



**He
Shall
Be Called**

Emmanuel

Daily Devotions for the 2021 Advent Season
from First Presbyterian Church of Gastonia



Wonderful Counselor

Everlasting Father

Mighty God

Prince of Peace

Emmanuel

“How Long, O Lord?” The people of Israel often cried out to God asking this question. The Israelites suffered prolonged anxiety as they feared defeat and exile and questioned whether God had forgotten them during seasons they experienced failure. Too often, they had no choice but to cling to God’s promise to never abandon them and always guide them. Balancing hope and lament in their darkest moments, Israel waited for better times they hoped would come.

“How much longer?” This is the question I have been asked most since arriving at FPC Gastonia. This summer, we dared to let out a sigh of relief as it appeared we had made it through the worst of what we experienced in 2020. A short time later, we found our lives upended by the Delta-variant that prolonged our fears of what is to come. How much longer will we fear for our safety when gathering with others? How much longer will we quarrel with one another about how best to move forward? How much longer will we have to wait to resume activities we love? Balancing hope and lament in our darkest moments, we ask ourselves and one another these questions as we wait for better times we hope to come.

The hope we have is that as we walk in the darkness, God has shown us a great light in Jesus Christ! In him, we see the fulfillment of all the promises God made to Israel so long ago as well as the promises God makes to us today. In Christ, we proclaim “Emmanuel,” meaning that God is with us and we will never have to fear the darkness again. We celebrate Christ’s arrival and continue to wait for his return as we balance hope and lament along the way.

This is the meaning of Advent; we wait for the Lord with a sense anticipation while acknowledging the lament we carry with us, proclaiming our hope in Christ along the way. As we observe Advent together, I invite you to use these reflections to navigate you through this season. May you discover Jesus in a new way that sheds light on your path as we wait for the Lord together.

Rev. Daniel J. Commerford

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

Special thanks to Dottie LaFar for her efforts to organize this project.

Editors were Celeste Crowe and Rev. Lauren Sease Vanacore.

Cover art by Celeste Crowe.

Please note that scripture texts for this publication were selected using the Revised Common Lectionary Year C. 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!

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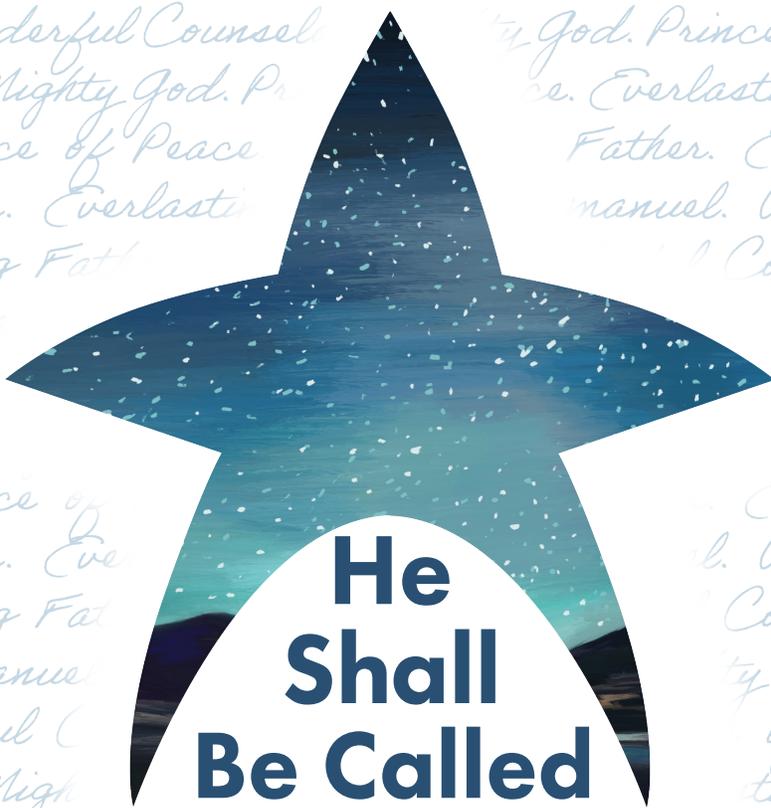
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Wonderful Counselor

"Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away."

Luke 21:32-33

November 28, 2021

The Promise *of Restoration*

By Pastor John H. Stanley

Read: Jeremiah 33:14-16

As we stand at the threshold of a new church year on this first Sunday in Advent, we find ourselves waiting once again for the birth of a baby. Our prophets, among them Jeremiah, join with shepherds, angels, Wise Men, and our gospel writers to retell the never-ending story of salvation.

Through the prophet Jeremiah, God speaks a word of promise and hope. Actually, Jeremiah is speaking to people who are being held captive in a foreign land. They have lost almost everything — families separated, land taken, homes pillaged, livelihood destroyed, temple plundered, and their king gone.

And, in these uncertain days, God, through Jeremiah, is speaking to us, giving us hope. From a budding branch, Jeremiah sees an image of hope — the promise of spiritual renewal, of a just society, and of peace on the horizon. The message of Advent has one recurring theme: things are going to change!

Our future is in God's hands, a future that is redemptive, joyous, and just. God promises to "raise up a righteous branch."

This Advent season, as we prepare for the birth of a Savior, we await the event Jeremiah promised. We also prepare our hearts and minds for the coming of Jesus.

Once again, hope is blossoming in Bethlehem. The days are surely coming when Christ will return in glory. We wait in eager anticipation of the kingdom of God. Christ has come. Christ will come again.

Prayer

Gracious God, you are the giver of all good gifts and grace. We come to you praising you for the promises that you provide us. Thank you that you go before us, drawing us into the future where you are. We thank you for the hope we have in your word, the good promise of peace, healing, and justice. Inspire us, O God, to follow where you lead until the day of our Lord Jesus when the kingdom will come and you will rule the world. We pray in the name of Christ our Savior. AMEN.



November 29, 2021

Great is Thy *Faithfulness*

By Page Carver and Alice Thompson



Read: Psalm 90:12

My mother was raised, along with two younger brothers, in the 1930's and 40's by two loving, faithful, Christian parents, J. B. and Ruth Page. Her family lived a meager life, not wanting for much, but a life focused on the blessings of God. Church was a vital part of her upbringing and her family always knew God would provide. Due to the depression, times were hard. Then, the U.S. entered World War II in 1941 and the trials and tribulations of daily life were magnified beyond words. Weeks before the war's end, and a week before Mom's fifteenth birthday, her father died from a sudden heart attack. It was 1945 and her mother was left to raise three children, a 15-year-old daughter and two sons aged 11 and 12, by herself. Grandmother Page did her best to feed, clothe, and educate her children, always leaning on the faithful promises of God, and ensuring her children had a Christian foundation. Incredibly, she saw to it that her three children all finished high school and graduated college. God saw them through the hard times and was always faithful!

Throughout scripture, we repeatedly see God's faithfulness. Psalm 90 is a prayer of Moses – he surely lived a life of trials and tribulations! Yet, Moses knew that God would be faithful and honor his promises. My grandparents had that same assurance in God. They relied on the faithfulness of God and sought his wisdom in their everyday lives. When facing challenges or important decisions, we must seek God's wisdom! How? By seeking him through prayer, by meditating on his word, and by obeying the principles of scripture. He will teach us how to apply his truth to our lives and know the way of wisdom.

I am confident that my grandparents turned to God for every need in life and totally trusted his faithfulness. God loves us, so we don't have to worry about the future! After all, he loved us so much that he sent us his son to give us everlasting life!!

Prayer

Great is thy faithfulness, O God my Father. There is no shadow of turning with thee. Thou changest not; thy compassions they fail not. As thou hast been, thou forever wilt be. Great is thy faithfulness! Great is thy faithfulness! Morning by morning, new mercies I see. All I have needed thy hand hath provided. Great is Thy faithfulness, Lord unto me! AMEN.

November 30, 2021

Life Everlasting

for all who Believe

By Kenley Howe

Read: Revelation 22:12-16

The Lord's words have the power to warn anyone of what could happen in the future. These scripted truths warn us to repent for our sins and turn toward God before it is too late. These prophecies are also an encouragement to one that is living for the Lord. When the Lord finally reveals himself in this chapter, it is through his shed blood that humanity is redeemed, and through him is life everlasting for all who believe. The day is fast approaching when Jesus will come down from the clouds as that bright morning star, to gather those who have been born again. On the day of the Lord, Jesus will come again to bring his people into his presence.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, your plan of redemption is amazing, and we worship and praise you for your goodness and grace to the children of humanity. Thank you that you sent the Lord Jesus to be born into the human race so that by faith in him, we may be transferred from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of your dear son. Thank you for revealing your plans and purposes through the holy scriptures, and for purposing that the eternal son should be the perfect man, to die and rise again for our sake. As we wait for the return of Jesus, keep us focused on you, so that we may live and work to your praise and glory. In Jesus' name we pray, AMEN.



December 1, 2021

Looking for *the Signs*

By Ann LaFar



Read: Luke 11:29-32

In Luke 11:29-32, Jesus is speaking to people in the crowd who were doubters and were looking for proof of his divinity. The crowd pressed him with the expectation that he was going to show them a sign from heaven. But Jesus refused, instead telling them that they were an evil race of men. The signs were already there. Jesus performed miracles every day. And yet, their hearts were not open to see the signs. Because they persisted in doubt and did not turn toward Christ, they have proven themselves unworthy.

At an earlier time in my life, there was darkness and doubt in my spiritual life. The Gospel of Jesus was there, but my fallibility prevented me from seeing the true light of the Gospel. The greatest sign was there and it should have been the only sign I needed.

Jesus sacrificed for me and rose from the dead. That validates who he is in my mind and validates everything he teaches us. What that means is, if we believe in him, and long to be united with him, we need to center Christ as the person around whom our life revolves.

We do not need more proof. Lack of proof is not the problem. The problem is that we cannot see because our hearts are still in the darkness. If we use our spiritual awareness and have faith in Jesus, we can see the signs that are already there.

Prayer

Lord Jesus, as we turn to you in prayer, we trust and believe in your desire to give us grace. Please forgive us for our sins and doubts and help us to see things more clearly. Lord give us the courage to reject evil. Help us to trust the signs of your love. Help us to become the best servants we can be and become Christ-like examples of your constant love. Lord, please bless all families in our community and let them know your joy, peace, and everlasting love. AMEN.

December 2, 2021

Paul's Chains

Advance the Gospel

By Frances Henry

Read: Philippians 1:12-18a

I chose this Bible verse because it spoke to me. Paul is in prison and relaying a message to the Philippians to assure them that he is okay. He wants them to know he is in chains for Christ and that he is conveying that news to anyone who will listen. Paul could complain about his state, but he takes the high road and chooses to let people know that his difficult situation is still helping to advance the Gospel in many ways. When I read this, I feel like Paul is trying to maintain a positive attitude, in spite of his imprisonment, for the sake of others. He tells them that he is reaching the prison guards and changing their hearts.

Paul's imprisonment, and his response to it, is like the saying, "when life gives you, lemons make lemonade." His response of "I'm okay" gives others the courage to continue to preach the word of God fearlessly. Paul also lets them know that he knows there are people preaching the Gospel not from the heart, but from envy and rivalry with him. His response is, if it furthers the Gospel, he is fine with it. Paul is fully committed to spreading the Good News in every circumstance.

One of my favorite words around Advent and Christmastime is Joy. I have three candle holders that spell it out. Dr. Thomas White, the President of Cedarville University, gave a lesson on this scripture to his students. He said that Paul's attitude of "JOY", Jesus first, others second (serving others), and you last (selfless, not selfish), shows others his commitment to the Gospel and the people.

Prayer

Dear Lord, during the Advent season, please help us to use our actions, during both the good times and difficult times in our lives, to show our faith in you. Then, help us encourage others to do the same boldly. Please show us the true joy of putting Jesus first, serving others, and acting selfless, not selfish. AMEN.



December 3, 2021

The Gift *of Light*

By Warren Quarles



Read: Luke 1:68-79

In Zechariah's prophesy, we learn of the coming of our Savior, Jesus Christ, who will save the world and redeem us of our sins, just as the holy prophets shared long ago. What a magnificent gift!

It is during this season of Advent that we prepare a renewed place for Christ in our hearts and in our homes, continuing to tell of his splendors as our Lord and Savior. We are especially grateful to have been brought out of the darkness and into his light, regaling his magnificent glory. What a gift indeed!

As we journey through Advent, pause and remember all of the ways God has touched you and brought you into the light. Reflect on his love for us and his great sacrifice for our salvation. In doing so, may we all find renewed faith and strength to accomplish all that God has planned for us, as well as a deepened gratitude for the gift of Jesus.

Prayer

Dear Lord, we come to you this day with grateful praise for ALL that you have done for us. Help us to stay focused this Advent on your wonderful gift to us and help us to be better servants to you. AMEN.

December 4, 2021

Lighting the Way *to the Future*

By Charles Davenport

Read: Luke 1:68-70

In Luke 1:68-70, Zechariah, the High Priest, speaks concerning the fate of his son, John. John will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give the knowledge of salvation to all who believe, and to guide the people's feet in the way of peace. This is all we hear of John until he appears in the wilderness clothed in camel skin and munching on locusts and wild honey. In the wilderness, John will urge his Jerusalem neighbors to repent, believe, and be baptized. In the meantime, he prepared himself to accomplish all that his father had foretold he would do.

Memory must have been important to John in those early days in the wilderness. John must have been sustained by the collective memory of the Jewish faith as he mused on his future mission. The call story of his early childhood informed his ability to embrace his mission "to prepare the way for the Lord." John has rightly been called "a blast from the past that lighted the way to God's future."

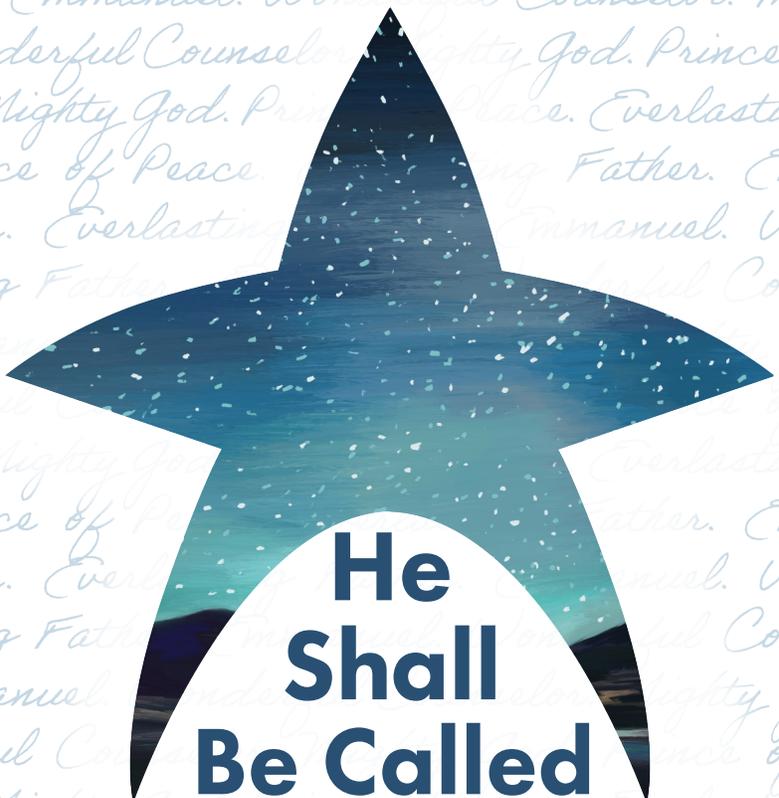
Memory is important in matters of faith, as our memories inform our ability to articulate our faith. Zechariah in his prophecy remembered God's covenant. With the coming of the Messiah and John's birth as a foretaste of the good news, Zechariah knew of God's deliverance and mercy. Here in two people, Jesus and John, would be living proof that God kept his promise that there would be a new day when all would know God's love through Jesus Christ.

During these days of Advent, we have the opportunity to remember God's covenant and his special guidance in our lives. God comes to earth, in the person of Christ, to comfort the lonely, heal the afflicted, and rise up those who are poor and oppressed. Let us remember God's gracious promises to us.

Prayer

Blessed is our Lord and our God. You have visited us and redeemed us through your son Jesus Christ. We give thanks that we are numbered among your covenant people and pray that we might be worthy of this most costly of gifts. Let us not forget the extent and cost of your love for us. Help us proclaim your peace to our world. AMEN.





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Mighty God

“When he saw Jesus, he fell down before him and shouted at the top of his voice, ‘What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me’ for Jesus had commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man.”

Luke 8:28-29

December 5, 2021

The Proclamation *of John the Baptist*

By Ellie Shine

Read: Luke 3:1-6

It is very important to be regular in attending worship, to pray, to be a cheerful giver, to share our time, talents, and treasure. But, these things mean absolutely nothing unless we have a personal relationship with Jesus.

John wants us to understand this relationship when he says “proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins,” in verse three. Baptism was a powerful sign of this renewal with Christ.

Repentance has two sides: turning away from sin and turning toward God. Unless we do both, we have not repented. We cannot say we believe in Christ and then live as we choose.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, we thank you for this Season of Advent. Please help us focus on the hope that Jesus brings us in the power of the Holy Spirit. Father, we ask for your guidance with our repentance as we prepare for the Lord to come into our lives again and as we joyfully celebrate his birth into the world. Help us to expect a renewal of our relationship with Christ during Advent.

Lord, may we all experience your joy in this coming Christmas season.

In Jesus' name we pray, AMEN.



December 6, 2021

Even Better Than *You Dreamed*

By Richard Rankin



Read: Psalm 126

Advent is the first season of the Christian calendar, leading up to Christmas and including the four preceding Sundays. It is a time of expectancy and hopefulness as we await Christmas day to celebrate Christ's coming into the world as a real baby, born in Bethlehem, at a real time more than 2000 years ago. Christ's entry into the world and into our lives is a constant source of comfort and joy. The Old Testament psalmist foresaw a time of similar joy, laughter, and redemption happening in Jerusalem. A time when tears were turned into "shouts of joy." When the fortunes of the people of Israel would overflow just as spring rains replenished the Negeb Desert's bone-dry gullies. The psalmist imagined and anticipated a time so overwhelmingly wonderful that it seemed like waking from a marvelous dream, only to find that things were even better than the dream!

Christmas makes the psalmist's vision real. It is the perfect fulfillment of the psalmist's hope. "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son." God himself, as Jesus Christ, has entered our world. The Christ child has become our brother who identifies completely with our personal struggles and pain. The Christ child has become our Savior who rescues and returns us to abundant and eternal life. Not only has God reclaimed "the fortunes of Zion," God has restored the fortunes of the universe! "Joy to the world, the Lord has come! Let earth receive her King!" This is no dream. Through Jesus Christ, God has restored us beyond our greatest hopes and dreams. Christ is reconciling us to God and guaranteeing abundant living now and forever. Advent signals the arrival of the perfect one who came into the world to save us! "Repeat the sounding joy!"

Prayer

Loving God, thank you for the ways you repeat the sounding joys of Jesus in our daily lives. For your desire to be our God we pray to have the strength and courage to be your faithful people this Advent season. AMEN.

December 7, 2021

The Wild Hope *of Christmas*

By Geof Planer

Read: Luke 21:25-36

I love listening to music and enjoy a fairly wide variety of genres. My favorite time for listening is around 6:00 in the morning, just before sunrise, when the world around me is still mostly quiet. Classical music is my choice at that hour.

Whether it's the contemplative calm of a Gregorian chant or the on-rushing sweep of a Bach concerto, in listening, I feel that if God is anywhere, he is most certainly with those whose music so enriches my life...but then I know he is also most certainly with that morning biscuit maker at Hardees...just as he must also be with that teacher I see with her class on the playground at the school just across the street from my office.

Contemplating this reality, I begin to see that it is a small step from "God with them" to "God with us"... as in the Advent hymn, "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel."

In our scripture meditation, Luke envisions the chaotic world into which the Son of Man comes. For me this day, however, I think Frederick Buechner says it best:

"What keeps the wild hope of Christmas alive year after year in a world notorious for dashing all hopes is the haunting dream that the child who was born that day may yet be born again even in us..."

Prayer

O Lord, even as we await the celebration of your birth in a manger, may your Spirit be born yet again this day in our hearts. AMEN.



December 8, 2021

Those who Sow *in Tears*

By Cynthia Anderson



Read: Psalm 126

It was April 2015 when we received the bitter diagnosis of cancer. The numbness Ed and I felt as the doctor spoke, “it’s bad, it’s aggressive and it has to come out.” We cried, we worried, and we prayed. Quickly, we began to realize that we needed to lean on God to take the wheel. This was a reminder that we were not in control and needed to give our worries over to God. We learned that another church member had been through the same diagnosis, surgery, and treatment. He was willing to share his experience so, at least, my husband would know what he would be facing. His reassurance was a Godsend and helped us to be hopeful for a healthy outcome. Surgery and recovery came and went followed by 38 straight days of radiation. Ed focused on his health, continuing his workout regimen, while I worked on healthy food options and a positive attitude. On August 19, 2015, my husband rang the “all clear cancer bell” at the hospital. We were surrounded by family and friends. I was so touched by the support, encouragement, and all the prayers we received. God had turned our time of trouble and tears into joy and laughter as the bell rang.

About a year later, Ed was delivering flowers and happened to have a delivery to a friend of ours. Jennie met Ed at the door with her usual big bear hug, but Ed noticed something a little different and asked if everything was okay. She and her husband had just received the same bitter cancer diagnosis. Ed asked if they were willing to sit down for a few minutes to talk and Jennie and her husband agreed. Just as Ed had been given reassurance, he was now providing that to Jennie’s husband. I still get cold chills today thinking of how God put Ed there that day to share his experience and to provide encouragement. Blessings abound even when we are blind to them. Just as in scripture, joy, laughter, and spiritual growth come after we sow in tears. As bad as the cancer diagnosis was, it was also a blessing to our family. It brought us closer for our journey with our Lord and Savior!!

Prayer

Dear Heavenly Father, this Advent season and always, may we remember your blessings of hope and joy, even amidst our times of trouble. Help us to see through the tears to know that joy and laughter are soon to come. AMEN.

December 9, 2021

Surely God *is My Salvation*

By Tom Watson

Read: Isaiah 12:2-6

It is during this Advent season that we celebrate our faith at the manger. I ask for a moment of personal privilege: I have spent my business life in the insurance industry. I have put my faith life in this church. As I consider the intersection of these two aspects of my life, I have come to know there is no insurance except the assurance of Jesus Christ. His promising love for even me is my hope and yours.

Friends, with me, look at every image of Advent and Christmas and think of it as a reminder in this holy season that Jesus is mine and yours.

Prayer

Dear Father, thank you for the greatest story ever told and certainly the best insurance policy ever written, the one of assurance in our salvation. AMEN.



December 10, 2021

Listen for the Cries *of Those in Need*

By Hayley and Lee Nester



Read: Amos 6:1-8

Wow, seems like current day America is in need of Amos to come and spread this same message. As an affluent nation, we have become extremely SELF-righteous. Should we be proud of our accomplishments and hard work? Absolutely! But there is a fine line between being proud and becoming complacent and unconcerned, just like the Israelites in today's passage.

In the world today, it is so easy to flaunt your wealth, whether on Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, or Snapchat. Who can post the most expensive car, the fanciest vacation, the biggest house, or the newest pair of shoes? We are so engrossed by our material success; we neglect and ignore the cries for help all around us. Like the Israelites, America classifies affluence as importance and this misconception locks us in a dark box of comfort and ease. It is apparent we have the time, talents, and treasures, so let us break away from flaunting our own material wealth, and instead, use it to carry out God's work.

We challenge you, not just during the Christmas season, but year-round to break away from the Israelites' way of life. Enjoy your success, but also find a way to extend that wealth of your accomplishments to those in need. The expensive car posted on Snapchat could deliver food for Meals on Wheels each month. The beautiful house posted on Twitter could host a youth event. Those brand-new shoes posted on Instagram would serve as a trendy, comfortable base to pack hundreds of meals for Rise Against Hunger. I challenge you to break out of the box, listen for the cries of those in need, align your priorities, and use your gifts to alleviate the pain of the ones who need help the most.

Prayer

Dear Heavenly Father, we pray that we can break out of the box and use our blessings to bless the ones who need it the most. Help shift us from a place of ease and comfort to one of active engagement outside of our comfort zone. Be with us as we think about boasting our material success and remind us of the cries all around so that our apathy will be replaced with empathy, love, and kindness. AMEN.

December 11, 2021

A Song of *Thanksgiving*

By Claude Hathcock

Read: Isaiah 12:1-6

The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary discusses a distinction that occurs in Hebrew but not in the English translation of the phrase, "in that day you will say," that occurs in verses 1 and 4 of today's scripture. In Hebrew, the "you" in verse 1 is second person singular while the "you" in verse 4 is second person plural. Therefore, the first part speaks to an individual, while the second part speaks to a community of believers.

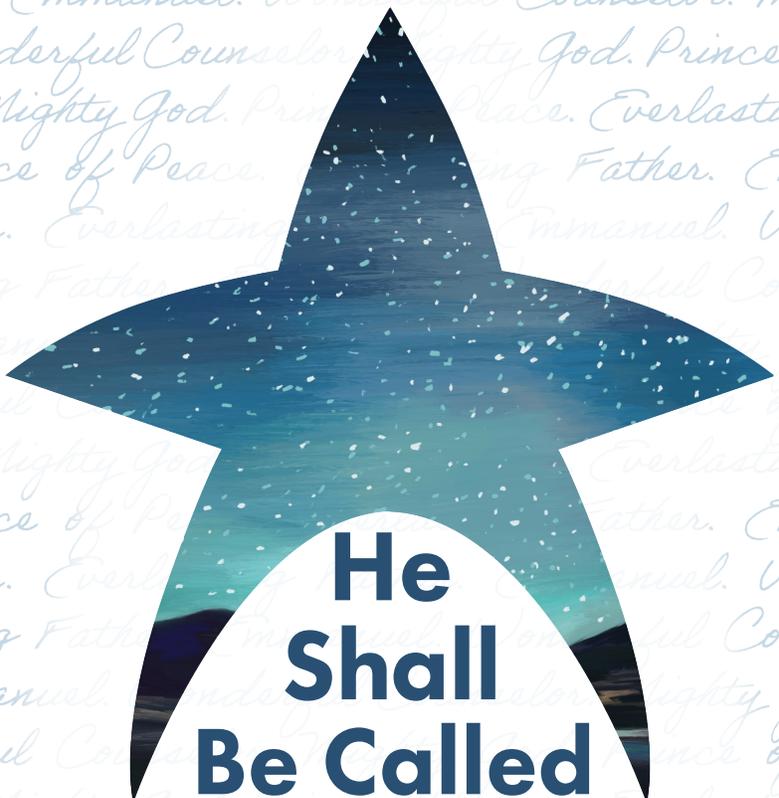
The prophet's use of "in that day" points to a future time where the current woes being suffered no longer exist and thereby gives hope to individuals who are feeling the punishment that was the result of their sins. They are grateful and sing praises to the God who had justly punished them but is also the same God who will be the source of abundant salvation. Furthermore, they will together proclaim God's greatness to the world with joyous praise.

As Christians, we believe "that day" has come with the birth, death, and resurrection of our Lord, Jesus Christ. Let us use this time to reflect on the salvation that has come to us individually due to this wonderful birth that we are celebrating. Let us joyously unite each other with songs of praise to our great and loving God and share that love with others.

Prayer

Dear Heavenly Father, thank you for the precious gift of salvation that you lovingly gave through your son, Jesus. May we show your great love throughout Gastonia and beyond. AMEN.





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Everlasting Father

**“Do you not believe that I am
in the Father and the Father is in
me? The words that I say to you I
do not speak on my own; but the
Father who dwells in me does his
works.”**

John 14:10

December 12, 2021

What is in *a Name?*

By Tom Efird

Read: Luke 1:57-66

Luke's Gospel contains the most detailed account of the Christmas story. In it we find a whole cast of characters in addition to Mary and Joseph. Among those characters are Elizabeth and her husband, the priest Zechariah. Their story is told in parallel with the story of Mary and Joseph. Elizabeth is a kinswoman of Mary and the Angel Gabriel comes to both women with the good news that they are to bear sons. Mary is astonished by the news because she is not married. Elizabeth is astonished because she has been childless into her old age.

In both cases, the angel gives specific instructions as to the name each child is to be given. Zechariah is told, "your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son and you are to give him the name, John" (Lk.1:13.) Likewise, Mary is told "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you will give him the name Jesus" (Lk 1:30.)

Names are important, especially to the ancient Hebrews where each name has a meaning. I recall when Anne and I were naming our children, we wanted to convey the importance of our faith and the importance of family. Our sons have continued the tradition, so now we have in our immediate family three Davids, two Thomases, two Marys, two Elizabeths, two Annes, and one Timothy.

The name "John" means "God is gracious" or "the Lord is Merciful." The Angel foretold that John would make the people prepared for the coming of the Lord. Meanwhile, the name "Jesus" means "Yahweh is salvation" or "God Saves." The Angel Gabriel promised Mary that Jesus would be called the Son of the Most High.

May we be reminded of the importance of that name above all names this Advent season.

Prayer

Gracious God, the very name of Jesus tells us of his mission if we will but listen. The scriptures prepared us to receive Emmanuel, God with us. Allow us to contemplate, as Mary did, the wonders of the Christmas event. In Jesus' holy name we pray. AMEN.



December 13, 2021

The Other *Babe*

By Cookie Brenner



Read: Luke 3:10-15

It is Christmas, and examples of the Christmas Nativity scene, filled with familiar personalities, abound. From the Anri hand-carved Italian gift in our Memorial Gallery, to the pop-ups in Walmart books, we recognize these figures.

I count nine figures, sort of: Mary, Joseph, shepherds, curiously grazing sheep in the middle of winter and, of course, the glamorously attired wise men. (Biblically, there are three gifts, not three wise men.) The cattle (unsure of the number), are lowing and a magnificent angel is hovering over the usually wretched home of the animals. Each of these characters has come to herald the birth of the babe.

There is another babe, probably six months old by now, whose life is a ghost in the Christmas pageant. But his life becomes central to Jesus' kinship, to Jesus' proclamation of divinity, and to the affirmation of Christ's message. This babe is Elizabeth's child. Perhaps, he is Jesus' second cousin. This babe is John, later known as John the Baptist. In our scripture today, the babe, John, appears as a man from the wilderness preaching a call to repentance. He has a sure resolve in Jesus' divinity.

In Luke's scripture today (which has no other biblical parallel), the publicans, the soldiers, the multitudes to whom John is preaching ask:

"What shall we do... to achieve repentance and escape damnation?" John answers with two hallmarks of the Christmas season:

"Exact no more than that which is appointed you... Do violence to no man, neither accuse any falsely; and be content with your wages."

I wonder sometimes what John would have prayed from our Christmas carol catalogue. I think he may have prayed the following:

Prayer

Dear Father, let us go tell it on the mountain, over the hills and everywhere. Let us go tell it on the mountain, that Jesus Christ is Lord. AMEN.

December 14, 2021

For Unto Us *a Child is Born*

By Kay Brown

Read: Isaiah 9:6

In my prayers, I pray for PEACE....

between nations

for the lonely

for the sick

for the broken hearted

for the unhappy

for the anxious

When life feels heavy, it is only natural for things to seem out of control. We want calm in the midst of the storm. Yet, with each new day, we turn on the news and see another upsetting story unfolding halfway across the world... or even in our own backyards. The human need to somehow make sense of it all runs deep, even when the things that worry us are much bigger than ourselves and our ability to control them feels non-existent. But the power of prayer can be strong, whether we are facing inner turmoil, conflict at home, or anxiety about the state of the world around us.

As we think about the coming Christmas season; may we remember that God sent us his son so that we could receive salvation and have our prayers assured.

Prayer

O Lord, even as we await the celebration of your birth in a manger, may your spirit be born yet again this day in our hearts. AMEN.



December 15, 2021

Creation will be *at Peace*

By Bethany Jennings



Read: Isaiah 11:1-9

This past Sunday, December 12, the Sanctuary Choir and a few Sanctuary Ringers offered an anthem titled, “Creation Will Be at Peace” written by Anna Laura Page. The words of this anthem are the exact words of the scripture assigned to me for this devotional. A secular worldview may argue a simple irony but I believe the Holy Spirit is bringing me back to this scripture on purpose.

One encompassing theme in this passage is the promise of God’s peaceful kingdom. The wolf will lie down with the lamb, the cow and bear will feed, the leopard and goat will graze, and a little child will lead. Each given example is an impossible pairing and an unlikely occasion. The idea that conflict, war, and strife will be no more - absolutely gone - is beyond my comprehension. While conducting our anthem, each time the men’s voices join with the women’s voices on the phrase “In the holy mountain of the Lord, all war and strife will cease; in the holy mountain of the Lord, creation will be at peace,” my eyes brim and fill with tears - even during rehearsals! I think my tears come from a place of sadness knowing that conflict and strife are a part of our lives as a result of sin. But also, my tears come from a sincere place of gratefulness to God for loving me - loving all of us - enough to save us from our sin. I long for the second coming and our heavenly home.

Until then, let us cling to the hope and promise of a time when destructive forces and uncomfortable circumstances no longer exist.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, as we wait for a time when war and suffering will cease, we pray that our endeavors point toward your love and grace, and our lives serve as a living example of your goodness. Thank you for loving us enough to send your son! AMEN.

December 16, 2021

Christ's Presence

with Us

By Matt Smith

Read: Isaiah 11:1-9

We read in this passage from the prophet Isaiah about the coming of Christ: who Christ's forebears are, what righteous works he will do, and what peace shall come because of his presence and his mighty works. I think it would be fair to say that the first century Jewish folk were not expecting a tiny baby to fulfill the wisdom, understanding, counsel, might, and knowledge that Isaiah foretold. Nor did they expect many of the things that Jesus did in his life and death. But he did fulfill Isaiah's prophecies... in his unique Christlike way.

Christ often doesn't show up the way we think he's going to. Like the thief in the night that we read in Matthew 24 (my favorite book, for obvious reasons), we must be watchful for the signs that Christ is coming, and that Christ is present with us.

When your seven-year-old offers some of his candy to his school buddy, Christ's kindness is there. When your father-in-law helps repair your car, Christ's goodness is there. When your niece breaks her attention from her phone to give you a huge hug, Christ's love is there. When your friend admits they can't pay you back this month, Christ's humility is there. When a stranger stops to help change a tire, Christ's compassion is there. When a neighbor responds with a smile and hug when your daughter backs over their mailbox, Christ's gentleness is there. When your workout buddy whom you have neglected for months calls you out of the blue, Christ's honesty is there. When your wife stops to pray with the homeless man, Christ's prayerfulness is there.

In this season where the signs are usually Christmas trees, Nativity scenes, wreaths, sleigh bells, presents, and Santa, let's all look for those unexpected signs of Christ's presence with us. Look for Christ in everyone around you and I'll bet you'll see a bit of Isaiah's prophecy too.

Prayer

Holy Child of Bethlehem, reveal yourself to us in your unique and wonderful ways. Show us signs of your glory in others around us. Help us to live each day the way you taught us. Thank you for becoming one of us so that we might understand the Father's will. Jesus, we love you! AMEN.



December 17, 2021

Restore Us, *O God*

By Rev. Rachel Vogado



Read: Psalm 80:1-7

Sometimes reading psalms such as this one, in a season full of holiday cheer, warm glowing lights, and good tidings, can feel a little bit jarring. In a time when we are prayerfully anticipating Emmanuel, God with us, here we find ourselves with a psalm that gives a palpable description of suffering amidst God's absence. These days, I wonder which portion of the psalm is easier for you to proclaim- the first portion, which lifts up the power and majesty of God, or the second portion- which names the suffering of a people who feel such distance from the God that they worship.

The psalmist implores, on behalf of the people, for the Shepherding God to return to them, fulfilling the promise of care and protection. Not once, but twice the psalmist calls upon God, "Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved." It is proclaimed after declaring the power of God, and proclaimed again after it feels as if their powerful God has gone missing. I can fully appreciate the fact that the psalmist makes space for the full width and breadth of our faith and life experiences. There are times when we can robustly proclaim that God is good and stand in a place of deep assurance of God's presence with us. And yet, there are also times when we feel so far from God. The psalmist teaches us in this psalm that in both of those times, in the peaks and in the valleys of life, the refrain remains the same: Restore us, O God.

What does restoration look like for you this season? What, in the world around you, would you call upon God to restore? Where are the places in your life that you are longing for God to transform? However you find yourself this Advent season, whether proclaiming the goodness and power of God, or deeply yearning to feel God's presence, may God's face shine before you.

Prayer

Shepherding God, when we feel that you have hidden your face from us, open our eyes to your wonder and work ongoing in our lives. Raise our heads in expectation and open our hearts to your transformation. Restore us, O Holy One. Let your face shine until our tears are dried, our hope is restored, and we are made new. Amen.

December 18, 2021

Fond Memories *of Christmas*

By Laura Lineberger

Read: Hebrews 10:32-39

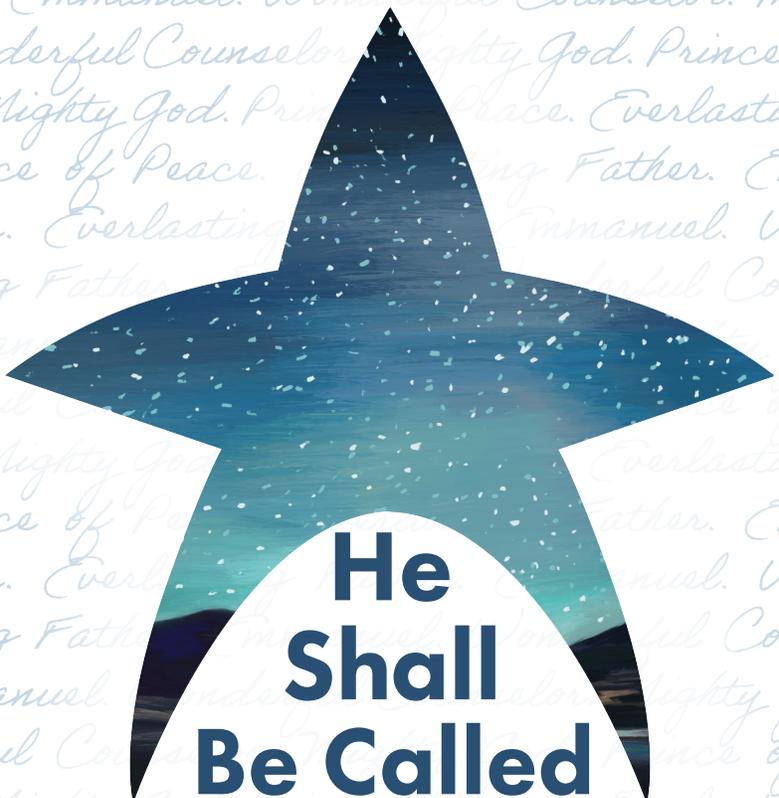
When I recall Christmas over the years, some of my fondest memories are the trips that we made to my grandparents' home in Hartwell, Georgia, every Christmas Day. Our family would open gifts in the early morning, and then pack up the car and travel there to celebrate with aunts, uncles, and cousins. As children, we did not complain about leaving our toys and presents because we knew what a special time we were going to have with our extended family. The fellowship that was shared on those Christmas Days brings back so many happy memories of a family whose faith was strong and enduring through the best and worst of times.

Today, our world is vastly different from those Christmas Days I remember as a child. Keeping a confident trust in the Lord, no matter what happens, is not easy. Some days it is really hard to live with patient endurance and continue to do God's will. Yet, if we do these things, we will receive all that God has promised. What a comforting joy it is to know that there are better things waiting for us in eternity and that our faith assures that our souls are saved.

Prayer

Loving God, please be with us as we celebrate the last week of Advent and the birth of the Christ child. Give us the perseverance to continue to do God's will and a faith that grows stronger as we receive the promise of salvation. AMEN.





**He
Shall
Be Called**

Prince of Peace

“Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels? But how then would the scriptures be fulfilled, which say it must happen in this way?”

Matthew 26:53-54

December 19, 2021

Longing for *the Light*

By Pat Glenn

Read: Psalm 80

As we all know, the holiday season is not universally one of comfort, joy, and good will toward humankind. For many, it is also a season filled with stress and depression caused by loneliness, grief, illness, or any of a million other causes.

On this last Sunday of Advent, the collision between the secular season of Christmas and the sacred calendar of the church reaches its zenith. Many Christians feel that we are living in a parallel universe that much of society is losing awareness of, except for the occasional Christmas carol on the car radio or a glimpse of the symbolic nativity scene at the neighborhood church.

Our scripture for today is a lament, Psalm 80, which offers a profound description of suffering caused by God's apparent absence. The psalm expresses a longing for God's face to turn toward us rather than away and to shine upon us with the light of God's grace.

Surely some of us might be feeling that same longing for the light of God's presence and grace at this time during Advent. This week, Jesus would advise us to brew a fresh pot of coffee, shake off that feeling of negativity, and alert ourselves to his arrival. The necessity of being awake, alert, and ready is the overriding theme of the Advent season. Let us all return to that hope and prepare ourselves for the celebration of Christ's birth.

Prayer

Our Heavenly Father, we know you are always present in our lives, but we are especially reminded of how important each of us is to you when we celebrate your ultimate gift to us, the birth of your son. May we each take time during this final busy week to reflect upon the significance of that gift and of this season. Help us to acknowledge its importance as the only gift that really matters. We ask this in the name of your son, AMEN.



December 20, 2021

A Surprise *Christmas Gift*

By Sabrina and Trey Robinson



Read: Luke 1:39-45

Our family was expectantly awaiting the birth of our second child who was due to be born in the middle of February. She had been prayed for and was already deeply loved. Her big brother even requested her from Santa! Of course, we tried to explain to him, three-and-a-half years old at the time, that she was coming but that the really special presents sometimes take longer. He told us, “No, she will be here in time for Christmas. I just know.” Twelve years ago on this very day, she made her grand entrance into the world - eight weeks early and weighing a whopping two-and-a-half pounds. As exciting as that was, it was the most frightening thing we had ever experienced. She was tiny and fragile in the neonatal intensive care unit. She spent Christmas and New Year’s, 28 days in all, in the NICU. She was a fighter from the beginning, though, pulling off her oxygen mask, because she did not need it. She also pulled out her feeding tube because she did not want it. She reached every milestone earlier than expected, and finally left the hospital on January 18, weighing four pounds. For those of you that know us, you know we like to be in control, but this whole experience really taught us the power of prayer. Through prayer as tenacious as our newborn daughter, our fears were replaced with peace and we celebrated a Christmas that we’ll never forget.

Prayer

Father, as we expectantly await the birth of the Christ child, let us set aside any fears that we have and focus on the one who makes all things possible - even a surprise gift wished for by a little boy. AMEN.

December 21, 2021

God Stoops *Down*

By Rev. Lauren Sease Vanacore

Read: Psalm 113:5-9

Psalm 113, a Psalm of Praise, comes to us at a time when we might need it the most: the longest night.* On December 21, due to the winter solstice, we witness less daylight, and more darkness, than any other day of the year. For many people, the lack of daylight and the longer nights can seem to exacerbate concerns or sadness we may already face in our daily lives.

The psalmist declares that God looks upon the heavens, but God also, and most especially, looks upon the earth. Particularly, God looks upon those who are poor and needy in body, mind, or spirit, and God lifts them up to sit among royalty. God brings the barren to a place of rejoicing. We are lifted up from our pit onto a peak, from our darkness into the light because, as one of my seminary professors, Rolf Jacobson, declares, “God stoops down.” While God is enthroned in heaven, “God is not content to be a distant, unmoved creator.”

It’s okay to acknowledge that some days are just difficult and that life can feel unstable and untrustworthy, even during a season that tells us we should be filled with joy all month long. God stoops down either way. Psalm 113 reminds us that, as we experience despair, God remains stable, God is trustworthy. Were it not so, God would not have desired to stoop down into humanity to become one of us in the form of an innocent infant boy, sent to redeem us and give us hope for the living of these days.

Like the psalmist, let us find ways, even though they may feel small or meager, to praise the Lord even on the longest of nights.

**The Longest Night: A Service of Hope will take place in FPC’s Chapel at 6:00 p.m. this evening. Livestream also available at www.fpcgastonia.org/livestream.*

Prayer

Loving God, tenderly stoop down to us today and enfold us with your love and grace. Thank you that you are not a distant God, but one who wants to be intimately involved in the lives of your children. Even on the longest days, Lord, support us and grant us your peace. AMEN.



December 22, 2021

Swelling with *Happiness*

By Rev. Dr. Joan Martin



Read: Luke 1:46-56

God blessed Mary in a most extraordinary way. God set her apart, made her holy and special and held in high esteem. She is to become the mother of GOD! In this passage, we see Mary respond with joy and thanksgiving. “My soul magnifies the Lord.” Her heart swells with happiness. She dedicates her life to the honor of God.

In her Magnificat that follows, Mary speaks about the marvelous aspects and attributes of God. She expresses that God is steadfast in his love and loyalty - year after year, generation after generation. God is grand and good in so many ways, overflowing with love and compassion. God resides with those who are poor, taken advantage of, who are hungry. God seems to side with those who need him most.

The beauty of this passage is that God takes a lowly girl and gives her great responsibility. Mary quickly acknowledges that. The weight and the future of the entire world rests upon what she is about to undertake. She accepts this with great grace and self-confidence. But, she recognizes that she cannot do this without the love, guidance, and power of God. She tells herself (and us) how it is right and proper for her to place all of her trust in him. And how it is right and proper for US to place all of our trust in him as well.

By lifting Mary up, God lifts us up as well. Many of us can identify with Mary in this situation. We, at times, feel lowly, hungry, or taken advantage of. And yet, we, like Mary, give thanks for God’s grace and mercy and respond by sharing what we can.

Mary shows us that God loves his followers beyond measure and that through him, our hearts, too, can swell with happiness. We too, can and should give our lives in honor to God.

Prayer

Lord, help us to love you with hearts that swell with joy and amplify your goodness and mercy, much like Mary. We are grateful for all that you have provided in our lives. Allow us to give all that we are and all that we have to your honor and glory. In Jesus’ name we pray, AMEN.

December 23, 2021

A Humble and Willing Servant

By Jan and Rick Jones

Read: Luke 1:46-55

We spend weeks in December shopping, wrapping, and decorating for Christmas. However, before we know it, December 25th has come and gone. For most of us, it's like we experience this kind of joy and thankfulness only during the Advent season.

Mary sang a beautiful song of praise and thanksgiving to God. She knew the reality of the challenges that lie ahead. She and her family were likely to experience severe scrutiny for her being pregnant and unwed!

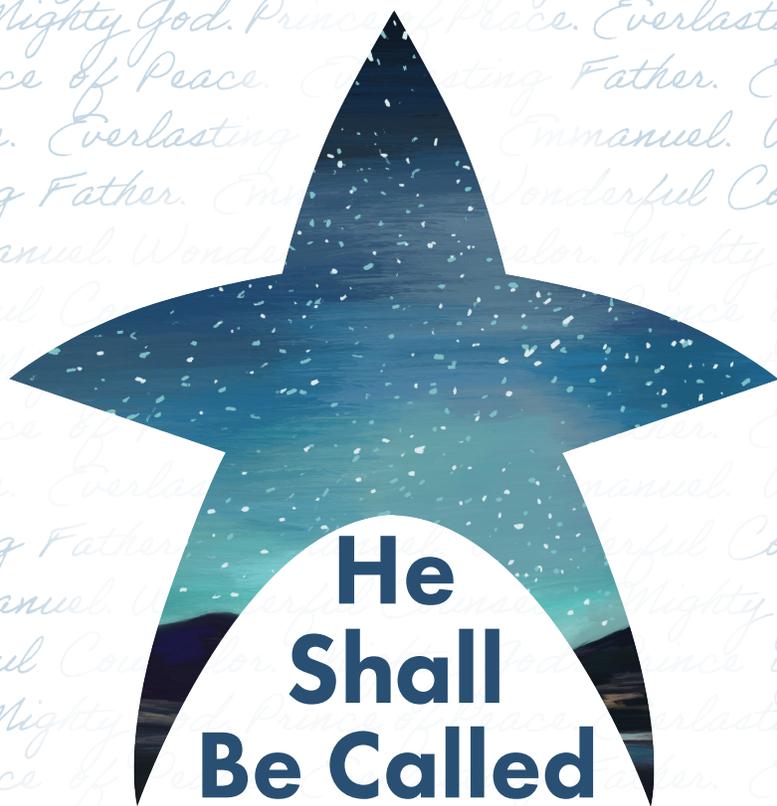
However, Mary was a humble and willing servant, thankful that God had chosen her for the most important role, the mother of our Savior.

Maybe we should seek to be more like be like Mary, a humble servant, accepting the gifts that God has given, and using them for his glory. How can we do this? Meditate on scripture and let it embed in our hearts. Then, go out into the world sharing God's gifts and reflecting his love in our daily interactions with others.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, when we consider your servant Mary, what we see is a humility and obedience that is so often lacking in our own lives. Let us consider the one through whose body you entered this world and may she remind us of the meaning of humility and help grant us a confidence of faith that knows your promises to us are always fulfilled. Lord, we ask that you would enable us to grasp this scripture, to understand it, and embrace it as truth for our lives, not just during the Christmas season but throughout the year. In Christ name, AMEN.





**He
Shall
Be Called**

Emmanuel

**"She will bear a son, and
you are to name him Jesus,
for he will save his people
from their sins."**

Matthew 1:21

December 24, 2021

Nativity of *the Lord*

By Charlie Grissom

Read: Isaiah 9:6

It was in the late 1990s and I was working for an exceptionally large transportation company who delivers roughly 25 million packages per day during December. Living in the South, we generally do not get hit with a major snowstorm in December. This year was different. It was not a blizzard, but it began snowing on December 19 and before you know it, things were a mess. All departments at the company were tasked with delivering packages and helping get areas “cleaned up.” I was assigned to work from Asheville – Arden. The incentive being that it would have to be done in order to go home for Christmas.

Beneath this stoic exterior for me is a person who, from time to time, feels sorry for himself. We worked from 2:00 a.m. until 10:00 p.m. every day, delivering packages. I say all of this so that you can see what led to me not liking Christmas.

Well, Christmas Eve rolls around. They sent me with a man named Jack to Weaverville to deliver packages. We wind up a hill through the snow to a small house with smoke coming out of the chimney. Jack stacked the six boxes up and together we walked another 150 yards, through the snow, to the house.

As I rounded the corner to the porch, the door swung open, and I could see three young children inside. The lady said, “Praise God. That is our Christmas.” I was speechless. That was Christmas. The children’s eyes were filled with wonder.

Suddenly, there was no dreary snow, no feeling sorry. God hit me with the tornado after tweaking me up that unmarked pathway to this house.

I made it home for Christmas. They let us go after Jack and I returned. I was in one great mood. Suddenly, “I’m Dreaming of a White Christmas,” didn’t set me off and “Merry Christmas” was a great phrase again, because the Prince of Peace had spoken that day.

Prayer

O Lord, even as we await the celebration of your birth in a manger, may your Spirit be born yet again this day in our hearts. AMEN.



December 25, 2021

Jesus is Well Worth *the Wait*

By Rev. Daniel J. Commerford



Read: Psalm 97 and Luke 2:1-7

Some of my fondest memories growing up are from Christmas morning. After spending the night at my grandparents' house on Christmas Eve, all the children would wake up on Christmas Day and make their way to the bottom step of the main stairway (just out of sight of the living room that was full of presents). Once everyone was awake, we would burst into the living room and open our presents together. At the time, those moments on the steps were not pleasant because I was so anxious to give and receive my gifts. But as I look back, I treasure that time of anticipation because I now know the joy that always followed. It was well worth the wait!

From the time of their first exile to Jesus' birth, Israel waited nearly 500 years for God to answer their prayers for a savior. They expected a political or military leader who would liberate Israel from its oppressors and restore peace for all the Israelites. Instead, God gave them something better. God's answer was Emmanuel, God with us! God's plan fulfilled in Jesus was not only to restore peace for Israel, but for all humanity. With the birth of Jesus, we know God's desire that everyone on earth be restored and given peace. Jesus was well worth the wait!

As God's children who proclaim Jesus' birth, death, and resurrection, we are able to wait through the season of Advent because of the joy we know that follows. With his life, Jesus showed us how to embrace and share God's restorative love. With his death and resurrection, we are liberated from the oppression of sin and death and restored to new life with God that will last for eternity. What joy! With that confidence, we wait for Christ's return. Our Advent never ends until Jesus comes again. In the meantime, we wait with hopeful anticipation while celebrating what Christ has already given us. Knowing the joy of God's promises that have and will be fulfilled, Jesus is well worth the wait!

Prayer

Lord, thank you for revealing your love in Jesus Christ, whom you gave to us on Christmas morning. Help us celebrate his birth and proclaim his resurrection until the day he comes again. AMEN.

Merry Christmas!

First Presbyterian Church

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Calendar of Events for Advent

Sunday, December 19: One Service in the Sanctuary at 11:00 a.m. featuring the Carolina Brass

Tuesday, December 21: *The Longest Night: A Service of Hope* at 6:00 p.m. in the Chapel

Friday, December 24: Children's Christmas Eve Service at 11:00 a.m. in the Chapel
Christmas Eve Candlelight Service at 5:00 p.m. in the Sanctuary
Christmas Eve Candlelight Service at 11:00 p.m. in the Chapel

Sunday, December 26: Combined Service of Carols at 10:00 a.m. in the Sanctuary

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