



*United Methodist Church of Mount Vernon*  
*Advent Devotional*  
*2020*



## **United Methodist Church of Mount Vernon**

### **ADVENT DEVOTIONAL 2020**

Advent is a time for community. Initiated by the birth of Jesus, humanity has been brought forward into a kinship, adopted by God through faith.

Advent is a time for remembrance. We relive the stories of old, recalling the numerous joys shared around trees, tables and towns. The memories of youth turned golden with age become the foundation for each new occasion and life touched by grace.

Advent is a time for pursuit. Tucked away in a manger, hidden from the world yet calling out to all is the babe. While Herod was driven by fear to discover the Savior, we seek to quench the longing in our heart that calls us to the manger.

Advent is a time for sharing. For to us a child is born, unto us the Son is given. With thanksgiving we turn to those around us and desire to demonstrate a mere portion of such generosity. The story is told over and over by voice, by page and by example.

Yes, Advent is each of these and so much more. During a time when our family, our community and our peace is held apart by a pandemic, Advent arrives with truth and hope and joy leading us into a deepening relationship with the one for whom the season was created and for whom we shall endure. On the pages that follow, members of this church family have come together to offer expressions of faith and morsels of tradition so that you may know you are not alone.

May this Advent be of special blessing to you whether it is ink on paper that draws us in or digital pixels across the internet. May this Advent devotional be a gift to you, a gift to us, a gift to Him. God Bless!

## November 29

### Mercy Rules

God knows what we need most for Christmas this year - freedom from our sins.

*Isaiah 63:16-19 & 64:2-7*

The Advent season is always a busy time with family, jobs, traditions, and many self-established goals to fulfill in our eagerness to create a meaningful, memorable holiday.

With busy schedules our well-intended goals can become burdens that weigh heavily on our thoughts, interfering with our ability to LISTEN, LOVE, and LINGER with the True Angels of the Season.

In the 2020 Advent season, fewer traditional distractions are in place . This creates time for us to recognize the most precious gift is freedom from our sins through the gift of Christ. In the coming days, guide us to find moments of Listening, Loving, and Linger as we await Christ's coming.

Let us pray: Our loving Father, guide us in making this Advent season one in which fewer distractions offer us more time to prepare our hearts and minds for Christ's coming. Amen.

*You come to the help of those who gladly do right,  
who remember your ways. Isaiah 2:5*

**Karen Stewart**

## November 30

When a friend or family member calls and says, “do you want to hear some good news” a smile naturally comes to my face. I begin to guess in my mind what exactly the good news might be. I always enjoy hearing good news. I’m happy for those who are sharing it and celebrate with them whatever they are exclaiming as good news.

Now, more than ever, I find myself hungry for good news. Just a little good news to focus on is healing for my soul and brightens my day. This 2nd day of Advent, I am reminded of the GOOD news that is most important. As we await the birth of our Savior who came to save our world and all who will call on His name, let us find hope in the GOOD news that abounds for us as Christians.

In the midst of anxiety, uncertainty and change, may we find encouragement in the GOOD news of Advent. And, as those around us struggle and yearn to hear a little good news, may we follow the Spirit’s urging to share our GOOD news with another who needs to hear it. Reach out to love on and care for others, acting out our GOOD news.

Think of how meaningful the best GOOD news can be for someone who needs to hear it and how good you’ll feel sharing it.

Love and Blessings to each of you during this Advent Season.

**Julie Baty**

*Romans 10:11-16: Scripture reassures us, “No one who trusts God like this – heart and soul – will ever regret it.” It’s exactly the same no matter what a person’s religious background may be: the same God for all of us, acting the same incredibly generous way to everyone who calls out for help. “Everyone who calls, ‘Help God!’ gets help.” But how can people call for help if they don’t know who to trust? And how can they know who to trust if they haven’t heard of the One who can be trusted? And how can they hear if nobody tells them. (The Message)*

# December 1

## **Newborn King: Jesus rules like no other- he aims only to bring peace.**

Far too often the advent season feels like a whirlwind, a nearly endless month of hustle and bustle, all culminating in family get togethers and large celebrations. Rarely, would an external observer say that the Christmas season is a peaceful one, especially in our current 2020 situation, as many wonder if those same get togethers and celebrations will even be possible. So much waiting and wondering is yet to be done, and with it comes nervousness and tension. How can we make a time with so much noise and distraction a peaceful time for us?

We put Jesus in the center. Now of course that seems reductive, and is often easier said than done. However, the cliché is 'Jesus is the reason for the season', and he is the Prince of Peace. He brings peace to the World and to his people in ways we do not know, nor do we expect. On Christmas we celebrate his birth, but if you look at his entire life it speaks to the unexpected ways of Jesus and the peace that we can find in them. His followers expected a conqueror, not a man who would die on the cross, seemingly without a fight. Jesus is not just the calm after the storm. He is the calm **IN** the storm.

Oftentimes this year it has felt like everyone is running around like chickens with their heads chopped off. We all want answers. When will normal return? When can I hug my friends again? When can I plan a family vacation without worrying about travel? I don't know about you, but I have no answers. But Psalm 72: 5-7 says, "May he continue while the sun endures, and as long as the moon, throughout all generations. May he be like rain that falls on the cut grass, like spring showers that water the earth. May the righteous flourish in his days, and PEACE abound until the moon is no more."

Sometimes it's difficult to see God's peace working around us. We equate peace with rest, quiet, and relaxation. But we say peace **AND** quiet, not peace **IS** quiet. God works in mysterious ways, and that's not to say that 2020 and Covid are results of a wave of his hand, but he is able to take our darkest, most fearful moments and provide a path. There is peace to be found in the noise of this advent season. It may not be a seat by the fire with a cup of cocoa, but it's there to be found. In the kids fighting over who frosts what cookie. In the cleanup of copious amounts of crinkly wrapping paper. Even during the 150th time hearing Mariah Carey sing *All I Want For Christmas Is You*. Jesus is peace, and God is with us. Let his peace wash over you this Advent season.

**Trevor Baty**

## December 2

Cornerstones were selected and crafted by stone masons to be what the rest of the building is built upon. The quality of the cornerstone results in a quality building that can withstand storms. If you walk on Cornell's campus you will see many cornerstones; some are stamped on the stone and others are carved into the stone. The cornerstone of King Chapel is a block that is about 20x15 with a decorative border and text carved into it. King chapel's cornerstone has the Latin word *humanitas* (civilization) stamped as well as the year 1876. This great structure took time to build and has been a building that has had many investments over the years to maintain it to continue withstanding storms. That 20x15 cornerstone holds a building that tower about a 130 feet. That cornerstone was selected for its strength - its stone mason selected it for this task.

In 1 Peter Chapter 2 v 6 and 7  
For in Scripture it says:

“See, I lay a stone in Zion a chosen and precious cornerstone, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame.”

7 Now to you who believe, this stone is precious.

We are the cornerstone of our church - we have been chosen. Our church, our community, our faith is built on the cornerstones - each and everyone of us. We have to be willing to take a step forward, be willing to provide the foundation for our church, our faith.

Verse 10 - “Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.”

Open your hearts to receive God's mercy and be his cornerstone in this building so that it can reach great heights spreading the word.

**Suzette Kragenbrink**

## December 3

### Wishing

The greatest Christmas gift is the joy of building one's home on faith in Christ, our foundation.

I remember as a child loving the Christmas season as most children do. In addition to the lights, decorations and of course Christmas presents I was fortunate to grow up in a Christian home. Christmas was centered on the Birth of our Savior and included church, advent readings and Christmas Hymns. I thank God that I was brought up in a Christ centered home. I was lucky to have parents that gave me a rock home foundation.

I accepted Christ as my Savior at a young age and my parents' beliefs became my very own. For a while I believed that was all that was required of me (I was forgiven). As time passed the Holy Spirit continued to prod my conscience until I made effort to obey his commands for the way to live my life. The Holy Spirit also convicted me of living a mostly selfish life and I now try to do for others and serve God as Jesus did. But, as we Christians know, I will never arrive at complete obedience or total unselfishness until I am transformed in Heaven.

I thank God for the foundation that my parents gave me at a young age and the foundation that God gave me in Jesus. God has pulled me through some storms in my life and I know there are more coming but I know that Jesus will never leave my side until we meet face to face.

Amen.

**Rainey Brown**

*“Not everybody who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will get into the kingdom of heaven. Only those who do the will of my Father who is in heaven will enter. Matthew 7:21 CEB*



## December 4

### Shining on

May each twinkling light, each glowing candle, grant you the comfort of God's protection.

I find the Christmas tree lights, street and house decorations, stars and candles all a bit mesmerizing. When you just stop and really look at them there is a kind of peace and wonder that fills the air. Maybe we are trying to get a sense of what the folks experienced with Jesus' birth. After all, it was a great light and a host of angels that first appeared to the Shepherds and then the Star that guided the Wise Men.

There are many references to light in the bible. Right from the beginning God said, "let there is light." We are drawn to light. We need light to thrive. Things look much different in the light than they do in the dark. Jesus' birth was a bright light in a dark world. Our lights, decorations, stars and candles help remind us of that to this day.

An old legend says that Jesus wanders the streets of the world on Christmas Eve seeking shelter. A lighted candle in the window guides him to a house where he is welcome.

Maybe we pull out all the extra lights and candles and decorations at Christmas because we are hoping for a "Hallelujah" moment like Clark Griswald has when he plugs in his house lights.

*Psalms 27:1 The Lord is my light and my salvation, whom shall I fear?*

May you find peace and wonder this Christmas as you observe the twinkling lights, candles and stars and feel the comfort of God's protection.

**Barb Shepley**

## **December 5**

### **Peace on earth**

Peace is certainly something we all seek in our lives and in our world, but peace has been in short supply this challenging year. For me, and I suspect for many of you, I feel most at peace when I know what is coming next, or at least have a good idea of what is coming next. Well, NEXT flew right out the window in 2020! I'm not even certain where I'll place my head after April. We sold our home, but due to several unforeseen circumstances, our new home won't be ready to welcome us for a year. Covid has made living with family difficult and not a good option. So, now do I, how do we, find PEACE during a time like this? For me during this year's journey, God has shown His faithfulness every step of my way. My trust and my faith has grown deeper during this struggle.

Advent is a period of waiting and preparing our hearts for Christ's birth. Isaiah 30:18 tells us, "Blessed are those who wait for Him." As I go about my life, not knowing what I'm doing for sure or what comes next, waiting can be hard.

Today's scripture says, "Whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you saying, 'This is the way. Walk in it.'" "At each step of the way this uncertain year, there has been an answer, a path forward. The experience has helped me grow in my faith and trust in God. God is good. God is faithful.

We will find our Peace, our Shalom, in Jesus Christ this holy season and in all the seasons of our lives when we walk in faith trusting God to walk every step of the way with us.

God help us this Advent season, and in every season of our lives to walk in faith with You waiting, listening, trusting and finding that peace which surpasses all understanding.

## December 6

2 Peter 3:8-14

I recently read an article about COVID quarantine fatigue. The author said that people are tired of having been subjected to the strict measures of the quarantine for so many months already, although the threat of COVID hasn't diminished, but rather has gotten worse. The fact that the duration of the quarantine is unknown has brought on the feeling, "Why bother? We don't want to keep on taking these stringent measures forever when they don't seem to be making a difference. We miss the freedoms associated with pre-COVID times". The author speculates that with the announcement of the new Pfizer vaccine, people will have a renewed willingness to quarantine and take precautionary measures now there's an end in sight.

We don't know when the Lord will make good on his promise of a new earth and a new heaven. It'll be in His own time. With the duration uncertain it would be easy to give in to "righteousness fatigue". In 2020 life has been so challenging with the pandemic, political divisions, the derecho, racial tensions, and the conflict in the United Methodist Church. It would be tempting to throw up our hands and say, "Why bother?" But the Lord gives us signs of His care and faithfulness, the promise of a "vaccine" against indifference and apathy: our health care providers, going to extraordinary lengths to care for the sick; teachers doing double duty, educating students both online and in person; the volunteers and staff working to keep our church functioning; our faithful members with their financial support; and the kindness and caring of our church family towards our members and our community. We can support and encourage each other while we pursue the path of righteousness despite what we encounter in the world around us.

Dear Lord- We thank You for the glimpses of Your Grace that promise the time of righteousness to come. Help us to keep our eyes focused on you. We appreciate the blessings you have given us as signs that we can trust in You to guide us and protect us, and that all will be fulfilled in Your Own time.

In Your Name- Amen.

**Karen Stoll**

## December 7

### On the Roof

Whether you come bearing gifts or bring other to the blessing, God is glorified in it. Luke 5:17-26

He saw their faith. Jesus was so in tune with the people in the story that he saw their faith without even speaking a word. Their actions spoke for them. These people went out of their way to find Jesus and get the paralyzed man to Him to be healed. So much so that they lowered him into the crowd from the roof. If Jesus were here today, would he see our faith? What would our actions tell Jesus about our faith? It seems it could be easy for us to take advantage of the grace Jesus offers us so that we don't feel like we need to go out of the way to show our faith. The men in this story could have just waited outside in the crowd and tried to get Jesus' attention. But they didn't take the easy way and went above and beyond to get their friend healed. Do you go above and beyond for Jesus? What could you do today to go above and beyond for Jesus?

When Jesus healed the paralyzed man, He told the man, "Your sins are forgiven." When we believe in Jesus we are also forgiven. And that forgiveness wipes away our sin. I struggle with this often. How can He just forgive me that easily when I can't forgive myself? Jesus tells us over and over again throughout the bible that he forgives us when we ask for it and believe in Him. When we are forgiven we are supposed to let go of that sin and give it to Jesus. For me that's a work in progress. I hope its easier for you to let go of your sins. You are forgiven!

In this story the men used their gift of perseverance to get the paralyzed man to Jesus to be healed. We all have gifts. Some us use our gifts to care for others, yet some use our gifts to create beauty shared with all. Yet others have gifts of sharing a message to bring others to Christ. Regardless of the type of gift, God is glorified by the use of our gifts. He wants us to use what He has given us so that we can show him how much we love him. It starts with belief in Jesus, is followed by forgiveness and finished with giving back to glorify God. Wherever you are in your journey with Christ, you can take small steps to ask for forgiveness and use your gifts to glorify Him. What can you do this Holiday season to ask for and accept His forgiveness? What gifts can you share with others to show Jesus how much you care? What will you do so He see your faith?

**Kim Guardado**

## December 8

### Christmas Caroling

Oh sing to the Lord a new song, a melody of the marvelous things he has done.

I am so thankful for all of scripture, which reveals to us the mind of God and teaches us about how His divine power became the Son of God and the Son of Man in the person of Jesus. The Psalms are my "go-to" guide on almost a daily basis--to help me learn about, and reflect upon, the mind and heart of God. Psalm 98:1-4 exhorts us to "sing a new song" and "shout for joy to the Lord." During Advent, this passage reminds me of one of our most beloved Christmas carols, "Joy to the World," which was a "new song," based on Psalm 98, written in 1719 by the English hymn composer Isaac Watts. A line in the carol, "Let every heart prepare Him room," recalls the nativity story in Luke 2:7 where we are told that there was no room at the Inn for Mary, Joseph, and baby Jesus. For us, when we prepare room in our hearts for Jesus, we invite his redemptive power to work in us and through us here on Earth.

The third verse of Joy to the World is particularly profound and encouraging during Advent. It says, "No more let sins and sorrows grow...He comes to make his blessings flow, far as the curse is found." Every year at Christmas, we celebrate the coming of Jesus in the form of a baby born to the virgin Mary. He came to save us, to provide all believers with His powerful restoring grace--as far as sin's furthest reach. Jesus came to help us rejoice over the faithfulness of our God, and rejoice always, "repeat the sounding joy," as we receive the salvation God has promised.

**Judith Pim**

*Shout for joy to the LORD, all the earth,  
burst into jubilant song with music; Psalm 98:4*

## **December 9**

### **Be Still**

Weary of all the season's activities already? Find your rest in the presence of the Lord.

ISAIAH 40:25-31

It is still early in December – are you tired and stressed already? Is your 'to-do' list growing daily with addressing cards, wrapping and mailing gifts, decorating, baking holiday goodies and attending all the Christmas gatherings (well, maybe not THIS year!)???

This text in Isaiah assures us if we will just stop a moment, take a deep breath, and wait upon the Lord, we will gain the strength we need and the calmness of spirit which would make our Advent and Christmas preparations seem easy and joyful. Perhaps this season is the best time to get back into the habit of talking with God first thing each day before our feet even hit the floor, giving thanks for a new day stretched before us and asking for the strength to complete the day's tasks. In the process, let's also ask that we might be a blessing for someone that day! Let's try to gain the inner peace God can give us and then share it with others this season.

“They who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.”

Creator God, thank you for the assurance that you are always with us, holding us up in times of stress and blessing us with quiet assurance if we but stop a while and listen.

Amen.

**Babs Moore**

## **December 10**

### **Follow Him**

John humbled himself and pointed the way to Jesus. This alone is what makes him great.

If God is pointing to John the Baptist as somebody we should look up to and emulate, I do not know how to actually do that because he is such an important historical figure in the Bible, but he paved the way for people to follow Jesus and for that I try to pave the path for people to understand Jesus better or to get an unbeliever to get to know Jesus completely.

The verse that really stands out to me is Matthew 11:15 As Jesus says "Whoever has ears let him hear." Every Sunday morning my husband and I sit down with the kids and watch the Sunday School video. We review what we have gone over in the previous sections, watch the video, and talk about what is happening in the Bible story and answer all the kids questions. Throughout the week I will hear the kids talk about Jesus or hear them relate Jesus to something that happened in their day. I feel like I am emulating what John the Baptist did when he paved the path for the people to follow Jesus. The kids have ears and they are hearing what is being said about Jesus.

We must be able to pray to God to be able to hear the way Christ described. It cannot come in the natural way, but only having God open our spiritual eyes to hear what He wants us to hear.

**Allison Traynor**

# December 11

Matthew 11:16-19

*"We played the flute for you, and you did not dance;  
We sang a dirge, and you did not mourn." Matthew 11:17, NIV*

## **An asynchronous Advent season**

I will tell no lies. When I read the full verse selection, I paused and thought, "huh?".

Boy, was I stumped. How was I to get an advent message out of verses that Jesus seemed to rebuke the response of the general community? He compared them to children calling those taunts out to their friends. Just prior to these verses, even John the Baptist had asked from his jail cell if Jesus was indeed the one.

*God is good, all the time.* Matthew's words, thousands of years old, sound like today. "Why aren't you happy?" "Why are you so cheerful?" "Aren't you worried about?... (Fill in the blank)" "Doesn't (name a politician) just tick you off?"

We've become an asynchronous society. Not just in the sense I've sent YouTube playlists full of my music class out to grade levels last spring, so they could view on their own schedule,

*But that we sometimes fail to see our feelings aren't the only ones during December.*

Some of our friends want that flute music ringing high in the air. Celebrating- a win? - school's still on?- Christmas is coming?... Christ is coming!

Other friends need that dirge. A loss, a lost person, living secluded because of Covid. Fed up with Covid's damper. Sad, maybe shameful, that the lights and music are not how they feel.

Matthew 11:19b says, 'But wisdom is proved right by her actions.' Thank you, Jesus, for reminding us that our actions are wisdom in flesh. We can strive to be in sync with the feelings of those around us. We do not need to be the children chiding others like verse 17. One of my favorite hymns is, "Open my eyes that I may see, glimpses of truth thou hast for me.". If I see a friend is not all light and cheer, I pray I sit with them and just be. Let them be, and feel, and reminisce. May my actions be wisdom in action, reaching them where they are. Not expecting a leap, but perhaps I can coax some comfort?

Or perhaps I walk into a Christmas wonderland home. (Someone should outlaw pumpkin spice!) I decorate less each year, less company to see it. My curriculum is bare bones, and who knows how long I see student faces in person. I haven't seen my parents since July. May my actions be wisdom in action. Honor their delight. What is my friend's favorite piece? Do they enjoy the process? Why did God place me here? Am I being ungrateful? Need a pick-me-up myself? Soak it in and know God sent me there. I needed the lift. I don't need to be the downer, and can celebrate my friend's enthusiasm, if not their décor.

*All the time, God is good.* We all receive the gift of His son this season. No matter how's it's wrapped or whether our heart is quiet and blue, or raucous and bright. Joy comes in many forms. May we all feel it in our way this Advent season.

**Kristi Keast**



## December 12

### The Most High

Christ came down from on high, to each of us, who serve him in humility.

As a mother I think about Mary during this season. How very scary to be engaged to Joseph and to be told you will bear a child that isn't his who will save the world. I can't imagine. The whole situation for Mary would spin me into chaos. Angels popping in here and there to explain what is coming and how she was chosen to give birth to the most important baby of all time. That is overwhelming. Yet here she was humbled to God's plan.

When she held Jesus in those first moments in the manger what did she feel when she looked upon the tiny little wrinkly face? I would imagine serving him in humility came quite easily. That's what we do with children, they are amazing creations. My boys find ways to humble me daily some good, some not, but they challenge me to grow as a parent. It is at times overwhelming the awe I feel when I am with my own boys, and then there is Mary. Can you imagine the awe she had to feel as she watched her sweet baby grow into the Savior? He came down from heaven to teach us, each of us, to serve in humility. We can follow Mary's example in this.

### Ally Rushford

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

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

*"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled." Then the angel left her.*

*Luke 1:26-38*

## December 13

**We are called.** Mary was blessed to receive the mission of carrying God within her.

Sitting as an imperfect person in a flawed world, I feel far from the level of holy that I know Mary was as she carried the Christ child. I wonder how I can find Christ in me this advent season. I look everywhere but really, I need to focus on the part I can control, my mind, my actions and my words. Wow, this is truly on me to become worthy of being a follower of Christ. I sit down with open hands and send up prayers for divine inspiration on how to get there.

The line from "O Holy Night" rolls over and over in my head as I imagine our advent waiting and eventual Christmas celebration. "The weary world rejoices" seems so appropriate for this year. I think back to a lifetime of big family gatherings. On my mom's side, we have regularly hosted 75 to 100 for Thanksgiving and Christmas dinners for many years. I think of all the babies I have held throughout them. We sort of have an unwritten rule that everyone will hold the baby to welcome them to the family and to also give the parents a little break. (unless there is crying and then parents are summoned to fix whatever is needed.)

So if I was holding the Christ baby in my lap, I wouldn't hold him at arm's length or say hello and then not pay any attention to him. No, I would snuggle him as close to my body as I could, and my whole focus would be on him. I would tell him how loved he is and how special he is to me and so many people I know. I would tell him he is so sweet and how adored he truly is. I yearn to be this close in my relationship with Christ. I would hold his hand and be close by him, never leaving his side or turning away. Instead, I feel distracted, self-involved and sometimes unaware when Christ is all around me. Let us take time this advent to pray, to journal, to pause and in this time, openly invite Christ into our hearts. May we remember that Christ lives in our hearts when we believe.

**Alison Dix**

## December 14

In Matthew 21:23-27 Jesus had previously cleared the temple of merchants and money changers and had returned to the temple to teach. The priests and elders interrupted and confronted Jesus to challenge his authority, hoping he would say his authority was from God so they could accuse him of blasphemy. Jesus did not fall for their trap and answered them with a question to expose their motives. Jesus asked whether John the Baptist got his authority from heaven or man. If they answered the question, Jesus would answer theirs. There was no good answer for the priests. If they chose heaven, they would acknowledge John's power. If they said man, they would anger all of the people in the temple who believed John was a prophet. Afraid they would lose their authority/power over the people they answered that they did not know. This exposed the priests true motive and allowed Jesus not to answer.

I am sometimes guilty of being more like the priests than Jesus. I don't want to give up control. I will charge through a situation relying totally on my own solution. I often tell myself that I don't want to bother God with something so trivial, or am I not wanting to trust God's solution? As I look back over my life, charging through on my own often did not turn out well for me! On the other hand, during the most difficult times in my life, I chose to trust God completely and He was faithful and supplied me with the strength that I needed.

Jesus did not need to answer the priests. Jesus committed totally to heavens authority as the Son of God ("This is my beloved son, with whom I am well pleased." Matthew 17:5 ) and himself as God ("Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was born, I am." Peter 8:58. Heaven's authority can be seen "as the power from above that is present in the words and deeds of Christ, who is God sent." Jesus did not use his authority as power but as an tool to empower others. He came to serve and teach us the way of love.

Let's look forward to celebrating the birth of Jesus who answers our need for a trustworthy authority, wonderful counselor, mighty God, everlasting Father and prince of peace.

**Cathy Stoner**

## December 15

### Sing out

When was the last time you stopped to look at the multiple colors of fall leaves? How many times have you marveled at spring flowers trumpeting their colors and aromas? A babbling brook, winding river or ocean shore; a brilliant starry night sky captivating your gaze; or, a cool, foggy morning holding back the onslaught of day to let a whispering hint of notes play in your mind. There are songs all around us if only we have ears to hear and dare to let patience give us notice.

As long as I can remember, there has been a song embedded in my heart. From the earliest of ages, memory after memory can be activated by lyric, melody or composition. It did, however, take years for me to begin to realize the true origin of my singing. In fact, I turned away from the song and hid it away inside while I let so many other trivial traits control me. Then, like the sun rising to break the darkened sky, music began to change who I had become and transform me back to who I always was meant to be.

These days, I face every moment with a song just below the surface, waiting to burst forth. So why wait? The flowers do not, the leaves do not, the water doesn't stop churning. "If creation sings Your praises so will I". For when I do, all that seems against me begins to fade away. We were made to sing and each of us in a different way, not for entertaining but for sharing, for witnessing...and at times for lamenting. It is in the songs of our hearts that our faith emboldens us to know we are loved and cherished full of grace.

*Psalm 37: 17-19*

*The righteous cry out, and the Lord hears them;  
he delivers them from all their troubles.  
The Lord is close to the brokenhearted  
and saves those who are crushed in spirit.*

**Jim Baty**

## December 16

**God With Us: Jesus is that one, special gift you have always wanted but never expected. Receive him today.**

Mom was resting peacefully in her hospital bed in the living room as we took turns sitting with her. The family was gathered around the table and around the living room. There was the usual lively after dinner conversation and laughter. The evening was winding down and people were thinking about heading home when her breathing changed. The hospice nurse was called. Departures were postponed as we watched and wondered what was next. We were told it looked like the timeline was changing from days to hours, and that she could become agitated and have increasing trouble breathing. I imagined a night with Ann and I taking shifts trying to keep Mom comfortable and medicating her as often as every hour while watching her suffer, and I imagined how hard that would be us and for Dad. It sounded like torture. The nurses left and before anyone had time to gather their things together and leave, Mom took a few more labored breaths and then stopped. Ann listened long and hard to see if there was any hint of a breath or a beat from that giant heart before she announced that she thought Mom was gone. Everyone who wanted to be there was there. We cried together and got to say our final goodbyes as Mom left the house for the last time.

In spite of covid challenges, in spite of the Derecho that made it seem impossible to get Mom the hospice care she needed so urgently, in spite of power outages and gas shortages and closed grocers, in spite of the impossibility of having the funeral we would have normally planned with our church overflowing – in retrospect, everything was oddly perfect, even though it often felt so difficult at the time. As the days passed, we had more and more gratitude for how little Mom had to suffer, how blessed we were and the many gifts in the time we had together as a family in those last days. We had to meet each new challenge the best we could with as little resistance as possible, trust in God's infinite wisdom and let God guide it all in ways we could never have dreamt of but which, in the bigger picture, were perfect.

What a gift it is to remember that you are supported in ways you could never imagine – that you are a part of something bigger than you can see and that there are loving arms around you.

**Jean Lehman**

Isaiah 45:6-8

So all will know, from the rising of the sun to its setting,  
that there is nothing apart from me.

I am the LORD; there's no other.

I form light and create darkness,

make prosperity and create doom;

I am the LORD, who does all these things.

## December 17

### Age to Age

From age to age prosperity shall come to God's people in Christ. Spring his blessings.

We just made it through another presidential election year filled with campaign ads, telemarketing polls, rallies, and yard signs. While we all don't agree on who the best candidate may be, we do share an expectation that elected officials accomplish certain objectives. We also hope that our leaders act justly and with integrity.

Please join me in prayer that the Lord will give us just and righteous leaders in our local, state, and federal government. Along with our leaders, we must recognize and act upon the needs of the poor, the needy, and the oppressed.

Take some time today to reflect on how you might have a positive influence on someone else. It is often said that you never know what circumstances another person may be facing. Kindness and grace for friends and strangers may make the difference for someone.

Looking at our nation today, you might feel discouraged. But you can make a difference in your circle of influence by living compassionately and sharing the good news of Christ. The more the love, grace, forgiveness and freedom of Jesus is understood, the more our nation can be blessed by its citizens.

**Jackie Morrical**

*May the mountains bring prosperity to the people,  
the hills the fruit of righteousness.*

*May he defend the afflicted among the people  
and save the children of the needy;*

*Psalm 72:3-4 NIV*

## **December 18**

### **God Said It – I Believe It – That Does It!!**

#### **Jeremiah 23: 5-8**

We've all read predictions about everything from ball game results to election outcomes.

Have you heard of Nostradamus, the 16<sup>th</sup> century physician and psychic who predicted that the world would end in the twentieth century? Or, more recently, do you remember the Y2K scare that warned that computers would not be able to process dates when the calendar rolled over to the year 2000?

In today's Bible reading the prophet Jeremiah predicts that a branch from the line of King David would rule the world in justice and righteousness. So what 's the difference between human prognostications and the ones God sent through Biblical prophets? It is the fact that God's word and His promises are always true!! In the book of Luke, the Virgin Mary didn't doubt when the angel told her she would bare the Son of God who would be the Savior of the world. The three kings didn't consult a map, but on faith alone followed the star as they were told in order to find the baby Jesus. And it was no coincidence that they brought frankincense and myrrh as gifts that foretold Christ's death and resurrection that would fulfill God's plan.

We can trust God's word. His prophesies and predictions are true and he always fulfills His promises. All we need to do is trust, obey and believe!

Almighty God- Thank you for sending your son Jesus, the Light of the World! As we celebrate his birth, let that same light shine through us to help bring peace, love and joy to a troubled and broken world. Thank you for always being with us and always loving us. Thank you for sending the Holy Spirit to guide and comfort us and for your reassuring promise of eternal life. We ask that as we celebrate Christmas you would keep us mindful of the needs of others and help us to see Jesus in all human kind, no matter what their race, color or creed. Though these are uncertain times, we rest in the assurance that You never change. These things we pray with grateful hearts in the name of Jesus.

Amen.

**Judy Stine**

## **December 19**

**You will be Speechless.**

**Quiet the voices around you today and listen to what God promises in the Word.**

Anyone who knows me, knows that "silence" is not my forte, and "quiet" is not a task that comes easily. With the situations in the world, especially during 2020, there is little silence. So many opinions, so many thoughts and fears. Life is loud. It's even loud in the moments when there is no noise. It wears on us. Times of silence and reflection are important in order to remind ourselves that God is in our presence. We are always thankful for the blessings that we are given, but we often pray most when we are troubled. This scripture reminds us of the gift of answered prayer, even if we have to give something up in order to receive it.

The true moments of silence can be so precious and powerful: a mother cradling her baby at 2am, sitting at the bedside of a loved one during their last moments. Blessings. One of the blessings of silence that we've shared as the church family is on Christmas Eve. Silent night is sung, we light each other's candles, and when this most beautiful hymn ends, we leave the sanctuary silently, and anticipate Jesus' arrival.

Your angel may come in the most unexpected ways and answer your prayers. Stay quiet, listen, be present, and open your heart to the blessings of this Christmas season.

**Ann Currie**



## December 20

### It's Possible!

Mary was initially frightened by the appearance of Gabriel. After he gave his message to her that she would bear a son, she said to Gabriel that she was unmarried yet, but she accepted by faith the promise of God as spoken by His messenger Gabriel.

Christmas and Advent are seasons of anticipation, wonder, and faith. It was POSSIBLE for Elizabeth to conceive and bear a son, John, at an age well past normal childbearing years. It was POSSIBLE for Mary to become pregnant through the Holy Spirit before her marriage to Joseph. Birth is in itself a POSSIBLE miracle.

As I reached for a pen on my desk to write this Advent message, I saw my two stone paperweights engraved with "Miracles Happen" and "Believe in Miracles." Many miracles are recorded in the Bible and we continue to see miracles today if we look through the eyes of faith. As Christmas nears, open your eyes to POSSIBLE miracles. Reflect on the good things that have happened even during the Covid pandemic, derecho, hurricanes, political turmoil, and the perception that 2020 is a lost year. Family and friends come together to help each other during times of need and sorrow and that is a blessing. Christmas reminds us that God sent a baby to earth whom Christians still follow today, over 2000 years later.

ALL things are POSSIBLE with God!

*Despite the sinfulness of David's line, God remained faithful to it throughout the generations.*

*Luke 1:26-28*

**Jackie Wallace**

## December 21

### Sharing Joy

Are friends and family coming your way?  
Celebrate and share the Good News together.

#### *Mary Visits Elizabeth*

*<sup>39</sup> In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah, <sup>40</sup> and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. <sup>41</sup> And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, <sup>42</sup> and she exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! <sup>43</sup> And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? <sup>44</sup> For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. <sup>45</sup> And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord." Luke 1:39-45*

I admit, this devotional topic was a bit daunting for me. If your 2020 is anything like mine, viewing all choices under the lens of COVID-19 is the new norm. The current advice is to avoid family gatherings this Christmas season. Yet, isn't going home, or having friends and family in your home for the holidays what the holidays are about? This year, maybe God is calling us to all do things differently...even Christmas celebrations. Differently (change) does not have to be bad. Maybe a break from tradition this year will make us appreciate our family or church gatherings even more once we can safely gather again. Going to church is another home we have, but this home has also been altered by this virus. Church families always revolve their plans around the special Advent services, and there is always the excitement of Christmas traditions. What if we can't hold them safely this season? Yet, this year can still be a great celebration by focusing on the family nearest to us. What if the hustle and bustle of the Christmas season can be replaced by more intimate time with our loved ones, thinking about the true meaning of the Savior's birth. I invite you to open your hearts to the Holy Spirit this unique Christmas season. Ask in your prayers for creative ways to stay connected with friends and family, reminding them of the importance of the gift and the promise that came with the birth of Jesus. (continued on next page)

**Jeff Schmatt**

This song, written by our talented Praise Team Director, Clint Stanerson, also came to mind as I wrote this devotional. It is a song called “Home”. It was originally written during the COVID-19 quarantine time this spring and performed for us this summer for the first time. He has provided the lyrics to share with you. Hopefully, it will allow more contemplation on what our “Homes” mean to us in our walk with Jesus.

Home- by Clint Stanerson

When I'm running hard it's hard to breathe  
I start longing for a quiet reprieve  
No other place I'd rather be  
Than the place where I can find my peace

I'm going home  
I'm going home  
I'm going home  
In need of rest I'm going home

A father bids his boy goodbye  
The lad always had a wild side  
He worries for his prodigal child  
Till his son returns devoid of pride

You're welcome home  
You're welcome home  
You're welcome home  
Arms open wide you're welcome home

As my reflection turns from young to gray  
I'm looking past my earthly stay  
My wild side has found its way  
Oh reunion in Your arms I pray

Bring me home  
Bring me home  
Bring me home  
I found my peace Lord bring me home

## December 22

### Magnify Him

*We, his servants, lift up our voices and our lives to exalt the Lord and his help.*

Lifting up our voices brings to mind the blessing of music, singing, calling out to the Lord. Many songs call out to God in praise, in celebration, with prayers of thanksgiving. Many others call out in pain, in desperation, with prayers for help. Lifting our voices and our hearts up to the Lord is a way to communicate with God.

In addition to song, “lift up our voices and our lives” says we use not just our words, but our actions as well, to honor God. As we teach children, actions speak louder than words. It is important, and often difficult, to turn our beliefs into actions. To say we value compassion is easier than to act with compassion, though acting with compassion is more important. We should strive to not only speak, but also act, in a way that exalts the Lord.

*Luke 1:46-56 - Mary's Song of Praise: The Magnificat*

“My soul magnifies the Lord” begins Mary’s Song of Praise. Magnify means glorify; it also means to increase the effect of. Like a magnifying glass focuses and increases the effect of the sun’s power, we can magnify God by letting God shine through us and show in our words and in our actions; in the way we listen, the way we forgive, the way we understand, and the way we love, not just our family and friends, but also those with whom we disagree. God shining through all of us has the power to amplify God’s presence among us if we use our voices and our lives in a way that honors God, even when that challenges us.

In *Psalm 69 - Rescued From Deep Waters*, David lifts up his voice, crying out, “Save me, O God!” His plea for help progresses to a prayer of celebration, where in Psalm 69:30, he says, “I will praise the name of God with a song, and will magnify Him with thanksgiving.” We should not be afraid to cry out when we need help, but we also should call out our thanks.

**Jessica Johanningmeier**

## December 23

Filled with Wonder

With wonder and awe, we welcome those whom God has placed in our lives. Luke 1: 57-66

“I WONDER: Where did you see God in this story?” This is one of six questions on the “Wondercube” we use each week in our virtual Sunday school program. After we read the day’s Bible story, we take time to Wonder. I invite children to pause the video so they may use their Wondercube to ask these questions with their family. Then, I roll the cube and answer one for anyone that wants to “stick with me.”

So how would I answer this WONDER question for our verses today? Like the neighbors, I see God working through the miraculous and surprising events (birth of a son to very old parents, breaking of custom to name him John as the angel instructed, and the sudden return of Zechariah’s ability to speak). The neighbors were filled with awe and carefully considered what God had planned for this child.

Still, my take away goes a step further. I see God inviting us to wonder. And not just about the child that would prepare the way for Jesus, but about everything and all the people God has put as blessings in our lives.

This “invitation to wonder” is what our Celebrate Wonder curriculum is all about. Experiencing it with the children each week has been a blessing that has “filled me with wonder”, helped explore my faith, and reminded me that God is always with me. The natural sense of curiosity and use of imagination we see in children, is a gift from God. As adults, we still possess this gift, we may just need to be more intentional.

I encourage you to join us and WONDER about the Christmas story.

What part of the Christmas story do you like the best? Who would you want to be in the story? What brings you joy? If you were a shepherd, would you have been afraid, what would you have done? How is God asking you to be creative to keep the joy and wonder in this year’s most unusual Christmas season? Who has God put in your life to bless you this season? As I say at the end of each Wondercube activity – “I wonder what you wondered!” May you be filled with wonder and blessings, knowing our God is with you.

All their neighbors were filled with awe, and everyone throughout the Judean highlands talked about what had happened. All who heard about this considered it carefully. They said, “What then will this child be?” Indeed, the Lord’s power was with him. Luke 1: 65-66

**Brittany Booth**

## December 24

*“By the tender mercies of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.” – Lk. 1: 78-79*

I have been lighting candles around the house these past few weeks. Part of it is that, with moving out of daylight-savings time and losing an hour of daylight in the evening, I viscerally feel the darkness. Also, with the temperatures descending, the dancing flames calm and comfort me, and bring a sense of peacefulness to my soul.

In one of the readings for this second week of Advent, we have the song of Zechariah. (He was father of John the Baptist, husband of Elizabeth who was Mary’s cousin—Mary being the mother of Jesus. Whew.) Zechariah, a priest, had become mute after a visit by a heavenly messenger who told him he and his wife would have a son. His first spoken words after the birth of John and the restoration of speech include these: “By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

Isn’t that our hope? That whatever bad thing is occurring now won’t last forever. That, in this season where celebrations look very different as we adjust to the restrictions of a world in the grip of a pandemic, that the fog that obscures our vision of the future will be dissolved by the light of hope. That the freezing darkness and death that seem so near—especially, for many, this year—will begin to melt from the warmth of peace.

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## December 24

It is Christmas Eve, and we celebrate the coming of Christ. Jesus was sent to earth as Emmanuel: “God-with-us”, wrapped in humanity to show us God -with-skin-on, and God’s love for us. We are reminded that the Christ child came to earth to give light, and to guide us on a path toward peace.

And so we light candles as a testament to the light of the world that is Christ, and as a reminder that we, too, carry that very light out into a world of darkness. So we sing and pray, give tokens of our love, and know, in the tender mercies of God, that the Light that is Christ will guide us, strengthen us, comfort us, and bring us peace.

O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie;  
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep  
the silent stars go by.  
Yet in thy dark street shineth the everlasting light;  
The hopes and fears of all the years  
are met in thee tonight.

O Holy One, on this sacred night, let us know that you are with us – loving us, leading and guiding us by the light that is your Son Jesus Christ. We give thanks for him coming to us as Emmanuel, showing us who you are and your great love for the world by Christ’s life, death, and resurrection. May we sing with the angels “Gloria in excelsis Deo”. And may we celebrate the birth of your Son with hearts that are filled with praise. Amen.

**Pastor Terra Amundson**

## December 25

*15 When the angels returned to heaven, the shepherds said to each other, "Let's go right now to Bethlehem and see what's happened. Let's confirm what the Lord has revealed to us." 16 They went quickly and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in the manger. 17 When they saw this, they reported what they had been told about this child. 18 Everyone who heard it was amazed at what the shepherds told them. 19 Mary committed these things to memory and considered them carefully. 20 The shepherds returned home, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen. Everything happened just as they had been told. – Luke 2:15-20*

The shepherds were simply minding their own business, caring for the flocks that were entrusted to them through the dark of night. They were a motley crew, among the marginalized of their community. So imagine their surprise when in the midst of a typical, boring, utterly routine night they were visited by an angel, who first reassured them, then told them that the Savior who had been prophesied for centuries was flannelly here, born in Bethlehem, no less! And, as if adding an exclamation point to the whole scene, the heavenly messenger was joined by a chorus of angels singing praise to God and sharing a message of peace.

→ continued to next page



## **December 25**

I can imagine the shepherds hurrying the sheep as quickly as they could as they made their way to the stable to see for themselves what they had been told had happened. Then, with the great news confirmed, they reported to anyone they met what they had seen, praising God. Their lives had been transformed, and they could not contain it.

Friends, we, too, are called to share the good news of what we have seen. We, like the shepherds of old, are also sent to share the good news of Christ's birth by our words and by our actions. In the words of the hymn writer we here:

Down in a lowly manger the humble Christ was born,  
And God sent us salvation that blessed Christmas morn.  
Go, tell it on the mountain, over the hills and everywhere;  
Go, tell it on the mountain, that Jesus Christ is born.  
- John W. Work, Jr., #251 UMH

**May your Christmas be blessed!**

Loving God, we celebrate this Christmas day. May we, like the shepherds, be so filled with the joy of your birth that we cannot contain it, but share it with a world longing for good news. Amen.

**Pastor Terra Amundson**





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