

Adages of  
*Advent*



Daily Devotions for the 2022 Advent Season  
from First Presbyterian Church of Gastonia



Dear FPC Family,

I don't know about you, but life has seemed to speed back to normal this year. After enduring multiple years of disruption, the world is again open for business. With all that business comes the busyness of starting everything again from scratch. All of the activities we love and commitments we used to make are vying for our attention again. As we approach this time of year, the hustle and bustle of the holiday season only seems to add to that sense of calamity.

Amidst the noisy chatter of our busy world, God is at work, continuously speaking to us words of life. We know these words because of Jesus Christ, God's Son, the Savior of the world given to us on Christmas morning. In him, the depth, strength, and power of God's love is shown to all humanity. Above all the messages we hear, it is the words of Jesus revealing God's love that can best guide us through every season.

In Advent, we anticipate the arrival of our Savior. Carrying our hopes and fears, we approach God with a sense of wonder, proclaiming the journey leads us to the gift of Jesus Christ. As we observe Advent together, I invite you to use these reflections to navigate you this season. Through the words written by your brothers and sisters here at church, may you hear clearly the many ways God says, "I love you" as we make our way to Christmas Day together.

Advent Blessings,

Pastor Dan



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

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*Cover art by Caleb Hayes.*

*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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November 27, 2022

# THE TIME IS UNKNOWN

By Matt Smith

## Read Matthew 24:36-44

We hear the near-constant warnings on our watches, and every fifteen minutes Westminster echoes through the landscape. Then all of the sudden, the hour gongs, jarring us into awareness, reverberating through every inch of our physiology. Another mark closer to an event. Another smidgen nearer to a meeting. Another step towards the bed. Another parcel of time simultaneously gifted and taken. Have we been productive by the coming of the next tick? Have we prepared enough by each chime? Are our affairs in order when the gong sounds?

I imagine some people in Noah's era were not even aware they needed to be ready for a flood. Joseph and Mary's contemporaries had centuries of prophecies, yet most of them weren't ready for the Messiah. How long have we known that Christ will come again? Yet we continue in our human drownings, our tunnel-visionary goals. God sent the flood at a time unknown to humans (except one family). God sent Jesus at exactly the right time (and for this we celebrate in this season!). But let's not rest in our faith simply because we know the end of the story!

Each Monday to Saturday, the staff here at FPC Gastonia are busy planning, rehearsing, writing, creating, printing, saving and emailing so that we are prepared for our Sunday morning worship gatherings. We know when 8:55 and 11:00 are coming. But there's often an internet glitch, a soloist who is sick, a handbell that gets dropped or a guitar string that breaks. But we can be ready for these unknowns through education, communication and preparation. The same is true for our faith. God has promised that Jesus Christ will come again to earth at a time unknown to us. Pray, teach, worship, share, love your neighbor, feed God's sheep. "Therefore, stay alert! You don't know what day the Lord is coming." The time is unknown, but the event will be glorious!

## Prayer

Jesus, we look to the examples of the past and we humbly wait for you.



November 28, 2022

# PATIENCE

By Hayley Nester

## Read Psalm 40

I could dissect and write pages on this Psalm, but for now I'll stick with what stood out to me as soon as I began reading it.

David begins Psalm 40 with, "I waited patiently for the LORD; and he inclined unto me, and heard me cry." The Psalm continues to note that while David was waiting, he was in a "horrible pit of the miry clay." David described he felt like he was trapped in a deep hole of noise and tumult with no rest or escape. Because David was patient with the Lord and trusted in him, God brought David out of the clay pit and placed his feet on solid rock.

Patience, such an easy word to say, but such a hard word to practice. It seems now a days that many people have lost their patience card. Whether at the grocery store, driving to work, or going through the drive thru for a quick meal, everyone is in a constant rush to get to the "next thing."

While we all need to work on practicing patience in our everyday lives, we also need to be patient with the Lord. Have you ever wanted Him to hear you so bad it hurt? You pray and pray and pray for days and you feel like you get nowhere? Your patience runs paper thin, and you eventually give up? I know I have!

When you feel like you are in the horrible pit of miry clay, remember what David declares in Psalm 40 and wait patiently for the Lord. Your wait may feel long and dark, and you may feel like you are hanging on by a thread, but he will hear your cry and lift you back up on solid ground. Trust in the Lord and be blessed.

## Prayer

Dear Lord, please help us find patience, not only in our day to day activities but also as we are crying out to you for help. Help us remember that even when we are immersed in the pit of wet clay, as long as we put our full trust in you, we will be blessed. Amen.



November 29, 2022

# FORGET EMPTINESS AND HOLD FAST TO GOD'S PROMISES

By Sarah Sumner



Read Isaiah 1:21-31; 1 Thess. 2:1-12;

Luke 20:9-18; Psalm 85

These verses in Isaiah, Thessalonians, and Luke are not the feel-good moments of Christ's birth and celebration. They lay out the darkness and brokenness of the world before a savior. "See how the faithful city has become a prostitute! She once was full of justice; righteousness used to dwell in her— but now murderers!" (Isaiah 1:21). They tell of each of us seeking our own ways through empty delights and forsaking justice. "You will be ashamed because of the sacred oaks in which you have delighted; you will be disgraced because of the gardens that you have chosen." (Isaiah 1:29). How often have we chosen to look for fulfillment in something only to realize what we thought was valuable just creates a wider chasm of longing for more empty things? Where are the places in our lives we treat as valuable when others are without?

But the light is coming. We can hope with conviction because the beauty of the gospel is that God's promises are steadfast. "He promises peace to his people" (Psalm 85:8) and brings to mind another time he gave peace to the earth: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!" (Luke 2:14) when the multitude of angels proclaimed Christ's birth. These verses proclaim the light. We are called to seek justice for those who are needy and forget our selfishness. Christ is coming. A savior is coming. Redemption is coming. Let us hold fast to God's promises as we journey through this season of waiting.

## Prayer

Lord, turn our minds to You. Help us forget the things that are empty and hold fast to your promises. Help us be faithful stewards of the areas of the world we have influence over. Let us live lives worthy of You (1 Thessalonians 2:12), encouraging each other to pursue goodness, justice, and faithfulness. In this time of excess food, gifts, and comfort, help us minister to those who are hungry, orphaned, and needy. In Christ's name, Amen.

November 30, 2022

# 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.



December 1, 2022

# A DIFFERENT KIND OF GIFT THIS YEAR

By Matt Miller

## Read 1 Thessalonians 3:1-13

Every year, I struggle with ideas for Christmas presents for my loved ones. It is so stressful because I want to buy the right gift for each person so they understand that I love and care for them; however, I know that Christ calls us to show our love in so many more important ways than a new sweater or a pair of earrings.

In Thessalonians, we learn that Paul was banned from Thessalonica. During his trip there, he had brought the Gospel of Christ to the people and any of them had abandoned their idol-worship to serve the living and true God. Paul was gravely concerned about how these new Christians would be able to grow in faith without his support and guidance. Paul expressed his great desire to be with those of Thessalonica because of his deep love for them.

Thessalonians 3:12 states “May the Lord make you increase and abound in love toward another, and toward all men, even as we do toward you.” He was desperate that he sent Timothy to check on them and help strengthen their faith. Paul had a selfless love for these new Christian and worried for their spiritual growth.

Love makes us desire to be close to those whom we care for. We are concerned for them. We want to be present with them and offer guidance and support when needed. To love selflessly like Christ, we also need the passion to strengthen the faith of our loved ones. We are charged with helping them learn the Biblical principles that will allow them to live victoriously for Christ, to give thanks to God in every situation, and to be led by the Holy Spirit. Selfless love will also move us to pray for them. This kind of praying needs to be frequent and fervent just as Paul said in verse 10: “night and day praying exceedingly that we might see your face, and might perfect that which is lacking in your faith.”

As we all check off our Christmas shopping lists this year, let us all add one more item to that list. Let us be intentional in expressing our love by caring for each other spiritually. Invest the time and effort into sharing and discussing the Gospel. Make a point to helping your friends, families, and the congregation to grow further in our faith. Let us love with our presence, our passion, and our prayers. Let us do all we can to help each other grow into strong mature Christians. Let us all love as selflessly as Christ Our Lord.

## Prayer

Heavenly Father, we thank you for your son, Jesus Christ. He was the best example of caring and selfless love. Lead us to care for others so that we can be more like Jesus. Help us express our love through both physical and spiritual care. With your help, let us seek to love and care deeply for all of humanity so that we may build a united church family that is committed to making disciples through salvation, sanctification, and service to the glory of God. Amen.

December 2, 2022

# A SONG OF ASCENT: WAITING FOR THE SUN TO RISE

By Mary Stewart Efird

## Read Psalm 130

As Christmas approaches and the advent season begins, I look forward to one of my favorite things about Christmas, the music! I listen to my favorite Christmas carols and turn on K104.7 every time I get in the car, singing along to the familiar tunes that play only during Christmas time. Music is such an essential part of our lives, whether it's singing hymns at church, dancing to songs with friends, or listening to our favorite tunes, music brings us closer together to each other and God when we use it to glorify Him. This summer, I took a trip out west, and I backpacked with 11 new friends across Washington. The best part of the trip was when we summited Desolation Peak. We left camp at midnight to begin the 14-mile hike, and it was one of the most challenging things I have ever done. The only thing that kept me going was singing my favorite songs with my group mates into the darkness. We waited to get out of the trees and reach the top to see the sun finally rise. Similar to this, Jews traveled to Jerusalem to celebrate festivals and holidays every year. Jerusalem, the city upon a hill, was not an easy journey to make, so the Jews sang several songs, such as Psalm 130, that encouraged them and praised the Lord on the strenuous journey to Jerusalem. They were called the "Songs of Ascent," and they represent how we can worship God through the power of music during times of struggle! Whenever I feel disparaged or beaten down, I find myself waiting for a sign, a light at the end of the tunnel, an encouraging word or a hopeful song...something to push me through whatever obstacle I may face. The Jews were looking for the same thing. "More than watchmen wait for the morning," more than I wait for Christmas carols, more than our group waited for the sun to rise, the Jews waited for their King to rise.

## Prayer

Dear Lord, during the Advent season, as we wait for the birth of Jesus Christ and the sun to finally rise after the long nights, help us to worship you with the same enthusiasm and passion as those determined Jews even through dark times. Let us use all of our talents, especially the gift of song, to glorify you as we wait for the greatest gift of all, your Son!



December 3, 2022

# APOCALYPTIC FRUIT

By Rev. Dr. Charles Davenport



## Read Luke 21:5-19

In the first couple of weeks of Advent, the lectionary text for the season doesn't actually address the story of Jesus' birth. There are no angels or mangers the first couple of weeks of Advent. Instead, we get apocalyptic texts. Weird end-of-time stuff.

Apocalyptic texts were really common at the time the Bible was written. They were often code for speaking about the world people at that time lived in; they were a way for people in politically dangerous situations to speak the truth to power. And, yes they are disturbing texts. Such texts have often been used to predicate the end of time. However, apocalyptic text, such as the words spoken by Jesus in Luke 21, were not meant to be crystal balls.

If these texts are not about the future, what do they mean? Maybe the Advent themes of being awake, alert, and expectant are not about prediction, but about an unknowing longing for Christ presentence in a new way. Perhaps having an unknowing longing for Christ allows us to be surprised by the grace of God.

This season I suggest that maybe we should make an Advent list. But instead of a list of things we want Santa to bring us, we should write down things we want Christ to break in and take from us. Maybe Christ could break in in the middle of the night and take out resentment, self-importance or our love of money. That's how God works sometimes. Not by things we are prepared for but through the things we don't expect.

## Prayer

Lord, break into our lives this season in unexpected ways. May we be able to hear your voice not through the material, but through the spiritual. Amen.

December 4, 2022

# HOPE IS HERE!

By Jim and Margaret Smith

## Read Isaiah 11:1-10

What a wonderful depiction of Jesus coming. Out of something we thought was dead, he will spring forth. We get a glimpse of what the Messiah will do when He comes. He will provide justice and right judgement for the poor and needy and wipe out evil. He will rule with love. He will restore creation to its intended order. Everyone including the animals will love each other. Children will even reach into the viper's nest! Yikes! Peace and justice will be over the whole earth!

As we await the Messiah this Christmas season, let's pray for peace and justice on Earth and let us continue living that peace and justice until Christ comes again.

## Prayer

Dear God, thank you for creating love out of what we think is dead. Show us how to love each other even when all hope seems lost. We have brokenness, sinfulness, and selfishness in our lives and you provide the assurance that it won't be that way forever. We await your coming, your bringing your Kingdom to Earth, your ultimate salvation. Come Lord Jesus and cause love and hope to spring forth in our lives. Amen.



December 5, 2022

# THE DAY OF THE LORD

By Kevin Schultz

## Read 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

When I read this passage, I think of how we are to be supporting each other and to be the face of Jesus to others as brothers and sisters in Christ. Judging by world events, maybe indeed we need more ambassadors for Christ. The breastplate and helmet were vital to soldiers for survival in battle. When we arm ourselves with Christ's love, we not only receive his salvation, but we also receive the protection of his love, and we are able to freely express this love to others. I believe that we are to "be always the light of Christ," not on certain days or times or seasons. We are to show the love and patience and humility of Christ to others daily in our actions and our deeds. To support others and lift them up. This is easier done by arming ourselves with the word of the Lord. Service to others builds our relationship with our Lord.

## Prayer

Lord, I pray that you give me the courage to love, and to show patience and kindness and humility to others, all others by arming us daily with your love. Help me Lord to 'be always the light of Christ.' Amen.



December 6, 2022

## IT IS NOT ABOUT ME

By Betty Burrell

### Read 1 Thessalonians 5:12-28

During this season of the year, I feel a little sorry for myself. I miss my parents. I find myself asking “Oh if they were still here I could ask them this question” or “How is it that we make that?” or even “What was I like as a kid on Christmas morning?” All questions that will be left unanswered by them for now. But this passage from Thessalonians reminds me that I do not have to feel sorry for myself because it is not about me. It is about others. It is about our family relationship as sisters and brothers in Jesus Christ and it is our individual and collective call to be faithful, to pray, and to live in peace. These are simple words but not so simple actions. So as we travel to the manger together, let us consider taking to heart the words of Paul as he challenged the Church of Thessalonica. Let us encourage those that are discouraged. Let us help those that cannot or will not help themselves. Let us find patience in our interactions with others. Let us never fail to be kind. Let us remember that it is our collective call to rejoice together, to pray in all things and to give thanks even when we may feel a little sorry for ourselves. It is not about me. It is not about you. It is about us. It is about others. It is about our Lord Jesus Christ born in a manger to live, to die, and to come again.

### Prayer

Lord Jesus, as we ponder the wonder of your birth, let us remember that it is your gift of life that provides us opportunities for service to others. Open our eyes to see these opportunities so that we may fulfill your call for our lives. In your holy name. Amen.



December 7, 2022

# A MOST UNLIKELY ADVENT STORY

By Craig Whitley

Read John 8:1-12

At a first reading, the passage appears a poor choice for Advent. A sinful woman, condemned by the Law to death. Craven Jewish leaders seizing on her misfortune to discredit Jesus. Jesus presented with a Hobbesian choice: Say 'spare her' and violate the Mosaic Law? Or condemn the miserable woman to death? It sure doesn't sound like a Christmas story.

Or does it?

Although the leaders condemn the woman, each is in the same position: condemned by sin. The woman by her sins of passion; the leaders, by the wickedness of their hearts. For despite differences in station, each one has been faithless to God. Each is indisputably guilty. Each is consigned to death—the woman at the leaders' hands, and the leaders at life's end, by God's judgment.

Jesus provides the participants with a way out. Without minimizing their sins, he calls each to repent. He shames the leaders with their hypocrisy. He calls the woman with an admonition to "go, and sin no more." Grace is shown to each.

And that makes this a Christmas story. The people in the story represent mankind writ large. People separated from their God, by sin. People unable to expiate their failures. People unable reconcile themselves with God. People condemned to death.

And then, inexplicably, God shows us grace. He sends his only son into this broken world to provide an alternative. An out. Just as Jesus showed grace to the people in this story.

Any question that this passage is a Christmas story is laid to rest by the next verse in John. For in verse 12, we read these words:

*"Again, Jesus spoke to them, saying, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."*

See? Whatever our personal failings, the Star of David shines on us all.

## Prayer

As we look forward with anticipation to Christmas, we thank you for the presents which you have set before us: a grace that saves; a Messiah who atones for our sins; and the Holy Spirit that strengthens our Faith. Amen.



December 8, 2022

# HOW DO YOU APPROACH THE MANGER?

By Josie Conner

## Read Psalm 62

Advent is a time of preparation and waiting. For over thirty years, the first decorations I bring out during this time are our nativity sets. One of them is a very old, very inexpensive wooden stable that I purchased with one of my first paychecks as a teacher. This is the stable that sat empty beneath our tree for several years to remind us to prepare for the birth of Christ. Over the years, I have collected several nativity sets. Some are more simple and some are more ornate. The nativity sets are a visual reminder for me that Jesus is our salvation and our rock.

After our five children were born, putting up our main nativity set became something each child wanted to do. I had to come up with a rotation order, to prevent mayhem in Bethlehem! Each child approached the task of setting up the stable and its inhabitants from a different perspective.

### **How do you approach the manger?**

Our oldest, Matt, had a “sock Baby Jesus” he had made in preschool at the ripe age of three that he insisted on placing right in the middle of the stable. This position would make sense if Baby Jesus hadn’t also been larger than the stable and all of its inhabitants put together! However, in his eyes this was the perfect set-up and Baby Jesus was large and in charge!

### **How do you approach the manger?**

Child number two, Zach, has always liked things in a very orderly manner. When it was his year to set up the manger, all of the inhabitants (the Holy family, the sheep, the cow, the donkey, the wisemen, the camel, and the other visitors to the manger), lined up in straight rows on either side of the stable in perfect symmetry.

### **How do you approach the manger?**

Child number three, Ben, always brought an artistic flair to our rendition of Bethlehem. One year, he created a large star, again something larger than the actual stable, out of tinsel and pipecleaners. His star had to have extra support to make certain it didn’t topple the entire manger. He wanted to make sure there was no doubt when the wisemen looked up that they would see the star!

### **How do you approach the manger?**

Child number four, Harrison, always kept with the outdoor feel and often would park a toy tractor or a toy fishing boat outside the stable. I think for him, shepherds were also farmers and fishermen.

### **How do you approach the manger?**

For our daughter, Emma, setting up the manger was always a time to create conversation among its inhabitants. She would sit for a long time and have the animals have conversations with one another as well as the Holy Family and other visitors. They would all speak to Baby Jesus. For her, relationship was key.

How do you approach the manger? During this season of watching and waiting, as we prepare our hearts and our homes for the birth of Jesus, let us always be reminded that “He alone is our rock and our salvation.” He comes for us in times of joy, trouble, darkness, and light. “God is our refuge.”

## Prayer

As we prepare to celebrate your birth, silence our hearts and our minds as we wait for you. Regardless of where we are in life or how we approach things, help us be ever mindful that you alone are our fortress and our strength!

December 9, 2022

# THEREFORE THE LORD HIMSELF WILL GIVE YOU A SIGN

By Lenise Melton

## Read Isaiah 7:10-25

Verse 14 is such a familiar and beloved verse in this passage; it is unsettling to read it in the context of this whole passage. We see Isaiah confronting one of the worst leaders of Judah—Ahaz, a direct descendent of David who has completely abandoned the faith, plundered the temple and become an idolatry addict. Despite Ahaz' abject failures, God is reaching out to him here through Isaiah, offering redemption. Trust God, says Isaiah, do not trust Assyria or Israel or Aram or Egypt or any other country. Only God is your final fortress.

The sign of Emmanuel to Ahaz warns him that all foreign alliances are doomed; a tiny nation like Israel is forever fated to be only a pawn in the political designs of far larger and more powerful countries. Nations rise and fall, but we are never to forget that God is always with us.

And there we discover the deeper truths of Isaiah 7 for us- if we rush to attach ourselves to another protector out of fear that we will lose what we so desperately wish to retain our way of life, our nation, our individual safety – our hopes in these protectors are forever destined to be dashed. The hope of the birth at Christmas is that God is with us in the midst of our greatest fears. Remember the first word from Luke's chorus of angels to the awestruck shepherds was "Fear not!" Do not be afraid, for his name is called Emmanuel, and in him God is with us.

As we cocoon ourselves in all the beautiful Christmas-y Messiah promises of God in Isaiah we should not forget that the first person who heard them refused to listen and leaned instead on worldly powers and values. Are we like Ahaz? Or can we be more like Ahaz' son Hezekiah who heard the promise, saw the sign, and returned to following God and keeping his commandments.

## Prayer

God, please help us in our sin and darkness to see the sign you have given us. Soften our hearts, open our eyes to the reality that you are ever and always seeking relationship with us; calling us out from our apathy and weakness to accept the Messiah and redemption; to enter into the building of Your Kingdom. We ask this in the name of your saving Son, Jesus Christ.



December 10, 2022

# WORK: CURSE OR BLESSING?

By Cynthia Anderson

## Read 1 Thessalonians 3:6-18

Growing up, I always remember how hard my father and mother worked. Dad worked tirelessly taking care of his patients, making rounds at the hospital and delivering babies whenever they were ready to come into this world. I never heard him grumble one time about work. Maybe he did, he just never let us hear him. My mother worked hard around the house, making sure the house was clean, preparing meals - breakfast, lunch and dinner. We always sat down at the kitchen table at mealtimes and ate together. Mom made sure my brother and I were prepared for school with a good bag lunch. She was quite the seamstress too, making clothes for me when I was young and for my Barbies! Although their work was different, one earned a paycheck and the other one didn't, they both taught me a good work ethic. They set a good example of what "work" looks like. Always give 100%, never quit something you have started and be proud of your work product.

Growing up, I wanted to work so that I would not have to rely on Mom and Dad for money. I wanted something to do. Work made me feel worthwhile. Are there days now when I don't want to go to work – yes! Then I try to remember my mom always said, find something you enjoy about your work, something that gives you a sense of accomplishment.

The Apostle Paul made his appeal that we need to keep working until the Lord comes. After all, one of God's blessings was that man should work. Think of all the work our Creator has done and all he continues to do. Work truly is a blessing!

## Prayer

In this season and in all seasons please guide us to view work as a blessing and not a curse. Please help us to be good examples for others showing them that hard work is God's command for us. I pray you are the center of my workplace and the hearts of my co-workers. Give us grace and strength for all the demands of our jobs. It's in your name I pray, Amen.



December 11, 2022

# IN GOD WE TRUST

By Stephanie Miller

## Read Psalm 146

2022 has been one of the most trying years of my life. I have always had a very difficult and tumultuous relationship with my father for more reasons than I can count, but about three years ago, we seemed to turn a corner. We were on a path of healing and forgiveness. Things began to look up and I started to feel like the hole in my heart was closing. Until the phone call. He called to tell me he had been diagnosed with stage three lung cancer. Where did I turn in this desperate time? I turned to Google. I had to see what stage three meant in terms of lung cancer, what were the treatment options, and how much time did I have left with my dad? I also turned to my husband. He had lost his father a few years prior to cancer. I needed him to tell me what to do in order to get through this. When times are desperate, our first response is often to turn to others for help. People can be a source of great comfort during painful times, but we need to remember they are only human. However, there is One greater than any other human being on earth.

“Do not put your trust in princes, in human beings, who cannot save.” Humans will always have a potential to fail, even when we know they have the best of intentions. God, on the other hand, never fails.

God is our help, and He is our hope. He is our healer. He is our provider. He is our King of Kings and Lord of Lords. He is our strength. And through it all, “The Lord reigns forever, our God, O Zion, for all generations.

Often when things go wrong, we ask God, “Why?” Then, we turn to everyone else for advice on what to do. There’s nothing wrong with asking God why or seeking wise counsel. But if we are putting all of our hope in internet experts or our loved ones, then our trust is misplaced.

God is not surprised by our problems or worried about how it will all turn out. He brings order to the world and helps those that call out to Him. If we will just reach out to God in difficult times, He can bring us more peace and understanding in ten minutes of prayer than we can find in ten hours of searching on the internet or talking to others.

We must ask ourselves.... where will we put our trust?

## Prayer

O Lord, You say that I should have faith in You so that I will be upheld. I do, Mighty Lord. I place all my faith in You. You strengthen me. Your holy force keeps my spirit alive and burning fiercely for You. I know that with You I can overcome anything. Thank You for remaining faithful to Your chosen people. Thank You for guiding me in my life and helping me to become a vessel for Your will. I pray that I continue to put my faith and trust in You because You know all things. You know what the hearts of Your people need, and I know You will help me through whatever this life brings. Amen.



December 12, 2022

# AN ADVENT DEVOTION

By Roger Rizk

## Read Psalm 145

We live in a time of uncertainty. Where are we going as a nation? Where are we going as a world? Yet we have entered the season of Advent, a time of great expectation and hope for us all.

Psalm 145 is one of the many psalms of David. David's life had many faces: triumph over evil, coronation as King, escaping from the instant threat of a predecessor, succumbing to immoral acts, prediction of punishment from a God judging him for his immoral acts, the taking away of a first child, the promise of greatness from his creator. His life, like ours, was filled with uncertainty.

Yet amidst this uncertainty, David knew of the greatness of God and the goodness of God. It was this firm belief that brought solace and hope to a life filled with uncertainty, often filled with fear.

David knew that his Lord was gracious and merciful, even to those whose sins might appear to be incapable of being forgiven. He knew that although his sins might bring anger to his Lord, that the love of his Lord would be abounding and steadfast.

David knew that his Lord upheld all who were falling and raised up all who were bowed down. He knew that his gracious and loving Lord would give food of nourishment, hope and promise in due season to allow himself and other mortals like him to find their place in their journey of life.

In the maturity of his life, David, like us today, found himself in a time of Advent, a time of great expectation and hope. Although we live in tumultuous times riddled with uncertainty, sorrow and fear, we can know that we live in a season of Advent filled with the wondrous expectation of a Savior who is coming to save us all and whose steadfast love will lift us as we are bowed down. It is the age old story of the Good News of the coming of our Savior and we, like David, are abounding in gratitude and thanksgiving.

## Prayer

Gracious and loving God, we stand in the period of Advent filled with the wondrous expectation and hope of your coming. We long for your abounding and steadfast love in our broken world. We long for your loving touch to lift us and feed us with your nourishment that we might further your Word and deed and transform our world into a celebration of your goodness and love. We ask these things in Christ's name. Amen.



December 13, 2022

# THE GREAT AND AWESOME GOD

By Grady Kennington



## Read Psalm 33

When I was asked to do a short Advent Devotional and was given several verses to choose from I chose Psalm 33. People that know me have cracked up laughing when I have told them because this Psalm is about singing! Singing hymns is not my favorite part of a worship service.

However, this Psalm is also about a great and awesome God. I recently spoke at worship about my faith being based on my private conversations with God. I try to base my important decisions on can I discuss them with God without him asking “really?” This season of Advent is immediately following our political season. I feel like God has asked “really?” quite often as He has watched the 2022 version of electing our politicians and just being an American in general. My true Advent wish for First Presbyterian Gastonia and the world in general is that all of our beliefs, all of our opinions, all of our conversations are not based on what we want and believe, but what our God finds acceptable. How many times have we heard from our ministers -- “may the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight?” Being acceptable in His sight is a wonderful Christmas goal for all of us.

## Prayer

Please grant me the strength and courage to follow your path and not try to convince you that I know what is best for me, my family, my church and my country. In your holy name, Amen.

December 14, 2022

# THINK ABOUT IT

By Jimmy Greene

## Read Mark 1:1-8

This passage made me think of my visits to the holy land. I've been to the Jordan River, close to where John was baptizing people. I've been to Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Nazareth. I've walked the same stone walkways that Jesus walked.

I'll never forget the feeling of disappointment and missed opportunities I felt when I returned home from my first visit. I failed to grasp the importance of these places, and the wonders and miracles that had happened where I was standing. I was too busy looking at the architecture, watching the people, and thinking about what souvenirs I would buy at the many shops along the street. I think the magnitude of what happened in these places was more than I could comprehend at the time. I remember that on my subsequent trips I made more of an effort to think about where I was and the significance of what happened there — like the Jordan River where John the Baptist foretold of Jesus' coming; the Sea of Galilee where Jesus feed the 5000 and walked on the water; and of course Bethlehem where Jesus was born.

Think about it — the two most significant events in the history of mankind are the birth of our Savior and his sacrifice for our sins. This Advent season I plan to slow down and try not to get caught up in the hustle and bustle of the holidays. I plan to take some quiet time and try to truly grasp the significance of Christmas. I plan to take time to contemplate what we are really celebrating during this season. We are celebrating God's gift to us, the birth of our Savior. The greatest gift in the history of mankind!

## Prayer

Thank you Lord for your gift to us, your son Jesus Christ. May we take the time this holiday season to truly think about this gift and its significance in our lives. Thank you Lord for all that you have given us. In the name of our Savior Jesus Christ, Amen.



December 15, 2022

# A TIME TO TURN AROUND

By Beth Silvers

## Read Matthew 3:1-12

The four Scripture references given to me did not speak to me of Christmas or Advent. The closest one was the story of John the Baptist's preaching from Matthew 3:1-12. This comes after Joseph's return of Mary and Jesus from Egypt to Nazareth. The key verses from Matthew 3 that spoke to me were verse 3 "repent for the kingdom of God is at hand." and verse 8 "therefore bear fruit in keeping with repentance."

Repent is to show remorse or regret, but even more, to turn around. An about face from the life of sin and idolatry, to the life of freedom that the Holy Spirit provides. When we do this the Holy Spirit works through us to "bear fruit" as evidence of God's love for all mankind. We become the hands and feet of Christ on earth at this time. Every day we need to ask for the Holy Spirit to fill us, guide us, and lead us through the day to see what He has planned for us. At the end of the day, confess where we have failed Him and ask for help to do better tomorrow.

Other references that spoke to me on repentance were Acts 2:38, 17:30, 26:19-20 and 2 Peter 3:8-9.

As we prepare to welcome Christ into our lives and homes Christmas Day let us prepare our hearts and homes for the King's arrival.

## Prayer

Dear Lord of repentance, help us to see and hear you every day. Help us to change from our ways to Yours with the help of the Holy Spirit. Remind us of our need to repent and open us up to You as move towards Christmas. In Your Son's Name, Amen.



December 16, 2022

# GOD HEARS US AND RESPONDS

By Richard Rankin

## Read Psalm 17:6, Matthew 11:2-6

John the Baptist was in prison, wondering. Is Jesus the long-awaited Messiah, or will another come in the future? In a similar position of distress, the Psalmist cried out to God for help. John, locked in his cell, may have as well. But he also took action and sent his disciples to ask Jesus if, indeed, he was the Christ. Jesus answered by pointing to the miraculous things that he was accomplishing: the healings and his preaching the good news to the poor. These were things that only God could do.

Surely, John the Baptist rejoiced when his disciples returned to tell him what Jesus had said! From his prison cell, John's question had reached the ears of the living God. And Jesus reassured John that he was God come to earth. This is the Good News of the Advent season. Jesus Christ hears our cries, and His love saves us now and forever. To paraphrase Revelation: our savior will wipe away every tear from our eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away. This is God's fixed word of comfort and assurance for all those in distress or dark places.

## Prayer

O God, hear the cries of our hearts and fill us with the peace that passes all understanding. Thank you for the gift of Your Son who is always listening to us.



December 17, 2022

# HAVE COMPASSION ON YOUR SERVANTS

By Claude Hathcock



## Read Psalm 90

The New Interpreter's Bible commentary points out that Psalm 90 is the only psalm attributed to Moses. This alone might indicate its significance, but this is especially the case since Psalm 90 opens Book IV of the psalter. (See Note 1 below). Book III is heavily weighted with prayers that lament the destruction of Jerusalem, and Psalm 89 concludes Book III with the announcement of God's rejection of the covenant with David.

With Psalm 90, while composed during the Babylonian exile, immediately takes the reader back to the time of Moses, when there was no land, Temple, or monarchy. Therefore, one should read this psalm in context of the stories about Moses.

D. N. Freedman notes the similarity between Psalm 90:13 and Exodus 32:12 where Moses tells God to "turn" or "repent" from God's anger. The biblical scholar, D. N. Freedman, in his article entitled "Who Asks (or Tells) God to Repent? – Other than Moses..." (Note 2), wrote that "the composer of this psalm based it on the episode in Exodus 32 and imagined in poetic form how Moses would have spoken to the exile's monumental crisis posed by the loss of land, Temple, and monarchy.

When I read this scripture, I wondered why it was one of the four scripture choices given to me for an Advent devotion. In the first two verses, it starts out beautifully describing our omnipotent and everlasting God as our dwelling place. Then in verses 3 through 11, the prayer takes on the Lenten theme with us facing the reality that we are merely worthless dust. We incur God's anger and wrath with our iniquities and secret sins.

Then, in verse 12 and following, the plea is for God to help us gain wisdom and to turn, or relent, from His anger toward us and have compassion for us; giving steadfast love, that we may sing for joy, and witness God's deeds and splendor. Then the Psalm ends with a blessing that God will find favor and make our lives worth something.

Here is the Advent connection! God indeed has compassion for us. He has indeed shown us this steadfast love that leads to our joy. How? He gave us His Son, whose birth we celebrate.

## Prayer

Thank you, Lord, for your wonderful gift of love, your son Jesus for he has shown us how to live worthy lives. Amen

December 18, 2022

## RESPONDING TO GOD'S CALL

By Charles & Kathy Gallman

### Read Matthew 1:18-25

Joseph was a quiet, steady, hard-working, and strong – probably with a few bits of saw dust always in his beard. You know the type – that guy who can do anything and, more importantly, is always willing to help out when there is a need. This is how I imagine Joseph, but the reality is, we don't know. Other than a few references in the Nativity narratives in Matthew and Mark, we don't know much about Joseph. He is kind of like a character actor in a play, one of those actors in the background who has no lines and might otherwise be forgotten. But Joseph is much more than a character actor; he is the glue that holds the scene together. Without him, the play couldn't be finished! He gave Jesus the legal connection to the House of David, thus fulfilling prophesy. More importantly, he was called by God. And what a calling it was - to raise God's son to adulthood. You have to ask yourself here: how does one punish God's Son? If you are too harsh on the young Messiah, does God call you out? So many questions.

What we do know about Joseph is that he was obedient. He answered God's call. He gave up everything to be the father of Jesus. God came to Joseph in his dreams four times. Each time, Joseph responded to God's call without question or hesitation. Through his obedience, Joseph shows his devotion to God, to Mary, and to Jesus. During this time of expectant waiting and preparation, what is God calling us to do?

### Prayer

Heavenly Father, in this time of preparation, help us to be still and to listen for your call. More importantly, help us to be like your servant Joseph, answering your call without question or hesitation. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.



December 19, 2022

## KEEPING CHRISTMAS

By David Dickson

### Read Ephesians 6:10-20

Christmas time is so special to me after being blessed with the family that I have enjoyed for sixty three years. From Bible stories read to me as a child by mom and dad, to holding and reading the same stories to my three fantastic daughters and by the time you read this, my four fantastic grandchildren. Not to mention my First Presbyterian church family of teachers and friends. But as we grow we are all painfully reminded daily that these stories and the studying of the Bible is constantly utilized to strengthen our body armor against the evils of this world knowing that evil is very much alive and well in this world. We must strive to be faithful as a church family to continue putting on our full armor of God, so that we can take our stand against the devil's schemes. During the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ, let us stand firm then with the belt of truth buckled around our waist, with our breastplate of righteousness in place, and with our feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all of this, take up the shield of faith with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Do all of this with the power of the Holy Spirit, which is the word of God.

Go in peace this Christmas time to enjoy and teach and love your children and your children's children. In Jesus Christ our lord and savior live, with the love Jesus left us within the Holy Spirit live, and with the full armor of God protect.

### Prayer

Lord we pray to you this Christmas season to keep us safe, and to continue to deliver us from evil. Be with everyone around the globe to remember Jesus and his gift to us this Christmas time. For it is in his holy name we pray, Amen.



December 20, 2022

# PRAISE THE LORD!

By LeeAnn Harris

## Read Psalm 146

"Praise the LORD!" How many times do we say that when some chore, project, or problem we are attempting to solve ends in success? I am guilty of uttering the words and not really considering that my praise, thanks, and success all belong to God. I'm sure throughout history the world has seemed like a scary place full of disappointment, uncertainty, and fear. Just think back to some of the things the elders in your family have witnessed and endured. The pandemic, the economy, political division, crime, health, aging and life feels like a tsunami that just keeps hitting our shores. In this season of commerce, rush, overindulgence, flared tempers, chaos and doubt why not pause and reflect on Psalm 146:7-8 "He always does what he says-he defends the wronged, he feeds the hungry. God frees prisoners-he gives sight to the blind, he lifts up the fallen." Wow! I'm with Him! Psalm 146 ends with the reassuring promise from verse 10, "God is in always in charge. Zion's God is God for good! Hallelujah!" So, take a moment today to think about this promise and claim it as the ultimate gift.

## Prayer

Dear LORD, You always have been and always will be in charge. Remind us to rely on and respond to you as we face all that life throws at us. Remind us too that You who gives, loves, watches, and frees will continue to do these and all good things on our behalf. And to that all God's children say, Hallelujah!



December 21, 2022

# IT'S OKAY TO NOT BE OKAY

By Rev. Daniel J. Commerford

## Read Revelation 21:10-11

Advent will always be a mixed-bag of a season for me. On one hand, I love the joy it brings as we anticipate the birth of Jesus Christ. Every year, I look forward to the lights, the festivities, and all the fun that goes into preparing for Christmas. On the other hand, Advent will always be marked by the solemn anniversary of my mother's death that occurred in December of 2020. Alongside the happiness that Advent brings, I also spend this time of year wrestling with grief and sorrow. More than anything, Advent is a complicated season to navigate.

With the sun setting at the earliest point of the day, December 21 is the shortest day of the year. This fact may resonate with so many who try to find holiday cheer this time of year while struggling with grief, illness, depression, or strained relationships. Even in a season where we proclaim light, darkness still has its say. For that reason, Advent can be a complicated season for any of us to navigate.

### **It's okay to not be okay.**

In the Book of Revelation, God gave John a vision of a New Heaven and New Earth that gives a sneak peek of the eternal Kingdom Christ makes available to all of us. Christ's birth leads to his life, death, and resurrection, ensuring there will be a day we are all together again in God's glory without the constraints of sickness and death. Therefore, Advent is not only a season of waiting for Christ's birth; it's also a season of waiting for the fulfillment of all his promises. As complicated as this season can be to navigate, Advent is ultimately a season filled with hope.

December 21 may be the darkest day of the year, but it gets brighter and brighter after that. I love my mother and miss her so much. But with gratitude for everything Jesus promises us, I look forward to seeing her again, even if that means I have to wait a bit longer.

## Prayer

Eternal God, thank you for the hope we find in your Son. Be with us today and comfort us in our grief and sorrow. May the promise of Christ's Eternal Kingdom serve as a light that pierces through the darkness that often surrounds us. We pray this in Jesus' name, amen.



December 22, 2022

# OUR MIGHTY SAVIOR

By Sally and Gwin Hilton

## Read Isaiah 31:1-9

The passages of Isaiah speak of how foolish it is to trust more in something or someone other than our God, who is wise and all powerful.

Isaiah 31:1-3. "Woe to those who go down to Egypt for help, and rely on horses, who trust in chariots because they are many, and in horsemen because they are very strong, but who do not look to the Holy One of Israel, nor seek the Lord!"

Isaiah 1:6-9. "Return to him. For in that day every man shall throw away his idols of silver and his idols of gold- sin, which your own hands have made for yourselves."

After reading this passage, it made us think how easy it is to put other "secular idols" before God, especially during this Advent season. People are often exhausted from the shopping, decorating, baking and other holiday activities. We think too much about "things" we think we must do rather than spending time in God's presence. Because we have such an awesome God who asks only that we repent and follow Him, let us put him first not only during this Advent season but every day. He has given us the gift of eternal life if we will only accept Him as our Savior.

## Prayer

Dear Heavenly Father, thank you for your grace and for forgiving us when we repent of our sins. Help us to remember what is most important during this Advent season and to always put you first.



December 23, 2022

## READY, SET, GO!

By Patty and David Ratchford

### Read Revelation 22:6-11; 18-20

During our childhood and youth, our parents, teachers, coaches, mentors, and close friends reminded us to be ready, to be prepared, to do our homework, read, study, plan, and even have back-up plans. This coaxing was for our own good to better prepare us for living a full life with purpose.

In the last chapter of the Bible, Revelation 22, the angel showed John visions of the river of the water of life flowing from the throne of God, the tree of life bearing twelve crops of fruit, and the throne of God and of the Lamb in The City. The angel also foretold that they would see God's face and that his name would be on their foreheads, and there would be no need for light from the lamp or sun, for God would give them the light, and they would reign forever.

The Lord sent his angel to show his servants the things that must soon take place, and the angel quoted Christ saying: Look, I am coming soon! Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy written in this scroll.

John's eyewitness account emphasizes being prepared because Jesus is not only coming soon, but he will come unexpectedly.

These are surly words to live by each day. Here at the end of the Bible, the truth is accentuated – to have a deep desire to know God, to thirst for him, to believe, and truly worship and adore him. We are told to confess our sins, then ask God to stir our heart, to meditate upon God's revelation, to see him in a new way, and to cheerfully worship him.

We are instructed and decreed how we can best live a fulfilled, purposeful life as we reflect on Jesus' expression of the "greatest commandment" to "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and with all our mind".

Revelation closes human history as Genesis opened it – in paradise. It describes the perfect city (the new Jerusalem) where evil is gone forever. Revelation describes people worshipping God face to face and ends with an urgent request: "Come Lord Jesus". Revelation is above all a book of hope, and it is a reminder that God is in control. It depicts the wonderful reward that is waiting for all of us who believe in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. Believe!

Final cue: Coming soon means at any moment, and we must be prepared and not caught off guard.

A final question to ask ourselves each day: Are we prepared?

### Prayer

Lord, help us to set aside our daily routines and duties to give you first place in our lives. Fill our minds and hearts with your truth and your wisdom so that we may be prepared to meet you at any moment. Amen.



December 24, 2022

# WHAT DOES CHRISTMAS AND THE CELEBRATION OF THE BIRTH OF CHRIST MEAN TO YOU?

By Lee DuBois



## Read Luke 2:1-20

In researching this scripture, I was reminded that this is the only inspired account of our Lord's birth recorded in the Gospels. Neither Mark nor John discuss the birth of Jesus and Matthew tells us about the visitation of the angel to Joseph, prior to the birth of Jesus. Even Luke chooses to give us a very brief account of the factors which occasioned Jesus' birth – that it occurred in Bethlehem, the decree of Caesar, the census, and how nearby shepherds came to witness the Messiah's advent. These events reported were chosen from many that could have been.

When I reflect on the birth of Christ and the celebration that occurs each Christmas, I try to pause and reflect on what are we celebrating. Christmas is about the love of our God for us. It is important that we express his love for us to others through our words and actions. I believe that many times in today's world we lose this focus. We are influenced by social media, the news and people using shortcuts like saying Merry X-mas instead of Merry Christmas. I feel that many people are slowly losing sight of Christmas' true meaning. The focus often turns to material things, and the question of "have I bought everything I needed to buy for everyone on the list? What if someone gives me something and I do not have something to give them in return? What if I can't make it to a Christmas party because I have already RSVP'd to another Christmas party on the same night?" Stop! I know I am guilty of this as I know many of you are as well. We lose focus on the true and only reason for the season - the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ our Savior.

This Christmas let's focus not on ourselves but on others and how we can help them find the love that Christ brings to us not only at Christmas but throughout the whole year. Let Christmas be the catalyst that reinvigorates Christ love in our hearts so that we may spread it to others throughout the year.

## Prayer

Lord, help us to set aside our daily routines and duties to give you first place in our lives. Fill our minds and hearts with your truth and your wisdom so that we may be prepared to meet you at any moment. Amen.

December 25, 2022

# LIGHT NO MATTER WHAT!

By Rev. Lance Perry



Read: Isaiah 52:7-10, Psalm 98, Hebrews 1:1-12, John 1:1-14

It's Christmas Day and this year it is a Sunday. We may have spent our morning around the tree with family, and we may have also made the trek to church for Christmas morning worship. In either case, our scriptures for the day invite us to rejoice in the salvation God brings. Isaiah and the Psalmist invite us to sing joyous new songs and rejoice that God's messenger brings salvation and peace even in the ruins of a destroyed Jerusalem. In our world today, we have our own places of ruin and this text reminds us that God is one who bares his arm (rolls up the divine sleeves) and comes to us bringing salvation and peace. Where is God in the midst of ruined places today? All creation joins us in this celebration, the writers say... can you see that today? Do the blue sky, the crisp air, the beauty of the sanctuary, and smiles on faces around the tree remind you of God's peace and salvation? The texts from Hebrews and John name Jesus as the culmination of God's promised salvation for in him all creation was made, God has spoken, and in him light has come shining in the darkness.

How are you celebrating God's promised salvation in the birth of Jesus today? Where do you see God's salvation even in places where there is ruin? How can you share the light? What song of joy can you sing today or play for your family on Spotify or Apple Music? Joy to the world, the Lord is come!

## Prayer

May your salvation be known today in all creation. Help me to sing songs of joy and reflect your light that has come in Jesus Christ. Amen.



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## Calendar of Events for Advent

**Wednesday, December 7**

Cocoa & Carols Hymn Sing at 6:00 p.m. in Fellowship Hall

**Wednesday, December 21:**

Longest Night Service at 6:00 p.m. in the Chapel

**Saturday, December 24:**

Children's Service at 11:00 a.m. in the Chapel

Candlelight Service at 5:00 p.m. in the Sanctuary

**Sunday, December 25:**

Joint Service of Lessons and 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!**