

CELEBRATING

Advent

2023



Cover art by Jaxson Tyna (age 7)



CHRISTMAS UNDER THE STARS

CHRISTMAS STORY
FOR YOUNG FAMILIES AND YOUNG AT HEART

MUSIC PROVIDED BY OUR PALMS PRESCHOOLERS

Wednesday, December 13

5:30 - 6 pm

At the Courtyard.

Bring lawn chairs for the family!



Dear friends,

Who knows how long it took for the wisemen to take their trip to Bethlehem. Matthew tells us they came “from the east”, which I suppose is a way of saying that they came from a far away eastern country. From where, who knows? The Parthian Empire, the Tibetan Empire? Who knows? But they likely came from far away following the star that guided them west to Palestine and Bethlehem. And we can only imagine the many stops along the way to rest, to dream, to ask for direction. Bethlehem for them was the end of a journey and the beginning of another.

The Church grants each of us every year the gift of Advent. For the four Sundays before Christmas Day and the intervening weeks we set our sights toward Bethlehem and we take our journey. Some of us may feel far away, others of us feel closer at hand, but Advent points us toward Bethlehem and beckons us west.

The temptation is to skip the journey and instead parachute into the Bethlehem at the very last moment. Land for the egg nog, the carols, the gifts and then get out. But I suppose that would be missing the point. Christmas isn't the day, it's the journey. It's the pausing, resting, dreaming and the asking for directions. It's why we hope you will take advantage of this precious devotional. Many from our congregation have taken their own pause to reflect upon the Advent journey and the texts of Scripture. These reflections are offered to you for your daily stops along the way of your pilgrimage with every hope that you will arrive in Bethlehem with the very gift the child desires – a heart yearning for grace.

Advent is brief this year. Just three weeks. Maybe with fewer days we can travel with more intention. Keeping our eye on the road, and the star, and the hunger for good news.

See you along the way.

Grace and peace,

James McComell

The First Week of Advent

SUNDAY • DECEMBER 3

Scripture Lesson

1 THESSALONIANS 5:1-11

by Ruth & Rob Anderson; Artwork by Cathy Futral



Advent is a season to anticipate the rebirth of hope that comes with the birth of Christ, following the winter solstice. The First Epistle of Paul to the Thessalonians 5:1-11 reminds us that we are, and are meant to be, “children of light, ...and of the day: ... and not of the night, nor of the darkness.” It calls us also to “be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love; and for a helmet, the hope of salvation.” Let us approach the season in that spirit, confident that we are loved by God; that the Prince of Peace is coming; and that joy will follow in due course.

MONDAY • DECEMBER 4

Scripture Lesson

MATTHEW 21:1-11

by Beth Hill; Artwork by Benji Collins (age 4, Luke 1:1-25)



Advent is by far my favorite time of year. You could say I am kind of a Christmas freak. I can't wait to put all of my Christmas trees up and get my husband to put the lights on the palm trees in front of our house. I love hearing Christmas music played in stores, on the radio, and every possible corner of our house. When Hmingi asked me to write a devotional I was thrilled....until she gave me the scripture passage. "Wait a minute," I said to Hmingi, "I thought you wanted me write an Advent devotional!" Thus began my "research" into Matthew 21:1-11.

When Jesus comes into Jerusalem he rides a donkey to fulfill the prophecy that he was entering as a humble King of peace. Likewise, his mother Mary rode a donkey to Bethlehem further symbolizing to us that he was the Chosen one. Through the miracle of Christ's birth, we can find grace and peace. Our faith is renewed knowing that the prophecy of his resurrection will come.

Prayer: Thank you, God, for always being there for us. Give us grace to help us through our problems. Thank you for the hope that we find through your son, Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

TUESDAY • DECEMBER 5

Scripture Lesson

2 PETER 1:12-21

Devotion & Photograph by Cathie Lloyd



In Peter's second letter he reminds us that to be productive and effective servants of God, we must make an effort to add a very specific set of Christlike qualities alongside the faith we already have. These qualities include knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, brotherly kindness, and love. If we have these Christlike qualities and continue to grow in them, we are being effective and productive servants.

If we fall short we still remain God's children through our faith in Christ. But if we don't take on these traits we are wasting our knowledge of Jesus. We become ineffective and unproductive and can seem like unbelievers who are spiritually blind. If we fail to live up to the life we are called to, we can become forgetful about who we are in Christ.

Peter knows his readers are already aware of this, but intends to keep reminding them by stirring them up, so that they will continue to connect what they know in Christ with how they live.

Peter also reminds the reader that he was told by Jesus Himself that he would die. And yet, Jesus also allowed Peter to see the transfiguration: the moment when Jesus was revealed in His glory and the Father's voice declared Jesus as Son. Peter's eyewitness testimony to that event confirms all of the prophecies about the Messiah, including His return.

WEDNESDAY • DECEMBER 6

Scripture Lesson

2 PETER 3:1-10

by Anne Owens; Photograph by Dr. Hmingi Browne



“For with the Lord one day is as a thousand years and a thousand years as one day.”

Peter writes a second letter to the beloved believers as a reminder and assurance – the promised Day of the Lord will come. Be patient. Be diligent and persevere with steadfast faithfulness. Be prepared for tribulation and judgment. Remember the words of the prophets, the warnings and commandments of Christ which were passed along through the teachings of the apostles. In those days there will be mockers who fail to recall it was by the word of God the heavens and world were formed, and it was by His word, the earth was flooded with water.

Remember, beloved, we are called to stand by His promises, await for “... the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night.”

Ours is a myopic view of time and a limited understanding of the transcendental. Just one hour can seem an eternity for a child and likewise for us with our limited knowledge and faith. God is working according to His purpose of a new world in which righteousness dwells. “Come Lord Jesus, come”.

THURSDAY • DECEMBER 7

Scripture Lesson

MATTHEW 21:33-46

by Ginger Pavloff; Artwork by Hadley Steger (3rd grade)



The meaning of Advent to me is one of expectation and awaiting the arrival of something glorious and special. As a little girl the time it took for Christmas to arrive felt overwhelming. There was always the admonition of being good so you wouldn't get coal in your stocking. I never really knew what that meant nor did I ever know anyone who got coal for Christmas.

I grew up with a big extended family who could always manage to fuss at each other for one thing or another. Those issues seem to melt away as we got closer to Christmas. It was so special to select and wrap presents for one another. My one bachelor uncle put all his presents in a dresser drawer unwrapped. Christmas was a time when all quirks were forgiven and even found to be amusing

Going to church with my Nana, the matriarch, symbolized how being together and caring for each other was of primary importance.

FRIDAY • DECEMBER 8

Scripture Lesson

PSALM 102

by Don & Julie Schalekamp; Artwork by Larry Weaver



Throughout the Bible we see God's people suffering. Much of the time that suffering is a result of their disobedience to God's commandments. In Amos chapter 5 we also read of their suffering due to social injustice. During Israel's exile in Babylon, their suffering is lamented as is poignantly expressed in Psalm 102. However, in Jude, the writer urges his people to "keep themselves in God's love as they wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to bring them to eternal life." So it is during this season of Advent that we celebrate the fulfillment of God's promise in the birth of the Christ child for the redemption of our sins. What a joy we have in Jesus!

SATURDAY • DECEMBER 9

Scripture Lesson

JUDE 17-25

by Rev. Melvin Christian; Photograph courtesy of Unsplash (Thomas Koukas)



Sometimes, when I am discussing religious and theological issues with people who profess to be followers of Jesus Christ, it is not unusual for me to hear false doctrines. It is important to point out the difference between false doctrines and denominational disagreements. Different congregational groups see secondary issues in Scripture differently. These differences are not always due to false doctrine on anyone's part. False doctrine is that which opposes some fundamental truth, such as the deity of Christ, the virgin birth or the physical resurrection of Christ.

We live in a unique time in history, and the Book of Jude can help equip us with the challenges of false doctrines. Today's Christian must be on guard against false doctrines which can so easily deceive us if we are not well-versed in the Word. We need to know the Gospel and maintain a strong spiritual life. Authentic faith always reflects Christ-like behavior.

The Second Week of Advent

SUNDAY • DECEMBER 10

Scripture Lesson

LUKE 1:57-68

by Rev. Genevieve Beauchamp; Artwork by Cathy Futral



There was such rejoicing at the birth of John! God's great gift to Zechariah and Elizabeth, who was barren, was a joyful promise fulfilled by God. This unexpected birth was an answer to prayer, and we appreciate John's unique role in God's plan of redemption for humanity through God's own Son. The awe that these two new parents experienced, surrounded by their community, is for us to share as well today. When we delight in the miracle of new life, we also wonder in joyful anticipation what role this child will play in the great story of our world, trusting in God's gracious casting of characters in this beautiful, complicated, exciting, and wonderful life.

We remember today how precious life is, and we give thanks to God for the blessing of being a part of God's great plan for the world.

MONDAY • DECEMBER 11

Scripture Lesson

PSALM 122:6-9

by Dr. Will Browne; Photography courtesy of Google images



Pray for the peace of Jerusalem:

'May they prosper who love you.

Peace be within your walls,

and security within your towers.'

For the sake of my relatives and friends

I will say, 'Peace be within you.'

For the sake of the house of the Lord our God,

I will seek your good.

Yesterday, on the second Sunday of Advent, we lit the candle of peace and remember Jesus as our prince of peace. Psalm 122 called the people to pray for peace in Jerusalem back then. Now this Psalm calls us to pray for peace in our time. Jesus, our Prince of Peace, is still at work among us. Let us find ways to participate in peacemaking in homes, among friends, in neighborhoods, in the city, in the country and in the world. Let us pray for peace everywhere in the world.

TUESDAY • DECEMBER 12

Scripture Lesson

MATTHEW 22:34-46

by Al Jeffrey; Artwork by McKenna Budz (age 5)



This passage can be broken down to two parts; Matthew 22:34-40 “The Greatest Commandment and Matthew 22:41-46. Whose Son Is The Christ”? In Matt 22:34-40 this familiar passage is famously known as “The Great Commandment.” The Pharisees (religious leaders) ask an awesome question! “Which commandment in the law is the greatest”? Jesus answers right to the point. He says, “ Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” This is the first and greatest commandment. Jesus goes further: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” He not only provides the greatest commandment but he also provides the second greatest commandment as well! His response tells what is most important for the follower of God to do. LOVE GOD WITH EVERYTHING IN YOU! In verse 40 Jesus continues and tells us that all the law and the prophets hang on these two commandments. Wow - that is a powerful statement!

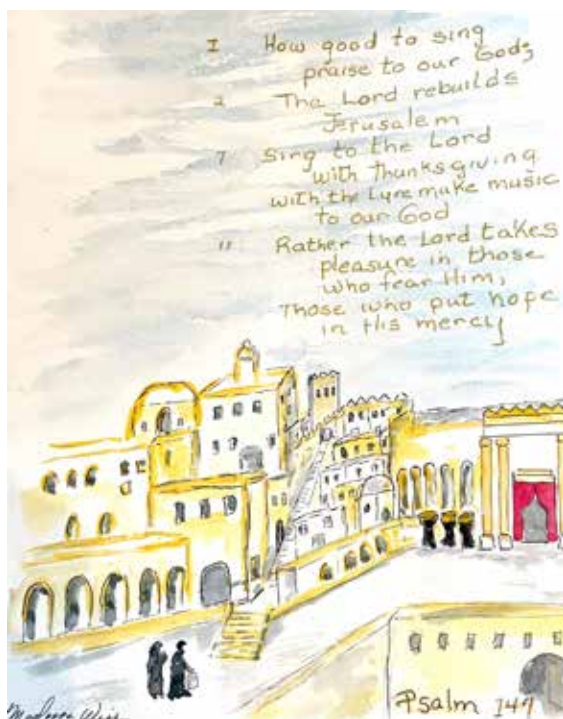
In Matt 22: 41-46- Jesus asks “What do you think about the Christ”? “Whose son is He”? Then Jesus fully explains the answer. To paraphrase - the Messiah would not be only a descendant of David but would also be the son of God, making him both David’s son and Lord. This is a fact the Pharisees and many others will not accept. As Christians and especially in the season of Advent, we recognize Christ divinity, accept it through faith and celebrate it. Jesus is our Lord and Savior. He says to love God with everything in you and to love your neighbor as yourself. These are the greatest commandments!

WEDNESDAY • DECEMBER 13

Scripture Lesson

PSALM:147:1-11

by Chuck & Dianne Corbett; Artwork by Madonna Weir



During this season of Advent we are reminded of the incomprehensible, steadfast love God has for us.

The things God asks from us are born from his love for us. Throughout the Psalms, God calls on us to sing praises. Some amazing benefits of singing include: longer life; lowered blood pressure; toning of facial muscles; increased empathy between cultures; lung development; bringing people together with sense of community; and boosting immunity.

I pray we sing hymns of this season with joy and thanks for God's never-ending love. How amazing to receive immediate blessings from complying with God's requests!

THURSDAY • DECEMBER 14

Scripture Lesson

PSALM 18:1-20; AMOS 9:1-10; REV. 2:8-17; MATTHEW 23:13-26

by Katherine Andersen; Artwork by Sylvia Batton (1st grade)



The four passages listed above describe different ways in which God relates to his creation. The passage in Psalms reassures us that God can come to our rescue when we are seeking his face. In the Book of Amos, God makes it clear that he has the power to destroy nations, including Israel.

In Revelation, God states that he knows where we live – where Satan has his throne. God knows that despite the fallen world we live in, he sees when we remain true to his name.

The passage in Matthew is a scathing description of how corrupt the politically correct can be. God more or less “undresses” the Pharisees, religious leaders of his time. He exposes their hypocrisy, giving specific, obvious examples of their sinful behavior.

We can humbly declare that our creator is multifaceted, who loves and disciplines us with incomparable wisdom.

FRIDAY • DECEMBER 15

Scripture Lesson

PSALM 130

by Rev. Sarah Soboleski; Photograph by Dr. Hmingi Browne



Advent is a season of waiting and preparation. As people waited for the Messiah, and as we wait on the Messiah's return, the psalmist reminds us we can wait in hope. Jesus has given us certain hope that our loving triune God is characterized, above all else, by unfailing love; that Jesus came and will come again is a testimony to this love. Psalm 130 is a succinct and powerful expression of the theme that is at the heart of scripture: the predicament of our sin and our utter dependence on divine grace. It is divine grace on which we can count, "for with the Lord there is steadfast love". So whatever we are waiting for, whatever forgiveness we are seeking, trust that as we wait...we can do so hopefully.

SATURDAY • DECEMBER 16

Scripture Lesson

MATTHEW 24:1-14; REVELATION 3:1-6

by Maxine Perry; Artwork by Austin Grewe (3rd grade)



During this season of Advent, let us reflect on the message from Revelation 3:1-6 (NIV): “To the angel of the church in Sardis write: These are the words of him who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead. Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have found your deeds unfinished in the sight of my God.”

In Advent, we are reminded of the need for spiritual awakening. Just as the church in Sardis was called to rouse from spiritual slumber, let us examine our lives and faith. It’s a time to rekindle our passion for Christ, strengthen our commitment, and live in a way that reflects His grace. As we await the birth of our Savior, may our hearts be awakened, and our lives transformed, so that we may shine brightly as lights in the darkness.

The Third Week of Advent

SUNDAY • DECEMBER 17

Scripture Lesson

PSALM 150

by Dick Thompson; Artwork by Cathy Futral



“The most glorious time of the year!” Yep, that is the Advent Season. That’s when God came to us in human form to teach us, by his example, how to love. When he arrived he could not speak and he trusted his earthly family to care for him. Thirty some years later he said, “Tend my sheep... and follow me!”

So now we know he loves us despite our shortcomings and for that we are forever grateful. This season the organ leads us in singing and the bells sound forth in our praise for the unexpected gift of “just a baby.”

MONDAY • DECEMBER 18

Scripture Lesson

JOHN 3:16-21

by Connor Peters; Artwork by Riley Deery (age 4)



Though God's light came into this world, we often lose sight of what this means for us and battle between living in light and darkness. God's light, Emmanuel, entered our world. Focusing on the light of God takes daily consciousness and intention. How have we been letting darkness into our lives lately? How have we been avoiding God's light in exchange for our own personal desires? As we await the celebration of God's light entering our world, how might we need to refocus our own lives in preparation?

TUESDAY • DECEMBER 19

Scripture Lesson

LUKE 1:1-25

by Faith & Bill Reynolds; Artwork by Faith Reynolds



The opening verses of Luke’s gospel describe the circumstances under which the priest Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth learned the good news that, at their advanced age, they were to become parents, and of the important work to be done by their son John (known to us as John the Baptist). That work included (v. 17, NIV): “And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.” His job would be to prepare the Jewish people for the coming of Christ but in the same spirit John’s message of repentance remains valid today.

During the coming holidays many of us will be the guests of friends or relatives while others will be the hosts. For those hosts, the days before the guests arrive will be days of preparation, certainly of lodging, food, and entertainment, but also of the anticipated companionship of loved ones. In like manner, John’s message is that we should get ready for the coming celebration of Christ’s arrival in human form over 2,100 years ago so that He will find us “a people prepared.”

WEDNESDAY • DECEMBER 20

Scripture Lesson

LUKE 1:26-38

by Dr. Will Browne; Artwork by Rogan Durrant (age 5)



I wonder who it was who talked with Mary and heard from her what happened during the visitation by the angel Gabriel? Only she and Gabriel were present. Someone heard Mary's account and shared it. Was it Luke? However it happened, it is grace and blessing to us.

This passage is all the more extraordinary as it reveals Mary's humility and her concurrence with what God calls her to do. In my reading she is not given a choice – she is told she will conceive and have a child who will be called “the Son of the Most High.” The beauty of the passage is that Mary accepts God's direction saying, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” She accepts and we receive our Messiah. Thanks be to God!

THURSDAY • DECEMBER 21

Scripture Lesson

LUKE 1:39-48 (48-56)

by Linda Getzen; Image courtesy of Google Images



Love ‘em or hate ‘em, “gender reveal” parties are a thing nowadays. The party is held to reveal the baby’s sex to the expectant parents’ family and friends and sometimes to the parents themselves. Prenatal technology furnishes the necessary information. A cake is cut – blue or pink inside? A balloon full of confetti is popped –blue or pink? There are countless gender reveal ideas on the internet for all types of parents-to-be. Pink fireworks, anyone?

When expecting Mary visited her even more expecting cousin Elizabeth, there was a reveal of the most magnificent sort. Wonder of wonders, Elizabeth’s baby (John the Baptist) leaped for joy in her womb at the sound of Mary’s voice. The Holy Spirit revealed to Elizabeth that Mary carried her Lord, the Son of God. No blue cake or confetti was necessary! Mary celebrated with Elizabeth and sang praises to God. Now THAT is a reveal!

FRIDAY • DECEMBER 22

Scripture Lesson

LUKE 1:57-66

by Rev. Laurie Haas; Artwork by Andi McClenathen (age 4)



God has granted an old barren woman the birth of a son and her mute husband the gift of speech. I am encouraged by the responses to these miracles. First, the community rejoices with Elizabeth. No one is judging or whispering behind her back. Elizabeth is overjoyed and the people in her village are genuinely happy for her. They rejoice with her!

After being mute for 9 months, the first thing Zechariah utters when he can speak again is praise to God. He does not curse from his loss of speech over these past months, nor is he bitter or resentful. He is overjoyed with the gifts of his son and his ability to speak again, so he offers doxology.

May we rejoice with those who rejoice and offer our praise to God as the first response for all the good in our lives! Praise God from whom all blessings flow.

SATURDAY • DECEMBER 23

Scripture Lesson

JEREMIAH 31:10-14

by Jackie Gomez; Artwork by Geneviev Stickley (4th grade)



As we journey through the Advent season, we must take pause and allow ourselves to contemplate the goodness of the Lord. This passage is a declaration of all that God has done for His people, “their life shall become like a watered garden, and they shall never languish again.” God wants us to be satisfied and to look only to Him to fulfill our deepest longings and desires. God is there to love us, protect us, guide us, and to fill us with His peace. “I will turn their mourning into joy; I will comfort them and give them gladness for sorrow.” As we look inward to ourselves, what goodness has God done for you? In what ways will you sing praises to God and give thanks for the countless ways that God has worked in your life? Even in our darkest moments, God is there with His abiding love, to see us through. May we receive the wonders and bounty of God’s great goodness, and may we “Hear the word of the Lord, O nations, and declare it in the coastlands far away.”

The Fourth Week of Advent

SUNDAY • DECEMBER 24

Scripture Lesson

ISAIAH 60:1-6

by Lesley Conzelman; Artwork by Cathy Futral



Isaiah wrote these words 700 years before Jesus' birth and yet they resonate with us today. We've made it to the eve of his birth, hopefully having taken some time to reflect on why this event is so important to our sense of faith. Jesus came to shine light into the darkness. His life on earth was given up for our sins. Give us enough grace to accept it for ourselves and for others. So, on this Christmas Eve, as we gather with friends and family to celebrate the birth of Christ, rejoice and be glad that the Light of the World is upon us. Thanks be to God. Amen.

MONDAY • DECEMBER 25

Scripture Lesson

I JOHN 4: 7-12

by Dr. Steve McConnell; Artwork by Geneviev Stickley (4th grade)



In the *Peanuts* version of the Christmas story Charlie Brown shouts out to a near empty auditorium his age-old question, “Isn’t there anyone who knows what Christmas is all about?” And it’s the wise man Linus who steps to center stage and tells about the shepherds hearing the good news from the angel – “that unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior which is Christ the Lord.” It’s a scene that still gets me.

If there could have been a follow up monologue to Linus’s I would vote for these six precious verses from I John. “In this,” John writes, “the love of God was made manifest among us that God sent his only Son into the world that we might live through him.” And how do we live through him? By loving like him. We love because God is love.

And it all starts at Christmas. It all starts with that baby. And maybe today in some new way it will start with you. Who will you love this day, this year, in a new way? They say the wise men left Bethlehem and went home by another way. Maybe for you and me the new way from Bethlehem is the way of love. Merry Christmas!

NOTES

Join us this
Christmas



Christmas Beach Service

12/23 @ 5 pm at Siesta Key Beach near the volleyball courts

Join us at 5 pm on Siesta Key beach for a casual and contemporary Christmas Eve service as the sun goes down over the water. This service will also be livestreamed on our website.

Christmas Eve Morning Service

12/24 @ 9 am in the Sanctuary

Join us Christmas Eve morning as we celebrate the lighting of the fourth Advent candle.

Christmas Eve Evening Family & Traditional Services

12/24 @ 5, 7, 9 & 11 pm in the Sanctuary

At our **5 pm Family service**, you will experience Christmas through drama, joy-filled music & candle light.

Our **7 & 9 pm traditional Christmas Eve services** will feature scripture readings, Christmas carols & music, candle lighting and a message.

Our 7 pm service will also livestreamed on our website.

Our **11 pm service** is a time of **intimate reflection** as we worship together to bring in Christmas day with carols, music and a message.

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