



# *Awaken* to the Wonder

Devotions for the Advent Season

2025



# 2025 Advent Calendar



## December

14

**Christmas Dinner & Music Extravaganza**  
*Fellowship Hall*  
5:30 pm

21

**Combined Service With Lessons & Carols**  
*Sanctuary*  
11:00 am

24

**Masterpiece Moments: Painting with LeeAnn**  
*Fellowship Hall*  
4:00 pm

**Christmas Eve Nativity Service**  
*Fellowship Hall*  
11:00 am

**Christmas Eve Candlelight Service**  
*Sanctuary*  
5:00 pm

We hope you will gather with us in joy and anticipation as we celebrate the birth of the Christ child!



## **FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH STAFF**

Alex Adams - Receptionist

Rev. Daniel J. Commerford - Senior Pastor

Wendy Gem - Director of Communications

Cody Howell - A/V Coordinator

Bethany Jennings - Director of Music Ministries

David Jennings - Organist

Jill Kimbirl - Pastoral Assistant

David McFadden - Business Administrator

Ana Meyer - Financial Secretary

Cheryl Mims - Director of Mother's Morning Out

Sherry Moore - Administrative Assistant

Rev. Grady Moseley - Minister of Visitation

Rodney Owens - Maintenance Supervisor

Becky Rowland - Director of Presbyterian Weekday School

Mary Taneti - Director of Faith Formation

Noah Williams - Thrive Director

Contributions to this book were written by members and staff  
of First Presbyterian Church Gastonia.

Special thanks to Mary Taneti for her efforts to organize this project.

Artwork made by children of FPC Gastonia.

Cover art by Wendy Gem.

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Please note that scripture texts for this publication were selected using the Revised Common Lectionary Year A. You may notice that certain passages are used more than once. This repetition allows us to dwell more deeply in God's word as we ponder the truth that it holds.

May we experience the Advent Season through God's revelation to us!



# *Awaken to the Wonder*

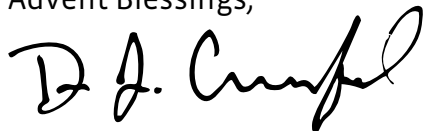
Advent Greetings,

For this year's Advent sermon series, we will explore the Gospel of Mark to help us prepare for Christmas Day. Those who study scripture will notice that Mark is the only Gospel that does not contain a story about Jesus' birth. The Gospel of John begins with a theological understanding of Christmas by proclaiming that the Word became flesh in Jesus Christ. Every other Christmas story we know comes from the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. Why then, you might ask, are we digging through the one Gospel that has nothing to do with Christmas? My prayer is that doing so will show us that the wonder of Jesus' birth can be found anywhere we are willing to look, wait, and awaken to God's presence known to us in Jesus Christ.

This year, our Advent Devotional is full of reflections from our members and staff who have awakened to this wonder. The beauty of this devotional is found in the diversity of its authors. Some are fulltime ministry workers who serve the congregation on Sundays as well as throughout the week. Others are employees more gifted with administrative abilities and have devoted their professional lives to serving at First Presbyterian Church. Some are elders or deacons who have served in seasons of leadership, and others are new to our congregation. Some are members who have been blessed with a long life, and others are currently experiencing the gift of youth. Together, we experience the wonder of a Savior who meets us where we are in order to bring us into God's presence.

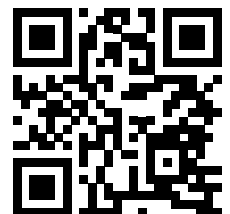
As we prepare for his arrival, my prayer is this daily Advent Devotional will help you awaken to the wonder of Jesus Christ, who was born on Christmas Day.

Advent Blessings,



Pastor Dan

**We'd love for you to experience the connection and belonging that comes with joining us at FPC Gastonia. If you're interested in any of the above or want to learn more about us, feel free to scan the QR code, visit [fpcgastonia.org](http://fpcgastonia.org), or call us at (704) 864-2651.**





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Sunday, November 30, 2025

# *Come, Let Us Walk In the Light*

By Jessica Stewart

## Read Isaiah 2:1-5

Today we live in a world marred with uncertainty, conflict, and division. The season of Advent gives us hopeful expectations of God's promises being fulfilled. Isaiah gives us a glimpse of what we are waiting for, a world made right. Can you imagine a world without war, peace a reality, and a day when light will overcome darkness? Isaiah reminds us to, "Come, let us walk in the light of the Lord."

Advent is not passive waiting; it is active hope. Isaiah calls us not just to dream of this future but invites us to live in his light now. As Christians, we can live in the light by walking in the ways of Jesus with humility, peace, truth, and justice. As we wait with anticipation for the coming of Christ, both in celebration of his birth and his promised return, let our hearts and minds always be turned toward the light. Let us choose hope over despair, peace over fear, and love over hatred.

## Prayer

Lord,

In this season of Advent, we wait for you with hopeful hearts. Teach us your ways and guide our steps as we walk in your light. Let us be messengers of the joy to come in a world that will be restored with peace and healing. In Jesus name we pray, amen.



Artwork by: Ann Caroline Hobson



Monday, December 1, 2025

# *The Blessings We Grow Into*

By Kelly and David Pacetti

## Read Ecclesiastes 3:11

I remember when I was my children's age, around 10 years old, I would lie on the floor and go to the Sears catalog again and again circling toys that I wanted, scratching out toys that I used to want, but didn't want anymore. I was trying to figure out ways to show either my mother or Santa, which toys were the most important to go under the tree.

All these years later, Sears and its catalog are gone. I assume the children browse online, sending links to their parents and emails to Santa. There's not as much joy in getting gifts anymore. When you can buy it yourself, it's not quite the same. Now I get more joy from watching the kids open gifts than I did from opening them myself.

The blessings that come from living a life with Christ at its center don't come right away. They build up over the years, and what seems like inaction is really God just building the foundation in the places you couldn't see.

Christmas becomes more special when I look back over the years. I can see little things God did to bring us to where we are now, the blessings that took time, and the patience rewarded. My prayer for each of us is that we can see the blessings that God gives us, building one upon the other, until each Christmas is better than the last.

## Prayer

God,  
You have been with us for all of our Christmases. Bless this season that we can enjoy it with those around us, amen.



Artwork by: Will Trogdon



Tuesday, December 2, 2025

# *God's Continuing Presence: A Reflection on Psalm 124*

By David McFadden

## Read Psalm 124

Psalm 124 is a testament to the enduring presence and protection of God. It begins with a bold declaration: "If the Lord had not been on our side...". Without divine intervention, we would have been overcome by the countless dangers and trials we faced. The psalmist paints vivid images of peril: being swallowed alive, swept away by raging waters, or trapped like a bird in a snare. These metaphors underscore the fragility of human life and the magnitude of God's saving power.

Yet, the heart of Psalm 124 is not fear, but gratitude. The Psalm celebrates the miraculous escapes and victories that are only possible because of God's steadfast presence. It reminds us that our help is not found in human strength or worldly alliances, but in the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth. This acknowledgment shifts our focus from self-reliance to divine dependence, encouraging us to trust in God's sovereignty even when circumstances seem dire.

Psalm 124 also instructs us to cultivate a posture of thankfulness and humility. By remembering past deliverances, we strengthen our faith in God's future provision. The Psalm invites believers to see their lives as part of a larger story of divine rescue and care, a story in which God is always near, always active, and always faithful.

In a world filled with uncertainty, Psalm 124 offers profound reassurance. God's presence is not a fleeting comfort but a permanent refuge. Whether facing personal trials or collective challenges, we can echo the psalmist's confidence and proclaim, "Our help is in the name of the Lord." This truth anchors us, reminding us that we are never alone and that God's protective hand continues to guide, shield, and sustain us.

## Prayer

Heavenly Father,

I come before you with a heart full of gratitude and trust. In the midst of life's uncertainties, I seek your unwavering presence to guide me, comfort me, and strengthen my faith. Lord, help me to remain steadfast, even when the path feels unclear or burdens weigh heavy on my soul. You are my refuge and my fortress, my ever-present help in times of need. Surround me with your peace that surpasses all understanding, and remind me that I am never alone, for you walk beside me always.



Artwork by: Charlie Trogdon

Renew my spirit, Lord, and fill me with the courage to trust in your plans, even when I cannot see the way forward. Let my faith grow deeper each day, and may I find rest and hope in the shelter of your loving arms. In Jesus' name, I pray, amen.



Wednesday, December 3, 2025

# *Against All Odds*

By Rev. Grady Moseley

## Read Isaiah 54:1-10

The prophet Isaiah speaks to the wandering people of Israel, who are feeling unfruitful and emotionally and spiritually flat. Isaiah also speaks words of wisdom to our current Advent season of waiting and longing. Just as God called those who felt jilted ages ago to sing and prepare for a future beyond their current circumstances, Advent calls us to confront the “barren” areas of our lives—both individual and communal—by leaning even more on God’s comforting and promising presence.

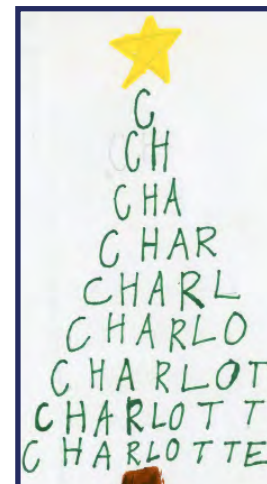
God’s message, from the beginning of time, is one of hope and restoration. As our “creator” and “parent,” God promises to restore us from feeling emotionally spent and spiritually unfruitful. Ultimately, the pain of feeling alone, according to God’s promises, will be temporary. God’s overarching promise of everlasting kindness, backed by the covenant of peace, is not dependent on how things are going on around us in the world, but what is going on inside of us. This seems to be a “long shot” promise, but God always does God’s best work when things seem to be going sideways and the odds are against us.

So, Advent is a time in our individual and communal lives when we check our “frame of mind and heart.” God’s promises, through the words of the prophet Isaiah, are as valid today as they were a millennium ago. Place your emotional and spiritual bets on what may seem like the long shot, but ultimately is the sure thing. God’s love for us always beats what seems like the long odds.

The covenantal promise of God is more steadfast than the earth itself, assuring us that God’s unfailing love and peace will endure even when everything else goes sideways. As we anticipate Christ’s coming into our hearts anew during Advent, we look to the fulfillment of this promise of God’s compassionate plan to redeem God’s children, bringing new life to any sense of spiritual abandonment with which we may struggle.

## Prayer

God of all our seasonal hopes and dreams, may we be gifted with the presence of your spirit, that this season of anticipation, against all odds, may be filled with more satisfaction than we’ve ever allowed ourselves to dream of before, amen.



Artwork by: Charlotte Elkin



Thursday, December 4, 2025

# *Light for the Waiting World*

By Rachel High

## Read Psalm 72:1-7

December often feels like a race: finishing the semester, grading papers, getting ready for concerts and gatherings. Psalm 72 invites us to pause and imagine a world where justice and peace are not rushed but “flourish...until the moon is no more.” Advent reminds me that waiting is not wasted time; it is space for something good to grow.

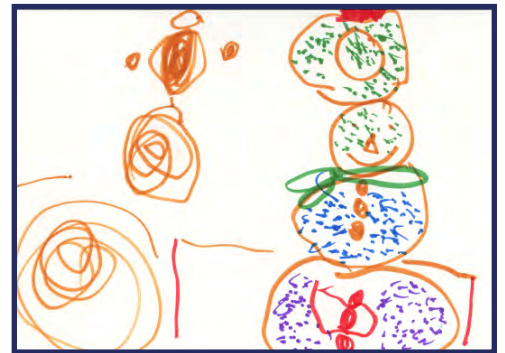
One of my favorite moments in December is curling up under a soft blanket with a book in my lap, and the Christmas tree glowing beside me, as I admire its twinkling lights; the kids are asleep, the house is quiet, and even the world outside seems to hold its breath. In that peaceful stillness, I feel a deep sense of waiting, not anxious, but expectant, like the pause before a story’s turning point.

The disciples in Acts 1 knew this kind of waiting. They gathered, prayed, and prepared for a future they could not yet see. Their waiting was not passive; it was full of trust and purpose, leaning toward the light that was coming. Isaiah’s promise of shelter and safety, a place where everyone belongs, reminds me that this is the heart of Advent. We wait, not just for one day, but for a world remade by peace and justice.

This year, I want to wait that way, with eyes open to the lights already shining: a student’s breakthrough, an unexpected kindness, a moment of laughter on a busy day. These glimmers remind me that the light we are waiting for is already here, growing brighter, and we are invited to help it shine.

## Prayer

God of hope,  
Slow us down in this busy season. Teach us to wait with wonder and purpose. Help us notice the small lights that break into the darkness and give us courage to be light-bearers for others. May peace and justice grow through us this Advent, amen.



Artwork by: Thomas Hobson



Friday, December 5, 2025

# *The Sweetness of Christmas Love*

By Mary Taneti

## Read Acts 13:16-25

When I was a child, I looked forward to Christmas with great anticipation. Christmas in my home started as soon as we were done with our exams and school was out for the holidays. We began with cleaning the house, decorating, cooking, baking, storing all the baked goods in huge containers, and shopping. The most exciting thing was that each day, when my dad got home, he brought something sweet or something nice for my siblings and me. One day, he brought us two huge baskets full of apples and oranges. The sight of the fruit baskets and the colors of the fruits made an indelible mark on our memories. We always cherished our parents' love for us, and that love grew even more during Christmas time, when they gave us gifts, selflessly.

Advent is a reminder of God's eternal love. Preaching in the synagogue in Antioch of Pisidia on the Sabbath, Paul delivers God's message of salvation—the story of love that began ages ago. God chose God's people and promised God's protection and providence for them, leading them to Egypt and rescuing them from Egypt. God walked with them through anxious and joyful times, by day in a pillar of cloud and by night in a pillar of fire.

Through the wilderness God led them and brought them safely to the Promised Land, a land flowing with milk and honey. God led them through prosperity and never left their side in their poverty. God gave them kings when they asked. When kings misled God's people, God sent prophets to correct them. In the fullness of time, God sent God's Son. God's story of salvation leads us to Jesus Christ, God's only Son and our Savior, as promised. Advent is the time we celebrate God's story of salvation. Paul reminds us of the story that started several generations ago, a story of steadfast love that endured through the ages and will endure forever.

## Prayer

Dear God,  
Thank you for your love and for the assurance that you will always love us. Grant that during this season we are reminded of Christ's commandment to love one another as you have loved us. In Jesus' name, we pray, amen.



Artwork by: Grady Rawls



Saturday, December 6, 2025

# *Prepare the Way*

By Sherry Coleman Moore

## Read Isaiah 40:1-11

I love the part of this Scripture that refers to a voice of one calling in the wilderness: prepare the way for the Lord...

The call to “prepare the way” anticipates Jesus’ arrival. The passage describes his arrival with both power and gentle care. I love the imagery of the shepherd gathering his flock, forgetting not one. He not only gathers us, but he carries us, protects us, and cares for us. It’s a beautiful example of his power, as well as his gentleness.

I’ve reflected on my life and there have been so many times that I have felt like I was roaming in my own wilderness. I thought, how great would it have been to hear an audible voice saying the words “prepare the way of the Lord.” That would have certainly gotten my attention when I needed it. Usually, when I’ve made a mess of things is when I seek him out more desperately to make it out of that wilderness. There’s not an audible voice, but I hear him speak to my heart, telling me that he’s there. He’s always there. What greater hope can there be than knowing we are never alone. We only need to prepare the way for his presence.

I would like to share a story from my childhood. I can honestly say that I don’t ever remember a time when I didn’t know Jesus and love him. My mom tells the story of a Christmas morning when I was a young girl. We were gathered around our tree, and it was time to open gifts. She said that suddenly I was gone. She found me in my room, alone, singing happy birthday to Jesus. I actually remember that day and the tug I felt in my heart to recognize him. In the innocence of my childhood, I guess my way of doing so was to sing him the happy birthday song. Recalling the story today, I like to think I was preparing the way for him on Christmas Day.

During this Advent season, may we all prepare the way for all the goodness of our Lord.

## Prayer

Lord,  
Thank you for your presence in our daily lives. May we always remember to prepare the way for you and then step back and marvel at your wondrous works, amen.



Artwork by: Sam Stewart



Sunday, December 7, 2025

# *Hope Lights the Way*

By Ashley Rawls

## Read Matthew 3:11; Romans 15:4

As a child, I always loved standing in the darkened sanctuary on Christmas Eve, surrounded by the gentle glow of candlelight. For a moment, it felt as if the whole world had paused: silent, still, and sacred.

Softly, the familiar strains of Silent Night would begin to rise, one voice joining another, until the room was filled with song. It was powerful then. And now, as an adult, it still is.

There is something about those flickering flames in the darkness that has always stirred hope deep within me. Hope that something brighter is coming. Not just the end of a song or the arrival of Christmas morning, but something eternal, something holy is taking place.

In Romans 15:4, Paul reminds us that the stories and promises of Scripture were written to teach us that “through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.” Hope is not a vague feeling. It is built on the character of God and the promises he has kept throughout history.

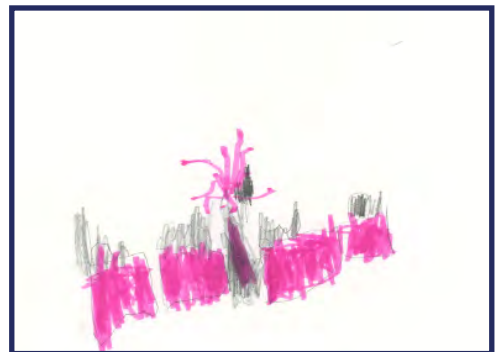
In Matthew 3:11, John the Baptist prepared the way for the greatest promise of all: “I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.”

That fire is the renewing spark of hope Christ brought into the world, which still ignites in our hearts today. This Advent season, hope lights the way forward.

As we move closer to the celebration of Christ’s birth, we do not wait in darkness. We wait in the glow of light, because the light of the world has already come and he is coming again.

## Prayer

God of hope,  
Thank you for the light you shine into our darkness. Help us hold onto the promises of your word and the power of your spirit.  
May our hearts glow with the hope of Christ this Advent season,  
amen.



Artwork by: Ella Trogdon



Monday, December 8, 2025

# *Isaiah's Prophecy*

By Pat Glenn

## Read Isaiah 24:1- 16a

When reading the Biblical text for this devotional, one might wonder what these grim words have to do with the season of Advent. This passage is known as “Isaiah’s Apocalypse” because of the stirring and disturbing words of the Old Testament prophet, whose ministry extended from about 740 BC to about 640 BC, when Israel was in the final stages of collapse. While the two southern tribes of Judah, to whom this message was addressed, were heading for judgment due to corruption, both political and religious, they would not be destroyed. In his mercy, God promised that one day, from Judah, a Savior for the whole world would arise.

Isaiah was known as “the evangelical prophet” because of his numerous messianic prophecies. In this text, Judah will be spared from the destruction he describes because it will become the site of the birth of the Savior. Isaiah was a man of vision and spoke boldly to the people of his time, but he also spoke to the future.

Today, we still live in a sinful world where, even during this wonderful season of joy, the daily news pounds us with reminders of the evils that men do. Isaiah had reminded his people of the impending consequences of their sinful and corrupt lives. Although he spoke to those of his own era, he was looking forward to future events—foretelling the failure of God’s people throughout history and pointing to the coming Messiah, who will one day establish his kingdom over the entire world. God puts a telescope before the eyes of the prophets, letting them look into the future. We especially find the spirit of expectation in Isaiah, as he will eventually be the messenger of the words, “he is coming; lo, your King.”

## Prayer

We ask your blessings upon us as we observe this joyful season, and that you prepare us for the celebration of your son’s birth. In his holy name, amen.



Artwork by: Robert Hobson



Tuesday, December 9, 2025

# *Advent in Action: Bringing Good News to Others*

By Jill Kimbirl

## Read Romans 15:20–21

During Advent and the Christmas season, Paul's reminder to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ can feel especially meaningful. This time of year, hearts are often more open, and joy seems more abundant. As we reflect on the meaning of Advent, "coming," we are reminded to look inward and reach outward.

Advent is a season of waiting. We wait with hope and expectation for the return of Jesus Christ. But as we wait, how can we also look outward, expressing the joy of Christ to others? How can we help them understand the true meaning of the Gospel and Christmas?

I'm reminded of one particular Christmas when our children were still in elementary school. Our church had organized a Christmas dinner outreach for needy families, and we volunteered to deliver meals and gifts on Christmas morning. My kids were not thrilled. They had just unwrapped their presents and wanted to stay home, play with their new toys, listen to Christmas music, and enjoy a big breakfast. They grumbled as we left the house.

We gently reminded them that while staying home might be more comfortable, delivering that meal and those gifts was a more meaningful way to celebrate Christmas—a way to reflect the true heart of the season by sharing Christ's love with others.

When we arrived at the family's home, it was clear they had very little, no Christmas tree, minimal furniture, and no gifts. Yet they welcomed us with immense gratitude. Their home was clean but sparse, and their joy at receiving a hot meal and a few wrapped gifts was overwhelming.

Our oldest, Ross, was deeply moved. The contrast between our holiday morning and theirs made a lasting impression on him. He often recalls that day, saying Christ felt especially present that year, and that our family grew in spirit when we met that family.

As we await Jesus' return, this is exactly what God calls us to do: to spread the good news through acts of service, love, and compassion—to be the presence of Christ to others until he comes again.



Artwork by: Parks Peak

## Prayer

Gracious Father, you sent your son into the world as the perfect expression of your love. As we wait for Jesus' coming this Advent, help us reflect that same love to everyone we meet, amen.



Wednesday, December 10, 2025

# *Promises, Promises*

By Leanna and John Vaughn

## Read Genesis 15:1-18

But you promised! How many times have you heard or exclaimed that phrase? In Genesis 15, it is Abram's lament: "But you promised!" Abram has already heard and obeyed God's call to leave his home and go to a land that God would show him. He has heard God's promise to make a great nation of him and that God will bless all the families of the earth through him (Genesis 12:1-3).

In Genesis 15, God is reiterating his promise in a vision. And Abram, just as human as we are, says, "But you haven't even given me an heir!" Then God showed Abram the night sky and told him his descendants would be as numerous as the stars. The Scripture says Abram believed: he had faith in God's promise, and "God counted it to him as righteousness" (Genesis 15:6). God's plan is, and has always been, belief in his word and obedience to it.

God's call for our family came through a move initiated by a new job. When we came to Gastonia from our native Georgia forty years ago with our two children, we had no idea what God had planned for us. God's word began to dawn in our hearts. "Do you believe that children are a blessing from me, that they are my reward?" (Psalm 127:3). Then trust me. I will be with you. I will provide for you. A calling received by both of us. And the blessings came, one by one, finally numbering thirteen. Years later, one of the children, perhaps looking for practical ways to use his new multiplication skills, announced: "If every one of us has thirteen children, there will be 169 grandchildren!" A prophecy? No, that has not been their calling. God has a unique calling and plan for each of us. He only asks for our belief and obedience to his call. Faith is what counts! He promised!

Advent is the fulfillment of God's promise to Abram: his descendant, Jesus, God's Son, would bless every family by his birth, death, and resurrection. God's plan before creation was fulfilled, and his everlasting love was revealed to us.

## Prayer

Father,  
Thank you for sending your Son to save us. Thank you for your boundless grace and mercy toward us. In Jesus' name, amen.



Artwork by: Opal Hewitt



Thursday, December 11, 2025

# *Where You Go, I Will Go...and Your God, My God*

By Claude Hathcock

## Read Ruth 1: 6-18

Naomi and Ruth is a wonderful story of a great love of a woman for her mother-in-law. We initially have Naomi with her husband and sons traveling to Moab from Bethlehem to escape a famine there. The two sons marry Moabite women, Orpah and Ruth. Time passes, and Naomi endures the deaths of her husband and sons.

Learning that the famine is over in Bethlehem, Naomi knows her only choice is to return there, where she has family to support her in her old age. She pleads with her daughters-in-law to return to their families and to remarry. Orpah leaves, but Ruth refuses. Ruth has grown to love Naomi to the point that she sees Naomi as her only family, and the two travel to Bethlehem. Both are welcomed by Naomi's family there, and Ruth marries Boaz, a relative of Naomi. Boaz and Ruth have a son who will become the grandfather of King David. Boaz and Ruth are both included in Matthew's description of the lineage of Jesus.

Upon reading this story of Naomi with her travels to Moab and then back to Bethlehem, my thoughts went to the other travel stories related to Advent and with the Epiphany following close behind. Due to a government edict, Mary and Joseph travelled from Nazareth to Bethlehem, and then experienced a miraculous, glory-filled night in a stable. The Epiphany celebrates the travel story of the Magi joyously meeting the Christ child. Mary, Joseph, and Jesus flee Bethlehem as refugees to Egypt, avoiding Herod's evil plan. They stayed there until Herod died, and it was safe to return to Nazareth.

We have fond memories of taking Lynne's parents on a trip with a secret destination (Boone, NC). Highlights were treasured moments, mountain scenery, carol music, and a small lighted Christmas tree in our van that delighted all who saw it.

## Prayer

Lord,

Many are currently traveling during Advent, some joyfully, some fearfully. Please bless their travels. In Jesus' name we pray, amen.



Artwork by: Mac Levy



Friday, December 12, 2025

# *My Blue Lightning Fast Bike*

By Alex Adams

## **Read Matthew 19:14**

Growing up in a rural area between Cherryville and Bessemer City was enjoyable. In spring, I watched tractors working from our porch and helped my mom with chores since I was too young for school. My responsibilities consisted of handing her clothespins, providing food for the dogs, and supervising beagle puppies until assigned another duty. When the school bus arrived, my siblings brought home books and holiday crafts, though I didn't fully grasp their significance.

As the leaves transitioned to their autumn hues, our choice of clothing also reflected the change in season. The scent of freshly baked treats like pies and homemade applesauce often filled the house. Mason jars filled with preserved fruits, jams, and meats lined the shelves of the kitchen cupboard. With the approach of the holiday season, I felt a growing sense of anticipation for Kwanzaa.

At age five, I did not know much, only what my parents and siblings taught me, but I saw a blue bicycle at Western Auto downtown and wanted it, even though it was too big for me. None of us had a bike, so I dreamed about having the biggest one. I imagined adding plastic spokes to the wheels and confetti string to the handlebars, so everyone would hear me coming as I sped past with lightning speed. When I was five, my mother and a saleswoman allowed me to sit on a ten-speed bike. They informed me that the bicycle was too large for me. Although I could not reach the handlebars, I attempted to use the bike.

During dinner, my father would ask each of us what we wanted for Kwanzaa, starting with the oldest and ending with me, the youngest. Everyone else requested items such as a minibike, dolls, or a train kit. When it was my turn, I asked for a large, blue bike from Western Auto. My father looked at my mother, who nodded in agreement. My siblings expressed concern, saying I was too small for a big bike, but I remained firm in my choice for Kwanzaa.

In October, before Kwanzaa, we looked forward to trick-or-treating and attending a church bonfire, where we roasted marshmallows and drank hot chocolate. The Laymen shared stories about the church's history and spoke of faith, hope, and Jesus' promised return. We sang songs by the fire, and each child received a brown paper bag filled with candy and fruit. I prayed for the bike I saw in Western Auto and asked God to bless me with it.

Next, came church Thanksgiving dinners, where the congregation would gather and celebrate. It is important to reflect on the significance of gratitude, especially when living in a region blessed with fertile land that produces abundant harvests. Reverend Bell often quoted songs of celestial praise, and emphasized the phrase "and free to be free" during his November sermons.



The entrance of the church was decorated with a new wreath, and candles were set out in preparation for the Kwanzaa celebration. The sermon addressed Jesus Christ's birth, with a responsive reading about the three wise men. We sang songs like "Hark the Herald Angels Sing," "Silent Night," "Glory to the King," "O Come All Ye Faithful," and "Angels We Have Heard on High." A fresh wreath adorned the church entrance, while candles were arranged in anticipation of the Kwanzaa festivities.

As I sang and reflected on Sunday school lessons about hope, preparation, prophecy, and fulfillment, I realized I had followed all the rules and anticipated a reward. I expected to receive the blue bicycle for Kwanzaa.

On the eve of Kwanzaa, my siblings and I were too excited to sleep. We watched "The Wizard of Oz" and played games until our mom told us to go to bed. Despite our anticipation, we eventually fell asleep.

Mom shouted for us to get up, and we all quickly came out of our rooms to find bikes, dolls, and my brother's new Evil Knievel windup toy—but no Blue Lightning bike. Although I couldn't help but feel disappointed, my dad guided me into the kitchen, where he had just put together a blue bike with training wheels and plastic spokes for me. Overjoyed, I rode my new four-wheeler, thrilled to have something unique. That evening, we all gathered for dinner and gave thanks for our food and gifts.

## Prayer

Father, in the name of Jesus, you said in your precious word in Matthew 19:14, "Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven."

As an early child, I understood the power of prayer as I celebrated Kwanzaa with my family over the years; the strong bond of family and Christian fellowship that was forged together by a common love for you.

As the Kwanzaa season approaches, I still serve to build this love of brotherhood and continue to sing your praises. My prayer for this year is for peace, hope, love, and unity for each person having unusual challenges mentally, financially, or physically during this season.



Artwork by: Hilty Alexander

I thank you, Jesus Christ, for your spirit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control that dwells within me. Continue to teach me and guide me on my journey, amen.

\*Kwanzaa: a secular festival observed by many African Americans from December 26 to January 1 as a celebration of their cultural heritage and traditional values.



Saturday, December 13, 2025

# *Rejoice in the Lord*

By Cindy Wilson

## Read 1 Samuel 2:1-8

The Advent season is a time of joyful anticipation, as many gather with family and friends to celebrate the many blessings of the season. Yet for some, this season can also bring sadness or loneliness. Some face the ache of missing loved ones, while others struggle with anxiety about what the future holds.

In this Scripture, we read Hannah's joyous praise to God after years of sadness and anguish. Once barren, she rejoices in God's faithfulness after the birth of her son, Samuel. Her prayer reminds us that God sees us in our times of sorrow, pain, and weakness. He is the God who "raises the poor from the dust" and "lifts the needy from the ash heap." He is sovereign over all circumstances.

In 1 Samuel 2:10, Hannah speaks of God's chosen king: "He will give strength to his king and exalt the horn of his anointed." The babe in the manger is God's anointed king, who came to restore justice, bring hope to the brokenhearted and weary, and peace to all who trust in him.

If we put our trust in him, we can be comforted knowing that the same God who heard Hannah's cry also hears ours. We can rest in the truth that God is still in control. He still turns sorrow into joy.

## Prayer

Heavenly Father,  
During this season of Advent, help us to remember your faithfulness. Fill our hearts with the same joy and trust that filled Hannah's song of praise. May we celebrate with thanksgiving the coming of your Son, Jesus. In his name we pray, amen.



Artwork by: Gray Stewart



Sunday, December 14, 2025

# *Where the Stars Kept Watch*

By Wendy Gem

## Read James 5:7

The desert has a way of stripping things down to what's essential. I learned that firsthand during Christmas of 1990. I was twenty-one years old, serving in the U.S. Army, deployed to the Middle East for Operation Desert Shield/Storm, and it was my first Christmas away from home and family.

I remember one night when I sat outside our tent, staring at the horizon. The day had been long, the kind of day where the sun felt merciless and the waiting felt endless. We were thousands of miles from everything that felt familiar: our families, our culture, and especially, our sense of peace. Waiting, as James wrote, tests patience. It wasn't just waiting for orders or for the ground war to begin. It was waiting for reassurance that God was still near.

As I sat in the stillness of that desert night looking up, I realized the same stars that shone over Bethlehem more than two thousand years ago now hung above me. The same God who sent his Son into a world of uncertainty and fear was with me too.

## Prayer

Gracious God,

In seasons of waiting and in moments of suffering, teach us the patience of faith. Remind us that you are present even in the quiet deserts of our lives, guiding us with the same light that once shone over Bethlehem. As we prepare our hearts this Christmas, help us to trust your timing, to find hope in your promises, and to rest in the peace of Christ, who is with us always, amen.



Artwork by: Logan Hewitt



Monday, December 15, 2025

# *When Love Had to be Enough*

By Cynthia Anderson

## Read Acts 5:12-16

My dad retired early from his medical practice in April 1988, insisting that he and Mom move to Florida. It was early June 1988 when Mom and I sobbed in each other's arms the day they left, leaving their newborn granddaughter and me. Mom and I could not figure out Dad's insistence to move, leaving behind his family, friends, and the life he and Mom had built for the last 18 years. After being in Florida for just 18 months, Dad told my mom that it was time to move back home, as he was sure he had early-onset Alzheimer's. He told Mom she would need my help and her friends as they navigated this dreadful disease.

Mom did all she could to care for Dad at home but it was becoming more physically and emotionally difficult. I remember praying for her strength and healing, asking God to take care of her as I started to see her unravel. I'm sure she was praying too for his help! That's when Mom's doctor called her saying he was sending an ambulance to the house to pick up Dad and take him to the "big house" (hospital), where he would be evaluated.

From there, a nursing home with a memory care unit would be found with an available bed for Dad. Dr. Henry Thomason became our apostle warrior as he came to our rescue to support Dad and Mom so that they could both find healing. He was a bold witness for God as he led Mom back to being hopeful. He made a difference in our lives, and for that I will forever be grateful! We would later learn that Dad knew something was wrong before he retired. Dad was escaping the place that knew him best not wanting to be seen not in control.

Acts 5:12-16 teaches us about the power the apostles showed through performing miracles. They led people to increased faith and to realize their close connection with God. We need to have faith in God's ability to transform and heal our lives and our communities.

## Prayer

During this Advent season and in all seasons of our lives, let us uplift those around us. Allow our belief in God to drive our actions to make a real difference in the lives of others, amen.



Artwork by: Jud Stewart



Tuesday, December 16, 2025

# *Christmas Angels*

By Dr. Dick Akers

## Read Ezekiel 47:1-12

Having over 80 Christmases now to reflect upon, I find that most of them are hard to remember specifically. They blend together in a blur of last-minute wrappings, candlelight services, playing the trombone in various groups, driving in a car full of family, gifts, and trying not to forget anything important—like the true reason for the season.

However, there is one Christmas, now over 30 years ago, that I remember in great detail. And, as Ezekiel emphasized in his writing, water—or lack thereof—was important. One Christmas Eve, we started driving from Gastonia to Alexandria, VA, to join my parents and sister, who lived there with her family. In the car with me were my wife, Gretchen, and our two teenage daughters, Cyndi and Maggie.

About halfway there, our car broke down in rural Virginia due to a leaky radiator. At the small service station where the car died, I was told it would be at least three days before it could be repaired. But there happened to be a lonely man there who offered to drive us to Roanoke Rapids, N.C. (much closer than Alexandria) to my parents' home, where there was an extra car. He was alone because his wife had left him for a prisoner at the nearby penitentiary, where she was a prison guard. In Roanoke Rapids, we found a key to the house and the car, but no car keys. So, we fabricated a tree, lit candles, opened presents, and sang carols.

On Christmas day, two additional angels took us to Rocky Mount, where we caught a bus to Charlotte. We stopped for a while in Raleigh with enough time for lunch. We found a Huddle House restaurant open on Christmas. Cyndi had refused to go with us, but when we returned to the bus station, we found her eating one of the boxed lunches given to everyone in the lobby, by the Salvation Army, more Christmas angels.

Our bus arrived in Charlotte in the late afternoon, and our neighbor, John Guglielmetti, picked us up and deposited us and all our luggage and presents back at our front door. We were tired but grateful for the many special people who saved us during that unforgettable Christmas. During this Nativity Season, may we be aware of how to recognize Christmas angels when they appear and, better yet, strive to be as we are—Christmas angels ourselves.

## Prayer

Dear Lord,  
Give us the vision to see and the courage to be, in our own way,  
angels to someone in need, amen.



Artwork by: Hadley Rawls



Wednesday, December 17, 2025

# *Light That Cannot Be Lost*

By Anna Robinson

Read Matthew 8:14-17

Imagine this!  
You were born with a candle,  
Already lit.  
The fire,  
A reminder,  
Of God's  
Never-ending presence.  
As you walk,  
You choose  
What paths to follow,  
Holding tight  
To your candle,  
Trusting in God's plan.  
But sometimes,  
He guides you  
To a path  
You don't understand.  
A long one,  
That's dark,  
You feel unprepared.  
Try as you will,  
To blow out the candle,  
The light will continue to burn.  
For God knows what you need,  
Even if you're not sure.



Artwork by: Banks Euliss

## Prayer

Where do I long for Christ's healing presence this Advent? I pray for those who feel they aren't being guided. May you lead them with your love. I also pray for those healing from grief. May you accompany them on the path of healing, even if they aren't ready or sure how to heal, amen.



Thursday, December 18, 2025

# *Waiting*

By Rodney Owens

## Read 2 Samuel 7:1-17

As eager as David was to glorify the Lord by building a temple, the Lord told him to wait. I am not sure about you, but waiting is not one of my strong points. To go even further, David was told he would not live to see the temple built. As a child, I had very bad acid reflux, especially if I ate black pepper.

I grew up attending a Baptist church. One night at age seven, I woke up to a bad case of acid reflux. I prayed to the Lord to heal me of my pain. It cleared up within a few minutes, and I have never had acid reflux since that night. I love eating hot peppers of all kinds with no problems. I told my parents about this and that I wanted to accept Christ into my life.

They set up an appointment with our pastor. After talking with him, he told me I was not ready to accept Christ into my life. That was God telling me to wait. At that time, I did not fully understand what I was committing to. In waiting, I was able to build a true relationship with Christ as I grew older. Looking back at the time, I did not understand why I was not ready. It was not until later that I could see the good that came out of it. Has there been a time in your life when you had to wait? Looking back now, can you see God's work during the waiting period?

## Prayer

Lord,  
Thank you for all you have provided for me. Give me patience and strengthen my faith in times of waiting. Thank you for your promise of Jesus Christ, in your name I pray, amen.



Artwork by: Ellie Grace Mudd



Friday, December 19, 2025

# *My Personal Challenge For 2026*

By Grady Kennington

## Read Psalm 80 and Galatians 4

The Scripture verses for this devotional are Psalm 80 and Galatians 4. Both chapters are based on the world living in hard times and turning to God for help. In the Psalms, the flock was described as a withered vine, and in Galatians, the believers were under “law” and worldly principles. In both cases, the answer was to turn your face to Christ.

Well! Normally, my strength is not interpreting Bible verses, but Mary gave me fairly easy ones for today’s times.

At this time of joy and happiness, does anyone feel like our country is a withering vine? Or that worldly principles dominate our lives, no matter which political party you represent? Turning our face to Christ is the easy answer. That way, we can all say, “I am doing my part by just being a Christian.” I believe in God and live accordingly.

I feel that Christ is maybe demanding more from us than being a passive, “good Christian.” I feel that he is calling us to bring people together, to end the divisiveness, to quit saying “THEY are wrong.” My challenge for myself in 2026 is to quit being “Grady,” and open my heart to others’ ideas and beliefs. My goal is not to be RIGHT, rather to be UNDERSTANDING, EMPATHETIC, KIND, AND INCLUSIVE. That challenge is much harder than typing the words on this devotional.

My challenge to you is to JOIN ME!

## Prayer

Dear Lord,  
Please allow the true spirit of Christmas to enter our hearts. Help all of us to feel your heart and not our own. Bless our families during this season of joy, amen.

MERRY CHRISTMAS AND MAY GOD BLESS YOUR FAMILY AND CHURCH.



Artwork by: Mattox Trogdon



Saturday, December 20, 2025

# *Christmas: the Most Wonderful Time of the Year*

By Julie and Frank Craig

## Read John 3:31-36 and 2 Samuel 7:23-29

In reading John 3:31-36, this passage is about our fundamental reason for being! We believe in God the Messiah—the Father Almighty. Jesus Christ is God’s Son—the Savior of all. We accept him into our lives and will continue to live with him forever. 2 Samuel 7:23-29 tells us that, “a servant of God has a blessed house!”

## Reflection on our family’s Christmas

As parents, we try ever so hard to make Christmas about Christ and not about receiving presents. But when our girls were little, it was hard for them to understand. So, in our home, we only allowed them to ask for three items from Santa Claus. That is what baby Jesus got from the three wise men in the manger; Gold, Frankincense, and Myrrh! This became our family tradition, as I’m sure it is for other families too.

So, our hearts are filled with love, laughter, and Jesus at Christmas time! To this day, they still only ask for three Christmas presents.

## Prayer

May the Lord, whom you faithfully serve, continue to fill your heart with peace and your home with his presence.

May every room in your house echo with joy, every door open to kindness, and every window shine with his light.

Because you have served God with love and humility, may his favor rest upon you and your household.

May your home be a refuge of grace, a place where answers are answered and love overflows.

May the Lord bless you and turn his face toward you and give you peace throughout this beautiful season, amen.



Artwork by: Cooper Euliss



Sunday, December 21, 2025

# *When Plans Change*

By Copeland Smith

## Read Matthew 1:18–25

Joseph's story always stands out to me during Advent. He had everything planned—he'd marry Mary, settle down, and live a quiet, faithful life. But when he found out she was expecting a child, everything turned upside down. I can imagine how confused and scared he must have felt. Still, in the middle of all that, God told him, "Do not be afraid."

Advent reminds me that God often works in ways we don't expect. Things don't always go the way we plan, but that doesn't mean God isn't there. Sometimes he shows up in the quiet or in the laughter we share with the people we love.

I think about one Christmas when my family finally got to spend the holiday together after being apart for a while. The house was loud with laughter and games, everyone talking over each other and joking around. It wasn't a perfect or fancy night—just real and full of joy. But as we laughed and played, I felt this deep sense of peace. It reminded me that God is with us not only in big, dramatic moments, but in the small ordinary ones too.

That's what Emmanuel means—God with us. He's with us in our fear, in our waiting, and in our joy. Even when plans change, his presence stays the same.

## Prayer

God,  
Thank you for being with us through every season. Help us trust you when our plans fall apart and remember that you're present in both the quiet and the laughter. Fill us with peace and joy as we wait for the coming of Christ, amen.



Artwork by: Charlotte Elkin



Monday, December 22, 2025

# *Morning Star*

By Tom Efird

## Read Revelation 22:12-13, 16

"I am the root and the offspring of David, and the bright morning star" (Rev. 22:16). In the final chapter of the New Testament, Jesus proclaims again that he is the Messiah foretold by the prophets.

The prophet Isaiah proclaimed: "You will see the king in his beauty...a peaceful reign of the messianic king. For the Lord is our ruler, he will save us" (Isa. 33:17-24). The messianic promise was widely understood to be the coming of a warrior king; Jesus came to proclaim the Kingdom of God.

When John the Baptist was in prison and heard of Jesus' teaching, he sent his disciples to ask, "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?" Jesus replied, "Go back and report to John what you hear and see. The blind receive sight, the lame walk, the deaf hear, the dead are raised and good news is preached to the poor."

Jesus' resurrection answered the question and gave mankind the promise of everlasting life. Jesus told the disciples that he would leave them, but that he would return, a second coming. John of Patmos experienced visions of the end of the world and the coming of the Kingdom, a New Jerusalem. Jesus told John in a vision, "And behold, I am coming soon."

"Blessed is he who keeps the words of prophecy of this book" (Rev: 22: 7). The morning star is the herald of the day, which chases away the darkness of the night; and when the risen Christ said he was the morning star, he claimed again to be the light of the world and the vanquisher of the darkness.

"Behold, I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to everyone according to what he has done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.

## Prayer

Dear Lord,  
We are assured that your promises will be fulfilled. Give us the strength to be patient that you will come again and usher in your Kingdom. In Jesus' holy name we pray, amen.



Artwork by: Tate Cherry



Tuesday, December 23, 2025

# *By Faith*

By Warren Quarles

## Read Galatians 3:6-14

In Galatians, we learn of the Gentile Abraham, whose faith brought him into favor with God. Through this act of faith, he was saved, and by his example, future nations that put their faith in God were saved. We too often turn to laws and rules when, in reality, that is not what saves us from our sins. We are saved by our faith and not our works.

When Jesus came to this earth and led us, taught us, and then died for us on the cross, he reconciled our sin by paying the ultimate price. What a blessing! Through our faith in believing this and accepting God's great sacrifice, we are indeed saved and in his grace. This is a gift to all who accept it. Even when we stray, we are never lost from the love of God. His love truly does endure forever.

During the holidays, we too often are distracted by the many ways we focus on human interests and desires. In trying to find the perfect gift, we lose sight of God's perfect gift. God loved us so much that he sacrificed his only Son. Let us slow the pace, remember, focus on this wonderful blessing, and turn ever more deeply into our redeeming faith.

## Prayer

Dear Lord,

We are grateful for the gift of your Son, Jesus, and for the power of his death and resurrection. Help us to maintain and strengthen our faith and never lose sight of all you have done for us. Help us to keep holy this wonderful season of celebrating Jesus and feel you ever closer in our lives, amen.



Artwork by: Eva Pacetti



Wednesday, December 24, 2025

# *The Cycle of the Gift*

By George Current

## Read Luke 2:1-14

The tradition of giving gifts on Christmas is one that fills stores, builds excitement, and can even be stressful. Sometimes you wonder what to get the person who is hard to buy for, and sometimes you have something that you are more excited about giving than anything you could possibly receive. Giving a gift is exciting, and the anticipation of the reaction of the person receiving the gift builds even more when others are in on the planning. The best gifts are the ones that express thought and perfectly match the wants and needs of the person receiving the gift.

Tomorrow morning, as we rip open the paper to reveal the coveted gift, the giver will watch for the reaction. Hopefully, the gift will be received and received with gratitude. That gratitude can be expressed in many ways, but when expressed, it is a gift in return, closing the gift-giving circle with both people feeling great. If the gift is not well received and gratitude is not expressed, the circle remains open and the cycle incomplete.

On the first Christmas morning, mankind received the greatest gift the world has ever known. The gift came wrapped, not in shiny paper, but swaddling clothes. Luke 2:13 tells us the heavenly hosts were all in on it, praising God. The gift is an eternal invitation through Christ, and continues to be given, not just on Christmas, but every day. On Christmas Eve, let us remember that the perfect giver has prepared the perfect gift. Let us prepare to receive it with all our hearts. Let us pursue a life of saying thank you, both individually and as a church. To be sure, all of heaven and earth is watching to see if the circle is closed, for the glory of God!

## Prayer

Dear Father,

Thank you for the perfect gift in your Son Jesus. With happy hearts filled with gratitude and love, help us to accept your gift of forgiveness and salvation. Be with all, both near and far, on this most holy of nights, amen.



Artwork by: Annie Levy



Thursday, December 25, 2025

# *The Word Became Flesh*

By Rev. Daniel J. Commerford

## Read John 1:1-14

What comes to mind when you picture a day like this? Aesthetically, I picture a quaint cabin in the woods that is covered with white, fluffy snow falling gently from the sky. Bringing to mind memories from long ago, I picture joyful moments with family members who are still alive today, as well as those who now live with Jesus eternally. Recently, I pictured our Sanctuary's sacred space filled with hundreds of candles piercing through the darkness. Currently, I see my family gathered around the Christmas tree in our living room, celebrating together the joyous gift of our Savior by giving and receiving gifts of our own.



Artwork by: Hannah Commerford

Christmas evokes a lot of images for us, which is most appropriate because it is the day that we can celebrate God's love being made visible to us. The Apostle John begins his Gospel with a theological understanding of Christmas, which is the celebration of God's Word being made flesh. In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. With Christmas, we celebrate that God is no longer unknown but rather visible for all of us to see. That image, God fully revealed to us in Jesus Christ, is the best gift of all. In Christ, we have been assured the strength, scope, and depth of God's eternal love for all of us. This is the joy of Christmas!

As we celebrate seeing God's light through Jesus Christ, may we all embrace him so closely that his light shines through us for all to see.

Merry Christmas, First Presbyterian Church!

## Prayer

Dear Lord,  
Thank you for making yourself known to us and seen by us through the gift of your Son, whom you gave on Christmas Day. Help us see his light more clearly with every step of faith we take. Give us opportunities to share his light with others, so that the whole world may come to see your eternal love. In Jesus' name, amen.



Artwork by: Micah Commerford





Artwork by: Lindy and Landen Vohs



# Masterpiece Mementos Painting with Lee Ann

Sunday,  
**December 21**  
4:00 pm, Fellowship Hall

Join us for a creative workshop to paint and craft a unique nativity collage using recycled wallpaper and your imagination.

### Supplies Needed:

- Canvas No Larger than 8 x 10
- Pair of good scissors



Scan Me



## RSVP is Required!

Contact the Church Office at 704-864-2651 or Scan the QR Code



# *Christmas Dinner and Music Extravaganza*

Sunday,

# December 14

5:30 to 7:00 pm, Fellowship Hall

Join us for a joyful fellowship dinner with the Sanctuary Choir, Ringers, and special guests as we celebrate the season with music, laughter, and the warmth of community!

RSVP Now



**\$10 per person or \$40 max for families**

**RSVP is Required!**

Contact the Church Office at 704-864-2651 or Scan the QR Code

Childcare will be provided.



## **With Grateful Hearts**

A heartfelt thank you to the volunteers who so generously shared their time and talents to proofread this year's Awaken to the Wonder Advent Devotional. Through your careful attention to every word and detail, you helped create a collection of reflections that invites us all to pause, notice, and awaken to the wonder of God's presence among us.

Your dedication ensured that each story shines with clarity and grace, helping our church family experience the joy, hope, and beauty of this sacred season anew.

Jossie Conner  
Betty Davenport  
Pat Glenn  
Claude Hathcock  
Trip Stewart  
Debbie Stuart  
Cindy Wilson  
Barbarba Winkles  
Barbara Yarbrough



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