

# ***The Walk to Bethlehem***



***Advent 2015***



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Sunday, November 29

**Luke 21:25-36** “There will be signs in the sun, moon, and stars. On the earth, there will be dismay among nations in their confusion over the roaring of the sea and surging waves. The planets and other heavenly bodies will be shaken, causing people to faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world. Then they will see the Human One coming on a cloud with power and great splendor. Now when these things begin to happen, stand up straight and raise your heads, because your redemption is near.”

Jesus told them a parable: “Look at the fig tree and all the trees. When they sprout leaves, you can see for yourselves and know that summer is near. In the same way, when you see these things happening, you know that God’s kingdom is near. I assure you that this generation won’t pass away until everything has happened. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will certainly not pass away.

“Take care that your hearts aren’t dulled by drinking parties, drunkenness, and the anxieties of day-to-day life. Don’t let that day fall upon you unexpectedly, like a trap. It will come upon everyone who lives on the face of the whole earth. Stay alert at all times, praying that you are strong enough to escape everything that is about to happen and to stand before the Human One.”

Sunday, November 29

## **EXTERIOR SIGNS AND INTERIOR DESIGN**

**Luke 21:28** *So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near.*

Exterior design is changing all around us this season of Advent. There are signs everywhere, though Wal-Mart is already “looking a lot like” Halloween! The Christmas decorations have been on the shelves so long that they have cobwebs. The Ghost of Christmas Past?

The exterior designs and signs of the season are exciting. We all love this wonderful season of brightness and glisten, but the signs do us no ultimate good because in the end it is the interior design that counts. And new interior design will not be the result of something we do, not something we put on or hang from our human limbs, but something we allow to have happen within us.

God desires to do something new inside us. God desires for something in the interior of our lives to be made new in this season. And, as our scripture warns this first day of Advent, there is always the possibility that we might miss that opportunity. Jesus, here at the end of his ministry warns us to observe, watch, and get ready. We should guard our hearts against waste and worry. This is the soundest advice that we can get as we enter this season.

I was fuming as I watched a lady dump her car ashtray in the intersection while stopped at a light on Airline Drive. I said aloud to my passenger “That makes me very unhappy!” To which she responded by laughingly instructing me to observe the sign on the same lady’s rear window: HAPPINESS IS AN INSIDE JOB.

Advent is an inside job too. What happens on the exterior is cosmetic and delightful but it has its limitations. What happens on the interior will occur when we choose to allow God to do something within us. That something has eternal value. The signs will be everywhere but we must observe, watch and get ready to receive them. This IS Advent. We may enjoy our exterior decorations but we must also prepare and anticipate and notice the signs of His desired coming within us.

God is coming to make us new in this Advent season by interior design. Our job is to show up. God will do the rest. Peace to you as we together begin the long journey in darkness toward the marvelous light of Jesus birth.

**Prayer: *Open our eyes Lord, we want to see Jesus. Open our ears Lord, and help us to listen. Open our hearts Lord and fill us with the new you bring to our lives. Amen.***

Rev. Larry Norman

Monday, November 30

**Matthew 11:15** *“He who has ears to hear, let him hear.”*

Few people noticed her. She was a tiny thing, so quiet that she could sit in our classes day after day without being seen. Few people noticed when she began to wear a jacket even on warm days. We assumed she was expecting a child. We were right. So when she missed a few days of school, again we made the correct assumption that her baby had arrived. This young girl, in her junior year of high school, returned a different person. She told us she had a baby girl, and although she was still very quiet, she smiled often. Her story was not different from many a high school girl who becomes a mother too soon. Desperately searching for love from the boy who fathers her child, she is left with a child who becomes the focus of her life. Not long after her delivery my young mother came to school without smiling. I asked her if she wanted to talk. She did. On that day I listened to one of the most heartbreaking stories I had heard in my years of teaching. Her baby had died and her heart was broken. However, her family was relieved because the additional financial stress this baby had placed on the family was removed. She was told to get on with her life, and she was not allowed to grieve the loss of her child. We cried together that day. All this young mother wanted was to talk about how much she had loved her baby. All she needed was for someone to listen.

I had already become aware of the need high school students had for someone to listen.

A recommended assignment for students in my psychology classes was to write a brief paper on the one most important person or event affecting their lives. Was I in for a shock! Stories and events flowed onto these pages from young people who needed desperately to tell their stories. Broken families, divorces, abusive parents, feelings of being unloved . . . the list went on and on. They wanted unlimited space to answer, and most importantly they wanted someone to listen. Their papers were not graded, they were not mandatory nor were they shared with anyone. I heard the good, the bad, and the ugly. I was not there to judge. I was there to listen.

My faith journey has many a bump in the road. I struggle constantly with the need to talk less and listen more. In a world that prides itself on the speed and range of communication we rarely take time to listen to one another. School shootings and violent crime sprees have become all too common today. Maybe if someone had listened to these troubled youths the tragedies could have been avoided. Listening is often the only thing needed to help someone who is trapped in what they believe is a hopeless existence. Why are we so unwilling to listen? As we enter this Advent season I pray that God will help all of us become better listeners.

**Prayer:** *Heavenly Father, in the midst of this holiday rush and noise keep us reminded of the need to listen more and to talk less. Give us patience and understanding as we learn to listen with our hearts as well as our ears, and the grace needed to love unconditionally. Amen.*

Bobbi Marino

Tuesday, December 1

## **LITTLE GIFTS**

### **Psalm 148:7-10**

*Praise the Lord from the earth, you great sea creatures and all ocean depths,  
lightening and hail, snow and clouds, stormy winds that do his bidding,  
you mountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars,  
wild animals and all cattle, small creatures and flying birds.*

I had left my athletic shoes just outside the kitchen door overnight. Their bottoms had been wet and covered with leaves blown around by the sudden storm. I retrieved the shoes, preparing to take my dog Gracie for her morning walk. Gracie was hesitant because it wasn't quite daylight yet.

It had been a rough night – one of those dark nights filled with worry and self-doubt. I had felt spiritually dry as I tried to do my morning devotionals. Everything was out of synch and I was struggling, on the verge of tears, praying for help and comfort.

As I picked up a shoe, I heard a soft creak, almost sonorous. I wondered if one of my tired joints had made a noise. As I raised the shoe to my foot, that sweet little creak sounded again. I stopped all movement to listen, and when the sound came one more time I realized it was coming from my shoe. I reached inside and held in my hand a precious little toad which had found shelter and warmth in the shoe overnight.

My whole being melted at the sight. My heart opened and tears flowed. I had been given a gift – a precious reminder of the beauty and wonder of God's creation sitting peacefully in my hand, a reminder of God's presence and never-ending care.

***Prayer: Gracious God, you send answers to our prayers in such amazingly simple ways. Help us open our eyes to see the luminous moments in our lives and to live in gratitude for your gifts, large and small. Amen.***

Betty Schroeder



Wednesday, December 2

**Luke 2:4-5** *Since Joseph belonged to David's house and family line, he went up from the city of Nazareth in Galilee to David's city, called Bethlehem, in Judea. He went to be enrolled together with Mary, who was promised to him in marriage and who was pregnant.*

When I first read the theme for this year's Advent devotional book a song started looping in my head. Trisha Yearwood, one of my favorite artists, released *The Sweetest Gift*, a Christmas album, in 1994, and it includes the song "Take a Walk through Bethlehem." I love the song in its entirety, but the chorus and part of one verse particularly echo in my brain as I think about the walk to Bethlehem.

Take a walk through Bethlehem

Come and kneel before the lamb

Good news for every man

Walk through Bethlehem

...

'Cause every heart longs for more than tinsel

Something more than just a holiday

Come and celebrate the baby King

Let's take a walk

Through our walking we also need to stop and kneel to pray – in praise, confession, supplication and thanksgiving. It's so easy to become swept up in the manufactured magic of the broader holiday season and miss, forget or downplay the core message of God's great love for us expressed through the birth of His son.

**Prayer:** *Dear Father, we praise you for all you have done and are doing for us. We ask you to lead us on this journey through Advent. Show us again and anew the depth of your love for us and your whole creation. Equip us to share that love in new and exciting ways as we feed people spiritually and physically. Amen.*

Mari Walker

Thursday, December 3

**Isaiah 40:31** *But they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint.*

Heather: So now that Halloween is over and we're getting ready for Thanksgiving, what will be the next holiday we look forward to?

Evie: Christmas!

Heather: And do you know what this time is called, the time that we're waiting for Christmas to come?

Evie: What?

Heather: Advent! It's the season that we celebrate the coming of Christmas. Now, remind me what Christmas is really about:

Evie: It's not about teddy bears and candy and toys; it's about Jesus' birthday!

Heather: Right! And can you tell me about the days leading up to Jesus' birth? What were Joseph and Mary doing?

Heather: Well, they had to get married. Because they were about to get a baby. And they were going on a journey with camels.

Heather: Well.... You're close. They were going on a journey to Bethlehem, which would take a long time.

Evie: Like 100 years?

Heather: It might've felt like that! But probably, it took several weeks. According to the story, Mary rode a donkey much of the journey because she was very large and about to have Baby Jesus. And Joseph probably had to walk a good bit. If you were going on a long journey, what would you take with you?

Evie: I'd take food and water. And probably some toys. And hopefully Daddy could take his truck so we didn't have to ride on an old donkey!

Heather: Well what would you do while we journeyed? What would you do while you were waiting to get where we were going?

Evie: I don't know. Waiting is really hard.

**Prayer: *Dear God, help us learn to be good at waiting, so that we will be ready to receive all of your good gifts, especially your Son, Jesus. Amen.***

Evie Durham, 5  
Interviewed by her mother,  
Heather Johnston-Durham

Friday, December 4

**Mark 13:31-32** *Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.*

My father-in-law counted cars. He counted cars when he was waiting for someone to come to his house. In the days before cell phones there was no way to know the exact time when a guest would arrive for a visit. So Jug Palmer counted cars and hoped that the next car would bring the anxiously awaited visitor.

Now when Jug counted, he counted with *hope*. My Father-in-law counted cars when a family member or friends promised to come. He lived in the hope that the visitor would arrive. What he did not know, however, was the precise moment of arrival. Jug counted cars and hoped that the next car was the promised one.

I remember going to Marie's home feeling the welcome of someone waiting for us with hope fulfilled. It was always a blessing to know that he was waiting and expecting us. In the car Marie and I would often smile when we thought of someone prepared, ready, and waiting to receive us with open arms and an open heart.

During this season of Advent we are encouraged to live in hope and expectation that Jesus is coming. He came long ago to Mary and Joseph in Bethlehem. Let us count the moments and hours as we wait with eager expectation for Christ to come again in our hearts.

And you might want to try counting cars as you wait for your guests this Advent and Christmas Season. It helps the excitement build.

**Prayer:** *God of all times, give us faith to live in hope of your coming into our lives this Christmas season. Give us patience to wait with eager expectation of your coming. Amen.*

Rev. John Williams  
Advent 2008

### **PRAYING THE SCRIPTURE**

**Luke 3:1-6 (CEB)** *In the fifteenth year of the rule of the emperor Tiberius—when Pontius Pilate was governor over Judea and Herod was ruler[a] over Galilee, his brother Philip was ruler over Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias was ruler over Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas—God’s word came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. John went throughout the region of the Jordan River, calling for people to be baptized to show that they were changing their hearts and lives and wanted God to forgive their sins. This is just as it was written in the scroll of the words of Isaiah the prophet,*

*A voice crying out in the wilderness:*

*“Prepare the way for the Lord;*

*make his paths straight.*

*Every valley will be filled,*

*and every mountain and hill will be leveled.*

*The crooked will be made straight*

*and the rough places made smooth.*

*All humanity will see God’s salvation.”*

1. Take a few moments in silence to center yourself. Consider what you desire from this encounter with God.
2. Read the scripture passage twice, slowly, so the details become familiar.
3. Close your eyes and imagine what is going on. What do you see? Hear? Smell? Taste? Touch?\*
4. What emotions rise up for you? Does anything in particular cause a reaction for you?\*
5. Where do you see yourself in the scripture?\*
6. What questions or thoughts bubble up?
7. Close this time by talking honestly to God about your experience.

*\*If you are practicing this with children, offering them crayons and paper to draw the scripture is a good way for them engage with the scripture.*

Sunday, December 6

**Luke 3:2b-6** *“[T]he word of God came to John ... in the wilderness. He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet: A voice of one calling in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him. Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth. And all people will see God’s salvation.’”*

John was out in the wilderness – he was not playing around. He was aware that time was running out and he was on a mission to warn people. People just like you and me, distracted by many superficial things, came out to see this strange wild man preaching repentance. They were intrigued by surface level things, just like us, by his camel hair suit, his crazy hair, his homemade leather belt, and his passionate and challenging message of repentance. I can imagine that people wanted to talk to him and then would go gossip, telling all of their friends about their remarkable experience of talking to the wild man, much like we might do today. Do you recognize this self-absorbed journey? I certainly do.

John’s message was clear: REPENT. Repent? Why are we reading about repenting at Christmas time? Christmas is supposed to be all about the cute baby Jesus, and carols, and presents, and food, and family get-togethers, and shopping! Yet, John calls us to REPENT as we approach Christmas. He calls us to REPENT our way to a Merry Christmas.

Advent means “coming” and it requires a thoughtful and reflective approach to the coming of God into human form. Consider preparing for Christmas this year by repenting. It’s more than just having a change of heart or a feeling of regret. Repentance is a turning away from ourselves, and in simple trust and faith in God’s grace, turning back to Him. John calls us away from our worries and puts our lives into perspective ... actually, God’s perspective. John says prepare for the Advent – the coming of Jesus. God knew the world of John and Jesus and He knows our world. He is calling us to turn to Him this Advent season so that we may have joy this Christmas. Oh, how we long for joy! Let us turn away from our self-absorbed worries of this world and simply trust in God as we journey through this Advent season together.

**Prayer: *Spirit of God, make the way straight for us to hear and believe your word, for your word is truth and life and the path to joy. Amen.***

Theresa Sandifer

Monday, December 7

**Ephesians 3:17b – 19** ...*And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.*

Regardless of sight or blindness, regardless of knowledge or ignorance, the walk of my life has been a walk with Christ to the Father, as He calls me deeper still to Him with each and every step I take. Mesmerized by the flame of God's great love - in my sight, in my ears, in my mind, in my heart - I am drawn from my core to the beautifully inescapable, perfect light.

I am loved by Him.

Regardless of the distractions in my periphery that endeavor to pull my attention away from Him, He calls to me above all and draws me nearer to Him. He made the eyes of my heart to gaze ever upon Him.

I am loved by Him.

As I proceed on this journey, and I think about who I am as I walk to Bethlehem, and what gift I might bring the newborn King, all that I am in this world fades, as all that is needed to define me is the most sufficient "I am loved by Him."

I have no gold or frankincense or myrrh, and I feel less like a king and more like the little drummer boy, but without even a drum. The only gift I have to bring Him is my life – my heart, my mind, my soul; my hands and my feet. All of me; take all of me, my King. Let this be my gift to you. Prayerfully I ask, Father, make me a worthy gift.

Jesus, our King. He was born to die. And rise. For me. For you.

We are so loved by Him.

What a big, amazing love. How can I do anything but respond in-kind and gift my life to Him, for others, in return?

**Prayer:** *God my great and heavenly Father, I thank you for the gift of Jesus - perfect love made alive in this world – walking among us and living within us. I pray, Father, that I may be consumed by your Holy Spirit and fueled by its flame to serve You and your children as a light unto the world, as I long to serve and worship you forever and ever. Fill me to the measure of Your fullness. In Jesus' name, use me, O God, according to your great purpose. Amen.*

Natalie Cooper

Tuesday, December 8

**FIRST SUNDAY IN ADVENT**

O God,  
I have never known you to coerce,  
to punish, or to condemn,  
but you *have* made me *wait*.  
It was the waiting of a pregnant Mother  
sensing a new birth.

You have made me *wonder*,  
But it was the anticipation  
of one longing for a vision  
of the next great gift of love.

You have made me *cry*,  
but it was the cleansing of an  
inner soul too full of itself.

So, Dear God,  
when next the night comes  
and the wind howls,  
I will remember that  
*waiting* has been worth it,  
*wondering* has been fulfilling,  
*crying* has made me deeper.  
In the name of the One  
who is Mystery itself.  
Amen.

Rev. John Winn  
in *For All Seasons*

Wednesday, December 9

### **THE LEAST OF THESE**

**Mark 9:36-37** *He took a little child and had him stand among them. Taking him in his arms, he said to them, 'Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me.'*

'Van' and his brother were the first to arrive at Grace Camp, dropped off an hour and a half early by a relative – cute little boys, nine and ten, with closely cropped hair and bright eyes. The children who are invited to come to a week of carefree summer fun are children from families shattered by incarceration. The Grace Camp staff rarely knows the back story of any child, only that Daddy or Mama or maybe brother is in prison, and things at home and school are very sad and difficult.

As soon as the other campers began to arrive, Van began acting out in very aggressive ways. He looked for opportunities to shove another child or jump ahead in line. The energy he poured into antagonizing his fellow campers was profound, and in the cabin at night it seemed that he was playing the starring role in his own personal nightmare. Reasoning and reprimanding had no effect on Van. His errant behavior indicated deep-seated troubles.

The staff was totally perplexed as to how to help Van adjust to and enjoy the week of fun that had been so carefully and prayerfully planned for him and the others. One of the support staffers, a child herself, a child who has suffered the deprivations of love and security for many years, led the way. Macie took Van into her lap, held him tight against his desperate struggles, and gently ran her fingers through his short hair over and over.

Van surely sensed through those gentle strokes the love and compassion for a fellow sufferer that Macie offered. He also began – very slowly- to recognize the understanding and acceptance in the faces of both staff and fellow campers.

Van enjoyed his week of swimming and games and singing. It wasn't always smooth. There were renewed instances of shoving and hitting, but Macie stood in the gap each time and showed him the way back to peace and calm.

When his relative loaded Van and his brother into the truck to drive away that last morning, the Grace Camp staffers waved until the truck was out of sight. Five minutes later, however, the truck roared back down the camp's gravel road. The driver jumped out, and with a bit of hostility approached the director asking what terrible thing had happened to Van at this camp. He said that the little boy who NEVER cries was weeping inconsolably. After a brief conversation, everybody realized that Van simply didn't want to leave camp. Little Van, wounded in ways we will never know, had felt his heart opened by the love of Jesus shown to him at Grace Camp.

**Prayer: *Loving Abba, father of all, at this special time of the year, as we anticipate the joy of family gatherings filled with love and mutual support, fill our hearts with concern and compassion for the children of our community and the world who long so desperately for love and stability in their lives. Amen.***

Betty Schroeder



Thursday, December 10

**Revelation 1:8** *“I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty.”*

Advent is a time of waiting for Jesus to be born, so all the things on the Chrismon tree have to do with Jesus being born. Each Chrismon has a symbol on it that represents Christ. What is your favorite Chrismon on the Chrismon Tree? Mine is the crown on top. The crown represents Jesus our King. There are a bunch of Chrismons on the Chrismon tree:

Seashell—A seashell makes me think of water, and in the Church we use water for Baptism. The seashell represents Baptism.

Fish—The fish represents Jesus. It is one of the oldest Christian symbols and some of Jesus’ disciples were fishermen.

Butterfly—A butterfly is for new life. A butterfly is on the Chrismon Tree because during Advent we are waiting for Jesus to be born. Also, when butterflies are around, it’s during the spring which is a time of new life. When we believe in Christ, we have new life in Him.

Manger—We put a manger on the Chrismon Tree because Jesus was born in a manger. The manger was a humble place to be born, and Jesus came as a humble king.

Alpha and Omega—When Advent ends, we have a new beginning when Christ is born at Christmas. Alpha and Omega are the beginning and the end. As Christians, we believe that Christ is the beginning and the end of all things.

Chrismons are *Awesome Sauce*! Chrismons help us remember the life of Jesus Christ and help us focus on Jesus as we wait for him to be born at Christmas.

**Prayer:** *Dear God, help us be patient as we wait for Jesus to be born during Advent. Let the Chrismons remind us of your Son’s birth, and help us be focused on Him. In the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.*

Elizabeth Shoup, 8

Friday, December 11

**Matthew 2:10-11** *When they saw the star, they were filled with joy. They entered the house and saw the child with Mary his mother. Falling to their knees, they honored him. Then they opened their treasure chests and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.*

“Advent” makes us think of:

Christmas	Advent Festival	Holy	Candles
Wreaths	Prayer	Calendars	Wise Men
Preparation	Israel	Birth	Camel
Jesus	Mary	Gold	Frankincense
Myrrh	Hosanna in the Highest		

How we practice Advent:

- Lighting candles in the Advent Wreath in Sunday School
- Praying when we are together in worship services
- Going to Church and actively participating
- Lighting the Christmas Tree
- Setting out the Nativity scene
- Read Bible Stories

I hope this Advent season that I will:

- Stop being preoccupied with school because it stresses me out, and I don't want to be stressed
- Be closer to God
- Focus on the true meaning, not on possessions and all the social stuff
- Focus on the more spiritual part of Advent and Christmas
- Devote more time to the meaning of Advent and Christmas
- Get closer to other people and help people
- Keep Christ in Christmas
- Focus on having everlasting life

One gift that I can give God this Advent season is:

- Decorate as a celebration of God
- Attention
- Thanks
- Spreading the love
- Time
- Focus
- Giving
- Prayer

**Prayer:** *God, this Advent season, help us to focus more on you and the spiritual aspects of the season, rather than on the presents and the parties. In all that we do, help us to praise and worship you. Amen.*

St. John's Youth Ministry

### **PRAYING THE SCRIPTURE**

**Luke 3:7-18** *Then John said to the crowds who came to be baptized by him, “You children of snakes! Who warned you to escape from the angry judgment that is coming soon? Produce fruit that shows you have changed your hearts and lives. And don’t even think about saying to yourselves, Abraham is our father. I tell you that God is able to raise up Abraham’s children from these stones. The ax is already at the root of the trees. Therefore, every tree that doesn’t produce good fruit will be chopped down and tossed into the fire.”*

*The crowds asked him, “What then should we do?”*

*He answered, “Whoever has two shirts must share with the one who has none, and whoever has food must do the same.”*

*Even tax collectors came to be baptized. They said to him, “Teacher, what should we do?”*

*He replied, “Collect no more than you are authorized to collect.”*

*Soldiers asked, “What about us? What should we do?”*

*He answered, “Don’t cheat or harass anyone, and be satisfied with your pay.”*

*The people were filled with expectation, and everyone wondered whether John might be the Christ. John replied to them all, “I baptize you with water, but the one who is more powerful than me is coming. I’m not worthy to loosen the strap of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. The shovel he uses to sift the wheat from the husks is in his hands. He will clean out his threshing area and bring the wheat into his barn. But he will burn the husks with a fire that can’t be put out.” With many other words John appealed to them, proclaiming good news to the people.*

1. Take a few moments in silence to center yourself. Consider what you desire from this encounter with God.
2. Read the scripture passage twice, slowly, so the details become familiar.
3. Close your eyes and imagine what is going on. What do you see? Hear? Smell? Taste? Touch?\*
4. What emotions rise up for you? Does anything in particular cause a reaction for you?\*
5. Where do you see yourself in the scripture?\*
6. What questions or thoughts bubble up?
7. Close this time by talking honestly to God about your experience.

\*If you are practicing this with children, offering them crayons and paper to draw the scripture is a good way for them engage with the scripture.

Sunday, December 13

**Luke 3: 7-18** *John said to the crowds coming out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.” “What should we do then?” the crowd asked. John answered, “Anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same. “ Even tax collectors came to be baptized. “Teacher” they asked, “what should we do?” “Don’t collect any more than you are required to,” he told them. Then some soldiers asked “What should we do?” He replied, “Don’t extort money and don’t accuse people falsely-be content with your pay.” The people were waiting expectantly and were wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Messiah. John answered them all, “I baptize you with water. But one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am unworthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.” And with many other words John exhorted the people and proclaimed the good news to them.*

What to do? What to do? What to do? It is the question that comes from those who have come to be baptized by John. It continues to be the cry of all who claim Christianity and seek to live out their faith. Three times this question is posed to John and in all three responses, he calls us to a better relationship with our neighbor. Share what you have, treat people the way you want to be treated and use your words for justice not slander. Words that echo Micah 6: 8 “And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.” This Advent season we too wait as John did for the arrival of the Messiah, and we continue to ask ‘what are we to do?’. The answer is now as it was then to love God, and our neighbor as ourselves.

**Prayer:** *Gracious and loving God, we come this Advent season asking yet again ‘what are we to do?’. Open our hearts to hear the cry of the needy, open our minds to know how to minister to others, and use us to bring your light and love to all those we call our neighbors. Fill us with your Holy Spirit that we too may proclaim the good news to all the world. Amen.*

Deirdre Halliburton

Monday, December 14

### **RUNNING TO BETHLEHEM**

**Matthew 3: 1-3** *In those days John the Baptist appeared in the desert of Judea announcing, “Change your hearts and lives! Here comes the kingdom of heaven!” He was the one of whom Isaiah the prophet spoke when he said: “The voice of one shouting in the wilderness, Prepare the way for the Lord; make his paths straight.”*

My annual “Walk to Bethlehem” is typically a frantic run to Christmas Day filled with tasks and to-dos. I have already started my list for this year’s trek. It includes the following:

Touch-up kitchen paint  
Make Santa hats for Pooh and friends  
Take pictures for Christmas cards  
Decide on menu  
Make plans for pets  
Plus 44 other items (and it is early November as I write this)

The certainty that John the Baptist’s call to “prepare the way for the Lord” had a much different focus than my task oriented preparations has me considering this season’s walk. The word “walk” is the key. Defined as moving at a regular and fairly slow pace on foot, walking gives us time to reflect even as we progress on our path. My race to complete all of the must-dos on my list is in direct contrast to a pace that allows for taking time to prepare my soul for the season. The self-imposed burden of the things that have to be done by this week, by Christmas Day, by year end, by the end of next year prevents us from experiencing the wonder of the season. This season, can we make the journey the task? Can we find the joy of the season in our interactions with those around us, watch the awe in the eye of children, listen for the words of God in the ordinary?

I still have a long to-do list (and will probably still make Santa hats for Pooh and friends), but I am determined to focus on the journey this Advent season, on preparing the way for the Lord as John the Baptist guides. This year, I will be walking to Bethlehem.

**Prayer: Dear God: As we walk to Bethlehem, we thank you for the gift of Jesus. We are reminded that we are called to prepare a way for Him in our hearts and minds. We ask that you help to lift our self-imposed burdens, replacing them with an openness to find Your guidance for our journey this season and in the seasons to come. Amen.**

Susan Lambert

Tuesday, December 15

**Ephesians 1: 3-6** *How blessed is God! And what a blessing he is! He's the Father of our Master, Jesus Christ, and takes us to the high places of blessing in him. Long before he laid down earth's foundations, he had us in mind, had settled on us as the focus of his love, to be made whole and holy by his love. Long, long ago he decided to adopt us into his family through Jesus Christ. (What pleasure he took in this!) He wanted us to enter into the celebration of his lavish gift-giving by the hand of his beloved Son.*

Recently, the Lively class was studying Ephesians. One Sunday, our discussion led to each of us relaying how we came to accept God's invitation of a personal relationship with Him. It was very interesting to hear how we each had a unique story. Every one of us was at a different point in our lives when we made the decision to accept Christ into our hearts and follow Him. One was about 12, one was in her late teens, a couple were in college and another was in her late twenties. We all had very different stories to tell of exactly what was going on when the decision was made or the realization of His call on our lives became real.

This Advent season, remember your story. Remember when you accepted Jesus into your life. Was it a gradual understanding of His presence? Or an event going on around you that prompted you to say yes to God? A sudden moment in time when you just knew He was speaking to you to follow Him? However it happened, praise God! We are uniquely created for Him and are all called by Him to love and be loved.

As the scripture above says, he lavishly gifted us by giving us Jesus Christ. Let's remember to celebrate the Advent season with God, remembering when we accepted Him into our lives, and remembering why God sent His only son to be with us and for us. He wanted us to be made whole and holy and to enter into his celebration. That is certainly something to celebrate this Advent!

**Prayer:** *Jesus our Savior, this Advent season help us to focus on you and remember our love for you. Thank you for coming to the earth for us and for the opportunity to have a personal relationship with you. Amen.*

Kathy King

Wednesday, December 16

### **LOVING GOD MEANS LOVING ALWAYS**

**Mark 12:30-31** *‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these.”*

Over the past year I’ve gotten to hear this passage quite often. You see, every Sunday I had the privilege of being in a room full of middle school kids, learning about God from Mr. Jere Johnston and his family this past school year. Mark 12:30-31 was one of Mr. Jere’s favorite verses, and he reminded his students of the greatest commandment on a regular basis. Pastor Jay preached on this passage for All-Saints Sunday, where we honored the saints who have gone before us, including Mr. Jere.

Following the Great Commandment is not easy, but rather than throw our hands up and give in, we have to try, right? As a follower of Christ, I have been reminded over this past year and a half that life is short, and you should not let a day go by where you are not reflecting on and being a reflection of, the love of God. Pastor Jay preaches that “Faith is an action word” and I like to think that “Love is an action word too!” God put his love for us into action when he sent Jesus to be born, did he not? He desires a loving relationship with us and for us to share his love with others every day.

**Prayer:** *Faithful and Loving God, fill us with your Holy Spirit and fire! We long to be in relationship with you every second of every day. Let us not take that relationship for granted, let us not take each day for granted, led us back where we belong, led us back safe into your arms. Amen.*

Brian Shoup

**ECCE!**

**Luke 1:38** *“Behold, I am the Lord’s servant,” Mary answered. “May it be to me as you have said.” Then the angel left her.*

The title of the text series I use with my Latin students is Ecce Romani, “Behold the Romans.” The word ‘ecce’ (pronounced eh-kay) means ‘look’, ‘behold’. The word is used to turn the reader’s attention to the language, culture and history contained within the treasure house of the textbook. ‘Ecce’ (ἰδοὺ in Greek) is an important word in the Vulgate, St. Jerome’s Latin translation of the Bible from the original Hebrew and Greek. Often, English translations of the text omit the word, perhaps considering it too old fashioned or unnecessary. In the Advent story, however, ‘ecce’ occurs often and prominently and, I think, deserves special notice.

In Matthew’s account, the arrival of the angel delivering a message typically begins with ‘ecce.’ In Matthew 1:20, when the angel appears to Joseph, the text reads “Behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him” (my translation) to tell him not to be afraid to take Mary as his wife. In Luke 1:31, the angel Gabriel begins his message to Mary with ‘ecce’: “Behold, you will conceive and will bear a son.” Mary herself uses the word in her response to the angel’s message: “Behold the maid servant of the Lord. Let it be to me according to your word.” (Luke 1:38) In Luke 1:44, Elizabeth uses ‘ecce’ to call attention to her own baby’s leaping in the womb in response to Mary’s greeting: “For behold! As the voice of your greeting was brought to my ears, the infant in my womb exulted in joy”. In Luke 2:9 the word occurs to call attention to the appearance of the angel to the shepherds: “Behold an angel of the Lord stood next to them” and in verse 10 the angel announces “Behold, I bring good news of great joy for all peoples.”

‘Ecce’ is a rich and important word! It calls our attention, begs our notice. What deserves our attention more than the news of the promise and miracle of Advent?

For me, ‘ecce’ is a call to be attentive, to live in intentional awareness and gratitude for all of the good news and everyday wonderful gifts with which our awesome God showers us – the stars, the seasons, the songs of birds and beauty of flowers. As Mary Oliver so aptly expresses in her poem “Yes No”: “To pay attention, this is our endless and proper work.”

So, in this season of Advent,  
Ecce the song in your heart,  
Ecce the miracle of your life,  
Ecce the angel that brings news  
Ecce the whispers of God in the silence  
Ecce the babe in the manger  
Ecce the miracle of Emmanuel – God with us!

**Prayer: God of mystery and miracle, open all our senses to behold the innumerable gifts you give us each day. Help us live this precious life with focus and attention, in constant and genuine awareness of your presence with us. Amen.**

Betty Schroeder



Friday, December 18

**PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING AND SUPPLICATION**

O God our Redeemer, by your grace you enrich us in speech and knowledge. We can pray with all confidence that through Christ you hear us. You fill our days with the presence of your Holy Spirit; we receive guidance for the decisions we must make. Waking or sleeping, we are enfolded with your protection.

You bid us watch for signs of your reign. Open our eyes to behold your presence in all parts of our lives. Keep us from putting you on the fringe of existence, from turning to you only when we are in need. Keep us forever aware that you accompany us in all our journeys; help us to make you preeminent in all that we do. Let others see in us the firstfruits of goodness and mercy, and they themselves brought to know you through deeds of goodwill.

You tell us through Christ to be ready, since we know not when the hour will come. Keep us from putting off until another time the discipline that will make us better disciples. Make us willing to break the comfortable routine and dare to start ventures that will test our obedience. Surround us with those who have made a similar commitment, so that they may teach us. Help us to seek their assistance and to learn of their ways.

You send us out to be about our tasks. Go before us to guide us, and stay behind us to prod us. Live within us as God who fashions our being, as Christ who keeps us from falling, and as Holy Spirit in whose name we can do all things. Amen.

James G. Kirk  
in *When We Gather*

### **PRAYING THE SCRIPTURE**

**Luke 1:39-45** *Mary got up and hurried to a city in the Judean highlands. She entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. With a loud voice she blurted out, "God has blessed you above all women, and he has blessed the child you carry. Why do I have this honor, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as I heard your greeting, the baby in my womb jumped for joy. Happy is she who believed that the Lord would fulfill the promises he made to her."*

1. Take a few moments in silence to center yourself. Consider what you desire from this encounter with God.
2. Read the scripture passage twice, slowly, so the details become familiar.
3. Close your eyes and imagine what is going on. What do you see? Hear? Smell? Taste? Touch?\*
4. What emotions rise up for you? Does anything in particular cause a reaction for you?\*
5. Where do you see yourself in the scripture?\*
6. What questions or thoughts bubble up?
7. Close this time by talking honestly to God about your experience.

*\*If you are practicing this with children, offering them crayons and paper to draw the scripture is a good way for them engage with the scripture.*

Sunday, December 20

**Luke 1:45** *Happy is she who believed that the Lord would fulfill the promises he made to her.*

On this fourth Sunday in Advent, a Sunday which is traditionally known as the “peace” Sunday, the scripture reading, at least at first glance, is hardly “peaceful”. Mary has just been told by an angel that she is going to be pregnant: she is very young; although she is engaged, she is not married; she certainly fears for her very life; her first response is to flee, to run away. Mary leaves her home and travels the seventy or so miles to the “hill country.” It was not really a smart thing to do. In fact, for a man to make a journey like that alone was difficult and dangerous. For a young woman to do that, it was unheard of.

The inner turmoil that she was experiencing, however, made her do things that were totally out of the ordinary. I can picture the frantic pace of her journey – her actual walk and her emotional pace also. When she came to her cousin Elizabeth’s house she must have been filled with relief. She was physically safe and she must have known that in her cousin's presence she was emotionally safe.

What must have surprised Mary was that she was also spiritually safe. Elizabeth's greeting to Mary was an affirmation to her that all of this was God's doing; that indeed they were part of God's plan for the salvation of the world. In the midst of turmoil, Mary found that peace that she so desperately needed. That peace gave rise to words of hope, love and joy.

I am reminded that as I journey through life, I may find myself in situations of turmoil and fear like Mary did. If I stop and listen to the voices of faith around me, I will hear the voice of God calling to me as it did to Mary two thousand years ago: “Emmanuel” - God with us – God with me. Those words bring me peace.

**Prayer:** *Loving God, in the midst of the turmoil of life, in the frantic pace of my journey, bring me into the presence of faithful friends. Open my ears, God, that I may hear the word that you are with me. Bring me peace. Amen.*

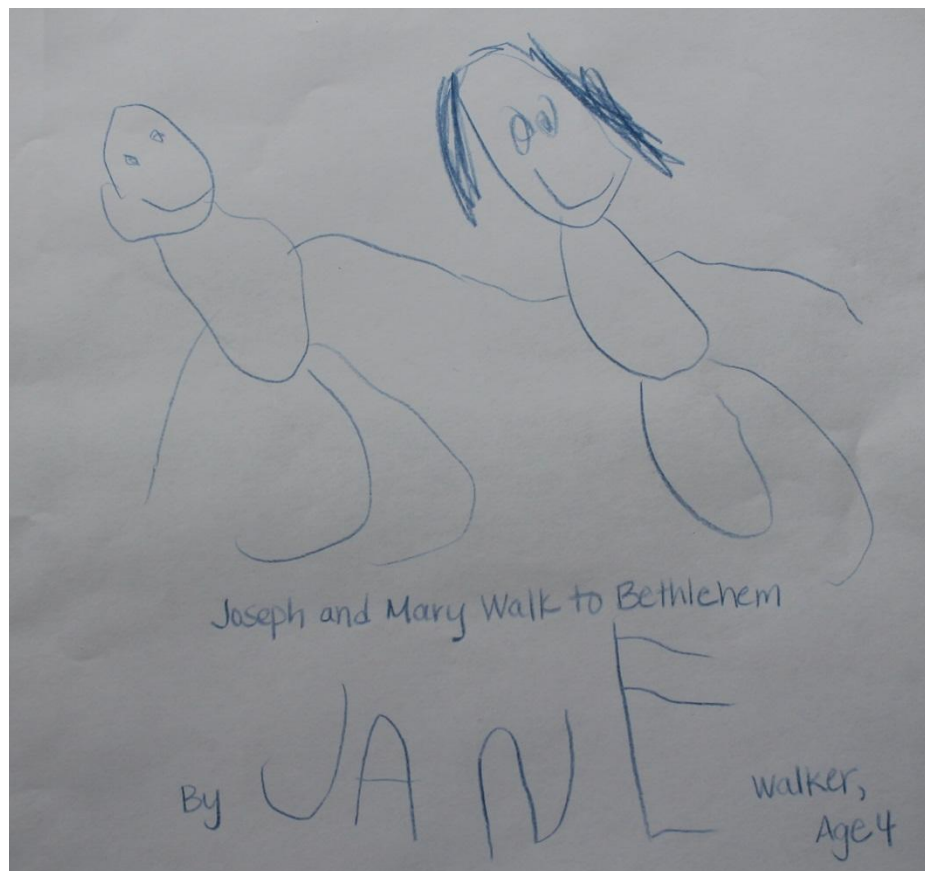
Rev. Marie Williams

Monday, December 21

**Deuteronomy 6:4-7** *Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise.*

I benefited from parents and grandparents who grounded me in the faith and recited God's words to me at home and away, at bedtime and when rising. I want to provide that for Jane and her sibling.

For example, Jane loves to hear the Christmas story. We don't participate in the Santa myth, so the Christmas story for her is and always has been the story of Jesus' birth. It doesn't have to be December for her to ask to hear me tell it again. There's power in telling and retelling this story, and even though I don't always feel like telling any story I try to indulge her when she asks. When I asked her to draw what she thought of when I say "Walk to Bethlehem" she gave me two figures – Joseph and Mary walking to Bethlehem, no extra explanation needed.



**Prayer:** *Be with us, Lord, during this holy season of Advent. Help us tell your greatest story to our children in ways that make it real for them. Fix our hearts and minds on you as we take this walk to Bethlehem. Amen.*

Mari Walker

Tuesday, December 22

**Luke 2:3-5** *“Everyone was required to return to his ancestral home for this registration. And because Joseph was a member of the royal line, he had to go to Bethlehem in Judea, King David’s ancient home—journeying there from the Galilean village of Nazareth. He took with him Mary, his fiancée, who was obviously pregnant by this time.”*

I must have read the Christmas story a thousand time over the years from childhood till today. Every time I read it I find comfort and always a point of view I had not seen before. This fall St. John’s has been preparing for a new beginning, renewal and addition to two of our buildings. We have begun “The Walk” to a promise of God’s blessings. I imagine that Joseph and Mary had to prepare for their journey to Bethlehem, not easy for Mary so pregnant and unsure of what was to happen as any new mother would be. Joseph also had his share of nerves and concern for himself and Mary. Yet they stepped out in faith to travel a road full of uncertainty and hardship. The trip from Nazareth to Bethlehem has a variety of terrain surfaces, flat lands, desolate tracts, along with Hills!! So they prepared to take on whatever they needed to in order to arrive at their destination.

Mary packed food, utensils, water or drink, bedding and items they might need along the way. Joseph I imagine took care of the donkey, money needed and shelter. So as any journey it began with the first step. We do not know what or if anything happened to them on the journey all we know is they arrived to find themselves in a desperate situation. They need a place to stay and Mary is about to give birth!!!

In today’s world we might say that these people are young and not so smart! Who would leave on such a journey and not have reservations when they arrive!!!! Did not Joseph write ahead to tell his family they were coming? Why did they wait so long to leave for Bethlehem? Why didn’t her mother go with her to help her? The hundreds of questions we would ask today are not asked in the Christmas story. Why? Could it be that Mary and Joseph had faith? Did they trust God more than we do? Is the story just that—a story? No, I don’t think so. I believe this story brings to light all that God promises us. The journey of unknown happenings, failure to plan and unexpected events is there to show us that God is always faithful, God will always provide and God’s ultimate desire is for we his children to obey his will so that He may gift us with abundant graces.

So family of St John’s we have begun the faithful journey of stepping out in grace listening for God’s Call to His Children. He calls us to come to Bethlehem so that I may gift you with my Love! We know not what will happen along the way and we may be fearful and unsure of our journey but we will trust God that his Love and Mercy will lead us to a place with a Star and a manger shedding light to the world and hope to those in need of His presence and Love! May we continue to find strength as we “Walk” in the Light of God?

**Prayer:** *Loving and gracious God, we ask you to be our beacon of Light, lead us on our path so that where ever we arrive you are there with us guiding our thoughts, our hands and mostly our Hearts to be like yours. Help us this season of Advent to reach out to others and to share your word with them. Give us the strength to be a flicker of you light in our home, church and community this Holy season, And all God’s Children Say AMEN.*

Lorri McGuire

Wednesday, December 23

THE CANTICLE OF THE TURNING

Stanza 1:

My soul cries out with a joyful shout  
that the God of my heart is great,  
And my spirit sings of the wondrous things  
that you bring to the one who waits.  
You fixed your sight on the servant's plight,  
and my weakness you did not spurn,  
So from east to west shall my name be blest.  
Could the world be about to turn?

Refrain:

My heart shall sing of the day you bring.  
Let the fires of your justice burn.  
Wipe away all tears,  
For the dawn draws near,  
And the world is about to turn.

Stanza 2:

Though I am small, my God, my all,  
you work great things in me.  
And your mercy will last from the depths of the  
past  
to the end of the age to be.  
Your very name puts the proud to shame,  
and those who would for you yearn,  
You will show your might, put the strong to flight,  
for the world is about to turn.

Refrain:

My heart shall sing of the day you bring.  
Let the fires of your justice burn.  
Wipe away all tears,  
For the dawn draws near,  
And the world is about to turn.

Stanza 3:

From the halls of power to the fortress tower,  
not a stone will be left on stone.  
Let the king beware for your justice tears  
every tyrant from his throne.  
The hungry poor shall weep no more,  
for the food they can never earn;  
These are tables spread, ev'ry mouth be fed,  
for the world is about to turn.

Refrain:

My heart shall sing of the day you bring.  
Let the fires of your justice burn.  
Wipe away all tears,  
For the dawn draws near,  
And the world is about to turn.

Stanza 4:

Though the nations rage from age to age,  
we remember who holds us fast:  
God's mercy must deliver us  
from the conqueror's crushing grasp.  
This saving word that our forbears heard  
is the promise that holds us bound,  
'Til the spear and rod be crushed by God,  
who is turning the world around.

Refrain:

My heart shall sing of the day you bring.  
Let the fires of your justice burn.  
Wipe away all tears,  
For the dawn draws near,  
And the world is about to turn.

Rory Cooney  
(Luke 1:46-45)

Christmas Eve

**Isaiah 9:2-7**

*The people walking in darkness have seen a great light.  
On those living in a pitch-dark land, light has dawned.  
You have made the nation great;  
you have increased its joy.  
They rejoiced before you as with joy at the harvest,  
as those who divide plunder rejoice.  
As on the day of Midian, you've shattered the yoke that burdened them,  
the staff on their shoulders,  
and the rod of their oppressor.  
Because every boot of the thundering warriors,  
and every garment rolled in blood  
will be burned, fuel for the fire.  
A child is born to us, a son is given to us,  
and authority will be on his shoulders.  
He will be named  
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,  
Eternal Father, Prince of Peace.  
There will be vast authority and endless peace  
for David's throne and for his kingdom,  
establishing and sustaining it  
with justice and righteousness  
now and forever.  
The zeal of the Lord of heavenly forces will do this.*

Christmas Eve

**Isaiah 9:2**

*The people who walked in darkness  
have seen a great light;  
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—  
on them light has shined.*

To trust God in the light is nothing. To trust God in the dark – that is faith. This from the larger-than-life Baptist preacher, Charles Haddon Spurgeon, reminds me of a Christmas Eve feast under the golden arches. “You mean McDonald’s...those golden arches? Seriously, Jay, c’mon.” You would be right to wonder.

Christmas Eve, 2010. Beck, Mariah and I were leaving University UMC after the 7pm Communion service. Grateful for having them with me for worship, we drove back down Highland Road toward our home in Kenilworth. Hunger crept up on us pretty quickly. Little did they know more than hunger was gurgling in me. Instead, a dark cloud was brewing in my spirit. I was due to deliver them back to their mom’s house by 10pm. We were facing the first Christmas Eve of our “new normal” – the reality of a Christmas season removed from familiar patterns into the darkness of separation and impending divorce.

While I was hoping like mad that my son and daughter were happy about Christmas Eve together and excited about Christmas celebrations to come, I was sinking. With every 100ft down Highland Road, they were hungrier. I felt like I was drowning.

Sometimes desperate places in life crack open lightened moments for God to move. And there it was – McDonald’s on Lee and Burbank. Turning into the lot, I saw Beck’s smile and Mariah’s eyes light up. Only 2 souls were there – 1 at the counter, the other standing at the fryer. I believe they were happy we 3 happened in.

Though the scene was certainly no Rockwell and maybe cheeseburgers don’t measure up to turkey and dressing, there was indeed a choir of angels. Light in my darkness. My two kids. God’s love outpouring. Reminders that the Everlasting Father holds us through dark times – even those of our own making. On Christmas Eve. Of all places, under the golden arches.

Prayer: Shining God, even the darkness is not dark to you. Please shine in our darkness, and light up our lives. When we walk in the gloom of confusion, when pain drains the color out of life, when we are paralyzed by the shadows of fear, please shine through. And when we know that others are walking in the darkness, grant us courage to be light for them. In the name of Jesus Christ, the illuminating Son, we pray. Amen.

Pastor Jay Hogewood



## Christmas Day

**Luke 2:1-20** *In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.*

*In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.' And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host,\* praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours!'*\*

*When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.' So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.*

## Christmas Day

**Luke 2:15** *Then the angels returned to heaven, the shepherds said to each other, “Let’s go right now to Bethlehem and see what’s happened.”*

On this Christmas Day, we are at the end of a journey—the end of our Walk to Bethlehem. For many of us, the journey has been long: filled with busy schedules, long hours at work, extra chores, and added stress. Many of us have the attitude that we want Christmas to “just be here already”! And it is. Christmas is here. The Christ child is born. The angels have come.

But are we prepared to receive the gift of our Savior? In today’s world, we are seemingly obsessed with “right now.” We want everything done immediately, to our personal specifications, and without inconvenience. I have been guilty on (many) more than one occasion of taking out my iPhone and ordering something from Amazon so that I can have it done immediately, and so that it will be delivered to my doorstep in two days or less. We are out of the practice of waiting—we fill our lives with so many things to do that we lose sight of what it is we are preparing and waiting for—the gift of our Savior.

It is on this day, that I think the shepherds have something important to teach us. As the shepherds are going about their daily tasks, keeping watch over the sheep, the angels appear to them, announcing the birth of the Messiah. And the shepherds’ response: “Let’s go right now to Bethlehem and see what’s happened.” The shepherds had been waiting for and preparing for this announcement for their entire lives, just as generations before them. And when the word came, they went without hesitation, to see their Messiah.

As we celebrate Christmas this year, my hope is that all of our desire for instant gratification will be transformed into a desire to meet our Savior without hesitation. I hope that we will, just like the shepherds, leave our daily tasks behind so that we can worship our King.

Christ is born! The Messiah has come! Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!

Prayer: Jesus our Messiah, thank you for coming into the world to live and walk among us. Help us to lay aside our busy-ness, so that we can meet you in wonder and amazement. Amen.

Deacon Sarah Shoup

## **INTERIOR**

Open with Prayer

Introductory Activity:

- Make a list together on newsprint or a whiteboard of all of the things that come to mind when you hear the word “interior.”

Entering the Scripture:

- Have someone read **Matthew 24: 36-44** out loud to the group (found on page 5). Spend a minute in silence reflecting on the scripture passage.
- Verse 36 says to “stay alert at all times” so that we are prepared for the coming of the Son of Man. What things are you doing to stay alert? What are the things that distract you from staying alert?
- Have someone read the devotion on Luke 21:25-36 by Rev. Larry Norman. (found on page 6)
- Larry writes that “God desires for something in the interior of our lives to be made new this season.” Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not?
- Both Larry and the scripture writer remark that we will be able to observe signs of the coming of God’s kingdom. What signs do you notice of God coming into your life this season? What signs do you notice of God coming into the world this season?

Further Reflection:

- On page 7, Bobbi Marino, talks about listening. Do you believe learning to listen well is an important part of a strong (interior) spiritual life? What keeps us from listening well? How do we become better listeners?
- On page 10, Evie Durham remarks that “Waiting is really hard.” Do you agree with this statement why or why not? What makes waiting easier? More difficult?

Closing

- Pray the prayer on page 6 together.

## **REPENT**

### Open with Prayer

#### Introductory Activity:

Give each participant a piece of paper or index card and have them write down a definition of the word “repent” or what he/she believes it means to repent.

#### Entering the Scripture:

- Have someone read **Luke 3:1-6** out loud to the group (found on page 12). Spend a minute in silence reflecting on the scripture passage.
- Have someone read the devotion on Matthew 3:1-6 by Theresa Sandifer. (found on page 13)
- Theresa asks us to: “Consider preparing for Christmas this year by repenting.” Do you think that repentance should be a part of our preparation for the coming of Christ? What would that look like in your daily life?
- Repentance involves a change of heart and a change of direction. What things do you need to turn away from so that you can turn to Christ?

#### Further Reflection:

- We do not only need to seek repentance and forgiveness as individuals, but also as a group. Of what do we need to repent in the Church today? Our church specifically? (Make a list together on a whiteboard or newsprint.)
- What new directions would lead us into deeper understanding of Jesus the Messiah?
- Natalie Cooper (on page 14) speaks of the gift she has to offer to God, her King. What gift(s) do you have to offer Christ this Advent season?

#### Closing

- Pray the prayer on page 13 together.

## LOVE

Open with Prayer

Introductory Activity:

- LOVE—Wait with this word for a moment in silence. Let LOVE settle into your thoughts. Let it spread across your imagination as look toward Christmas.
- What memories or stories from past Advent and Christmas seasons does this word, LOVE, call forth from your life?

Entering the Scripture:

- Have someone read **Luke 3:7-18** out loud to the group (found on page 19). Spend a minute in silence reflecting on the scripture passage.
- Do you view this story as a story of love? Why or why not?
- Have someone read the devotion on Luke 3:7-18 by Deirdre Halliburton. (found on page 20)
- Deirdre reflects that John the Baptist has a three-fold vision of how we should live while we are waiting for the coming of Christ:
  - Share what you have
  - Treat people the way you want to be treated
  - Use your words for justice not slander
- How is God calling you into this three-fold way of waiting this Advent season?
- How are you loving God this Advent season?
- How are you loving neighbor this Advent season?

Further Reflection:

- One of the greatest examples of love we have is that of God sending his Son, Jesus Christ as our Savior. On page 22, Kathy King, speaks of the gift of remembering when we accepted Jesus in our own lives. Share stories of how and when you accepted Christ into your life as your Savior. What is it like to know that kind of love?

Closing

- Pray the prayer on page 20 together.

Small Group Study Guide  
Lesson Length: 45 minutes  
Supplies Needed: Bibles

*Week 4*

## **PEACE**

Open with Prayer

Introductory Activity:

Ask participants to share a story of a time they were scared and chose to run away or not face the situation head-on.

Entering the Scripture:

- Have someone read **Luke 1:39-45** out loud to the group (found on page 26). Spend a minute in silence reflecting on the scripture passage.
- Have someone read the devotion on Luke 1:39-45 by Rev. Marie Williams. (found on page 27)
- Marie writes “The inner turmoil that she [Mary] was experiencing, however, made her do things that were totally out of the ordinary.” What is your first response when you experience this kind of inner turmoil?
- What helps keep you spiritually grounded? What are the signs in your life that you are spiritually safe?
- What are the voices of faith and peace in your life?

Further Reflection:

- Do you believe that there is a correlation between physical, emotional, and spiritual safety? In what ways or why not?
- What does peace feel like for you?
- Invite participants to share a story of a time they were scared and chose to face the situation head-on. What helped them make this decision?

Closing

- Pray the prayer on page 26 together.

## **HOPE**

Once again, we greet the season of Advent. Our Advent Wreath reminds us that we have begun a solemn time of waiting which will end in a time of great rejoicing. Soon a child will be born who will change the world forever. He will teach us of God's love and show us how to live.

Long years ago, during a period of bleak despair, the prophets of Israel told us this Messiah would come. They kindled hope in the people of Israel. One of them, Micah, wrote that the Savior would be born in Bethlehem, a little town only a few miles from the great city of Jerusalem. It's a long way to Bethlehem from here, but in our thoughts we can make that trip. We'll walk there, just as we would have done two thousand years ago.

There are four candles in our Advent Wreath. This morning we light the first, the candle of HOPE.

**Full of hope, we begin our walk to Bethlehem, following in the footsteps of the prophets.**

### **PREPARATION**

The first week of Advent has passed. We are caught up in a season of hectic activity. There is so much to do, so many preparations to make. It was no different in the days before the first Christmas. In their home in Nazareth, Joseph and Mary too were caught up in preparations. Joseph had to get ready for the long trip south to register for a census. Mary was preparing for the birth of her child. Together they faced the challenge of a long walk to Bethlehem.

Last week, we lighted the first candle in our Advent Wreath. Today we light the candle of HOPE again and also light the second candle, the candle of PREPARATION.

**We continue our preparation for the coming of Christ, our spiritual walk to Bethlehem in the footsteps of Mary and Joseph.**



**JOY**

On the hills outside Bethlehem, shepherds guard their masters' flocks. Their world is quiet now but it will soon be shaken. Angel voices will bring them the good news that their people have been waiting for so long. A savior will be born. Christ the Lord is coming. They will walk down from the hillside with hearts full of joy to see that newborn baby, the long expected Messiah.

This morning we light again the purple candles of HOPE and PREPARATION and light as well the pink candle of JOY.

**With hearts full of joy, we walk on toward Bethlehem following in the steps of the shepherds.**

## **LOVE**

We have come to the last week of the Advent Season. Our spiritual walk to Bethlehem is almost complete. Not far ahead we see the outlines of the town, illuminated by the great star which hangs above it. We want to run now, not walk, to meet the newborn king of kings. Our hearts, filled with love, reach out to him.

Each Sunday during this season of waiting, we have lighted a new candle in our Advent Wreath. The first was the candle of HOPE. Next we lighted the candle of PREPARATION. Third came the candle of JOY. Today all the candles will be lighted. The fourth candle is the candle of LOVE.

**With hearts filled with love, led by the light of the star, we walk on toward Bethlehem.**



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