

FIRST UNITED
METHODIST CHURCH
— LOVING GOD, LOVING NEIGHBOR —



2019
ADVENT
DEVOTIONAL



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This book of Advent devotionals aims to put Jesus at the center of your holiday season. Written by members of the First United Methodist Church - Lufkin congregation, this book features daily devotionals to serve as a companion to your personal Advent journey of reflection as we await the arrival of Christ in our lives.

DECEMBER 1



Matthew 24:36-44 (CEB)

But nobody knows when that day or hour will come, not the heavenly angels and not the Son. Only the Father knows. As it was in the time of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Human One. In those days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark. They didn't know what was happening until the flood came and swept them all away. The coming of the Human One will be like that. At that time there will be two men in the field. One will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding at the mill. One will be taken and the other left. Therefore, stay alert! You don't know what day the Lord is coming. But you understand that if the head of the house knew at what time the thief would come, he would keep alert and wouldn't allow the thief to break into his house. Therefore, you also should be prepared, because the Human One will come at a time you don't know.

It was not even Halloween. The weather was still warm. Yet, some stores had the Christmas decorations out and seasonal songs playing to “get us in the mood” for Christmas. The calendar rhythm of the stores is not aligned with the Christian liturgical calendar of the church. And yet, no matter what month it is, I am prone to sing along with the songs of Christmas whenever I hear them.

*“Angels we have heard on high
Sweetly singing o'er the plains
And the mountains in reply
Echoing their joyous strains”*

Matthew reminds us that we balance between the daily living of eating drinking, marrying, mill grinding (work and various activities), and the joyous coming of the human one, Jesus Christ. It is Jesus who will be the one to redeem the world.

Matthew reminds us that we do not know what day the Lord is coming. No matter how smart I am or what problems my computer can solve, we cannot know when the Lord is coming.

We are called to stay alert! Today is the first day of Advent. This coming weekend, FUMC-Lufkin will share An Evening in Old Bethlehem. I will be attentive to the manger – where Mary, Joseph, and Baby Jesus will be staged. While there, I will look into the eyes of the little children who come by and stare in awe of the Human One! For me, more than the Christmas songs and decorations, I am moved into the Advent and Christmas spirit when I am present to see these young faces light up in the presence of baby Jesus. I stay alert for such moments. What are you staying alert to see that reminds you of the season?

Dear God, today we begin our Advent journey to Christmas. We want to enjoy all the activities and parts of our lives and yet, waiting for your coming is not easy. Help us to stay alert and look for signs of Your Son Jesus throughout this season. Amen!

DECEMBER 2



Genesis 8: 1-19 (NIV)

But God remembered Noah and all the wild animals and all the domestic animals that were with him in the ark. And God made a wind blow over the earth, and the waters subsided; the fountains of the deep and the windows of the heavens were closed, the rain from the heavens was restrained, and the waters gradually receded from the earth. At the end of one hundred fifty days the water had abated; and in the seventh month, on the seventeenth day of the month, the ark came to rest on the mountains of Ararat. The waters continued to abate until the tenth month; in the tenth month, on the first day of the month, the tops of the mountains appeared. At the end of forty days Noah opened the window of the ark that he had made and sent out the raven; and it went to and fro until the waters were dried up from the earth. Then he sent out the dove from him, to see if the waters had subsided from the face of the ground; but the dove found no place to set its foot, and it returned to him to the ark, for the waters were still on the face of the whole earth. So he put out his hand and took it and brought it into the ark with him. He waited another seven days, and again he sent out the dove from the ark; and the dove came back to him in the evening, and there in its beak was a freshly plucked olive leaf; so Noah knew that the waters had subsided from the earth. Then he waited another seven days and sent out the dove; and it did not return to him anymore. In the six hundred first year, in the first month, the first day of the month, the waters were dried up from the earth; and Noah removed the covering of the ark, and looked, and saw that the face of the ground was drying. In the second month, on the twenty-seventh day of the month, the earth was dry. Then God said to Noah, "Go out of the ark, you and your wife, and your sons and your sons' wives with you. Bring out with you every living thing that is with you of all flesh -- birds and animals and every creeping thing that creeps on the earth and be fruitful and multiply on the earth. So, Noah went out with his sons and his wife and his sons' wives. And every animal, every creeping thing, and every bird, everything that moves on the earth, went of the ark by families.

After forty days and nights, the flooding rains subsided, but the inhabitants of the Ark were unable to disembark. In crowded conditions, they continued to wait for months until the right time to return and rebuild their lives after the flood. Months passed, and slowly the ground dried out until, finally, the dove that Noah sent out flew away and they knew it was safe and dry outside. The waiting in this story is easily overlooked. We all easily recall the forty days of rain, the dove with the olive branch, and eventually God's promise that will come in the form of a rainbow. The waiting, though, is just as important to the story. We have a loving and just God who provides what we need. Provision doesn't always come quickly, but it will always arrive at the right time. In this season of Advent, we are also waiting. Our world moves so quickly, and instant gratification is everywhere. But we can't rush the birth of our Savior. Christmas day will eventually arrive, but in the waiting, God will provide so many blessings. During these weeks, we ponder on hope in our expectation, faith in our Savior, the joy that will come from his arrival, and the peace of this season. Instead of getting lost in the hurry and bustle, let us slow down and show gratitude to our God, who will provide the things that we need at exactly the right time.

Dear God, thank you for this season of waiting. Help us to use this time to prepare for Christmas and the coming of Your Son, Jesus. Give us peace and patience as we slow down and find joy in the expectation of what is to come next. We are so thankful for the blessings You give us each day. In Your Son Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

DECEMBER 3



Genesis 9:1-17 (NIV)

Then God blessed Noah and his sons, saying to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth. The fear and dread of you will fall on all the beasts of the earth, and on all the birds in the sky, on every creature that moves along the ground, and on all the fish in the sea; they are given into your hands. Everything that lives and moves about will be food for you. Just as I gave you the green plants, I now give you everything.

"But you must not eat meat that has its lifeblood still in it. And for your lifeblood I will surely demand an accounting. I will demand an accounting from every animal. And from each human being, too, I will demand an accounting for the life of another human being.

"Whoever sheds human blood, by humans shall their blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made mankind.

As for you, be fruitful and increase in number; multiply on the earth and increase upon it."

Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him: "I now establish my covenant with you and with your descendants after you and with every living creature that was with you—the birds, the livestock and all the wild animals, all those that came out of the ark with you—every living creature on earth. I establish my covenant with you: Never again will all life be destroyed by the waters of a flood; never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth." And God said, "This is the sign of the covenant I am making between me and you and every living creature with you, a covenant for all generations to come: I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth. Whenever I bring clouds over the earth and the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will remember my covenant between me and you and all living creatures of every kind. Never again will the waters become a flood to destroy all life. Whenever the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and all living creatures of every kind on the earth." So God said to Noah, "This is the sign of the covenant I have established between me and all life on the earth."

Matthew 6:26 (NIV)

Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?

"Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?"

Paul McCartney & Wings wrote the song "Let 'Em In." You have heard it many times before. The main lyric is "Someone's knocking at the door, somebody's ringing the bell, do me a favor, open the door and let 'em in."

Jesus Christ was born as our Savior. So, do yourself a favor. Accept the invitation and open the door and let him in. I think you will find that void in your life will be filled.

Heavenly Father, in this Advent season, please help us to remember that through Jesus, You are available to all who accept the invitation. Help us to open the door and let Your spirit dwell in our lives. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

DECEMBER 4



Isaiah 54:7-10 (NIV)

For a brief moment I abandoned you, but with deep compassion I will bring you back. In a surge of anger I hid my face from you for a moment, but with everlasting kindness I will have compassion on you," says the LORD your Redeemer.

"To me this is like the days of Noah, when I swore that the waters of Noah would never again cover the earth. So now I have sworn not to be angry with you, never to rebuke you again.

Though the mountains be shaken and the hills be removed, yet my unfailing love for you will not be shaken nor my covenant of peace be removed," says the LORD, who has compassion on you.

In this passage from the Prophet Isaiah, we are reminded that in ancient times, God would often react to man's sin by getting angry with him, and yet God would always welcome man back with compassion. Isaiah tells us God no longer becomes angry with us for our sins but is always there for us with His love provided we are willing to turn to Him.

I can attest to this as I know I have said and done things in my life that weren't pleasing to God. There was a period from my senior year in high school until I got married that I rarely attended church and basically ignored God. Yet I never felt God rejecting or getting angry with me. God was there for me with His love and compassion when I turned to Him. Confessing my sins and asking for Him to come into my life. Since I have worked on developing my relationship with God, I have felt His presence in all aspects of my life.

Dear Heavenly Father, as we wait to celebrate the birth of Your Son, we are reminded of the sacrifices You have made for us. We are thankful knowing that no matter what happens in our lives and no matter how far we stray from You, You are always waiting for us to return to You and enjoy your love and the peace that only You can provide. Amen.

DECEMBER 5



Isaiah 4:2-6 (The Living Bible)

Those whose names are written down to escape the destruction of Jerusalem will be washed and rinsed of all their moral filth by the horrors and the fire. They will be God's holy people. And the land will produce for them its lushest bounty and its richest fruit. Then the Lord will provide shade on all Jerusalem—over every home and all its public grounds—a canopy of smoke and cloud throughout the day, and clouds of fire at night, covering the Glorious Land, protecting it from daytime heat and from rains and storms.

In the Old Testament, the Prophet Isaiah foretold the upcoming destruction of Jerusalem and the death of many people. God was angry because the Israelites continued to live sinful lives that were contrary to His commandments. Horror and fire would be used by God to purify Israel and set it on a new path.

God's grace however is unquestionable and always present. Just when things seem the worst, God's love for mankind is brought forth. His wonderful creation nourishes and sustains us, restoring confidence for a blessed immortality through His son, Jesus. From fire, death, and ashes, God provides a path to a brighter future.

Gracious Heavenly Father, we humbly ask for your blessings for us and our families. We are reminded through your teachings that You are a demanding but a gracious God. You are our provider, setting a path for us through hard times toward a glorious home with You in heaven. These things we ask in the name of Your Son and our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

DECEMBER 6



Isaiah 30:19-26 (ERV)

You people who live in Jerusalem on Mount Zion will not continue crying. The Lord will hear your crying, and he will comfort you. When he hears you, he will help you.

The Lord might give you sorrow and pain like the bread and water you eat every day. But God is your teacher, and he will not continue to hide from you. You will see your teacher with your own eyes. If you wander from the right path, either to the right or to the left, you will hear a voice behind you saying, "You should go this way. Here is the right way."

Then you will take your idols covered with gold and silver and make them unfit to be used again. You will throw them away like filthy rags and say, "Go away!"

At that time the Lord will send you rain. You will plant seeds, and the ground will grow food for you. You will have a very large harvest. You will have plenty of food in the fields for your animals. There will be large fields for your sheep. Your cattle and donkeys will have all the food they need. There will be much food. You will have to use shovels and pitchforks to spread all the food for your animals to eat. Every mountain and hill will have streams filled with water. These things will happen after many people are killed and the enemy's towers are pulled down.

At that time the light from the moon will be as bright as the sun, and the light from the sun will be seven times brighter than it is now. One day of sunlight will be like a whole week's worth. This will happen when the Lord bandages his broken people and heals the hurts from their beatings.

When God's people wait on Him and patiently trust His promise, God pours out His grace at the cry of their heart. Even when it feels God is distant, he hears and promises to answer. We have seen during prosperous times, we become comfortable and do not listen to God. This happened to Judah, and God gave them bread of adversity and water of affliction. It is better to be uncomfortable and in tune with the Lord than to be comfortable and out of step with God. When Judah put away their idols, boldly trusting God's promise, then God sent material blessings on Judah. For a nation of farmers, it was a wonderful promise to make them fat and plenteous. When we put away our idols and trust in God's promise, then God will send His blessings on us.

Heavenly Father, thank you for Your many blessings. Let us remember You are our God and creator. Help us to remember daily your blessings and to walk and talk with You each day. Let us remember You are our teacher and listen to your voice. Amen.

DECEMBER 7



Isaiah 40:1-11 (NRSV)

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. 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. A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. 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. Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken."

A voice says, "Cry out!" And I said, "What shall I cry?" All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever.

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!" See, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. 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.

"Comfort my people," instructs the Lord to his heavenly council. What loving words these must've been for the Israelites living in exile in Babylon. In the midst of hopelessness and despair come words of comfort and hope from their God. As they eagerly await divine intervention, a voice cries out "Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight a path for our God...the glory of the Lord shall be revealed!" Such good news this must've been! "The grass and flowers may wither, but the word of our God will stand forever." When all must have seemed lost, here the Israelites are reminded that God's promises will not fade.

Hundreds of years later, the prophet, John the Baptist, shouts these words into the wilderness to all who will listen. The Jewish people would've recognized this proclamation from the book of Isaiah and wondered; "Is now the time?" Thousands of years later, these are words that still speak to us still. In a world where hope can often seem so far away and all we see around us are people in need, we as Christians know that comfort has indeed come. We have seen the revealing of God's promises made true in the presence of Jesus. In the middle of our broken mess, Christ has come into our lives and our hearts so that we might know the glory of the living God and share his message of hope and peace to the world. Most of us have traditions of how we prepare the way in our churches, our homes, and our hearts for the glorious Christmas event. I pray that as we go about these traditions, we shine just a little brighter this season into a world that desperately needs light. May we offer to the world comfort and everlasting promises from God as we experience the beauty of the Advent season. And just as the generations of saints who have gone before us, we wait in joyous anticipation for the promise and hope that comes with the birth of the Christ child.

Heavenly Father, we take comfort in knowing that You hear our cries and that your presence is with us always. As we look to Christmas Eve, help us to live lives that shine for You as we shout your arrival on Earth. In the Holy Name of Jesus, we pray. Amen.

DECEMBER 8



Isaiah 11:1-10 (NLT)

Out of the stump of David's family will grow a shoot— yes, a new Branch bearing fruit from the old root. And the Spirit of the LORD will 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. He will delight in obeying the LORD. He will not judge by appearance nor make a decision based on hearsay. He will give justice to the poor and make fair decisions for the exploited. The earth will shake at the force of his word, and one breath from his mouth will destroy the wicked. He will wear righteousness like a belt and truth like an undergarment. In that day the wolf and the lamb will live together; the leopard will lie down with the baby goat. The calf and the yearling will be safe with the lion, and a little child will lead them all. The cow will graze near the bear. The cub and the calf will lie down together. The lion will eat hay like a cow. The baby will play safely near the hole of a cobra. Yes, a little child will put its hand in a nest of deadly snakes without harm. Nothing will hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain, for as the waters fill the sea, so the earth will be filled with people who know the LORD. In that day the heir to David's throne will be a banner of salvation to all the world. The nations will rally to him, and the land where he lives will be a glorious place.

The house of David (a tree) had been almost leveled, yet the Prophet Isaiah, gives us a vision of new life; new life coming from the stump of a tree that had been cut to the ground. This new shoot gives us hope that even in our most desperate moments in life, there is still hope for a new life - rebirth. This new shoot, Jesus, will be of the Lord, possessing all the qualities of the Lord, and the earth will be in perfect harmony.

I picture the night Jesus was born. Even though the city of Bethlehem was bustling with people, full to capacity, so much so that a pregnant woman had taken shelter in a barn and gives BIRTH in that barn, the scene in my mind is quiet perfection. The nativity scene does not look chaotic; it is peaceful and tranquil. As I read this passage, I see the nativity, with all of God's creatures dwelling in harmony with one another - a scene of perfection.

In this passage, we are given hope that a divine ruler, the Messiah, our Lord Jesus, will come and lead ALL of us to a relationship with the Lord. The Lord loves each and every one of us and WANTS to be in relationship with us. We will know His ways; we will live in His truth. We are reminded that when we fall, when we mess up, when we do not live the way God wants us to live, our salvation rests in the hands of Jesus and he will be the Light for the all the world to see.

Dear God, thank you for showing us that even in our darkest times, there is always hope through Your Son, Jesus. Even though our world is not a perfect place, help us remember how You wanted it to be - harmonious and perfect. Our job is to know and love You, and we pray that we open our hearts and ears to a relationship with You every day.

DECEMBER 9



Psalm 21 (NRSV)

*In your strength the king rejoices, O Lord, and in your help how greatly he exults!
You have given him his heart's desire, and have not withheld the request of his lips.
For you meet him with rich blessings; you set a crown of fine gold on his head.
He asked you for life; you gave it to him—length of days forever and ever.
His glory is great through your help; splendor and majesty you bestow on him.
You bestow on him blessings forever; you make him glad with the joy of your presence.
For the king trusts in the Lord, and through the steadfast love of the Most High he shall not be moved.
Your hand will find out all your enemies; your right hand will find out those who hate you.
You will make them like a fiery furnace when you appear.
The Lord will swallow them up in his wrath, and fire will consume them.
You will destroy their offspring from the earth, and their children from among humankind.
If they plan evil against you, if they devise mischief, they will not succeed.
For you will put them to flight; you will aim at their faces with your bows.
Be exalted, O Lord, in your strength! We will sing and praise your power.*

One of the remarkable things about the Bible is that each passage has different levels and depths of meaning. On one level, this passage represents a song of thanks to God by King David, king of ancient Israel, for victories in battle.

There is another level of meaning in this passage, a meaning for us in this day and time. The message is that our strength comes from God. We are powerless to live effective lives without the power that comes from a connection to God. God has the power to bestow abundant blessings and protection from evil. This power comes as a free gift of grace. We accept that gift by our faith and trust in God.

Dear God, strengthen our faith in your power to guide our lives, that we may glorify You in all that we do. Amen.

DECEMBER 10



Isaiah 41:17-20 (ESV)

When the poor and needy seek water, and there is none, and their tongue is parched with thirst, I the Lord will answer them; I the God of Israel will not forsake them. I will open rivers on the bare heights, and fountains in the midst of valleys. I will make the wilderness a pool of water, and dry land springs of water. I will put in the wilderness the cedar, the acacia, the myrtle, and the olive. I will set the cypress, the plane and pine together, that they may see and know, may consider and understand together, that the hand of the Lord has done this, the Holy One of Israel has created it.

While living in our earthly bodies, we experience many “wilderness” moments on our journey. Our souls are constantly seeking: seeking what we want, seeking what we need, seeking satisfaction. Our souls are in want and seeking the satisfaction that cannot be found in this world. It wasn't meant to be. Our souls long to be satisfied by the One who came to earth as a baby as a means for our salvation. The salvation offered to us by God the Father through the death of His Son, Jesus Christ. The gift of grace and reconciliation with the One who loves us best. God has provided comforts to supply all these needs, and to answer the requests we send up through our prayers.

God opens rivers of grace, rivers of living water. In John 7:38-39, Jesus spoke these words; *“Whoever believes in me, as scriptures have said, rivers of living water will flow from within them.”* By this, he meant the spirit, whom those who believed in Him were later to receive. Up to that time, the Spirit had not yet been glorified.

When God set up his church in the Gentile wilderness, there were great changes. Thorns and briars were turned into cedars, fir-trees, and myrtles. Rivers flowed where none had before. He provided.

Blessings are for the poor in spirit, for those who long for a deeper relationship with the Lord, those who were seeking pardon and holiness. God will fill their barren souls with the grace of His spirit, that all who behold will know that it is He who provides.

How has the Lord provided for you? Are you willing to be vulnerable and tell of the goodness of God's provision in your life? Give God the glory. What better way to share the love of Christ than to show the love of Christ. Every good gift we receive flows from the river of God's everlasting love for us. He provides and promises never to stop.

Loving Father, thank you for your provision. You know just what we need before we are even aware of it ourselves. Help us to be the people we are called to be. People who, when others are in our presence, they will come to know You, because they know us. In Jesus' name, Amen.



Artwork by Caley Oates, Xavier Landers, and Aila Clowers

DECEMBER 11



Genesis 15:1-18 (NLT)

Some time later, the Lord spoke to Abram in a vision and said to him, "Do not be afraid, Abram, for I will protect you, and your reward will be great." But Abram replied, "O Sovereign Lord, what good are all your blessings when I don't even have a son? Since you've given me no children, Eliezer of Damascus, a servant in my household, will inherit all my wealth. You have given me no descendants of my own, so one of my servants will be my heir." Then the Lord said to him, "No, your servant will not be your heir, for you will have a son of your own who will be your heir." Then the Lord took Abram outside and said to him, "Look up into the sky and count the stars if you can. That's how many descendants you will have!" And Abram believed the Lord, and the Lord counted him as righteous because of his faith. Then the Lord told him, "I am the Lord who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land as your possession."

But Abram replied, "O Sovereign Lord, how can I be sure that I will actually possess it?" The Lord told him, "Bring me a 3 year old heifer, a 3 year old female goat, a 3 year old ram, a turtledove, and a young pigeon." So Abram presented all these to him and killed them. Then he cut each animal down the middle and laid the halves side by side; he did not, however, cut the birds in half. Some vultures swooped down to eat the carcasses, but Abram chased them away. As the sun was going down, Abram fell into a deep sleep, and a terrifying darkness came down over him. Then the Lord said to Abram, "You can be sure that your descendants will be strangers in a foreign land, where they will be oppressed as slaves for 400 years. But I will punish the nation that enslaves them, and in the end they will come away with great wealth. (As for you, you will die in peace and be buried at a ripe old age.) After 4 generations your descendants will return here to this land, for the sins of the Amorites do not yet warrant their destruction." After the sun went down and darkness fell, Abram saw a smoking firepot and a flaming torch pass between the halves of the carcasses. So the Lord made a covenant with Abram that day and said, "I have given this land to our descendants, all the way from the border of Egypt to the great Euphrates River."

In this part of scripture, this is not the first time that God offers Abram a covenant, a promise. God continues throughout the book of Genesis to reassure Abram regarding his future, even when Abram challenges God about the goodness of His blessings. If you have ever traveled to a remote area away from city lights, you can visualize just how abundant the stars are in the night's sky. God shares this with Abram teaching him who God is and how abundant His goodness is towards us.

I remember a time in my work life where I struggled to get up and come to work. I felt like all I ever faced was discontent and disappointment. These feelings stayed with me for over ten years. I often felt like leaving and looking for a different job. God walked with me. I felt Him telling me to stay the course and not become discouraged. This was His purposeful work I was learning. As time has progressed, I can see God's blessings and how He helped shape me to do the work He needs me to do.

Lord, I praise Your name and the goodness that You give to us. Life is not always clear, yet You are with us walking beside us. The stories of Abram help to remind me that You want relationships with us. Thank you for your guidance, your mercy, and your love that You offer to every person.

DECEMBER 12



Ruth 1:6-18 (NIV)

When Naomi heard in Moab that the Lord had come to the aid of his people by providing food for them, she and her daughters-in-law prepared to return home from there. With her two daughters-in-law she left the place where she had been living and set out on the road that would take them back to the land of Judah. Then Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go back, each of you, to your mother's home. May the Lord show you kindness, as you have shown kindness to your dead husbands and to me. May the Lord grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband." Then she kissed them goodbye and they wept aloud and said to her, "We will go back with you to your people." But Naomi said, "Return home, my daughters. Why would you come with me? Am I going to have any more sons, who could become your husbands? Return home, my daughters; I am too old to have another husband. Even if I thought there was still hope for me—even if I had a husband tonight and then gave birth to sons— would you wait until they grew up? Would you remain unmarried for them? No, my daughters. It is more bitter for me than for you, because the Lord's hand has turned against me!" At this they wept aloud again. Then Orpah kissed her mother-in-law goodbye, but Ruth clung to her. "Look," said Naomi, "your sister-in-law is going back to her people and her gods. Go back with her." But Ruth replied, "Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me." When Naomi realized that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped urging her.

My first two thoughts when I see this verse are: "What does this have to do with Christmas?" and "Am I an Orpah or a Ruth?"

After doing a bit of research, it turns out that Ruth is Jesus' great, great, great, great, great grandmother. And it is beautiful to see that this woman, this "foreigner," this person that super-religious Jews would not have considered worthy, is a great example of faith. It reminds me that God uses people that other people that might not think are all that great. He uses the "foreigners," the mixed-up, the messed-up, and the sinners. People just like me. It reminds me that Jesus didn't come to save the people who think that they already have it together. He came for the rest of us. Those who sometimes forget to turn in their kids' permission slips, who sometimes say bad words in traffic, who don't make Pinterest-perfect meals, and sometimes go to Walmart in our pajama pants; we are His kind of people.

I am so glad that God can and does use those of us who put the "mess" in "hot mess" and the "fun" in "dysfunctional" because, in my heart of hearts, I know that I am not always a Ruth. I don't always follow God when it is hard. Sometimes, like Orpah, I go home where it is safe and comfortable. Sure, home might not be the most God-honoring place, but sometimes, I am too afraid to follow God as I should. God and I are working on that. Isaiah 41:10 says, "So **do not**

(cont'd)

***fear**, for I am with you; **do not** be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.” I hope that I am becoming less afraid and more like Ruth every day.*

Dear Jesus, thank you for using messed-up, mixed-up sinners like me. I know that I don't always do what You want me to do, and I thank you for loving me anyway. Please help me not to be afraid to do what You want me to do. Help me to follow You every day. I love You. Amen.

DECEMBER 13



Ruth 4:13-17 (NIV)

So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife. When he made love to her, the Lord enabled her to conceive, and she gave birth to a son. The women said to Naomi: “Praise be to the Lord, who this day has not left you without a guardian-redeemer. May he become famous throughout Israel! He will renew your life and sustain you in your old age. For your daughter-in-law, who loves you and who is better to you than seven sons, has given him birth.” Then Naomi took the child in her arms and cared for him.

The women living there said, “Naomi has a son!” And they named him Obed. He was the father of Jesse, the father of David.

When I read this passage, it reminds me that through faithfulness, God can take a terrible situation and turn it into a blessing. Ruth and Naomi have been through such hard times but remained steadfast in the Lord. The trust they showed in the Lord throughout their difficult journey stands out in the Bible, similar to the story of Job. We can only hope that if we are ever faced with these types of tough times, that we can have this much trust and faithfulness that the Lord will similarly deliver us from the situation and rain down the love and blessings on us, as He did for Ruth and Naomi. I honestly never want to find out.

Lord, thank you for the many blessings You bestow upon us every day, both big and small. Let this be a reminder in tough times, for us to remain faithful and know that blessings can come even from the most trying circumstances. GO, FIGHT, WIN, AMEN!

DECEMBER 14



Psalm 146: 5-10 (NIV)

Blessed are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord their God. He is the Maker of heaven and earth, the sea, and everything in them— he remains faithful forever. He upholds the cause of the oppressed and gives food to the hungry. The Lord sets prisoners free, the Lord gives sight to the blind, the Lord lifts up those who are bowed down, the Lord loves the righteous. The Lord watches over the foreigner and sustains the fatherless and the widow, but he frustrates the ways of the wicked. The Lord reigns forever, your God, O Zion, for all generations. Praise the Lord.

As we study the history of man and his relationship with God, we see mankind in an almost constant state of rebellion. God has always instructed us how to live, even though it has been done in various ways over the ages, and it has all been based on his absolute purity and holiness. However, mankind has often blamed God for our failure to live up to the standard he has provided.

It was the sin of Adam that opened the door for all evil in the world. When we choose to follow Satan instead of God, we find ourselves overwhelmed with problems, trials, and heartaches. It was not God who introduced sin and wickedness, but it was rebellion against God and His will that brought it forth. All of the sickness, the pain, the suffering, the hatred, fighting, and every other form of evil is the result of our failure to follow the will of God. God does not want us to suffer. God does not want us to be sick or to have pain. God did not create us to have all these problems in our lives. When God finished his creation, he observed that it was all good. We were given a perfect world in which to live, and it is we who destroyed that perfection.

When we consider all that is taught in scripture, we know that we all will die, and we will face judgment. Behind the scenes, there is a battle going on between God and Satan for each of us and our eternal destiny. God has already won the victory even though we do not see it with our physical eyes. This victory was won when Jesus rose from the dead to live forever. There is a battle. God has won. We must choose sides. We can choose the Lord's side and have eternal life.

Lord God, the giver of all good things, I thank you for the wonderful life you have given me. I have been blessed far beyond what I ever expected or even dreamed, and I know I do not deserve anything from you. Even though I have failed you so many times in so many ways, you have forgiven me. Help me open my heart to your will so your Spirit can work in me and make me more like you. Give me a heart of compassion and bless those who are less fortunate. I pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.

DECEMBER 15



Luke 1:46-55 (NIV)

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

Mary had just discovered that she was pregnant with God's Son, so it must've been great, right? But it was going to be a hard journey for her and the people around her to understand. Yet, she still praises God. This is because she knows a lot about God. She knows He will fulfill His promises, just like He fulfilled His promises to Abraham.

What would we do in Mary's situation? Would we praise the Lord like she does, or would we whine and complain that God has given us such a hard task? A lot of people would complain and ask God “Why Me?” They would not be thankful or joyful at all for this gift. They would see it as a big task or problem. But Mary does not do this. Through everything, she still praises the Lord. This Advent season, I pray that you find joy in everything God shows you.

Heavenly Father, I pray that we can accept your gifts like Mary did. I pray that we can see through the toughness of a task and still praise You through everything. This season reminds us of everything You throw our way is a gift that is given in love. In the Holy Name of Jesus, we pray. Amen.

DECEMBER 16



Acts 5:12-16 (NLT)

The apostles performed many miraculous signs and wonders among the people. And all the believers used to meet together in Solomon's Colonnade. No one else dared join them, even though they were highly regarded by the people. Nevertheless, more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number. As a result, people brought the sick into the streets and laid them on beds and mats so that at least Peter's shadow might fall on some of them as he passed by. Crowds gathered also from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing their sick and those tormented by evil spirits, and all of them were healed.

There are a couple of things that jumped out to me about this passage. As I read about the miracles that occurred throughout the Bible, I would love to know what went through the minds of those who were witnesses. To me, these speak not only to the faith of those who were healed but also to the faith of those who brought family or friends for healing. As detailed in this passage, it is amazing to me that it was only Peter's shadow falling on someone that brought about the healing. Surely those who witnessed these miraculous events were forever changed as they watched their faith become a reality. You could say this was a new beginning for those involved in the healings.

Additionally, chapter five of Acts is about the growth of the new church, and that resonates with me as we are working on ways to grow our church and fine-tune our vision. I do love that this passage focus' on Peter. Before Jesus met him, Peter was Simon. Simon was a fisherman, and for lack of a better word, he was an ordinary man. Jesus' vision for Simon was much greater than that. When Jesus changed his name from Simon to Peter, he was placed on a path where he could be shaped and trained into his role as the rock where Jesus would build His church. We all know that as Peter worked in that role, his road was a bit rocky at times, to say the least, but he persevered and fulfilled Jesus' vision for his life. Peter certainly had a new beginning when Jesus entered his life.

During Advent's expectant waiting and preparation for new beginnings, think about how your faith has been strengthened as you have seen miraculous signs and wonders in your own life. Think about what Jesus' vision is for you and for our church. Pray that more and more believers will be added to our number.

Father God, thank you for having a vision for our lives. Help prepare us to fulfill your vision for our church and for us. Thank you for the miracles that we see each day and help us remain strong in our faith. Thank you for this time of preparation as we wait on the new beginning that will be born in a manger. In Jesus' name, Amen.

DECEMBER 17



Ezekiel 47:1-12 (CEB)

When he brought me back to the temple's entrance, I noticed that water was flowing toward the east from under the temple's threshold (the temple faced east). The water was going out from under the temple's facade toward the south, south of the altar. He led me out through the north gate and around the outside to the outer east gate, where the water flowed out under the facade on the south side. With the line in his hand, the man went out toward the east. When he measured off fifteen hundred feet, he made me cross the water; it was ankle-deep. He measured off another fifteen hundred feet and made me cross the water; it was knee-deep. He measured off another fifteen hundred feet and made me cross the water, and it was waist-high. When he measured off another fifteen hundred feet, it had become a river that I couldn't cross. The water was high, deep enough for swimming but too high to cross. He said to me, "Human one, do you see?" Then he led me back to the edge of the river. When I went back, I saw very many trees on both banks of the river. He said to me, "These waters go out to the eastern region, flow down the steep slopes, and go into the Dead Sea. When the flowing waters enter the sea, its water becomes fresh. Wherever the river flows, every living thing that moves will thrive. There will be great schools of fish, because when these waters enter the sea, it will be fresh. Wherever the river flows, everything will live. People will stand fishing beside it, from En-gedi to En-eglayim, and it will become a place for spreading nets. It will be like the Mediterranean Sea having all kinds of fish in it. Its marshes and swamps won't be made fresh (they are left for salt), but on both banks of the river will grow up all kinds of fruit-bearing trees. Their leaves won't wither, and their fruitfulness won't wane. They will produce fruit in every month, because their water comes from the sanctuary. Their fruit will be for eating, their leaves for healing."

The Prophet Ezekiel was shown a vision in which he saw water bubbling out of the temple from a place where only the glory of God had passed. As they move forward, Ezekiel sees incredible lushness and growth. He is told how, with the Living Water, the Dead Sea became the Sea of Life and every plant, bush, and tree on its banks provided sources of food and healing. It is all traced back to the fact that the stream comes from God's sanctuary, and God is clearly the source of life and healing. In John 7:38 John says, *"and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, 'Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water.'"*

Advent is the season in which we are anxiously waiting for the birth of Jesus. What better time to remember to slow down, and seek out the nourishment of the living water of life that is freely given to us. The scripture says that God is clearly the source of life and healing, and He wants us to grow and be in relationship with Him.

Lord, as we go through Advent, help us slow down and remember waiting is what Advent is about. Thank you for reminding us that You are the source of life and healing and that You want a relationship with us. In Your Son's Holy Name. Amen.

DECEMBER 18



Mathew 8:14-17 (CEB)

When Jesus entered Peter's house, he saw his mother-in-law lying in bed with a fever; he touched her hand, and the fever left her, and she got up and began to serve him. That evening they brought to him many who were possessed with demons; and he cast out the spirits with a word, and cured all who were sick. This was to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah, "He took our infirmities and bore our diseases."

When we first read this, it seems that Jesus is, well, rude and selfish. He is going to heal Peter's mother-in-law so she could entertain them. But, have you ever been so excited about doing something you really wanted to do, and then got sick? It kind of ruins your whole day. Either you can't go at all or if you do, you feel so bad you wish you had stayed in bed. You know Peter's mother-in-law had heard all about Jesus, but she was very sick. He took away her fever, and she could enjoy what she planned.

We are excited. We are looking forward to Christmas, and we are looking forward to working for Jesus, and Jesus can heal us when we get sick or slow down.

Dear Lord, give us the wisdom and courage to do the things You have us do. And, when we get tired or sick, heal us and keep us going. Go-Fight-Win. Amen.





Artwork by Drake Tiemann

DECEMBER 19



Galatians 3:23-29 (NRSV)

Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.

The spiritual lives of our ancient ancestors were no different. The Hebrew people were bound by pages and pages of rules that ordered their daily lives. They had to abide by rules that dictated what they were able to eat, what clothes they could wear, how they were to worship, and how they went about most of their daily activities. Nearly every aspect of their lives was ritualized by following these laws and orders. And these laws weren't in place to order their daily lives; these rules were a requirement for finding justification with God.

Often we still find ourselves contained by similar rules today. It is easy for us to believe that the right living and right action is required for a right relationship with God, and through that, we find justification in our actions. However, in this passage, Paul is telling us that a life ruled by the law, a life ordered by rules, is a life of imprisonment. Instead, Christ came to remove the shackles of the law and replace them with freedom, justification, and the right relationship through faith alone.

Lord, may we learn to lean into faith and cease relying on our own good and works. Instead, may we be thankful for your abundantly justifying grace that reaches across all our shortcomings and brings us into relationship with Christ.

DECEMBER 20



Galatians 4:1-7 (HCSB)

Now I say that as long as the heir is a child, he differs in no way from a slave, though he is the owner of everything. Instead, he is under guardians and stewards until the time set by his father. In the same way we also, when we were children, were in slavery under the elemental forces of the world. When the time came to completion, God sent His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba, Father!" So you are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God.

Think back to when you were a child. As a child, we received your instruction from your parents and/or guardians. We lived under their direction or law. As we grew older, we developed a sense of independence and began to discern our own thoughts and laws. As an adult, we become independent and free of the laws (direction) of our parents. We develop our own values and live by those values.

This is similar to our faith walk. We start out young in our faith with some understanding of God and Jesus. As we grow in our faith, we get to know God more and begin to understand that if we know God, we know that God is love. We learn that God loved us so much that He sent His one and only Son, Jesus, to die on the cross for our sins so that we may have eternal life. We become mature in our faith and live in relationship with God so that we share God's love with others. Ultimately, we live as Jesus taught us to live – loving God and loving neighbor. This Advent season let us focus on what it means to love your neighbor.

Most gracious, loving Father, we thank you for sending Your Son into the world to set an example for us. Please be with us as we embrace your command by loving our neighbors as ourselves. In Jesus' name, Amen.

DECEMBER 21



2 Samuel 7:23-29 (NRSV)

Who is like your people, like Israel? Is there another nation on earth whose God went to redeem it as a people, and to make a name for himself, doing great and awesome things for them, by driving out before his people nations and their gods? And you established your people Israel for yourself to be your people forever; and you, O LORD, became their God. And now, O LORD God, as for the word that you have spoken concerning your servant and concerning his house, confirm it forever; do as you have promised. Thus your name will be magnified forever in the saying, 'The LORD of hosts is God over Israel'; and the house of your servant David will be established before you. For you, O LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, have made this revelation to your servant, saying, 'I will build you a house'; therefore, your servant has found courage to pray this prayer to you. And now, O Lord GOD, you are God, and your words are true, and you have promised this good thing to your servant; now therefore may it please you to bless the house of your servant, so that it may continue forever before you; for you, O Lord GOD, have spoken, and with your blessing shall the house of your servant be blessed forever."

Although it is easy for us to doubt ourselves, it is important to remember that all we have is a divine gift from God. What more can we ask for than the promise Christ brings us?

Dear Heavenly Father, help me remember that all we have is God's and help me to use my gifts for the betterment of all your children. Thank you for all the blessings You have showered upon us. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

DECEMBER 22



Galatians 3:13-18 (NRSV)

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. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do thus, an angel of the Lord appeared 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. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us." When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

The Jewish people had been waiting on the Savior, and he's finally here. The Jewish people are so excited until they realize that the so-called Savior is a child. The people are all wondering, "How can the Savior of the world be a small child?" And "How is this child from a woman who isn't married? The deliverer for the Jews from their Roman dictators is the son of a carpenter? Where is the Savior that is supposed to be a wealthy, beautiful, full-grown man? "

With this being the first chapter of the whole New Testament, you realize that God must be planning something very special. This "Savior" has unexpectedly shown up as Emmanuel. God has shown up now, and knowing this, the Son came to save His people from sin and to welcome them back into the Kingdom.

Heavenly Father, remind us this week that You often show up in the most unexpected of places. As we get closer to Christmas and the celebration of the birth of the Christ child, help us to slow down and experience your presence. In the Holy Name of Jesus, we pray. Amen.

DECEMBER 23



Galatians 3:13-18 (NRSV)

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree”— in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith. Brothers and sisters, I give an example from daily life: once a person’s will has been ratified, no one adds to it or annuls it. Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring; it does not say, “And to offsprings,” as of many; but it says, “And to your offspring,” that is, to one person, who is Christ. My point is this: the law, which came four hundred thirty years later, does not annul a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to nullify the promise. For if the inheritance comes from the law, it no longer comes from the promise; but God granted it to Abraham through the promise.

In the third chapter of Paul’s letter to Galatians, Paul is admonishing the church that is being influenced by the Jews in that region. The Jews are trying to convince the Gentiles that the way to salvation is to follow the law and not through faith in Jesus.

As an old high school principal, I always reminded my students that the most important thing to learn from me is the difference between your friends and your buddies. Your friend is one who cares enough about you to prevent you from doing something dumb or dangerous, and your buddy is the one looking for you to do something dumb with them. It never seems as dumb when you have company!

As this Christmas season approaches, we are bombarded with lots of “buddies” trying to distract us from the real reason for the season, like parties and presents and endless promotions to consume more and more. In this Christmas season, be a friend and let your life remind others that Jesus was born to provide us salvation from our dumb or dangerous decisions.

Lord, grant me the wisdom to see that my salvation begins with the birth of Your Son and lead me to be the friend to those with whom I am surrounded.

DECEMBER 24



Isaiah 9:2-7 (NRSV)

“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness, one them light has shined. You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy as with joy at the harvest, as people exult when dividing plunder. 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. For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire. 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. 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 forever more. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this”.

The Christmas season can be very difficult and stressful. Though it is meant to be a time of joy and celebration, we, as humans, struggle to look past our many worries and focus on the light that has been brought into the world. On this day, we celebrate the birth of that light. No matter how many things you have faced this year that makes it seem that life and light are not worth celebrating, remember that this light was born for you and for those many worries you have. If you can think of no other reason to celebrate during this Christmas season, celebrate our Jesus. This miracle has been born, and what a miracle He is! Remember to cast your stress and worries upon Him, but also celebrate Him and thank Him, for He has done so much for you.

I pray that if you feel as if you are in darkness, that you find light in Him. He is a mighty light, and He will always be there for you, just as He always was. Think of Him as you light your candle in the service, and remember to pray and celebrate Him no matter what you are going through.

Heavenly Father, please help us to remember that, in times of darkness, there is light we can always turn to. Help us to remember that You gave us Your Son so that we can enter the light with Him and live joyously. Remind us to not only cast our worries upon Him but to celebrate and thank Him always. We ask all of these things in Your Name, Lord. Amen.



Artwork by Cissy Minces

DECEMBER 25



John 1:1-14 (CEV)

In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. The Word was with God in the beginning. Everything came into being through the Word, and without the Word nothing came into being. What came into being through the Word was life, and the life was the light for all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness doesn't extinguish the light. A man named John was sent from God. He came as a witness to testify concerning the light, so that through him everyone would believe in the light. He himself wasn't the light, but his mission was to testify concerning the light. The true light that shines on all people was coming into the world. The light was in the world, and the world came into being through the light, but the world didn't recognize the light. The light came to his own people, and his own people didn't welcome him. But those who did welcome him, those who believed in his name, he authorized to become God's children, born not from blood nor from human desire or passion, but born from God. The Word became flesh and made his home among us. We have seen his glory, glory like that of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

When I read this passage, there's more than a few lines that stick out. But to me, the piece that sticks out most is the lines about "the light." The light is giving life; darkness has never put it out. In this version, the Contemporary English Version, the footnote of this verse says, "*the darkness never understood it.*" By wording it in that way, it creates an image of darkness, one who is unable to understand this life-giving light. What does John mean by that? Could the darkness be a sin? Later, John speaks of himself as not the light, but one who tells of the light's forthcoming. He speaks of the light as Jesus, the word. The word which exists at the beginning, which is God. Jesus is giving us all the kindness and truth found in the word of God. The kindness and truth are this: that we are God's children because he has made us his children, and God sent Jesus to save us all.

Dear Lord, today, help us to feel your light through us. Allow us to show your light to others and love all of your children. Help us to be like John, who was humble enough to know he was not the light, and preach it is coming to others. Allow us to be healed and moved, but your light, oh God. In the Lord's name, we pray. Amen.

DECEMBER 26



Psalm 148 (NRSV)

*Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord from the heavens; praise him in the heights!
Praise him, all his angels; praise him, all his host!
Praise him, sun and moon; praise him, all you shining stars!
Praise him, you highest heavens, and your waters above the heavens!
Let them praise the name of the Lord, for he commanded and they were created.
He established them forever and ever; he fixed their bounds, which cannot be passed
Praise the Lord from the earth, you sea monsters and all deeps, fire and hail, snow and frost, stormy
wind fulfilling his command! Mountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars! Wild animals and all
cattle, creeping things and flying birds! Kings of the earth and all peoples, princes and all rulers of the
earth! Young men and women alike, old and young together! Let them praise the name of the Lord, for
his name alone is exalted; his glory is above earth and heaven. He has raised up a horn for his people,
praise for all his faithful, for the people of Israel who are close to him. Praise the Lord!*

The scripture is telling us to praise God no matter what situation we are in. It is highlighting all of the wonderful things our God has created in our world and telling us to be thankful for them. Our God has put so much detail into our world, and He deserves to be praised. He forgives us of our sins and helps us through tough times.

Unfortunately, this Christmas, not everyone will have a Christmas tree with abundant gifts below it. It is easy to forget how great our world is when facing tough times and adversity. God's love applies to everyone, though, no matter what material belongings one has. We have to stay persistent at loving God because He is persistent at loving us.

Dear Lord, thank you for the beautiful world You made us. This Christmas, please be with those who are less fortunate. Please remind us that no matter what happens, You are always going to be there to guide and help us. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

DECEMBER 27



1 John 5: 1-12 (CEV)

If we believe Jesus is truly Christ, we are God's children. Everyone who loves the Father will also love his children. If we love and obey God, we know we will love his children. We show our love for God by obeying his commandments, and they are not hard to follow. Every child of God can defeat the world, and our faith is what gives us this victory. No one can defeat the world without having faith in Jesus as the Son of God. Water and blood came out from the side of Jesus Christ. It wasn't just water, but water and blood. The Spirit tells about this, because the Spirit is truthful. In fact, there are three who tell about it. They are the Spirit, the water, and the blood, and they all agree. We believe what people tell us. But we can trust what God says even more, and God is the one who has spoken about his Son. If we have faith in God's Son, we have believed what God has said. But if we don't believe what God has said about his Son, it is the same as calling God a liar. God has also said he gave us eternal life and this life comes to us from his Son. And so, if we have God's Son, we have this life. But if we don't have the Son, we don't have this life.

During this Advent season, have we been so busy that we have missed the joy of the season? Have we let the chaos and uncertainty bring us to a dark place? In this scripture, we are given assurances that by believing that Jesus is the Christ, then we are children of God. We are given victory over the world through this faith. We show our love for God by loving His children.

We've heard this before: Love God! Love Neighbor! Love is the key theme. **IF** we love God, we will love our neighbor. If we love our neighbor, we are showing our love for God. These exist together. Take each day to intentionally find ways to show love to all. Do random acts of Jesus for those that come across your path. Pray for opportunities to "be Jesus" each day! Live into the eternal life given to us through Jesus daily.

Dear Lord, open my eyes and heart to be able to find the opportunities to show love to your children in such a way that this becomes my status quo. May this be the way I live life daily, showing Jesus to the world - not just by the things that I say but by the things that I do. Amen.

DECEMBER 28



Matthew 18:1-5 (NIV)

At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Who, then, is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" He called a little child to him and placed the child among them. And he said: "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me."

For many of us, the holidays are a stressful time. We have presents to wrap and place under the tree, travel to arrange, menu planning and cooking, shopping to do, and so much more. We are the ones behind the scenes, bringing the joy of the holidays to life for our families.

If you are lucky enough to spend the holiday season among children, however, you know how magical this time can be. Each sight of twinkling lights or taste of a holiday treat brings unbridled joy to a child's heart, and they approach the holidays with wonder and excitement. Experiencing the holidays through a child's eyes can help us busy adults remember the reason for the season and enjoy this gleeful time.

In this verse from Matthew chapter 18, Jesus calls us to seek Him as a child does. Just as we gain insight and joy from viewing the holidays through the eyes of a child, seeking Jesus as a child does is imperative to understanding the way we should follow our Savior. Children come to Christ wide-eyed and full of trust. They do not let cynicism or worldly experiences get in the way of their love for Him. When we look at Jesus through the eyes of a child, we are able to fully see the wonder that is His love for us. Jesus tells us that only through this innocent view, may we gain entrance to His kingdom.

Jesus also calls His followers to welcome children in His name. In addition to seeking Christ like a child, full of trust and admiration, we must involve our children in our journey of faith. By including our children in our prayers and acts of service in the name of Christ, we welcome them to a life of faith. We learn from them as we grow to be child-like followers of God, trusting and loving Him in awe and astonishment.

Heavenly Father, thank you for giving us this time to spend with family and loved ones. Please help us remember to step back from the hustle and bustle and see the holidays through the eyes of a child, so that we may experience the joy of Christ's birth and the new year. Lord, guide us as we seek to know You as a child does, innocently and full of wonder, so that we may gain entrance to Your kingdom. In Your name, Amen.

DECEMBER 29



Isaiah 63:7-9 (NRSV)

I will recount the gracious deeds of the LORD, the praiseworthy acts of the LORD, because of all that the LORD has done for us, and the great favor to the house of Israel that he has shown them according to his mercy, according to the abundance of his steadfast love. For he said, "Surely they are my people, children who will not deal falsely"; and he became their savior in all their distress. It was no messenger or angel but his presence that saved them; in his love and in his pity he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old.

Without the intervention of God, what would have become of all people on this earth? His timeline is not always what we want it to be, but the presence of Jesus serves as a reminder that God has never abandoned us. In moments of unrest, it may seem as if God is far off but God is in action in all of our lives.

Dear God, thank you for always being present, and thank you for not abandoning us. Through You, all things are possible. Amen.

DECEMBER 30



2 Corinthians 4:16-18 (CEB)

So we aren't depressed. But even if our bodies are breaking down on the outside, the person that we are on the inside is being renewed every day. Our temporary minor problems are producing an eternal stockpile of glory for us that is beyond all comparison. We don't focus on the things that can be seen but on the things that can't be seen. The things that can be seen don't last, but the things that can't be seen are eternal.

This scripture has come to be more significant for me in the last ten years or so. As I have come to understand my faith and the glory that is given through Christ, the issues that I have had with my health are temporary problems that will not last. The Lord has allowed me the strength to accept the things that I can't change and focus on the larger focus of living my life to reflect His glory.

That is not to say that I have become the best Christian that I can be but that my faith has made me stronger when the difficulties in life have to be faced. To accept what is to come and to know that the eternal life to come will be provided by our Lord is a wonderful opportunity for each of us. I have had to occasion, this past year, to witness a strong Christian use his faith to be strong during a painful, long-running cancer and never falter. I will strive to be as strong a Christian in faith as he was this year.

Our Heavenly Father, we pray that You will give us the strength to deal with our physical problems each day with the knowledge that these are only temporary to this life. Allow us to provide assistance to those with greater needs than our own as You have given us the peace that passes all understanding. I give thanks for the many blessings of this day. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

DECEMBER 31



John 8:12-19 (NIV)

When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life." The Pharisees challenged him, "Here you are, appearing as your own witness; your testimony is not valid." Jesus answered, "Even if I testify on my own behalf, my testimony is valid, for I know where I came from and where I am going. But you have no idea where I come from or where I am going. You judge by human standards; I pass judgment on no one. But if I do judge, my decisions are true, because I am not alone. I stand with the Father, who sent me. In your own Law it is written that the testimony of two witnesses is true. I am one who testifies for myself; my other witness is the Father, who sent me." Then they asked him, "Where is your father?" "You do not know me or my Father," Jesus replied. "If you knew me, you would know my Father also."

Have you ever been in a dark room and needed to use the flashlight from your phone to find the light switch? The light from your phone guided your way. Jesus is that light guiding us! To follow Jesus means we will have the light of life. God sent his Son to save us from sin and give us eternal life. God has called us to come out of the darkness and live in the glorious and marvelous light of his presence. That is a wonderful promise. There is nothing we need more in this world today than light on our path. People are walking in darkness. The Bible references light and darkness to speak about the Creator. God is described using light. And in referring to himself as the light of the world, Jesus was also speaking about His identity with God. Other stories and verses in the bible tell us that God and Jesus share the exact same light. Its such an amazing feeling being able to be guided by God's light.

Dear Heavenly Father, thank You for leading us in your light. Without You, we would all be lost in the dark forever, searching for the light. Thank you for the promise of eternal light. Please help us to stay on the path that You have lit for us. In Your Holy Name, we pray. Amen.

JANUARY 1



Revelation 21:1-5a (NRSV)

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away." And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new."

Happy New Year! I truly believe there is no better way to start a new year, full of hope and wonder, than with the promises we find here in the final pages of the Bible. Possibly one of the most comforting passages in all of Scripture, John gives us an image of the new Jerusalem. Heaven—God's space, and earth—humanity's space, will again be joined in perfect harmony. The sea, which throughout the Bible has been a source of chaos and destruction, has now been fully tamed by the God of creation. Most importantly, God will once again dwell with his people. In the full presence of God, John shows us that there will be no more crying, pain, or death.

As Christians, our waiting during the season of Advent is different than those who were waiting for a sign from God in the first century. The joy at Christmas that is found in the birth of the Christ child is full of a different kind of hope and expectation for us today. With the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, we live in a space that Biblical scholars often call the already/not-yet space. We know that God has broken through our mess and walked among us, and we know that Christ died so that all things one day will be made right. We have hope in the resurrection of Jesus, knowing that one day, ALL things will be resurrected. This is the already—the hope of things seen. And yet we know that the work is not done, that it often feels like evil is still winning and we know in our bones that the world is not as it should be. We know that Christ has gone ahead to prepare a place for us and has promised to come once again. This is the space we live in between; what Christ has already done, and what has not yet been completed.

As the New Year begins, you may be asking God questions about what lies ahead. What is the work that is yours to do in your own life and in the lives of others around you? As followers of Christ, we know that through the Great Commission, we are invited into the work of making earth look more like heaven. As you spend time with John's vision of the new heaven and the new earth today, my hope and prayer for you is that you find comfort in God's work that is to come; the day when all things will be made new. Know that whatever chaos, pain, and suffering you're experiencing now will one day be redeemed and that God himself will wipe

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away your tears. I also hope that you're reminded that the already/not-yet space we live in means that the work is not over yet; that as Christians, we have the honor of participating in God's redemptive work of making earth look more like heaven each and every day.

God of all creation and redeemer of all things, we give thanks to you for today. Thank you for the promise of a New Year, full of new beginnings and new adventures. Help us to live into the hope and joy of what is to come and guide us in our efforts to make this world look more like Heaven. We love You, and we praise Your Holy Name. Amen.

JANUARY 2



Psalm 20 (NRSV)

I pray that the LORD answers you whenever you are in trouble. Let the name of Jacob's God protect you. Let God send help to you from the sanctuary and support you from Zion. Let God recall your many grain offerings; let him savor your entirely burned offerings. Selah.

Let God grant what is in your heart and fulfill all your plans. Then we will rejoice that you've been helped. We will fly our flags in the name of our God. Let the LORD fulfill all your requests! Now I know that the LORD saves his anointed one; God answers his anointed one from his heavenly sanctuary, answering with mighty acts of salvation achieved by his strong hand. Some people trust in chariots, others in horses; but we praise the LORD's name. They will collapse and fall, but we will stand up straight and strong. LORD, save the king! Let him answer us when we cry out!

We've all had bad days. Sometimes we get a bad grade. Sometimes we are hurt by friends. Sometimes we have to spend all of recess walking laps. Sometimes we even feel abandoned. The bad in this world can sometimes overwhelm us. This verse invites us to reflect on how we should react during our times of trouble or stress.

When we're in trouble, who do we turn to? Do we call our friends? Rant on social media? Go on a shopping spree to distract us? While it's easy to turn to worldly things when we are in need ("chariots" and "horses"), God teaches us that we should turn to him instead. The trappings of this world will fail us almost every time! Only God can truly provide answers for us in our time of need.

Lord, help us to turn to you when we are troubled or confused. Remind us to rely on you only when we are weak and discouraged. This world is fleeting, but you are always and forever. Only you can provide true peace and victory over sin! In Your name, we pray, Amen.

JANUARY 3



Genesis 28:10-22 (NLT)

Meanwhile, Jacob left Beersheba and traveled toward Haran. At sundown he arrived at a good place to set up camp and stopped there for the night. Jacob found a stone to rest his head against and lay down to sleep. As he slept, he dreamed of a stairway that reached from the earth up to heaven. And he saw the angels of God going up and down the stairway.

At the top of the stairway stood the Lord and he said, "I am the LORD, the God of your grandfather Abraham, and the God of your father Isaac. The ground you are lying on belongs to you. I am giving it to you and your descendants. Your descendants will be as numerous as the dust of the earth! They will spread out in all directions – to the west and the east, to the north and the south. And all the families of the earth will be blessed through you and your descendants. What's more, I am with you, and I will protect you wherever you go. One day I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have finished giving you everything I have promised you."

The next morning Jacob got up very early. He took the stone he had rested his head against, and he set it upright as a memorial pillar. Then he poured olive oil over it. He named that place Bethel (which means "house of God"), although it was previously called Luz.

Then Jacob made this vow: "If God will indeed be with me and protect me on this journey, and if he will provide me with food and clothing, and if I return safely to my father's home, then the LORD will certainly be my God. And this memorial pillar I have set up will become a place for worshipping God, and I will present to God a tenth of everything he gives me."

After deceiving his family, Jacob left home and was alone for the first time, traveling to an unknown place. How scary that must have been! In Biblical days, dreams tended to be visions of the future or a way for God to deliver a message. The stairway (Jacob's ladder) from heaven to earth references that there is only one true way to heaven – through God. Like many starting out on their Christian journey, Jacob only had knowledge of God, but not a personal experience or relationship until this very moment. The Lord spoke to him in his time of need and stillness, despite Jacob's past, and assured him that he would fulfill His promise to Jacob's family and also that He would be with Jacob wherever He was. In the end, Jacob vows to give back as a commitment to the Lord. He was in awe and overcome with the reassurance that God was with him. Can you imagine how exciting that felt, like electricity running through your body? That's how exciting your relationship with God can be! He has already given His promises to be with us at any time, in any place.

Dear Lord, we thank you for Your promises. Help us always to remember that You are with us, no matter our circumstances. Thank you for being with us wherever we are, and with everything we do. Give us the courage to follow and trust Your message, for we know that Your promises are good.

JANUARY 4



Exodus 3:1-5 (NRSV)

Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian, he led his flock beyond the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush, he looked and the bush was blazing yet it was not consumed. Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up." When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." Then he said, "Come no closer!" Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is Holy ground.

Have you ever had a "burning bush" moment? A time when you saw that God was near and was calling you to greater commitment and service to Him?

The story of Moses' encounter with God at the burning bush is a reminder to us of God's presence and power in our weakest moments.

This story is not about addiction in particular but about pain, suffering, oppression, and bondage. From the prison of slavery in Egypt, God is sending Moses to set the people free. I think this tells us something about how God responds to our pain and helps us find an escape.

Heavenly Father, what a long period of training Moses had to undergo to be prepared for the work You were destined to do in his life. At times, I am so impetuous and want things done in my life immediately, and yet I realize You take time to call and train and fashion and hone your servants in the things You have prepared for them to do. Develop that same patient spirit and humble heart I see in Moses and remove from my character anything that dishonors Your Holy Name. This I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.



Artwork by Reese Kelly

JANUARY 5



Matthew 2:1-12 (NRSV)

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising and have come to pay him homage." When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.'"

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage." When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

What difference would it make in your life if you had been one of those wise men, guided by a star to see the Savior of the world as a baby? They are said to have traveled hundreds of miles, not really knowing where they were going or how long it would take. They brought gifts, gold, a gift for a king, frankincense, incense, a gift for a god, myrrh, and a spice for a person who is going to die. When they found Him, they fell to their knees and worshiped the baby. Then, they went back to their homes. Do you think they acted differently after this experience? In a way, we have made that trip to Bethlehem to see that baby. We have just celebrated that same baby's birth. We have joined with family, given gifts, and hopefully worshiped and very thankfully been reminded that through our faith in this precious baby, we have been given eternal life. Now, we are taking down the tree and putting away the decorations. We are going on a diet because of all the good food we have been eating. Is that it?

I believe that the Holy Spirit is more active during the Christmas holidays. I see God's hand in many different and wonderful ways. People are reaching out to those who have different needs with food, clothing, or other types of help. We smile at everyone we meet. We let someone else in front of us in the line at the grocery store. But often, that caring and reaching-out spirit is put away after the holidays.

Did you take the time to think about what gift you could give your Messiah this year? Is a gift

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good enough for the Lord of your life? How about the gift of listening to what God has to say to you? How about the gift of obedience to God's call on your life?

It is a New Year. A new beginning. Louise Haskins talks about life in the New Year:

"And I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year; 'Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown!' And he replied: 'Go out into the darkness and put thine hand into the hand of God. That shall be to thee better than light and safer than a known way.'"

Dearest Father, this year may we be more and more aware of your guidance and call on our lives. May we go out into your world different than we were. May we kneel at your feet, giving You our lives. In your precious Son Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

Loving God Loving Neighbor



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