."

"So do I," said Gandalf, "and so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us."

> *Lord Jesus, help us to rise each morning with hope in our hearts and a prayer to serve you each day. Amen*

Contributed by Jane Steinkraus

Wednesday, December 2

Genesis 12:1-2
[1]Now the Lord said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. [2]I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.'

When I was in my late twenties our Presbyterian Church in Jacksonville had an extensive Bible study class called the "Bethel Bible Series." Every lesson had a catchphrase to help you remember the most significant aspect of that lesson, and the catchphrase for the study of Abraham and his call was "Blessed to be a Blessing." That really resonated with me because at a very early age my parents had instilled in me the theological concept of "to whom much is given, much is required." *Luke 12:48*

Growing up, we weren't the wealthiest people in town, but we always considered ourselves blessed. Our family, from my grandparents to my aunts, uncles, cousins, and parents, were close, and I always felt loved and supported. My family valued education, and I was taught at an early age that God had given me a good brain, and it was my responsibility to use it to God's glory. That meant studying hard to make good grades and choosing a profession that would benefit my community.

There were times when my parents' expectations overwhelmed me because there was a lot of stress living into their high standards. But I do believe, with all of my heart, that what they instilled in me was true: that I was blessed in so many ways, and that because I was so blessed I had a responsibility to bless others. In this season of Advent, who of us is not blessed through God's gift of Jesus Christ? We are blessed to bless others.

Contributed by Rev. Leslie Reeves

Thursday, December 3

Micah 5:2

[2]But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days.

In this passage, Micah foretells that from Bethlehem, Ephrathah (Fertility in Hebrew, another name for Bethlehem), the ruler of Israel will arise: the Messiah. He does not use the term Messiah, but the Israelites identified the true ruler to be the Messiah. Take note of the last portion of the verse and Micah's statement that this ruler has been at work from before their time and will be everlasting.

God, working through Micah, informed the Israelites and future Christians that the true ruler, the Messiah, would arise or be born from Bethlehem, which was tied back to the kingship of David. This was a statement of hope for the Israelites who were in political and religious turmoil as the Assyrians were enforcing their overlordship and is guidance for Christians.

During this Advent season, this passage reminds us of God's eternal love for mankind. He uses Micah as his messenger during a time when Israel as a people and nation were in decline. Micah reminds the Jewish people that God has not forgotten his covenant and will send the Messiah. As Christians looking at this passage, we are reminded of God's love for his people by sending Jesus, the Messiah, to atone for our sins. This passage also states that the Messiah, Christ, has been with God from the start and his power, rule over mankind, is everlasting—an insight into the concept of the Holy Trinity.

The Advent season is a time of preparation, reflection, and evaluation. Let us be reminded that every day is a time to remember the message of Christ and turn to him as our true guide through life.

Contributed by Derrik Olsen

Friday, December 4

Malachi 3:1-3
[1] See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. [2]But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap; [3]he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness.

Indeed, the Messenger is coming! Whether Malachi is heralding the Christ child or His cousin John is irrelevant! The point is, who will be able to abide it? This Messenger is bringing a refiner's fire so intense that the dross of our lives will literally be consumed and burned away. Who can possibly stand in the face of such inspection?

Malachi reminds us that we must look beyond our starry night visions of the sweet baby in a manger, angels serenading in the sky, shepherds with wondrous faces, and kings with gifts. Those are the visions of prophets and the dreams of disciples.

Christ comes not to affirm us, but to renew us in the fullness of God's grace. The crucible and the fuller's soap does not destroy what is pure. Rather it purifies and cleans, and makes ready for sacred use. We must examine our hearts, release what hinders our faith, and make room for God to work within us.

> *Prayer: Gracious God, prepare the way of the Lord in our hearts. Refine us by your Spirit. Cleanse us by your Grace. Make us ready to welcome Christ anew. Amen*

Contributed by James Gilbreath

Saturday, December 5

Matthew 24:36, 44
36 "But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. …
44 Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour."

I must say it was a bit of a challenge linking these verses about the second coming with the season of Advent.

Biblical scholar William Barclay helps us with the meaning of these passages: The message is never to let our concern with worldly affairs, like our busy preparation with Christmas gifts, guests, concerts, and meals, etc. completely distract us from remembering that God has the issues of life and death in his hands. We are not to speculate about the second coming but like the disciples and the faithful in all times, we must also stay alert and watchful for Jesus to come into our lives fresh and anew.

Contributed by Denny Nelson

Sunday, December 6

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

Sometimes I wonder how we have managed to make our world so complicated. We live surrounded by division, conflict, uncertainty, and endless demands on our time and attention. We build walls between ourselves, struggle to understand one another, and often lose sight of what really matters.
And then I read John 3:16.

I didn't choose this scripture because it is perhaps the most familiar verse in the Bible. I chose it because, in one beautifully simple sentence, God tells us everything we need to know about His love for us. God loved the world. So He gave us His Son. No complicated explanation. No elaborate conditions. Just love, expressed through the greatest gift imaginable.

As I reflect on Advent, I am reminded that God did not send Jesus because the world was perfect. He sent His Son into a troubled, imperfect world, much like the one we inhabit today. And He chose to announce that extraordinary gift not in a palace, but in the humble surroundings of a manger.

What a beautiful reminder that God's love doesn't need grandeur or complexity to change the world.

I believe God created this world out of love, intending us to live in relationship with Him and with one another. We are the ones who have made life so complicated.

This Advent, I want to quiet the noise, set aside the distractions, and return to that simple, beautiful truth. God loves us. He always has. He always will.

And that is the greatest Christmas gift of all.

Contributed by Mary Mann

Wednesday, December 7

Isaiah 40:9,11

9 *Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear, say to the cities of Judah, 'Here is your God!'. . .* 11 *He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.*

Life on our struggling farm was a day-by-day challenge. Although my parents shielded us children from discussions of the payment due on the farm loan or how weak crops or cattle illnesses put the herd in jeopardy, I knew when the stress of survival was present. I trusted my parents but carried anxiety about the family business.

Still, every Sunday while my dad sang in the choir I sat beside my mom in worship. Just to our right was a large stained glass window picturing Christ Jesus in vivid color. He stands erect holding a shepherd's crook in one hand. Held securely on his other shoulder is a fluffy white lamb, completely relaxed. As I gazed into Jesus's face, I felt entirely confident in the care of both my parents and Jesus.

Even today that image moves me to consider the foundation of my faith*. God is faithful and reliable*. Why does this matter? The daily uncertainties and bad news stories can make us easily slip into continual worry about what the future may hold. Yet in all of Isaiah's 40th chapter we can see that *God is the One who made us, who carries us, who sustains us,* and as the Rev Eugene Peterson writes in one of my favorite sermons, "God doesn't come and go. God lasts."

In our doubts and fears let us remember that God remains. God will renew and increase our strength as we wait and trust and hope in Him.

Contributed by Rev. Joyce Daniel

Tuesday, December 8

Isaiah 11:1-3
[1] A shoot shall come out from the stock of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. [2] 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. [3] His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD.

In Charles Dickens's novel *A Christmas Carol*, Ebenezer Scrooge is visited by three spirits: the Spirit of Christmas Past, the Spirit of Christmas Present, and the Spirit of Christmas Yet to Come. These three spirits visited Scrooge during the night before Christmas and revealed to him the errors he was committing in his life. With the new insights he achieves, he is able to change, for his own good and the good of others.

Isaiah is talking about the Spirit of the Lord. That's not a ghost story, but the Spirit of the Lord as described here includes three spirits, too: the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, and the Spirit of knowledge and fear of the Lord.

Can these spirits reveal to us the errors we might be making in our lives during Advent?

If our kids get overexcited during the run-up to Christmas, can we approach them in the Spirit of wisdom and understanding instead of exasperation or embarrassment?

If we feel overwhelmed by how much we need to do at work and church and in our community, can we let the Spirit of counsel and might help us feel strong enough and supported enough to accomplish our goals?

If, when thinking of these qualities that Isaiah predicts Jesus will embody, we feel that we can never be like Him, can we use the Spirit of knowledge and fear of the Lord to allow us to experience the Spirit of the Lord resting on us in all our imperfection?

It's a worthwhile goal.

Contributed by Rosie Haden Chomphosy

Wednesday, December 9

Isaiah 11:3b-5
3b … He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; 4 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. 5 Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins.

Everywhere I look, there seems to be injustice, lying, and manipulation by the "kings" of our time. The poor and vulnerable are ignored or mistreated. The meek and the marginalized are cast out of sight. The widows and the orphans are hungry and afraid. Unfortunately, this is the way it has been for a very long time, as confirmed and addressed in Isaiah.

The good news is that is not the end of the story! Isaiah prophesies about the sovereign king to come; the king who is divinely equipped by the Spirit of God to rule in a different way than anyone else before. He will not judge by appearances or hearsay, but with absolute vision, knowledge, and equity. He will look into the heart and see motives behind actions. He will consider the needy, the poor, the exploited, the meek, and the afflicted and judge them with compassion. He will deal with the wicked. With just the authority of His word and His breath, wickedness will be overcome.

Our perfect sovereign king will be encircled and strengthened by righteousness, and ready at all times to accomplish it. Unlike earthly rulers who lie and act out of self-interest, He will be true to His word and utterly reliable. (Wow! I would definitely vote for Him!)

Isaiah's hopeful message allows me to wait for the birth of Jesus with a sense of optimistic anticipation, but it also raises a question for me: Although I might treat Isaiah 11:3-5 as only applying to the life of the Savior, Jesus Christ, how might I live life differently if I was more Spirit-dependent?

Contributed by Pam Gilbreath

Thursday, December 10

Isaiah 11: 6–10
6 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. 7 The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. 8 The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. 9 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. 10 On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious.

Three thousand years ago, Arkansas was in the Archaic Period, inhabited by nomadic hunter-gatherers. And, very far away, Isaiah was writing for a divided Israel. The northern (Samaria) and southern (Judah) populations had turned against each other. Both were caught in the midst of an expansion of power by Assyria which involved terrible political terror and military aggression against them. In his panic, Israel's King Ahaz did not trust God and instead made poor geopolitical decisions which resulted in political and spiritual instability for the nation of Israel. Prophet Isaiah, in response to the threat of a new Assyrian world order, was trying to describe a vision of an alternative world order under the reign of God. It would be one of ultimate peace, safety, and reconciliation. It seemed impossible to imagine: the wolf and the lamb living together? a child putting a hand into a cobra's nest unharmed? a little child leading them?

Theologians who favor a literal interpretation believe Isaiah's description refers to God's ability to restore creation to a pre-Fall Eden-like state where animal biology and behavior is transformed. Theologians who propose a metaphysical/spiritual interpretation suggest that the animals represent sinful humans (fierce, cruel, hostile people) who are radically changed by the grace of Christ, creating a social and spiritual world where former enemies live peacefully as one community in Christ.

It is easy to identify with Isaiah's people. Our own culture has become distracted from spiritual practice by massive amounts of information and obsessive attention to money, entertainment, and superficial beauty. Like the nation of Israel in 800 BCE, we too are threatened by a new and very different geopolitical world order—forced on us by AI, proliferation of nuclear weapons, and the real possibility of a war fought in outer space. Any of these has potentially devastating consequences for our planet Earth. Realistically, our current situation is fearful and soul-crushing, except for our ability to persevere in our faith in God.

This passage from the Prophet Isaiah calls us to remember, and believe, that God can create peace in His time. Belief is not based on massive information or the thrills of entertainment. Rather, it is a heart-choice based on love. Let us choose to believe Isaiah's prophecy of God's transformational love for the future, as we prepare to welcome His ultimate gift of love, the baby named Emmanuel, our Jesus Christ!

Contributed by Sabra Martin

Friday, December 11

Isaiah 40:3-5
3 A voice cries out: 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. 4 Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. 5 Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.'

It was a beautiful summer day for a walk in the woods. I wanted to see if blackberries were ripe and if the little creek held any water after weeks of no rainfall. Four grandkids were part of our hiking group that approached the overgrown field leading to grass taller than the kids, tripping vines of passion flowers, and sharp spines of brambles making the trek more of a trial than an adventure. Once we got to the shade of the woods, an old logging road gave us a slightly better path, except for the poison ivy. The creek was delightful with enough water to splash in. But the way back was no fun as the ticks, chiggers, and a ground-hornet attack sent screams echoing over the hillside. The trail had not been cleared; the field had not been mowed.

Great rulers of ancient days made sure their road was completely groomed before leaving on a journey. Enormous crews of men were sent out to cut down hills, pull out uneven rocks, straighten out the road. The ruler wanted an easy, smooth ride.

Prepare the way, make straight the highway for our God. What a delightful command!

We won't be looking down to be sure we don't trip. We'll travel with uplifted faces.

Let's make it a smooth path to the love of God. Clear out the rocks of sinful acts, and the wavering thoughts that veer away from the straight way. All together we clear our souls and pull out stumbling blocks in our lives as we see the bright highway to the gift that Jesus brings.

Contributed by Carol Van Scyoc

Saturday, December 12

Matthew 3:1-3, 11
[1]In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming [2]'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.' [3]This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, 'The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight." ' . . . [11]'I baptize you with water, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.'

Matthew tells us that John the Baptist is the one about whom Isaiah spoke. A possible location of John's wilderness ministry is Bethany beyond the Jordan, on the east bank of the Jordan River, a sudden green oasis in the middle of barren limestone and crumbling clay hills. John traversed a landscape that today is considered an ecological transition zone, melding together rocky desert, steppe, and shrubland with the sudden surprise of green plants growing around life-giving wadis. A fitting place, this land of transition, for the prophet John the Baptist to announce a profound and holy change.

John can't have had an easy time of it as he walked in the heat over the broken rock and dust—a hot, arid, physically demanding environment—all the while facing the challenge of finding food and water. As John called on listeners to repent, did he struggle with an interior wilderness of his own? Did he wish his paths were a little straighter and less hilly? Perhaps the assurance he offered others, that the kingdom of heaven has come near, sustained him as well.

John's audience knew the challenges of walking the rugged terrain, just as they would have had a visceral awareness of fire—it was something essential, hard-won, and worth tending carefully. The listeners would have also called to mind the Old Testament scriptures that promised the outpouring of the Spirit as a sign that a new age, long awaited, was soon to be upon them.

Our footsteps are not John's. Our wilderness is endless news, outrage that never lets up, fear for our loved ones and our planet, and beneath that, an interior wilderness many of us carry alone. Into exactly this, John's words still arrive: prepare the way, make the path straight. The kingdom has come near even here, even now. We only need to clear space and straighten the path enough to notice that someone is coming, with the Holy Spirit and fire in hand, and offer welcome to the new arrival.

Contributed by Kathy Hall

Sunday, December 13

Psalm 106:1, 4, 13b
[1]Praise the Lord! O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever. … [4] Remember us, O Lord, when you show favor to your people; help us when you deliver them. … [13]But they soon forgot his works; they did not wait for his counsel.

Advent is a season of waiting, hoping, and remembering. As we prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus, we are reminded of something wonderful: God's love never ends, even when our patience does! Psalm 106 tells the story of God's people, who sometimes forgot all the wonderful things God had done for them. They became impatient and rushed ahead instead of waiting for God's guidance. Does that sound familiar?

Think about how difficult it can be to wait for Christmas morning! Children eagerly count the days, wondering what surprises await them. Even adults struggle with waiting, whether for good news, an answered prayer, or a difficult situation to improve. Sometimes, while we're busy waiting for what comes next, we forget to recognize the blessings already surrounding us.
But here's the beautiful thing about God's love: even when we forget God, God never forgets us. In Psalm 106, the writer asks God to remember the people with favor and kindness. Advent reminds us that God answered the world's longing for hope in the most unexpected way: through a baby born in Bethlehem. Jesus reminds us that God hasn't forgotten us. God's love comes to us right where we are, bringing hope into uncertainty, peace into worry, and light into darkness.

This Advent perhaps the greatest gift we can give ourselves is a moment to slow down, remember God's goodness, and trust that God is still at work, even when we cannot see what comes next. After all, Christmas is worth waiting for, but God's love is already here!
What is something you're waiting for? How can remembering God's love help you be patient and hopeful?

> *Faithful God, thank you for loving us through every season. When we grow impatient, teach us to trust your timing. When we forget your goodness, help us remember. Prepare our hearts to welcome Jesus with gratitude, hope, and joy. Amen.*

Contributed by Isaac Thomas

Monday, December 14

Philippians 2:5–8

[5]Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus ,[6]who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, [7]but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, [8]he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.

I grew up with these verses. They formed the backbone of our weekly worship and communion services in the Netherlands. Week after week, we remembered Christ, who, though he was in the form of God, emptied himself, took the form of a slave, and became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. I first knew these words in Dutch. They were so familiar that I hardly needed to open my Bible to recall them.

Yet it wasn't until last year, during my first year in seminary, that I learned something new about this familiar passage. Many scholars call Philippians 2:6–11 the Christ Hymn. They suggest Paul may have drawn on an early Christian hymn or confession, something the first believers sang together. I found that fascinating. Words that had shaped my worship since childhood may have been shaping Christian worship since the earliest days of the church.

But studying the passage also challenged me to look beyond the familiar words. Paul does not introduce this hymn simply to remind us of what Christ has done. He begins with an invitation: "*Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus*." The Christ who was in the form of God did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited. Instead, he chose humility, servanthood, and self-giving love. The hymn does not end at the cross. In the verses that follow, God highly exalts this humbled Christ.

At Advent, we remember the one who was "born in human likeness." God entered our world not through displays of earthly power, but in the vulnerability of a child. After so many years of remembering humility in worship, I find myself confronted with a different question: How much of that humility has shaped the way I live? Perhaps that is Advent's invitation. We are called not only to remember the Christ we worship, but also to have his mind and become more like him.

Contributed by Geert Middleman

Tuesday, December 15

Isaiah 40:1–2
[1] Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. [2] Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins.

Sometimes the hardest thing to hear or imagine when we are hurting is that everything will be okay. Even when those words come from love, they can ask us to reach for hope before we are ready to be hopeful.

"Comfort, O comfort my people." Isaiah speaks to people who know loss. Exile has separated them from home and shaken their understanding of where God can be found. Their grief cannot be hurried away.

God tells the prophet to speak tenderly. Before there is a road through the wilderness, there is comfort in God. Before the people begin their journey home, God calls them "my people." Even here, even after everything, they belong.

I hear an echo of this tenderness in Holy Saturday, that quiet space between the cross and the empty tomb. It is the day when grief is still grief, when the people who loved Jesus do not yet know what Sunday will bring. God is present even when hope is beyond their imagination.

Advent holds room for that kind of waiting, too. We bring the losses we cannot explain, the relationships we cannot repair, and the prayers that seem to meet silence. We wait for God while wondering and doubting where God has gone.

Isaiah's words give us something to hold: we are still God's people.

The child we are waiting for will enter our vulnerability and live among us. He will know grief, love people who suffer, and weep beside a tomb.

This is where our comfort begins—in a God willing to share the places we would rather escape. We share the love of God when we offer comfort by staying beside one another, without requiring answers or a cheerful ending.

We can come to Bethlehem weary. We can come wondering. We can because we know that we are God's people, and God is at work in the midst of despair.

> ***Prayer*** *Tender God, stay near in our waiting. Help us receive your comfort and offer your presence. Amen*

Contributed by Amanda McDonald

Wednesday, December 16

Luke 1:5–13
[5] In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. 6 Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. [7]But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years. …[11]Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. [12]When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. [13]But the angel said to him, 'Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John'.

Have you ever prayed for something so long that you began to wonder if God was listening? Luke provides assurance in verse 13 above: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard."

Zechariah and Elizabeth knew what it meant to wait. They were faithful servants of God, yet they carried the deep disappointment of being unable to have children. As the years passed and they grew older, their hope of becoming parents must have seemed increasingly impossible. But God had not forgotten them. One ordinary day, while Zechariah was faithfully carrying out his priestly duties, an angel appeared with extraordinary news: God had heard his prayer, and Elizabeth would bear a son.

What a beautiful reminder that God's silence does not mean His absence. Sometimes we mistake God's delay for His denial. We measure His faithfulness by our circumstances rather than trusting His perfect wisdom and timing.

Zechariah and Elizabeth continued serving God even when their prayers seemed unanswered. Their faithfulness reminds us that our relationship with God is not dependent upon receiving everything we ask for. And when God's answer finally came, it was greater than they could have imagined. Their son, John, would prepare the way for Jesus.

Perhaps you are waiting for an answer today. Take courage. God sees your circumstances, hears your prayers, and knows your heart. Waiting on God is never wasted time.

> *Prayer*
> *Heavenly Father, thank You for hearing our prayers, even when answers seem delayed. Help us remain faithful in seasons of waiting. Strengthen our trust in Your wisdom and remind us that Your timing is always purposeful. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

Contributed by Marti Woodruff

Thursday, December 17, 2026

Psalm 89:1-4
[1] I will sing of your steadfast love, O LORD, forever; with my mouth I will proclaim your faithfulness to all generations.[2] I declare that your steadfast love is established for ever; your faithfulness is as firm as the heavens. [3] You said, 'I have made a covenant with my chosen one, I have sworn to my servant David: [4] "I will establish your descendants forever, and build your throne for all generations."'

Does anything last forever? Even as we celebrate the 250th year of our Republic, we may begin to question its endurance. We see threats from climate change, artificial intelligence, national indebtedness, nuclear proliferation, and global conflict. In a chaotic and uncertain world, can anything last forever? Can we begin to imagine the world in which our grandchildren or great-grandchildren will live their lives?

And yet in Psalm 89 the psalmist celebrates God's promise to David that his throne would indeed endure forever. In fact, David's line would rule over Judah from father to son for 14 generations (*Matt. 1:6-11*). Nevertheless, the Davidic dynasty ended when King Jehoiachin was taken prisoner to Babylon and Solomon's Temple was destroyed (*II Kings 25*). But that is not the end of the story. Fourteen generations later a baby would be born to David's line in his hometown of Bethlehem. Through this birth God's promise would be fulfilled. The One whose name is "Faithful and True" is hailed as "King of kings and Lord of lords" (*Rev. 19:11-16*).

Whatever the future holds, this Advent Season we celebrate Emmanuel ("God with us"). We already dwell in the Kingdom of God. We have the sure and lasting hope that God's steadfast love endures for all generations.

Contributed by Dennis Brewer

Friday, December 18

Luke 1:26-35

26 In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth,27to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. 28And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.' 29But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. 30The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. 31And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. 32He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. 33He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.' 34Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?' 35The angel said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God.

Nothing is impossible with God. When Gabriel comes to Mary, she is understandably perplexed. The angel tells her that God is about to do something extraordinary through her, and Mary asks a perfectly reasonable question: "How can this be?"

I appreciate that scripture gives us Mary's question. Faith does not require us to pretend that we understand what God is doing. It does not mean that we never question, worry, or wonder what comes next. Mary does not have all the answers. What she receives instead is the assurance that God is already at work. That is an important distinction.

Our Reformed tradition reminds us that the story begins with God—not with our ability to understand, accomplish, or even believe perfectly. God acts first. God extends grace. God chooses to enter into the ordinary and uncertain circumstances of human life. And in this passage, God chooses Mary.

During Advent, we often talk about waiting. But waiting can be difficult when life does not look the way we expected it to be. We may find ourselves asking Mary's question: How can this be? The good news is that God does not wait for us to have everything figured out before drawing near. The God who came to Mary is the same God who comes to us—meeting us in our questions, our uncertainty, and our ordinary lives. Advent reminds us that our hope does not rest in our certainty. Our hope rests in the faithfulness of God.

Contributed by Leigh Woodruff

Saturday, December 19

Luke 1:46-55

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

Mary was a devout, humble, intelligent, young virgin Jewish woman. She lived in Nazareth, a small rural town of about 400 people in Galilee. The Angel Gabriel appeared to her and told her that she would bear a son, the long awaited Messiah. Gabriel told her ". . blessed are you among women!", told her to name him "Jesus", and that He would reign forever. Mary had a question "How can this be, since I do not know a man?" Gabriel replied ". . with God nothing will be impossible."

Soon after, Mary went to see her cousin, Elizabeth. She lived in Ein Karem, a village 100 miles south, near Jerusalem. Elizabeth was an older childless woman. Gabriel told Elizabeth that she would bear a son. Her son became John the Baptist.

While visiting Elizabeth, Mary praised God in a song now called the "Magnificat". She said "My soul magnifies the Lord. And my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior. For He has regarded the lowly state of His maidservant: For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed."

Mary's song came true. Here I am, 80 generations after Mary and I call her "blessed". And not only me. Johann Sebastian Bach composed incredibly beautiful music to Mary's words in his "Magnificat". Music so beautiful it makes me cry.

Or contemplate the great cathedrals such as Notre Dame de Chartres constructed about 1200 AD. Notre Dame means "Our Lady". These cathedrals were built in honor of Mary. The Chartres cathedral is considered one of the most beautiful buildings ever built. It was constructed out of love for Mary, by volunteers who donated their skills, time, and materials. Their dream was to build a cathedral so beautiful that it would draw Mary to Earth from Heaven.

Mary was obedient to God. She gave birth to the Messiah, nursed Him, and raised Jesus to adulthood. Here I am in 2026, part of a generation that calls Mary "blessed." I highly recommend you listen to Bach's Magnificat setting Mary's words to music.

Contributed by Don Steinkraus

Sunday, December 20

Luke 1:39-45

39 in those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, 40where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. 41When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leapt in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit 42and exclaimed with a loud cry, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. 43And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? 44For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy. 45And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.'

There's no shortage of joy in this encounter between Mary and Eizabeth, amid a backdrop of what today sone might call socially awkward circumstances.

There is Mary, a young, unmarried peasant woman who is pregnant and likely to be viewed suspiciously by onlookers and unwelcome in certain quarters. Then there is Elzabeth, Mary's much older cousin who's also pregnant while past child-bearing age following decades of being barren during her marriage to the priest Zechariah. Being a priest's wife provides Elizabeth some status that Mary doesn't have, but her burden was that "infertility was seen as a sign of divine disfavor and a great deal of shame was attached to being childless," according to scholar Marg Mowczko.

So they had much in common in this meeting. Mary, after her own astonishment and reluctance, had started coming around to the idea that she was going to give birth to Jesus. Elizabeth, who will be the mother of John the Baptist, is as ecstatic over Mary's pregnancy as her own.

About 30 years later, Elizabeth's son would pave the way for Mary's son to embark on his ministry. This meeting of the two women while they are each expecting foreshadows what's ahead. Judith Jones, a retired Episcopal priest, writes, "When Elizabeth welcomes Mary, she practices the same kind of inclusive love that Jesus will show to prostitutes and sinners. She sees beyond the shamefulness of Mary's situation to the reality of God's love at work even among those whom society rejects and excludes."

Contributed by Dave Edmark

Monday, December 21

Matthew 1:18-21
18 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 pregnant from the Holy Spirit. 19 Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to divorce her quietly. 20But 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. 21 She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, …"

Imagine yourself in Joseph's shoes …

You're consumed with shock and grief. Your beloved Mary is pregnant, and you *know* it's not your child! It's unthinkable to marry her under these circumstances, but the pain of losing her is excruciating. Desperate to get some space from all the questions, you slip away from your carpenter's shop.

In a quiet meadow at the edge of town, you throw yourself down under a tree. Alone, where no one can hear, you grieve aloud for your shattered dreams, your bleak future. You scream to the heavens, "Oh, God! Help me!!! What do I do now??!!!"

You lie there sobbing for a long while and eventually drift off to sleep. Night falls, and you begin to dream. Someone is approaching you, walking across the meadow. He—or is it she? —is one of the most beautiful people you've ever seen, luminous and radiating love and compassion. Suddenly you realize that this person is an angel.

In a deep, melodic voice, s/he tells you that everything is going to be OK. You feel a deep sense of peace. The angel tells you that you're special and that you've been chosen to help raise a very unusual child. You feel honored: God chose YOU! The angel tells you that Mary has not been unfaithful, that she truly has conceived a child through the Holy Spirit; that you should marry her and name the child "Jesus."

Suddenly the angel is gone and you're awake in the dark, lying on the hard, cold ground. Your face feels dirty and tearstained, your eyes swollen from crying. But you remember your dream, and your heart swells with joy, relief, and even excitement! You walk quickly back towards town, your head held high and a bounce in your step

Contributed by Bonny Stitt

Tuesday, December 22

Isaiah 9:2,6

2 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. ...6 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.

This reading focuses on Isaiah's prophesy of the divine identity of Christ, the Son of God, over 700 years before his birth. For context, at that time the people of Israel were in deep despair, "walking in darkness." I reflect on this verse and consider its meaning, applied to my own life as well as the state of the world today. In my life, many times it has felt like random and non-random events were crashing into each other, creating chaos. The feelings I've experienced in these times have been overwhelming and none of it made sense. The same applies to what seems like a world in chaos. We may wonder "what could happen next?" Isaiah's prophesy offered the people hope, and it offers us hope as well. Not only hope, but faith strengthening belief. Enduring darkness while waiting for dawn requires faith in the light of Christ.

It is important to note that Isaiah did not offer any hint as to the time of Christ's coming. Were they to continue simply "walking in darkness"? No, for "they have seen a great light." "A son is given and he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." Isaiah's prophesy brought light into their waiting.

> *In prayer, let us stand in the light that Christ brings for he is the hope that relieves our despair and worry. May we carry these truths in this passage in our daily lives, reflecting the hope, light, and justice that Christ brings. For the light of Christ cannot be overcome by darkness. Amen*

Contributed by Terry Cameron

Wednesday, December 23

Luke 2: 1-7
In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. [2]This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. [3]All went to their own towns to be registered. [4]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. [5]He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. [6]While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. [7]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.

I chose this passage flooded with the memory of all the Emperors Augustus who have tried not to trip as they have taken their place at the top of the blocks at our annual Celebration at the Manger. So many children have had this important role in our annual play and have stood before the other actors and congregation and belted the words: “All the world should go to their own hometowns and be registered!”

This role has been played by so many children, both male and female. I tell the ones who are hesitant about this role that this is a very important announcement, the one that sends the Holy Family off to Bethlehem. I hope you can picture the face of one of the many children who have played this or another role.

There is so much action packed into this small group of words. The decree is made, the family sets off, and then four verses later, the baby is here! When we tell the story in the Celebration at the Manger we see the Holy Family knock on doors, the little innkeepers nod their heads no to tell them there is no room, and the head innkeeper sends the family to where the animals stay. We sing “Oh Little Town of Bethlehem” and then a baby is brought out from around the curtain and placed in the arms of a young girl playing the role of Mary. Even though our play extends the four verses into four minutes, we still really are not taking time to sit in awe of what these verses really mean. This is the big news of a Savior born in a very unexpected place.
May we take time today to breathe in God’s love for us in this special gift and may we smile, remembering the children who just showed us the joy in this story three days ago in worship.

Contributed by Kristi Button

Thursday, December 24

Luke 2:8-18

8 In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 10But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: 11to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord. 12This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.' 13And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, 14 'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours!' 15 When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.' 16So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. 17When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; 18and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them.

These words from Luke are some of the most famous from the Bible, perhaps because, for many of a certain age, they are immortalized in an animated children's special—*Charlie Brown Christmas*, produced and penned by *Peanuts'* creator Charles Schultz, who insisted to the CBS network that a scene be included amidst their fears that including scripture would alienate viewers.

The scene (shown in this clip) displays the quiet beauty of Linus' speech, delivered expertly by the then 8-year-old Christopher Shea.

This children's cartoon is special for me, as it was created the year I was born. I imagine 8-month-old me in the arms of one of my doting sisters, reveling in the visual wonder of my first Christmas but unable to understand these profound words.

Of course, the objects of my fascination (lights, tinsel, tree, and presents) are not what Christmas is all about, and these words from Luke's gospel remind us all of God's gift to the world—a son that he knew was destined to die for our sins—and therefore show us that eternity is there for us (even if he had to come in person to make sure we see it).

So, in these hours of harmony (and occasional discord), I am grateful that Charles Schultz insisted on including this scene, a short and soft reminder that above all else, God loves us and will be there for us.

Thank you, Linus. And may we all have a Merry Christmas.

Contributed by Ron Warren

Friday, December 25

Luke 2:19
But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.

Mary has just been visited by the shepherds who only reaffirmed what the angel shared, that Jesus, this new baby, was magnificent and beautiful. Only Mary knew what this meant for Jesus or what would come of all the excitement and wonder surrounding the birth of this precious child. Then, the shepherds show up and reiterate the same prophetic words the angel had shared with her. So, in Luke 2:19, she decides to **treasure** their words and the affirmation they offered while pondering them in her heart. There is something beautiful about the word treasured. Mary didn't simply remember these moments; she valued them. She recognized their importance and kept them close.

To paraphrase Howard Thurman, the first African American Dean of the chapel at Boston University: What we hold in our hearts is what we put our effort and energy into. What values do you have that you pour your energy into and what values might need some more effort? What do you treasure in your heart?

Our lives move quickly and our days are filled with responsibilities, conversations, celebrations, challenges, and countless moments that often pass before we have time to appreciate them. We can become so busy doing, planning, and worrying about what comes next that we forget to pause and recognize God's presence in the moments we are living.

Mary teaches us that not every moment needs an immediate answer, and not every experience needs to be fully understood to be meaningful. Sometimes we simply need to hold it in our hearts, reflect on it, and allow God to reveal its purpose in His time. Perhaps, we are being invited to slow down and become more like Mary. Perhaps we should take time to notice God's goodness, to treasure the moments that matter, and to trust Him with the things we don't yet understand or have yet to put the effort or energy into understanding.

Our lives are filled with moments worth remembering, lessons worth reflecting upon, and blessings worth holding close. When we take time to ponder these things in our hearts, we begin to see how God has been weaving His love and faithfulness throughout our stories.

Closing Prayer

> *Thank You for the many ways You reveal Your love and presence in our lives. Forgive us for the times we become so busy with the demands of life that we fail to notice the blessings surrounding us.*
> *Help us to have hearts like Mary's, hearts that treasure the moments You give us. Grant us the wisdom to reflect on Your goodness, and trust in Your promises even when we don't understand Your plans.*
> *Teach us to slow down, to listen more closely, and to recognize Your hand at work in both the extraordinary and ordinary moments of our days.*

Contributed by Amy McCann