



ADVENT

DEVOTIONAL 2022

WHITE MEMORIAL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH ADVENT DEVOTIONAL 2022

We are grateful to members of our church family who took time to reflect and write about passages from the Bible this Advent season. We hope their words will nourish, transform and inspire your faith as we move toward Christmas.

GOD PREPARES FOR US

By Lillian Poole

Matthew 24:36-44

Today, we begin the season of Advent by lighting the candle of HOPE on the Advent wreath in our worship services.

On the church calendar, Advent is a time of preparation for the celebration of the birth of Jesus. It is also a time of preparation for the return of Jesus. How do we prepare for both ... at the same time?

We have December 25 on our calendars. It is a date we know well, in the church and in our culture. We get into our routines of celebrating Jesus' birth at home and at church amid the "Christmas chaos" that often surrounds us. What is the date of Jesus' return? There is no date on the calendar, but there is plenty of speculation about it. However, Jesus tells his disciples then and now "to keep watch because you do not know on what day your Lord will come" and "to be ready" (Matthew 24:42,44).

**Did you know that God is preparing for us...
as we prepare for Jesus' birth and for Jesus' return?**

"No eye has seen,
no ear has heard,
no mind has conceived—
the things **God has prepared for those who love him.**"
- Corinthians 2:9, quoted from Isaiah 64:4

What has God prepared for us to receive during this Advent season? Perhaps new insights or experiences of HOPE, PEACE, JOY and LOVE. Perhaps God's forgiveness, or grace, or wisdom, or comfort, or provision... or freedom from the burdens we carry. It will be different for each of us, as we are in different places in our lives, and God meets us where we are.

How are we preparing to celebrate Jesus' birth and Jesus' return? Perhaps by reading and pondering God's Word, praying, worshiping together, loving and serving others, being thankful.... What's your plan? What's my plan?

Gracious and Loving God, thank You for all You have prepared for us during this Advent season. Help us be intentional, watchful and ready as we prepare our hearts, minds and souls to celebrate Jesus' birth and His return. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

PAUSE AND LISTEN

By Melinda Fox

Isaiah 2:1-5

Isaiah 2:1-5 is proclaiming the glory of God's Word from the highest mountain tops. The people are streaming to hear God's message so they can learn to "walk in God's paths." God is promising to settle the disputes of the nations; they can trust God to judge the nations in conflict.

There will be no more need for swords and spears to use as weapons. "He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; he breaks the bow and shatters the spear; he burns the shields with fire" (Psalm 46:9). Weapons will be turned into tools for tending the earth and nurturing life.

Isaiah calls the people, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord" (Isaiah 2:3). God will teach us his ways. There is an Advent call to us: can we pause in our busy schedules and listen to God's call, God's promise of a savior?

"Come, let's walk by the Lord's light."

- Isaiah 2:5

Heavenly God, You are our hope and salvation. Still our hearts and minds this Advent Season. May we follow your Light on our journey to the Christ Child. Amen.

MAKE STRAIGHT A HIGHWAY

By Penny Carlo

Isaiah 40:1-11

For many years as December arrived, I would start to listen to Handel's *Messiah* sung by the Mormon Tabernacle Choir. I would listen and enthusiastically join in with the choir throughout each December. As I read Isaiah 40:1-11, I am taken back to the many times I belted out "make straight a highway...the rough ground shall become level" and imagined the way for the Lord's arrival being made straight.

However in Isaiah this call is preceded by God's command for his covenant people to be comforted while Jerusalem falls and the exile to Babylon proceeds. God appears to be reestablishing his relationship with His people, wanting them to be comforted and helped. God's grace is present. His forgiveness given.

And then came the call to prepare the way for the Lord. Remove all obstacles and do not be distracted. Keep the faith. We are reminded that we are mortal; however, God's word is constant and forever.

Isaiah calls for God's people to proclaim loudly the good news. God is with them. God is powerful. He will manage the enemy; he will reward those who follow him.

Personally I have always felt safe and comforted by the image of "shepherd." It is the ultimate in "having your back!" In verses 9-11, Isaiah tells us God, our shepherd, cares for us, hugs us as he gathers us in his arms and desires to nourish us with all that is good for us. Isaiah's message of God's constancy, forgiveness, comfort and love is sent to us all and can serve us each day.

This Advent season may God lead us down our highway to joyfully re-invite our Savior into our lives at the celebration of his life.

WHERE IS GOD?

By David Kim

Isaiah 57:14-19

When I was young, my mother would read from a children's Bible to me. Every time I was drawn to the pictures on the page. I was curious about where God was in the pictures, but my search was always disappointing because I found everything but God. One night, I unknowingly asked my mother a theological question: "Where is God?" She pointed up, saying, "God is in heaven, but God's Spirit is within us." This was too abstract for a ten-year-old boy to grasp. All I could feel was ice cream sitting in my little tummy—her answer only provided confusion. About twenty years later, I am asked the same question by patients I meet as a hospital chaplain. "Where is God?" Often the presence of God seems far away, especially when the weight of our lives seems unbearable.

In this passage, God states, "I live in a high and holy place, but also with the one who is contrite and lowly in spirit." I nostalgically remembered my mother's answer, and yet the childlike confusion remained. How can a God in the high heavens also dwell among people below on earth? As Augustine puts it, "You were more inward to me than my most inward part; and higher than my highest." Isaiah teaches us that God's capacity to be "higher than my highest" means God can be "more inward than my most inward part."

The word *contrite* describes the state of those who have their spirits crushed by someone or something stronger. If the God of the most high promises to dwell even with the contrite, then God can meet us wherever we are in this Advent season—this season of longing, of searching for God in this heavy world. Have we found where God is in our lives, or does God still seem too far from us?

One evening, as my mother read to me, she pointed to the sorrowful back of a man weeping outside the tomb of his friend Lazarus. She told me, "Here is God." In this world, Jesus meets many who mourn as he did. He wipes the tears of those whose spirits are crushed by the weight of this life. The same Jesus from my childhood Bible is turning to us now, the people of waiting hope, to dwell with us—even when our Advent is filled with life's sorrow and hardship.

God with us—Emmanuel.

A PEOPLE PREPARED FOR THE LORD

By Matthew Brookby

Luke 1:5-25

At this time of year, there is so much to prepare for: cooking and travel and out-of-town guests; school parties and church pageants; and everything that goes with trying to pull together the “Best Christmas Ever” at home. There is a lot to prepare for indeed.

Thankfully, during such a busy time, Advent gives us the gift of preparing for Jesus’ arrival in a thoughtful and measured way. But I find myself asking two questions: (1) Are we giving ourselves the time and space to truly receive the gift of Advent? and (2) Which arrival of Jesus are we preparing for?

At Christmastime, what most often comes to mind when we think of the arrival of Jesus is his coming to Earth as a newborn baby. After all, so much of the imagery we see and the songs we hear during Advent center on the newborn Christ. This is great, of course, and the first coming of Christ—to dwell on Earth with man—is a central part of God’s love story for us all. This deserves to be celebrated and studied as we do. But what about the second coming?

Honestly, I worry that I am preparing much more for what is under my tree or my Instagram post of the kids singing “Away in a Manger,” than I am preparing for meeting, literally in-person, Christ. I’d venture to say that if we really want to slow down and receive the gift of Advent, we should prepare for the second coming of Christ—whether that is here on Earth or when we meet him in Heaven. What are we each doing to prepare for when we actually, literally, meet Jesus face-to-face?

Fittingly, the Gospel of Luke opens with the foretelling of another miraculous birth, that of John the Baptist. In his time, John the Baptist prepared the way for the arrival of Jesus, the true Messiah, through his prophecies and baptisms in the Jordan River. Luke 1:17, referring to John the Baptist, says: “And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

My prayer for myself and for you all is that we are preparing for all the good things this Advent season, which includes all the festivities, but that we don’t miss the perfect thing to prepare for: dwelling with Christ in Heaven.

FAITH AND REASSURANCE IN A TIME OF HOSTILITY AND UNCERTAINTY

By Don and Betsy Thompson

1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

First Thessalonians is generally regarded as either the earliest or second earliest (after Galatians) letter from the apostle Paul to the Christian congregations he (with Timothy and Silas) had established during his missionary journeys. Thessalonica was a major port city of about 200,000 people in Macedonia. It was cosmopolitan and included Greeks, Romans, Jews and people from throughout the known world. In 50 AD, Jewish Christians were rejected by other Jews; Gentile Christians were sometimes viewed as less worthy. Christians were outside Roman law that made Caesar Lord; and the practices of Christians made them outsiders within the broader culture.

Paul tells us that he has heard great news regarding the church in Thessalonica from throughout the region (1 Thess 1:6-7). Nevertheless, at a time before the written Gospels have emerged, Paul is worried about them due to the persecutions they are facing. He sent Timothy to Thessalonica to lift them up and reinforce the message of Christ's love and salvation. Timothy has returned to Paul with good news about their faith and love (1 Thess 3:6), and Paul is writing to praise them for upholding their faith and to encourage them to be confident in the promise of salvation.

Paul and the apostles are wholly dedicated to spreading the good news about Jesus to the world, but they face the same type of persecution and resistance from the establishment and people that surround them that the new church in Thessalonica faces. It is striking that Paul is so moved by the love and faith of the Thessalonian church that he says,

“How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have in the presence of our God because of you?”

- 1 Thess 3:9 (NIV)

Thus, it is extremely heartening for Paul to learn that the church he has planted is taking the gospel message to heart. The church in Thessalonica has become “our glory and joy” (1 Thess 2:20).

Today is a time of divisions among different Christian denominations, different races and ethnicities, within a culture that seems increasingly hostile to people of faith. It is easy to take our own ministers, staff and our brothers and sisters in Christ for granted. Like the Thessalonians, may we exhibit the joy of Christ's salvation to those around us.

THE PATIENCE OF GOD

By Kurt Gilliland

2 Peter 3:8-15a

As we await the celebration of the birth of Christ in this season of Advent (Latin, *adventus*, “coming”), 2 Peter 3:8-15a describes what seems to be a delay to us but what is actually patience to God. Our sense of time and God’s sense of time are different. The passage notes that “with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day” (a reference to Psalm 90:4). During this period of suspense, we may possibly even wonder if it is worth the wait and what we should be doing in the meantime.

Carefully placed in the second week of Advent, this text also encourages us to expand our sense of waiting additionally to include not only our personal welcoming of Christ in our hearts but also the Second Coming of Christ. The scripture contains suggestions of salvation as we consider God’s power, patience, and graciousness and as we wait and live faithfully with holiness and godliness. We strive to understand the promises of Christ’s Second Coming and are reminded of a day of judgment and destruction that will occur one day... but after a period of repentance with a promise that all will be saved. During this time of waiting, we accept God’s grace-filled invitation to be hopeful, to resist the temptation to rush, and to welcome the good news.

We continue to compare God’s patience with our sense of hurriedness, and we continue to try to understand this difference. As Advent progresses and as the celebration of Christ’s birth approaches in the short term, we welcome Christ in our hearts and anticipate the Second Coming of Christ.

PREPARE YE THE WAY OF THE LORD

By Ray Watson

Matthew 3:1-12

A s someone who was in high school in the 1970s, my initial thought when I hear this title is the opening song to the musical *Godspell*, which is based on the Gospel of Matthew. I imagine John the Baptist blowing a horn, blowing a whistle, etc. then singing without musical accompaniment “Pre-e-e-pare Ye the Way of the Lord” four times as people pass by doing their normal activities. Gradually a small group hear John’s call and follow him and are baptized. *Godspell* ends with a combination of two songs sung together “Long Live God” and “Prepare Ye.”

Preparation comes in many forms, usually preparation for a test, a meeting, a party, a game or some other type of short-term activity. Advent preparation is a different form of preparation. Former WMPC Pastor Art Ross would talk about “human *beings*” versus “human *doings*.” Advent preparation is about *being*, not doing. Doing is easier – shopping lists completed, assignments of who brings what to the group dinner, which events get attended, who gets visited, etc. Being means slowing down, less doing, more reflections on various aspects of life, relationships, health, and the popular “work-life balance” debate. Reflection also means time spent on those who are not gathered, either through death or by separations and distances that involve more than just miles.

Advent preparation requires that we, as Psalm 46:10 says, “Be still, and know that I am God!” Advent preparation cannot be checked off the list and on to the next item. Advent preparation involves wondering what it means, individually and as a congregation, that the “Kingdom of God has come near.” What does it mean to live here and now in the Kingdom of God not just as if it were some future event?

WE NEED A HERO

By DeLana Anderson

Isaiah 12:2-6

“I need a hero. He’s gotta be sure, and it’s gotta be soon, and he’s gotta be larger than life.” I’m not sure why I read Isaiah 12:2-6 and a Bonnie Tyler song comes to mind. We like our heroes to be strong, to swoop in and save the day, that is why Marvel and superhero movies are so popular. A vulnerable infant born in a manger is not what was expected to save humankind, but that is indeed what happens.

Not unlike the people of Judah, our world can be scary, and we face uncertainties. We turn on the news and hear of gun violence in schools and even here in our own beloved city. We know and love people who are dealing with illness, with loss, and we pray for them but feel helpless. We take food to food banks, we support causes that hope to eliminate homelessness, but sometimes it seems it will never all be done. However, here in Isaiah we are told, we are not alone. God is our salvation. Trust and do not be afraid, because God is with us. He comforts us and shows up in the most unexpected ways. Whether it is the volunteer at the food bank, the friend that listens and gives us hope, the parents who stand up against gun violence, God is showing up on our behalf.

I think of a night I was driving home from Roanoke, VA. My flight, along with all other flights on the East coast had been grounded due to fog. I decided to rent a car and drive home because I was anxious to make it back to my family. It was late, I did not have GPS and my phone was almost dead. I was anxious and relying on my very poor sense of direction, I prayed. I must have seen 10 shooting stars that cold dark night. God was with me. When these moments happen, you can just feel it and, yes, we want to sing God’s praises. We are a people who choose to trust God. As we light the Advent candles each week, we know our hero is coming. He comes into the world humble and vulnerable. His very existence angers those in power. It doesn’t matter, he comes anyway, and, yes, the infant is larger than this life.

While we wait for the birth, let us continue to trust that it will happen. Let us sing “Joy to the World” loudly on Christmas Eve. Let us exalt the Christ Child. Let us sing our praises for the birth that changes the world.

ACT ON JOY

By Karl Rectanus

Zephaniah 3:14-20

The Book of Zephaniah speaks vigorously about the day of the Lord – a time of judgment and of restoration – but in this passage, he bridges a path from one's own personal joy to that warm feeling we often idealize during the holiday season, a shared reconciliation around the world.

First, we are encouraged to unashamedly and loudly pronounce our joy:

“Sing, Daughter Zion;
shout aloud, Israel!
Be glad and rejoice with all your heart,
Daughter Jerusalem!”

We are called to action – first through giving our joy a voice – and we know action is more powerful than a mere thought or feeling. By announcing our happiness, we both share that joy with others, and we amplify our own joy. Try it today... whether by yourself, or by sharing with someone you see, speak out loud any joy you feel today.

The verse goes on to reinforce that we should take action (“don’t let your hands hang limp”), just as our God (“a Mighty Warrior”) takes action on our behalf. We should not fear, but we should sing these songs and do these acts with the confidence and belief that our joy is not singular, nor is it felt in spite of others, but that it is and will be shared. That the gifts of our God are shared across nations, across the oppressed and shamed, and we will share in the restorative power of the Lord together.

Within a few verses, we are encouraged to not only sing loudly of our own happiness, but act on it, and feel confident that all of God’s people will share in that joy.

How blessed are we to feel joy, and to act on that joy today? As God does, we must first say it and then actively share it with others, regardless of their circumstance, situation or background.

STAY ALERT!

By Diane Britt

Mark 13:24-37

With both of my children involved in musical theatre, I self-identify as a “Drama Mama.” As I write this devotion, I am anxiously awaiting a cast list to be posted after my youngest child’s audition for the school play. I’m sure we’ve all been there— waiting for the tryout list, the job offer, the test results. While this situation is out of my hands, I’m still hopeful, and I am refreshing the theatre website A LOT.

Jesus’ apocalyptic teaching from Mark 13 is rather depressing as a whole, but today’s passage from verses 24-37 offers us some light. While the world may seem in chaos, we are still called to be hopeful and to stay alert. This is especially true during the waiting season of Advent when it is so easy to get caught up in the cards, parties and gifts, yet so hard to focus on the good news that Christ is coming.

In addition to “Beware, keep alert,” the NRSV version of verse 33 includes a footnote that indicates “other ancient authorities add ‘and pray.’” With that extra directive, I feel like today’s verses are calling us to action during our period of watchfulness. Not only should we eagerly await Christ’s coming, but we can help enact God’s Kingdom in the here and now. Eternal life doesn’t just have to be some future glimmer of hope—I think God wants us to experience God’s presence now and to share that peace with the world around us. Couldn’t we all use a little light in the midst of today’s news headlines and busyness?

More than just refreshing a web page, our actions of sharing Jesus’ compassion and God’s unconditional love can help us and those around us remember that there is still hope in the world.

Eternal God, during this season of Advent, help us to feel your presence as we await the Prince of Peace. Open our eyes to ways that we can contribute to your kingdom on earth. Amen.

LIVING IN UNITY AND HARMONY AS GOD'S HUMAN FAMILY

By Karen Fox

Romans 15:4-13

Following his encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus, his conversion and spiritual transformation, the apostle Paul traveled extensively as instructed to proclaim the Gospel to all nations and peoples, Jews and non-Jews (Gentiles) alike. Paul believed that to live according to the "Way" of Jesus, one must live by the Law of the Spirit, which is love for God and love for each other, especially concerned with care for the poor and oppressed, to bring about justice, peace and joy for all. In chapter 8 of his epistle to the Romans, where also is found the mantra we affirm, "In life and in death we belong to God," Paul writes of the hope of salvation for the children of God. Here in chapter 15, he references passages of Old Testament scripture that show from the beginning of creation how God has been instructing and encouraging all to live in hope that yields all of humanity joined as one in peace.

May we in this season of Advent welcome one another as Christ welcomed all. In the spirit of Paul may we joyfully reach out to all whom we encounter, encourage hope, and strengthen belief through the power of the Holy Spirit. May we see and respect all people as beloved children of God. May we accept and live in unity and harmony as God's human family, abounding in HOPE, loving and serving one another as Jesus taught, lifting our voices as one, praising, glorifying and thanking God for the gift of grace in Jesus Christ.

IN ALL CIRCUMSTANCES

By Tricia Willoughby

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

As I studied this passage, three verses began to guide my reflection: “rejoice always, pray constantly, give thanks in all circumstances for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”

During the Advent season, it is easy to rejoice and pray and give thanks in the anticipation of this joyful time. But wait—the scripture says rejoice *always*, pray constantly and give thanks in all circumstances. That is a much harder assignment. In our human understanding, some days it seems like there are few reasons to rejoice. There are people dear to us who are sick, or grieving, or out of work or facing other adversity. Yet the scripture tells us to rejoice always. And prayers are easier when we are communicating our gratitude to God for our many blessings... but what about praying when we are struggling? Giving thanks is easy some days... but when we feel hopeless in our circumstances or events in the world, gratitude comes less easily.

Rejoicing, prayer and gratitude can be hard sometimes because we only understand God in a limited human way. We know and trust that God always provides for us. In spite of all the hurrying and rushing of daily life, we must find times to pause, to remind ourselves that God is steadfast in helping us do His will in the world—whether we understand it or not. And in those quiet times, we constantly find many reasons to rejoice and pray and give thanks.

As we consider this scripture and light the candles of Advent, I am reminded of a poem written by theologian Howard Thurman:

*“I will light candles this Christmas,
Candles of joy despite all the sadness,
Candles of hope where despair keeps watch,
Candles of courage for fears ever present,
Candles of love to inspire all my living
Candles that will burn all year long.”*

WAIT WITH PATIENCE

By Carolyn Younger

James 5:7-10

Don't you think that the phrase "be patient" is certainly relevant to us today? My own patience seems to be in short supply these days. I grew up with "snail-mail" but now I get impatient if an email takes more than a few seconds. When I need something and place an order for it, I expect it to be delivered by the next day, if not within a few hours time. I expect "Siri" to answer my questions immediately if not sooner. I want it and I want it now!

What is it to be patient? To be patient allows us to live a life of deferred gratification. And it does seem to be in short supply. In this chapter, James is addressing his 1st century Christian readers who are suffering under extreme oppression and persecution. He tells them to be patient and uses the example of a farmer who must have patience as he waits for his land to produce crops. For a farmer, the circumstances regarding the weather, the rain or the economy are uncontrollable. The farmer has no guarantees. But, he hopes, he plants, he waits in expectation. Why? Because he has learned to trust in the reliability of God to supply the needs for his crops. Patience, kindness, gentleness, and other fruits of the Holy Spirit could mature in our own lives if we would take the time (patience) to cultivate them.

To read these verses in the season of Advent is to take the time to pause, reflect and recognize where our lives are unprepared to simply wait to welcome Christ anew. If Christ can come once, teach us how to live, be crucified, resurrected, then ascended, Christ can surely come again. Are we ready for him? During this season of Advent, let's prepare to wait and do so patiently through prayers, words of encouragement and acts of kindness.

GREATER THAN OUR EXPECTATIONS

By Brian Mock

Matthew 11:2-11

So what exactly is going through John's head when he requests his disciples to ask Jesus if he is the Messiah? Is this the same John that was told by God "to make ready a people prepared for the Lord" (Luke 1:17) and then later baptize Jesus? It is indeed. At this time in John's life, he has been imprisoned and we know he will later be put to death by Herod. Not a good situation. Could it be possible that like many Jews, John the Baptist had expectations of a different kind of Messiah? One that would deliver a worldly solution to the problem? Enter mighty Jesus the Warrior who will perish all enemies of Israel – including Herod.

We have the benefit of knowing how the events unfolded during Jesus' time on earth – John did not. How is John to know God's plan and in the meantime not insert his own narrative? We know Jesus was not put here to solve worldly problems with worldly solutions but to bring the Kingdom of Heaven to live in us. Does John's misplaced expectation diminish Jesus' regard for him? Absolutely not. Jesus proclaims, "I say to you, among those born of women there has been none greater than John the Baptist."

As I reflect on this passage it helps me understand that even the mightiest of us cannot resist seeing God as we want to and letting our expectations take hold. After all – we are wonderfully human and with that we're given two incredible gifts (1) the holy spirit that lives within us and (2) free will. I pray that God will give us grace and peace when his plans deviate from our worldly vision and understanding.

FROM TEARS TO JOY

By Liz McKee

Psalm 126

Do great things come to us without tears? Of course, they do. However, it is often through our tears that we can see the path God has chosen for us. When you think about it, without the sorrow of Christ's crucifixion, we would not experience the joy of the resurrection. When I think of the Jews returning to Jerusalem following their long exile in Babylon, it reminds me that even in hard times, brighter days are coming. If we did not experience times of sorrow, would moments of joy be as meaningful? Joy is mentioned three times in Psalm 126. Although I have never been held captive in a foreign land, I do not think it would make me joyful. I would feel scared, lonely, and hopeless – the opposite of joy.

While reading this Psalm, I asked myself two questions: Do my friends and neighbors know what God has done for me? Do I share the wonder of God's grace on a regular basis? Sadly, and admittedly, I do neither as often as I should. There is great joy in this season of Advent as we await the birth of Jesus. It is good to celebrate that joy. To those of you who are grieving or feel lonely or isolated, please remember that God sees you no matter where you are on the spectrum of happiness. Remember the love of God and allow it to give you joy and strength.

“They that sow with tears shall reap with songs of joy.”

- Psalm 126:5

ON EARTH AS IT IS IN HEAVEN

By Ryan Eves

Isaiah 11:1-10

For Advent each year, we wrap books for our girls to unwrap each night. Every night, a different tale of the joy and meaning of Christmas.

One of the books our girls love is *The Littlest Watchman*. It's a story of a young boy who's charged with watching the stump of Jesse (in this case a literal stump) to alert the people when the new growth appears.

The young boy isn't a fan of his job. His friends are shepherds, and he longs to do something that has more purpose than staring at an old stump. The story will be familiar as characters we know well make appearances as the boy watches the stump. Of course, the tale ends with a green shoot rising from the dead wood. The boy runs to tell his father and finds him with Mary, Joseph and the newborn Jesus, the long-awaited king.

Isaiah 11:1-10 describes a beautiful, peaceful kingdom where a child will lead the way. While the story of the watchmen and the stump can't be found in our holy scriptures, it demonstrates perfectly the way we can see the Kingdom of God through children's eyes.

It's a little bit boring at times and it's hard to understand all the deep mysteries of waiting.

*"Can we get to the presents already?"
"Why does Christmas take so long to come?"
"Do I have to get all dressed up for church?"*

As an adult (most of the time), I have trouble waiting for the peaceful kingdom to arrive. I long for conflict and strife to end. Sometimes I find myself staring at my Bible just wishing for a miracle.

And then I return to the beginning words of the 11th chapter of Isaiah. There's work to be done to bring God's peaceful kingdom to fruition on earth as it is in Heaven.

So, as we wait patiently or impatiently for the coming of Christ, may we ponder how we might act righteously towards the poor, build equity for the meek and speak truth to all the earth.

In God's unending grace and provision, Amen.

DROPPING KEYS

By Linda Robinson

Psalm 146:5-10

Psalm 146: 5-10 is packed with powerful images of a just and merciful God who models for us what our lives should represent. As the daughter of a judge, I am drawn to verse 7: "He upholds the cause of the oppressed and gives food to the hungry. The Lord sets prisoners free..."

After the death of my parents in 2015, a young lawyer in my south Mississippi hometown revealed that he had been given a copy of my father's 1951 closing argument in one of his first trials where he was appointed to represent a young black woman who shot a young white man. A portion reads as follows:

"We are patriotic people – proud of our past and to deny this Defendant the full measure of her rights and the complete protection of our constitution would bring dishonor to our flag, disrespect for the law, and desecration to the grave of every fighting man who has paid the supreme sacrifice to guarantee such rights even to this Defendant....Your Honor, this is your moment to decide whether to grow old stooped trying to stay on the level of people who want you to be one of them... or to stand erect and have them look up to you with respect for having known and followed the high road."

Such is our choice. God makes the decision clear. I keep the following poem from a 14th century Sufi poet named Hafiz on my classroom wall:

"The small man builds cages for everyone he knows, while the sage, who has to duck his head when the moon is low, keeps dropping keys all night long for the beautiful rowdy prisoners."

So this Advent, let us do justice, love mercy, walk humbly, and drop keys.

BLOOMING IN THE DESERT

By Nan Hannah

Isaiah 35:1-10

“**T**he desert and the parched land will be glad; the wilderness will rejoice and blossom. Like the crocus, it will burst into bloom.”
– Isaiah 35:1 (NIV)

In the Spring of 2013, I finally gave myself permission to travel and unplug from the world. My mother had moved into a memory care unit having held out until Dad finished his earthly journey, which included almost five years with dementia. I picked the “red rock” parks of western Colorado and southern Utah for a week in God’s creation to re-energize and prepare for Mom’s long, slow decline.

As I drove through and hiked around the high desert moonscapes, I became fascinated by the signs of life in the inhospitable lands. I have photograph after photograph of trees gaining a foothold in the tiniest crevices and growing towards the sun. I have photographs of flowers blooming in the desert.

As we travel through Advent and journey towards Bethlehem, I reflect upon that trip. As was promised in Isaiah 35:1, God sent his son to shine the light and fulfill the promise of love and life even in the harshest environments. In uncertain times such as those in which we live, be mindful and seek out those signs of God’s enduring love. It might be a flower or a tree in the most unlikely location.

GOOD NEWS!

By Wynn Dorsett

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

As in the time of the prophet Isaiah, we wait for good news in the midst of a troubled world. In Isaiah 61, the prophet proclaims the Lord's favor and promises a wonderful list of encouragements to his people who have suffered terribly through a time of exile.

This good news includes comfort to the broken-hearted, beauty instead of ashes, praise instead of despair, righteousness, justice, and salvation. The poetic language goes on to proclaim renewal, restoration, release, reward, rejoicing, replanting and resounding songs of praise.

Our Glory to God hymnal lists no less than 19 hymns that make reference to these themes in Isaiah 61 (see page 982 in the scriptural index).

In Luke 4:18, Jesus reiterates these promises from Isaiah as he announces his ministry of preaching and healing. Jesus proclaimed good news to the poor, freedom for prisoners, recovery of sight for the blind, release for the oppressed, and liberation from sin and its consequences.

Many of our Advent hymns echo these themes. One of my favorites is Hymn #82...

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

Good news indeed!

PEACE WHICH SURPASSES UNDERSTANDING

By Bill White

Philippians 4:4-7

This is one of my favorite passages and I reflect on it often, probably because it's my nature to be somewhat anxious at times. The last three years have given most if not all of us plenty to be anxious about. Paul was speaking to the people of Philippi but could have just as easily been speaking to us. His words were an aspiration to growing closer to God and to a greater maturity.

We often do not have answers for why things happen, and I have never heard a perfect answer as to why bad things happen to good people. One thing that is true is that God is our rock and wants us to lean on Him. The roads we travel can be difficult; I think Paul understood this and is giving advice as to how we should navigate such roads. This vision transformed Paul's life and his hope is that it would transform the lives of others. Perhaps Paul is also saying that we need to remember how much God has done for us including the blessings that we have. If we keep that in mind and take our petitions to Him, we will have a Peace only He can provide.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

By Bill Jackson

Isaiah 7:10-16

The disciple Matthew wanted his fellow Jews to realize that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah so they would accept Him as Savior. When Matthew wrote his Gospel, he backed up virtually every statement by showing how Jesus fulfilled Old Testament prophecy. Matthew even remembered a reference to virgin birth in the writings of Isaiah.

Isaiah wrote that young king Ahaz, who ruled Judah 700 years before Christ, was in trouble. The nations of Israel and Syria were attacking Judah to force Ahaz to join them in battling the Assyrians. The young king was not interested in fighting anyone. The Lord sent the prophet Isaiah to reassure Ahaz that God could protect Judah. Pointing to an *almah* ("virgin" or "young woman"), Isaiah told Ahaz that by the time she had a son and that son knew right from wrong, Israel and Syria would no longer be a threat. Symbolizing God's protection, the child would be named Immanuel, "God with us." The message given by God to Isaiah came true; within a few years Israel and Syria were out of the picture.

The focus of this Isaiah scripture is the timing of removing threats to Judah, not the virginity of the woman who would give birth before long; *almah* can mean either "young woman" or "virgin." The Greek language has no such ambiguity, so when Matthew quoted the passage, he used the word for "virgin," appropriate in describing the virgin birth of Christ. But what about the name? Jesus is not named Immanuel.

Jesus is called by many names in the Bible. Isaiah also called Him, "Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." Jeremiah called Him "the Lord is our Righteousness." Names in the Bible have meaning, and Jesus fits all of those glorious names beautifully, but they were not His given name any more than "Immanuel."

Matthew was right to apply "Immanuel" to Jesus, for God truly became "with us" with the birth of Christ. Since Jesus came to be "with us," we have the assurance that God is with us all the time. Because of our faith and trust in Him, we ultimately can go be "with Him" in heavenly glory.

And what does the name *Jesus* mean? It is even better: "God saves." Praise be to God!

GREAT LIGHT

By Jim Van Hecke

Isaiah 9:2-7

“The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light...
For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given...
and his name will be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” (RSV)

In our current time of political and economic turmoil, when acrimony, mistrust, fear and hatred divide us and keep us from being “one nation under God” ... when our world seems so dark, let us remember that our present time is not dissimilar to the time of our text, when Isaiah forecast the birth of Jesus and proclaimed it as a “great light.”

It has been more than 2,700 years since Isaiah spoke and almost 2,000 since Jesus lived,

“but the world don’t seem much better today than when ‘E were crucified.”
- *The Sorrow of God* by G.A. Studdert Kennedy

But what was prophesied by Isaiah is still ours to claim today: that our hope for peace, justice and righteousness in our land and in our world can become a reality.

As we prepare during this season of Advent for the celebration of the birth of Jesus, it is our acting upon our belief that will bring us out of the darkness and into the “great light.” In the words of this hymn:

*“Come thou long expected Jesus
born to set thy people free;
from our fears and sins release us,
let us find our rest in Thee.”*

It is up to us. May it be so!

SONGS OF THE SEASON

By Jared Smith

Psalms 96

Music is a central component of how many of us experience the Christmas season. By the time the last bit of Halloween candy is unwrapped – and often a great deal earlier these days – sacred and secular holiday music permeates our public life, as artists from Bing Crosby to Mariah Carey conjure familiar feelings of anticipation and celebration as they sing and dream and wish.

Carols and hymns have the power to connect us, to tell stories that stick with us, to echo times gone by and herald days to come. They share words of love, hope, joy, and peace with tunes that allow those themes to make themselves at home within us, for at least a little while, as the sacred waiting of the advent season continues.

It is no wonder, then, that Psalm 96 compels us to sing, all of us, all the earth. This passage commands us to sing, that through our singing, we may tell of His salvation, declare His glory, worship Him in holy splendor – for He is coming. He is not yet here, but our song welcomes Him, creates space in our lives for Him, centers Him among the stories worth sharing. And our song joins us together: nations, peoples, heavens, earth, the sea and all that fills it, the field and everything in it. A holy catholic church, a communion of saints.

So, as the journey of advent approaches its destination at the manger, **sing**.

GOD CAN DO INCREDIBLE THINGS

By Patrick Miller

Sophomore, Broughton High School

Matthew 1:18-25

This is a super important passage that really shows what happened leading up to the birth of Jesus and how good God really is. Just to summarize, there was a virgin named Mary who was married to a man named Joseph. Joseph was planning to separate from her, but an angel appeared in his dream and told him that Mary will have a child named Jesus from the Holy Spirit. I looked at many different Bible translations, and they all convey the same message: Mary will give birth to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

We all have heard this story before because it is one of the most important parts of the Bible! Joseph was called in this passage by God's angel, and this shows that God can do incredible things. This can bring connections to our lives as well. Have you ever gotten a call or invitation from God that something will happen or to trust the process? God has a plan for us, and he is always with us.

Were there any parts that stuck out to you? For me, it was when the angel said that they shall name him Emmanuel which means "God is with us." Another part was in verse 21, where it was said that Jesus will save people from their sins. We all sin, and that is why Jesus died on the cross for us. All of us.

Now let me ask you, what do you think Joseph was thinking at this moment? Scared? Excited? How would you feel if you were in this situation?

Overall, these are great verses and I hope you got something out of them and remember this passage for it is a big one. As we reach Christmas and the season of Advent, we should always remember why we are celebrating it.

FAITH, FAMILY AND GOOD NEWS TO SHARE

By Wesley Jones

Hebrews 1:1-4

Good News for Modern Man, *The New Testament in Today's English Version!* That was the name of the first Bible given to me by my parents and the folks at Hester Baptist Church. My belief in God, Jesus and the life he led started early, as church was a big part of our family's life growing up in Oxford, NC. We really did not have an option of attending; it was just something we did. My parents grew up attending church regularly, two separate churches, and when they married and started our family, they made absolutely sure we were raised the same way. Daddy was a smart man as the decision of which church to attend was pretty simple.... we went to Hester as that is where Momma attended! They were relentless in keeping us exposed to the Word and the Good News that was available to us. I don't think that I really understood back then what any of it meant, but I knew they believed strongly. Their beliefs drove the potential for mine. I believed because they believed.

I became a Presbyterian when I married Brenda and we started attending White Memorial. A lesson learned from Daddy! We progressively became more involved and when Haley, Kelton and Lucas started showing up, we were all in. I started to hear the message more plainly. Faith in what you cannot see, grace, mercy, hope, forgiveness and love. I have learned so much about these things and still have so much more to learn. These concepts can certainly prove to be difficult at times, especially for an imperfect soul such as myself in an imperfect world. Our world can be quite troubling, but there is always beauty to be found and opportunities for spiritual growth. Beauty recently provided to our family occurred with the arrival of grandchildren Brooks, Lillian and Jasper!

Beauty and understanding of the Word are offered by Jesus for all; anyone can have them for the asking. Good News was offered through God speaking directly to us through the life, death and resurrection of his son Jesus, the ultimate messenger. We have all been made clean. May we remember this now during the Advent season and may we live our lives in a manner that truly reflects these ideals and freely offers them to others.

AND MARY SAID, “YES!”

By Flo Durway

Luke 1:26-38

The passage starts with an angel, an angel with a perplexing greeting, sent by God, to a nondescript, but betrothed maiden, “Rejoice, favored one.” Surprised and confused, Mary wondered about this strange greeting. Nothing in the scripture tells us that Mary was known for her devotion to God, her spiritual uniqueness, or her outstanding good deeds in the community. She even questions the angel after she hears the message that she is to conceive and bear a son, whom she is to name Jesus, and her son will be called Son of the Most High and will be put on a throne to rule without end! We, too, question God when life doesn’t go our way, but do we wish for unsolicited messages from God?

In George Bernard Shaw’s play, *Saint Joan*, Joan of Arc annoys the king when she tells him she hears God’s voice and he asks, “Why don’t the voices come to me? I am the king.” Joan responds, “They do come to you, but you do not hear them.” Mary heard the voice. Suppose God sent us a message! Would we hear it? More importantly, how would we respond to it? Mary shows no enthusiasm, but neither does she resist, as she says to the angel, “let it be with me as you have said.”

The lovely Advent hymn, “No Wind at the Window,” captures this passage in Luke and shows us in the last verse just how unbelievable the message is and how clear the response is:

*No payment was promised, no promises made
No wedding was dated, no blue print displayed
Yet Mary, consenting to what none could guess
Replied with conviction, “tell God I say yes.”*

As we reflect on Mary’s story, may we be alert to God’s voice and be willing to say, “YES!”

THE GOD OF HUMILITY

By Jeff Siker

Luke 2:1-7

In these few verses Luke begins by contrasting the stage of world power (Roman emperor and governor) with the backwater town of Bethlehem in occupied Palestine. But already in Luke 1 Mary has sung a song of praise to God highlighting her faith in the God who sides with the downtrodden rather than with the seemingly powerful. God is a God of reversal. She will give birth to Jesus in a lowly manger, yet he will grow to live into his mother's faith in this powerful God of humility. Jesus also will preach the good news of God's empowering presence among the poor and needy (Luke 4:16-30), fulfilling Isaiah's prophecy.

We often romanticize the story of Jesus' birth, partly because of our tendency to conflate Matthew's birth story with Luke's birth story. But the two stories have striking differences and make different points. While in Matthew we witness the birth of a royal king (at home!) in Bethlehem, in Luke we know the story of Mary giving birth in a manger, an animal stall, because there is "no room in the inn." While in Matthew the infant king receives royal gifts from the wise men, in Luke we find a stark contrast between the powerful and the lowly. How is it that even a woman giving birth can find no grace, no accommodation, no mercy from those who have shelter? Instead, Mary is forced to give birth in the equivalent of a back alley. We tend to add gentle snow-flakes and the warmth of a bucolic scene with sheep and shepherds, both in our hymns and in art, all to make the retelling of the story more palatable. But in truth Jesus is born into a harsh and unforgiving world.

And yet, Luke's point is precisely that in coming among us, as one of us, God has chosen a birth of humility, which will lead to a ministry of empowering the lowly and preaching a gospel of challenging reversal. In turn this ministry will conclude with a shameful and scandalous death, only to find the greatest reversal yet to come in God's unexpected raising of Jesus from the dead to new life, a life that continues among us through the grace of God's Spirit.

GOD IS FAITHFUL

By Nathan Goettsch

Freshman, Enloe High School

John 1:1-14

Merry Christmas to everyone! On this Christmas day I invite you to look at John 1:1-14 with me. I believe that it is one of the strongest passages in the Bible. As we analyze this text one section really stands out:

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.

In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.” (NIV)

I invite you to take a second to think about these questions:

How does this passage provide hope?

What does this passage tell you about who God is?

What is the overall message?

For me I believe that this passage provides hope based on the fact that God was always there and that he will always be there, it is assuring in a way. That is also what I take away as the message, that God will always be there, that he will always be by our side. What this says about God for me is that he is devoted to us and cares about us more than anyone else could or does. I believe that we should be faithful to God just as he is faithful to us.

An exercise that might be interesting to try as you go about your day is to read different versions of this passage and think about the differences and if the meaning stays the same throughout multiple Bible translations.

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