

Advent:
**Something
New**



2022 Daily Devotional
MOUNT TABOR UMC

Advent: Something ★ New

2022 Daily Devotional

God is doing something new – for us, in us, among us, and through us – this Advent season. Even through all the interruptions and disruptions of the last few years, we remember that God is still creating and re-creating, still moving and working, still inviting us to new life through His Son, Jesus.

Nothing can interrupt or disrupt His plan for our salvation that burst forth with new life in a manger in Bethlehem, all those years ago. We celebrate that a new revelation of God was born: Immanuel, God-With-Us. The Spiritual Growth Team invites you to join in this booklet of daily devotions, and reflect on God's promise throughout scripture that He is doing "Something New."

Our team has designed this Advent booklet to focus on:

- God's permanence and stability that we can depend on.
- God's newness and change that brings a fresh start to life

We invite you to find a quiet place alone or with others each day during Advent. Breathe deeply and release your to-do list and anxieties. Ask God to open your heart to His Word. Read the selection for the day, answer the questions, and pray the prayer provided or offer one of your own.

Experience how God's great renewal plan has unfolded across history and how God desires to give new life to you. Respond to His invitation to accept the gift of new life in a weary world.

May fresh excitement and joy bubble up in you this Advent!

In Christ,

THE SPIRITUAL GROWTH TEAM OF MOUNT TABOR UMC

Jim Graham,
CHAIRPERSON

Alicia Bowman

Marcey Davis

Kim Harvey

Karen Miller

Wayne Pratt

Gray Handwerk,

STAFF REPRESENTATIVE



LIGHTING THE CANDLE OF HOPE

First Sunday of Advent

LAMENTATIONS 3:21-24

21 Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope: 22 Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. 23 They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. 24 I say to myself, "The Lord is my portion; therefore I will wait for him."

Lamentations is not something we normally read during Advent, but Jeremiah the prophet, speaks of the themes of Advent. He writes of hope founded in God's great love. He professes his confidence in God and declares he will wait for Him.

This hope and waiting are written as he witnessed the overwhelming destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BC where Solomon's Temple is completely destroyed and the people are carried off into exile to Babylon, the conquering nation. All is lost. No life has been spared. Hardship, poverty, and death stand on every corner. Violence reigns. God seems unreachable.

There are those times when I wonder "where is my God" in the chaos of my life. Relationships get hard. Work is tough. There is no sense of purpose. But at Advent I take hope in a compassionate God. A God who in His great compassion for a lost soul like me and a world that is selfish, ego-driven, and violent, decided to come among us in the name of Jesus to rescue me, you, and the world. A rescue plan that delivers us from exile, brings us back into relationship with Him, and fills us with hope. Like Jeremiah, I too will wait for Him with joy and without fear.

QUESTIONS

- Where do I find God in the chaos of my life?
- Where have I shown compassion to another who is suffering?
- Do I have the patience and sense of hope to wait with joy and no fear?

May Your Kingdom come on Earth as it is in Heaven. I give thanks to You for Your Son, Jesus, who has brought Your Kingdom here among us. I rejoice in Your great compassion and know that I am loved. May I walk in faith confident that Your Compassion is renewed every morning.
Amen.

REFLECTIONS

LUKE 5:33-38

Ripped jeans weren't always the fashion statement they are today. There was a time when mothers would spend hours with a needle and thread repairing holes in trousers and snags in sack-cloth dresses torn from climbing trees, jumping fences, or crawling through forts constructed from old barn wood. Moms would cut patches from old linen pillowcases, worn out aprons, and stained gingham tablecloths. It was a time when reviving clothing was commonplace, because money was needed for other essentials.

Luke 5:33-38 describes a lesser known parable of Jesus. He's just finished eating with tax collectors when they see an opportunity to use John the Baptist's reputation to bash him. Jesus responds with three stories.

³³ They said to him, "John's disciples often fast and pray, and so do the disciples of the Pharisees, but yours go on eating and drinking." ³⁴ Jesus answered, "Can you make the friends of the bridegroom fast while he is with them? ³⁵ But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; in those days they will fast." ³⁶ He told them this parable: "No one tears a piece out of a new garment to patch an old one. Otherwise, they will have torn the new garment, and the patch from the new will not match the old. ³⁷ And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. Otherwise, the new wine will burst the skins; the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined. ³⁸ No, new wine must be poured into new wineskins.

Jesus' point is clear, we can't fit His new life (new patch) into our old forms (old clothes). Jesus didn't come to patch up the old religious system. If he had done that, he would have ended up destroying his message, and he would have destroyed the old system as well. Jesus isn't into patching up. That applies to your life as well. He's not into patching up. He's into making something new.

QUESTIONS

- What do you think Jesus meant by saying, "the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them"?
- How did the new covenant He was bringing threaten their system and ways of thinking?
- Think about a time in your life when you felt stagnant or when your heart felt hardened. How does that make it difficult to be renewed or reformed?
- Why do you think God looks for new vessels to contain His new work? Think of ways you can be a new vessel.

Lord, fill us again with your new wine. Help us to contain it and grow with it, rather than lose it through our own inflexibility. Help me, Lord, to recognize the powerful new ways you want to work in my own life. In Jesus' name, I pray.

Amen.

COLOSSIANS 3:5-10

When I was a United Methodist district superintendent, a man I had never met came to talk. He described how gambling and other addictions cost him his job and marriage. The members of the band he was in threatened violence against him. He was so scared and hopeless that he put a gun to his head. God stopped him from pulling the trigger. Through tears he described how he gave his life to Christ in that moment. He left his rough life and found me so he could become a pastor. The more he talked, the more skeptical I became.

I gave him an enormous list of things to complete before he could be considered for ministry, including counseling, addiction recovery program, educational requirements, approval from the district committee on ministry, and staying away from the band. In a few years, he had accomplished everything on the list. I could see he was genuinely passionate about Jesus and his life had truly changed. I still worried about putting him in charge of a church, but we offered him a very small church with a questionable future.

He related well to the congregation. His former band members became the church praise band – the men and women who threatened him and caused him to want to end his life. They all gave their lives to Christ. Many other people professed faith and the church grew.

This man who had been ready to end his life in fear and desperation instead put to death his old self and put on a beautiful new self, as it says in Colossians 3:5-10:

⁵ Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. ⁶ Because of these, the wrath of God is coming. ⁷ You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived. ⁸ But now you must also rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. ⁹ Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices ¹⁰ and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator.

QUESTIONS

- Attachment to substances, behaviors, and abusive people caused this man great loss and despair. In his recovery, he had to recognize these attachments and his fear of being without them. What do you fear putting to death in your own life?
- This man had to let go of unhealthy behaviors and heal from his past. What steps might you need to take before healing and change can take place?

Lord, I invite you into the hidden and broken places of my life. I admit I am afraid to change my desires and habits, even though they harm me. Change threatens my security and makes me feel vulnerable. I need your help to overcome my desires and live a healthy, functional life. I pray for your grace, your loving guidance, and your empowerment. In Christ's name.

Amen.

EPHESIANS 4:22-24

²² You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; ²³ to be made new in the attitude of your minds; ²⁴ and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.

We are a few days into Advent and December has arrived. Advent beckons us to look towards the light as we anticipate the birth of Christ. In our scripture passage for today, the apostle, Paul, writes to the church at Ephesus to encourage the believers in their new life in Christ. When we accept the gift of salvation, our life changes, we put off our old self with its deceitful desires and our attitude is made new. It is the beginning, not the end, of a lifelong process as we grow in our relationship with Christ, try to be more like Him, and commit our life to Him. We will sometimes stumble along the way, but we keep going, we look to the light, and we begin anew.

QUESTIONS

- As your Advent preparations continue, what attitude do you need to change on this first day in December? Christmas is a joyous time but let's face it, it can be stressful with so many obligations and additions to our calendar.
- What would bring you new life so that you can really focus on the birth of Christ? What is holding you back? Maybe this year you need to simplify, or not say yes to every invitation. We hear the words, "Do not be afraid" that the angels spoke, as we read the Christmas Story. Maybe this is the year to heed that advice and make some changes. Go ahead, you know you want to. As we continue this process of becoming more like Christ, how can we best reflect his love and light and experience more joy in our celebration of the little baby who would change the world.

*Lord, help me to let go of those things that are interfering with the joy of this season, so that I may experience Advent in a way that is pleasing to you. May my life be lived in a way that reflects your light and love. In Jesus' name I pray,
Amen.*

REFLECTIONS

PSALM 96:1-6

¹ Sing to the Lord a new song; sing to the Lord, all the earth. ² Sing to the Lord, praise his name, proclaim his salvation day after day. ³ Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous deeds among all peoples. ⁴ For great is the Lord and most worthy of praise; he is to be feared above all gods. ⁵ For all the gods of the nations are idols, but the Lord made the heavens. ⁶ Splendor and majesty are before him; strength and glory are in his sanctuary.

It's a tradition in the Handwerk family to go bowling on Christmas Eve morning. For years it was a wonderfully useful way to keep my excited kids busy for a few hours on what seems like the longest day of the year. It's still a joyful time each year to laugh, to wear silly outfits, to spend precious time with friends and family, and to remember all the people with whom we have shared this strange tradition over the years. Bowling, of all things, feels like Christmas to me.

Christmas time for many of us is full of traditions, and maybe you have some odd traditions too. We look forward to getting out old holiday keepsakes, decor and recipes. We anticipate certain activities reserved for just this time of year. We excitedly seek out traditions that bring us the comfort of familiarity, reminding us of memories with loved ones and days gone by.

Yet in the midst of our holiday traditions, God is also doing something new. In Bethlehem all those years ago, God's presence was coming to be among us in a completely new way – in human form, of all things, to be God-With-Us. In this season of Advent, God is still with us, and still moving in a new way, doing something new among us and in us.

While we love to sing our favorite Christmas hymns, and re-create traditions from holidays past, let's take some time today to recognize the new thing God is doing, even now. And may that recognition spark a new song of praise from our hearts. Sing to the Lord a new song!

QUESTIONS

- What is your favorite holiday tradition? How does it bring comfort to you? Do you sense God's presence in the traditions?
- What is something new that God is doing in your life, or in your soul? How can you thank Him for the new things He is doing?

*Immanuel, thank You that You are with us. Thank you that You are the God of all my yesterdays, of today, and of all my tomorrows. Thank You for the beauty, comfort, and joy I receive from You through my favorite holiday traditions. Open my eyes to see the new things You are doing in me and around me today. You are worthy of all my praise, for things old and for things new. May my heart sing to You a new song, to proclaim Your name and Your goodness. In the name of Jesus,
Amen.*

JEREMIAH 31:31-34

³¹ “The days are coming,” declares the Lord, “when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah. ³² It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them,” declares the Lord. ³³ “This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel after that time,” declares the Lord. “I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. ³⁴ No longer will they teach their neighbor, or say to one another, ‘Know the Lord,’ because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,” declares the Lord. “For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.”

This passage is among my favorites of all the bible, as my heart fills with the Hope that it expresses. Although Christians believe that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus was the fulfillment of covenant promises made by God to His people in Old Testament times, the prophets pointed even further forward to the ultimate renewal of our relationship with God after Christ’s return. This passage likely points to the work of the Holy Spirit within us now, but it also describes a new relationship with God in which we and He are not separated by the sins of this life. In many ways, this new thing echoes the relationship God had with Adam and Eve before the Fall. I yearn to have this relationship with God.

Jeremiah, who wrote this passage, did not always express such Hope in his writings. His prophecies warned Judah of the consequences of not worshipping the Lord with all one’s mind and all one’s heart and all one’s soul. Like Jesus, he was particularly skeptical of outward expressions of piety that belied corruption underneath. In his lifetime, Jeremiah saw Jerusalem invaded and the Temple sacked. His people were exiled to Babylonia. And yet, in the midst of his own lamentations over the challenges of the people Israel, Jeremiah prophesied Hope.

QUESTIONS

- Life’s challenges are tough to bear, but even more so without Hope. Are there particular passages within the Bible that fill your heart? If so, might it be time to memorize them, so that you have those passages ready when you need them!
- Can you recall a time in which you were given hope during a dark time in your life? God works in us and through us now. Taking the time to remember God’s faithfulness to us in past days can increase our faith today and tomorrow.

Beloved God, you are our Hope. Even when we turn away from You, Your promises to us remain. May we be your people, and may you be our God. Write your law on our minds and in our hearts, that we may be willing servants of your Kingdom.

Amen.



LIGHTING THE CANDLE OF PEACE

Second Sunday of Advent



ISAIAH 65:17-25

¹⁷ “See, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind. ¹⁸ But be glad and rejoice forever in what I will create, for I will create Jerusalem to be a delight and its people a joy. ¹⁹ I will rejoice over Jerusalem and take delight in my people; the sound of weeping and of crying will be heard in it no more. ²⁰ “Never again will there be in it an infant who lives but a few days, or an old man who does not live out his years; the one who dies at a hundred will be thought a mere child; the one who fails to reach a hundred will be considered accursed. ²¹ They will build houses and dwell in them; they will plant vineyards and eat their fruit. ²² No longer will they build houses and others live in them, or plant and others eat. For as the days of a tree, so will be the days of my people; my chosen ones will long enjoy the work of their hands. ²³ They will not labor in vain, nor will they bear children doomed to misfortune; for they will be a people blessed by the Lord, they and their descendants with them. ²⁴ Before they call I will answer; while they are still speaking I will hear. ²⁵ The wolf and the lamb will feed together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox, and dust will be the serpent’s food. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain,” says the Lord.

The prophet Isaiah used poetry to paint this word picture of a world radically changed by the new things God will do. It was written to encourage a community of Israelites who had returned from exile. In contrast to their memories of shortened lives, grief, economic injustice, and terror, this vision restores peace, promotes joy, and extends life.

We long for healing from our memories of death and illness, divisions between nations, polarization of politics, and devastating economic hardship. God intervened in history through Christ to bring an end to being afraid and dwelling on the old so that we can live with love and joy. Christ inaugurates new life in us so that we can bring about the new world God intended in creation.

Howard Zinn saw the worst of human moral failures as a World War II Air Force bombardier. In his 2002 autobiography *You Can’t be Neutral on a Moving Train*, he wrote, “To be hopeful in bad times is not just foolishly romantic. It is based on the fact that human history is a history not only of cruelty, but also of compassion, sacrifice, courage, and kindness. What we choose to emphasize in this complex history will determine our lives. If we see only the worst, it destroys our capacity to do something. If we remember those times and places – and there are many – where people behaved magnificently, this gives us the energy to act, and at least the possibility of sending this spinning top of a world in a different direction. And if we do act, in however small a way, we don’t have to wait for some grand utopian future. The future is an infinite succession of presents, and to live now as we think human beings should live, in defiance of all that is bad around us, is a marvelous victory.”

QUESTIONS

- What word or phrase catches your attention in this reading?
- What does that word or phrase mean to you?
- After reading the quote from Howard Zinn, who comes to your mind as someone who behaved magnificently in bad times?
- How does that person inspire you?

Living God, Open my heart to the new things you want for my life. Help me to live as one who defies the bad around me with compassion, sacrifice, courage, and kindness.

In Christ’s name I pray.

Amen.

EZEKIEL 11:17-20

¹⁷“Therefore say: ‘This is what the Sovereign Lord says: I will gather you from the nations and bring you back from the countries where you have been scattered, and I will give you back the land of Israel again.’
¹⁸“They will return to it and remove all its vile images and detestable idols. ¹⁹ I will give them an undivided heart and put a new spirit in them; I will remove from them their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh. ²⁰ Then they will follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. They will be my people, and I will be their God.

As a Jew in exile in Babylon, Ezekiel responded to God’s call to minister to his fellow Jews as a prophet. He was to warn them of the divine judgment against God’s chosen people who have defiled the Holy Temple, the Holy City, and the Holy Land. In keeping with this prophecy, Jerusalem and the Temple are utterly destroyed by the Babylonians and there is a great dispersion of the Jews.

With the fall of Jerusalem, Ezekiel’s prophecies take a turn. A turn that speaks of hope. It speaks of our God who is not bound by the Temple or limited to the city of Jerusalem and the land of Judah but is present among the Jews in exile. This message of hope goes deeper as Ezekiel prophesies God’s promise to recover and restore His people where the scattered are brought back home to the land of their forefathers. In this journey home, they will receive a new spirit. A spirit that softens the heart to love God, be obedient to His law, and finally to remove the vile images and idols from the Holy City.

As we celebrate Advent with worship, prayer, song, and Scripture we hear echoes of Ezekiel’s prophecy that our Sovereign Lord promises to recover and restore you and me along with the world in which we live. He will bring us home. This promise is fulfilled in the birth of His Son, Jesus, whose message of love and compassion softens our hearts; whose sacrificial death restores the relationship between our Holy God and us sinners; whose call for a rebirth fills us with a new spirit. A loving spirit that unites us to each other and the God we serve. We can then be confident that we are His people and He is our God as we live in this new spirit.

QUESTIONS

- Where do I find idols in my life that divert my attention from God?
- God promises in His “I will...” statements in the passage to gather, bring back, give a new spirit, to be their God. But these “I wills...” are accompanied by “They will...” statements where we are to accept the offer to return, remove the vile idols, and to be His people. Do you believe that God can provide you recovery and restoration? Are you willing to declare yourself one of His people?
- At Advent we celebrate the coming birth of Jesus. Where do you see how he fulfills God’s promises of recovery and restoration?

You are my God and I am one of your people. I accept your new spirit which fills me with your love and compassion that unites me to all your people. Praise be to God.

Amen.

MATTHEW 13:47-52

⁴⁷ “Once again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was let down into the lake and caught all kinds of fish. ⁴⁸ When it was full, the fishermen pulled it up on the shore. Then they sat down and collected the good fish in baskets, but threw the bad away. ⁴⁹ This is how it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous ⁵⁰ and throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. ⁵¹ “Have you understood all these things?” Jesus asked. “Yes,” they replied. ⁵² He said to them, “Therefore every teacher of the law who has become a disciple in the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old.”

The Greek word for fish is “ichthys.” In the first century, Christians made an acrostic word from Ichthys: Iesous Christos Theou Yios Soter, which translates to Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior. The image of a fish and a net is seen throughout the New Testament. Christ fed the 5,000 with 2 fishes and 5 loaves, the phrase to “cast a net,” and Jesus called his disciples “fishers of men.”

The Greeks and Romans used the fish symbol many years before Christians did. Because of this, the symbol of a fish was the perfect image for believers who were being persecuted. It attracted little suspicion. When believers were being threatened by Rome in the years after Christ, Christians used the symbol of a fish to mark meeting places, to indicate tombs, or to distinguish friends from foes. When a Christian met a stranger on the road, they often drew a one arc of a fish image in the dirt. If the stranger drew the other arc of the fish, they both knew they were in good company.

In the Parable of the net and fish, Jesus referred to something different. It is a parable in terms of God’s authority in the future. Jesus wants us to understand there is a net that will gather us together and sweep us towards eternity. The net, or kingdom, is inclusive, but Jesus reminds us not everyone will be swept into heaven.

QUESTIONS

- Since Jesus wants us to be in the fishing business, what can we do as believers to “help catch people in the net”?
- How should we respond when people are reluctant to talk about hell?
- What new insights into God’s kingdom do you have after studying this parable?

Heavenly Father, help me to have a listening ear to hear all you are saying to me. I want to have a teachable heart so my wisdom will increase. I want to grow stronger in Your word. In the precious name of Jesus,

Amen.

JOHN 18:33-37

³³ Pilate then went back inside the palace, summoned by Jesus and asked him, “Are you king of the Jews?”
³⁴ “Is that your own idea,” Jesus asked, “or did others talk to you about me?” ³⁵ “Am I a Jew?” Pilate replied. “Your own people and chief priests handed you over to me. What is it you have done?” ³⁶ Jesus said, “My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is from another place.” ³⁷ “You are a king, then!” said Pilate. Jesus answered, “You say that I am a king. In fact, the reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.”

Have you ever had a conversation with someone who was speaking from such a different point of view (compared to your own) that you couldn't really understand their meaning? Pilate was smart and powerful, and he was well aware of the reasons that the Jewish leaders had brought Jesus to him. Already that fateful night, Jesus had been betrayed, and then questioned by Annas and Caiaphas and the Jewish council. Pilate knew that the Jewish leaders viewed Jesus as a threat to their authority, and that they had brought Jesus to Pilate hoping that he would come to the same conclusion.

So Pilate questioned Jesus about whether He claimed to be a king, which might threaten Rome's domination over Israel, and therefore would be punishable by death. Jesus answered clearly, but not in the manner that Pilate expected. Jesus did not claim to possess an earthly kingdom; instead He professed to testify to “the truth.” Pilate scoffed at Jesus' truth, and completely missed the message Jesus was giving. Though he did not find Jesus guilty, ultimately Pilate succumbed to the wishes of the Jewish authorities and had Jesus crucified.

I find this story difficult, particularly in the midst of waiting for Christmas and the Hope that it brings. And yet, even as Pilate questioned Him, Jesus spoke of the New Kingdom he was sent to earth to open for us all. There is no Hope at Christmas without Jesus' life, death and resurrection. Let us not miss what Jesus is telling us.

QUESTIONS

- In your prayers, have you opened a space for God to answer?
- We are not immune to Pilate's error. What messages has God sent you that you have been unprepared for?

Lord Jesus Christ, open our minds to your message and our hearts to your love. As we await Christmas, prepare our souls for the light that you bring to the world and the peace that you offer beyond all understanding. May we listen, Lord, with open ears.

Amen.

JAMES 2:1-5

¹My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism. ²Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in filthy old clothes also comes in. ³If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, "Here's a good seat for you," but say to the poor man, "You stand there" or "Sit on the floor by my feet," ⁴have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? ⁵Listen, my dear brothers and sisters: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him?

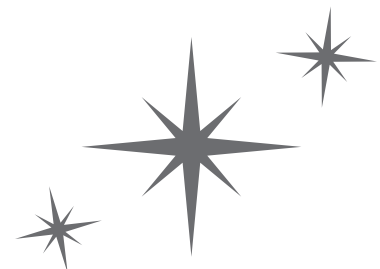
In our scripture passage, James, the brother of Jesus and the leader of the church in Jerusalem, writes to Jewish Christians warning them against favoritism or prejudice. As I read this, I am reminded of the old saying, "Don't judge a book by its cover." At the time of Jesus' birth, shepherds were looked down on or considered unclean due to their work with sheep, manure and insects, and in all kinds of weather. It was not a glamorous job. Yet the shepherds watched over and cared for their flocks, were dependable, and the sheep even knew them by the sound of their voices. When Jesus was born, these shepherds were the first people to be told of His birth, by an angel of the Lord no less. They were afraid but the angels told them, "Do not be afraid" for this news will be for all people. Yes, for all people, regardless of their job, money, or education. The shepherds visited Jesus, Mary, and Joseph and afterwards shared the Good News with others, glorifying and praising God.

At first glance, the shepherds might have been dismissed as unworthy to share the Good News, due to their humble status. We might also have dismissed that little baby born in a humble manger to a poor family in a little place called Bethlehem. But that baby was Lord and Savior, and would change history forever. As James reminded his brothers and sisters in the faith so long ago, and us today, God has chosen those deemed poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and inherit His kingdom, the same as everyone else. The Lord shows no partiality. All are welcome and worthy of the Good News - the shepherds, the homeless, the messy, the rich, the poor, even you and I. Thanks be to God.

QUESTIONS

- How many times have I judged or dismissed people based on their looks, their occupation, their money, or their education or lack thereof?
- Am I neglectful in sharing the Good News of Jesus, to all people?

*Lord Jesus, please examine my heart and make me aware of any prejudices I need to get rid of. Forgive me for the times I have judged people or have been dismissive. Create in me a new heart, that loves like you do, sharing the Good News with all people. In Your name I pray,
Amen.*



ACTS 2:1-4

¹When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. ²Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. ³They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. ⁴All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.

Dr. Pepper was created in the late 1800s, with a blend of “23 flavors” in an effort to give it a distinct and unidentifiable taste. Early marketing described it by detailing what it was NOT: not a cola, not a root beer, and (thankfully) not prune juice. It was “like” a lot of things, but then again, not really. In the 1800s and even today, it was and is something distinct, different, and therefore, very difficult to describe.

Kind of like when the Holy Spirit moved afresh among the disciples on the day of Pentecost. The Holy Spirit was like a wind, like a fire. But it also wasn't. The Holy Spirit was far more than wind or fire, but they were powerful words to describe this new experience.

It's kind of like when God moved into the neighborhood and walked and lived among us. Jesus of Nazareth was a living, breathing, human being, but also He was far more than that. He was God in the flesh, living among us. Something so new and so earth-shattering, it's hard to comprehend, let alone describe.

When we experience something entirely new and different, we have a hard time describing it. It's hard to capture exactly what it is, how it changes things, how it affects us. Our language limits us. Even our brains limit us such that we need our whole being (head, heart and gut) to help us understand and comprehend this new thing.

In this Advent season, we eagerly await and seek a new revelation of God in our own lives, a revelation of God living and breathing in our own homes and neighborhoods. Maybe you can't describe it or put it into words, but are you able to recognize the presence of God in your day today? Something like a fire, or a fresh breeze, or a tap on the shoulder. He is doing something new – something distinct and different – today that may be hard to comprehend, but we do well to spend some time contemplating that.

QUESTIONS

- Can you think of a specific time when you have experienced the presence of God? How would you describe it?
- How can you be more aware of the presence of God today? How can you seek a new revelation of His presence in your day?

God, You are present with me here and now. Allow me to experience Your presence throughout this day. I want more of You. And when I sense Your presence, may I remember to glorify You and praise Your name.

Amen.



LIGHTING THE CANDLE OF JOY
Third Sunday of Advent



ACTS 26:9-18

⁹“I too was convinced that I ought to do all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth. ¹⁰And that is just what I did in Jerusalem. On the authority of the chief priests I put many of the Lord’s people in prison, and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. ¹¹Many a time I went from one synagogue to another to have them punished, and I tried to force them to blaspheme. I was so obsessed with persecuting them that I even hunted them down in foreign cities. ¹²“On one of these journeys I was going to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests. ¹³About noon, King Agrippa, as I was on the road, I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, blazing around me and my companions. ¹⁴We all fell to the ground, and I heard a voice saying to me in Aramaic, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.” ¹⁵“Then I asked, ‘Who are you, Lord?’“ ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,’ the Lord replied. ¹⁶‘Now get up and stand on your feet. I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen and will see of me. ¹⁷I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles. I am sending you to them ¹⁸to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.’

Saul of Tarsus was a bright, charismatic, devoted Jew who felt empowered by his work as a persecutor of Christians. In this autobiographical testimony spoken before King Agrippa while he was held captive, he described how God intervened in a miraculous way and completely changed his life. His source of power shifted from his own accomplishments to God’s transforming work. As we know, the result was amazing. More than any other single person, Paul was responsible for the spread of the gospel in his day. His letters in the New Testament have brought new life to centuries of people.

The story of Saul’s transformation to Paul the Apostle demonstrates God’s power to give anyone new identity and purpose. At times we may feel infused with our own abilities and capacity. Other times we may feel, “I am powerless to change anything.” That may cause us to lose confidence and feel disheartened. Paul’s testimony demonstrates that no matter how we feel, God has the amazing power to change our heart and the direction of our life. God may even use us to transform the lives of others.

At a time when I was struggling, I was brought to tears by the simple beauty of a worship song entitled, “I Will Change Your Name” by Eden’s Bridge. It reminded me that through God’s love and power, I am a new person. Here are the lyrics or you can listen to it online:

*I will change your name.
You shall no longer be called
Wounded, outcast, lonely, or afraid.*

*I will change your name.
Your new name shall be
Confidence, joyfulness, overcoming one
Faithfulness, friend of God
One who seeks my face.*

QUESTIONS

- What is the source of power in your life?
- Where do you need the power of God right now?

Holy One, I often depend on myself to accomplish what I want. You know how that has worked out. Help me overcome my fear and disbelief and trust your power. I am open to whatever you want to reveal to me today. What new name do you have for me? I ask this in Jesus’ name.

Amen.

ROMANS 6:1-4

¹What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? ²By no means! We are those who have died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? ³Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.

Bruce Springsteen in 1975 wrote a song "Born to Run." In this song he sings of chasing the American Dream, of sweating it out on the streets, running till you drop, lonely runners, tramps like us. Sounds like you and me. We were born to run. And run we do till we drop.

But in Advent we encounter a new song, a new way to live. It is titled "Born to Die." In this song we sing of an innocent baby, born to a virgin, laid in a manger, and named Jesus. Jesus is born to die and henceforth the title of our new Advent song. It is His death, a sacrificial death, that is the purpose for Him being born. He is born to die for you and me, to offer us in that death a new way to live. A new way that ends our senseless running, chasing the American Dream. A new way that brings us into right relationship with our Holy Father. A new way that brings confidence to our living along with purpose and unites us in love with all the Father's children.

But to begin this new life we too must die. We must die to the ways of the world which are filled with competition, selfishness, and pride. We must put to death our sinful nature where our ego embraces the world while separating us from our Father. As Jesus died and was buried He rose in glory. As you and I die to the ways of the world we too rise and share in His glory. The shadow of death clings to the celebration of Advent and Christmas. But it is a death that is liberating and frees us to be the person we were created to be, not shackled to the ways of the world. This is the new life Paul writes of in today's scripture where we have died to sin and are now raised in glory with Christ. Jesus was "Born to Die" so that we may live.

QUESTIONS

- Am I "Born to Run" or "Born to Die"? Will I run till I drop or die to be raised in Glory?
- Ego is an acronym for Edging God Out. What am I to do with my Ego?
- Am I ready to renew my baptismal vows that sealed me as a benefactor of Jesus's birth-death-resurrection?

Father, your Son, Jesus, was born to be that final sacrificial death which saves me from my sin. As He was Born to Die may I find the courage to put to death my sinful nature and be reborn to new life filled with Your Spirit. A new life that is filled with love and joy being obedient to Your will and not that of the world. Thanks be to God.

Amen.

Suppose it is five o'clock on a Friday afternoon and you are headed home after a long day at work. You're driving down the road in a 45 mph speed zone, and you find yourself driving 46 mph. Then, you get to a 55 mph speed zone, and you start driving 56 mph. Finally you hit a 65 mph speed zone, and you are driving 66 mph. Did the speed limit give you the power to keep it? Did the power to keep the law have anything to do with the numbers printed on the sign? The speed limit does not give us any power to keep it. In fact, the speed limit arouses a passion in us to break it.

Here is another example. God's law says that we should not covet. When a neighbor pulls up in a new Corvette, how do we respond? Covetousness takes over, and we feel like we need a new car too. What is the fruit of that action? The law arouses sinful passions. Romans 7:4-6 reads,

ROMANS 7:4-6

⁴So, my brothers and sisters, you also died to the law through the body of Christ, that you might belong to another, to him who was raised from the dead, in order that we might bear fruit for God. ⁵For when we were in the realm of the flesh, the sinful passions aroused by the law were at work in us, so that we bore fruit for death. ⁶But now, by dying to what once bound us, we have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code.

Praise God for regeneration! Praise God for the new birth by His Spirit through what Christ did for us on the cross. The written code could not save us from sinful passions. It aroused sinful passions within us. Through Christ, we have died to sin and have been released from the law to serve God in the new way of the Spirit!

QUESTIONS

- What is the purpose or goal of a new Christians life?
- What changes a person's relationship with the law?
- What are the differences between an old life under the law and a new life under the Spirit?

Thank You Father, that in Christ I am dead to the Law. Thank You that I have been released from the Law. We are no longer bound to the old ways. It is because of Your grace and the work of the cross that I can now serve You in a newness of Spirit. It is in the name of our precious Savior, Jesus Christ,

Amen.

REFLECTIONS

1 CORINTHIANS 11:23-26

²³For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, ²⁴and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, “This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me.” ²⁵In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.” ²⁶For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.

Suppose we are having a potluck lunch at church next week. What’s your reaction when you hear the announcement? Do you love potlucks because you enjoy piling your plate with salads, meats, sides, casseroles, and bread? Or do you let out a sigh because now you have to prepare a dish late Saturday night or early Sunday morning? Sure, potlucks are fun, but they do take a little work. That’s why we don’t have them every Sunday.

Paul thought it was necessary to remind the church in Corinth how Jesus had instituted the Lord’s Supper on the night of his betrayal. The very next day Jesus would be hanging on the cross. It was a solemn occasion on which Jesus was making out his last will and testament.

What did Jesus have to leave his disciples in a will? He didn’t own any land or property. The only thing Jesus had to give was himself.

QUESTIONS

- How are a potluck and Holy Communion different?
- What did Jesus mean, “This is my body, which is for you?”
- What do we contribute or bring to Holy Communion?
- Why is it important that Jesus is the one who does all the giving, and us, all the receiving?
- What do the body and the blood accomplish for us?

Thank you, Father, for giving us the experience of Holy Communion. You invite us to come and savor the flavor of forgiveness and salvation Jesus offers us so freely. Lord, help us to remember Jesus wants to connect with us in new ways when we partake in His body and blood. It is in His precious name we pray,

Amen.

REFLECTIONS

2 CORINTHIANS 3:6-11

⁶He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant—not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. ⁷Now if the ministry that brought death, which was engraved in letters on stone, came with glory, so that the Israelites could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of its glory, transitory though it was, ⁸will not the ministry of the Spirit be even more glorious? ⁹If the ministry that brought condemnation was glorious, how much more glorious is the ministry that brings righteousness! ¹⁰For what was glorious has no glory now in comparison with the surpassing glory. ¹¹And if what was transitory came with glory, how much greater is the glory of that which lasts!

In the scripture passage today, the apostle, Paul, is writing to the church he founded in Corinth, along with the house churches in the province of Achaia. Paul's life as a former persecutor of Christians was amazingly transformed when he was converted on the road to Damascus. God gave him a new life and called him to be a minister of the new covenant. The Holy Spirit would use Paul's ministry to expand the church and bring even more people to Christ. The Holy Spirit continues to change hearts today and give us life even more glorious with the gift of eternal life. In this season of waiting and preparing for the birth of Jesus, we give thanks to God for his indescribable gift.

QUESTIONS

- In the midst of the busy preparations of the season, are we taking time to reflect and give thanks to God for his greatest gift?
- Can you think of people whose lives have been transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit? Reflect on their transformation and how God has used them.

*God, we thank you for the gift of eternal life, for the glory that surpasses all other glory and makes us in right standing with you. We give thanks for the transforming power of your presence which never leaves us and the reminder that no one is beyond redemption, as evidenced by the transformation in Paul's life. May all that we do honor you and be for your glory. In Jesus' name we pray,
Amen.*

REFLECTIONS

2 CORINTHIANS 5:17-20

¹⁷Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! ¹⁸All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: ¹⁹that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. ²⁰We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God.

It's always a big news story when the leaders of two countries with strained relations make plans to get together to talk. We all follow these stories, watching as seemingly irreconcilable leaders step off planes to shake hands and engage in each other's customs. We watch with hope that the participating nations will make steps toward peace. We have hope in these moments because we know that the first step to reconciliation is showing up for the conversation.

We all had strained, irreconcilable relations with God, because He is holy and we are not. We need reconciliation. During the Advent and Christmas season, we celebrate with hope that first step toward our reconciliation with God: when Immanuel showed up.

God made the first move to show up for the conversation, and He did so in the most vulnerable and sacrificial way imaginable. He stepped out of heaven and engaged in our customs, taking on flesh and living as a human, suffering among us. God made the first move toward reconciliation, loving us so fully while we were still in our sin.

Yet, it takes two to tango, as they say, and two to reconcile. Both sides have to show up. Both sides have to make steps toward peace.

QUESTIONS

- God showed up for you. Are you showing up for Him?
- God sacrificed Himself to make a way for you to be with Him. Are you sacrificing something old to embrace the new life with Him?
- As one reconciled to God, are you sharing that message of reconciliation with others? How can you act as an ambassador in this foreign land, showing up for others to lead them to reconciliation?

God of peace, you showed up for me in a manger, and on a cross, and you show up for me in every moment. Help me to show up for you, seeking to be in conversation and communion with you today. And as I rest in your presence, allow me to receive your peace, and receive it in abundance, so that I can then serve as an ambassador of your peace to others. May my reconciliation with you lead others to the same, and bring glory to your name.

Amen.

GALATIANS 3:26-29

²⁶So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. ²⁷for all who of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. ²⁸There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.

In the book of Galatians, Paul was responding to tensions within the Church. Many of the early converts to Christianity were also Jewish, and taught that salvation came from BOTH following the law and believing in Jesus. As you might imagine, this was a challenging message for Gentiles (many of whom were also converting). Paul, earlier in the letter, argues vehemently that while Jesus fulfilled the Law and made it perfect, it is our faith in Him alone that frees us from sin. Earlier in Galatians (3:22), Paul declares "...we receive God's promise of freedom only by believing in Jesus Christ."

We must constantly be on guard, for our sinful natures are quick to divide "us" from "them" in the same way that early sects of the church became divided. Jesus lived to bring us all into God's one Kingdom. Paul's declaration in today's passage is that in our Christian faith, we have become something new. Our unity in Christ changes us, clothes us in our baptism, and makes us all one in Christ Jesus.

We are still human, and as such, we all too easily look at others (and ourselves!) with human eyes rather than God's. All who have faith in Jesus, however, are God's heirs. All are the true children of Abraham. God made a covenant with Abraham that pointed forward to our salvation by the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

QUESTIONS

- If we are heirs to the Kingdom of God, we are also representatives of that Kingdom. What does that mean for you as you go about your daily life?
- Is there someone in your life that needs you to see and care for them as God does?

Jesus Christ, it is by your birth and life and resurrection that we are saved, and it is by the same that all who are Christians have become one in your body. Help us to build each other up and support each other in our faith. For it is by your will that we are called to serve you, and it is through your grace that we are the children and heirs of your Kingdom. Glory be to you, Lord Jesus!

Amen.

REFLECTIONS



LIGHTING THE CANDLE OF LOVE
Fourth Sunday of Advent



JOHN 3:1-5

¹Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. ²He came to Jesus at night and said, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him.” ³Jesus replied, “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.” ⁴“How can someone be born when they are old?” Nicodemus asked. “Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother’s womb to be born!” ⁵Jesus answered, “Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit.

The Pharisees believed pleasing God meant keeping the Jewish laws and traditions. Jesus compared them to whitewashed tombs; beautiful on the outside but filled with dead bones and uncleanness. Nicodemus must have known firsthand the uncertainty, restlessness, and spiritual exhaustion of religious legalism without genuine faith. Jesus indicated that to see the kingdom of God, a person must be born again. Nicodemus couldn’t understand this powerful abstract metaphor because he was accustomed to the literal interpretation of the law.

Christians are attracted to concrete action: showing love, reading scripture, doing good, and participating in community. John Wesley called people who only follow these outward aspects of the Christian life “Almost Christian.” There is more for us when we completely open ourselves to being born again. It starts with approaching God with repentance, the sincere confidence that in Christ our sins are forgiven, accepting forgiveness, and developing deep love for God and neighbor. We feel cleansed and the weight of our burdens are lifted. We have hope as we follow Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world. Service and generosity follow, but they do not replace being born again.

Occasionally, I go through the motions because they are expected, not because I am excited about my life in Christ. Does that ever happen to you? This Advent can be different. We can celebrate that we can be born again and experience rebirth whenever we need God’s transformation.

QUESTIONS

- Draw a horizontal line. On one side write, “Going through the motions”. On the other side write, “Born again life”. Mark where you find yourself on the continuum.
- What is the difference between “going through the motions” of religious practice and being born again?
- What are three specific ways God might be pulling you to the fullness of being born again or renewing your life?

*Holy One in Three,
It is tempting to simply go through the motions during this season. Help me slow down and see your presence in the events, people, and splendor surrounding me. I give you praise and thanks for the invitation to be born again. Please lead me on the path you want me to follow. In your holy name I pray.*

Amen.

1 PETER 1:3-5

³Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, ⁴and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you, ⁵who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time.

During the first semester of my son's attendance at UNC Wilmington he called one night to ask if he had a Trust Fund. I found this to be a bit of an unusual question and asked what generated this question? He replied that several of his friends were talking about sums of money they were to receive from their Trust Funds now that they were 18 years old, and he just wondered if he had some money coming his way. He was a bit disappointed when I told him he did not have a Trust Fund. I explained that a Trust Fund is an inheritance that is usually held for a child until they reach an age of maturity then given to them to manage responsibly.

As I think about this conversation and Peter's scripture for today I find myself asking, do I have a Trust Fund? This is an unusual thought and question to ask during this season of Advent but Peter speaks of an inheritance that is being held in Trust by our Father. An inheritance that can never perish, spoil, or fade. An inheritance that is kept in Heaven till we reach the age of maturity. This inheritance is given to us by our Father and is funded by the work of His Son, Jesus. It is this "body of work" that we celebrate during Advent as He came among us. A "body of work" which exceeded all expectations and yielded a fortune that does not perish.

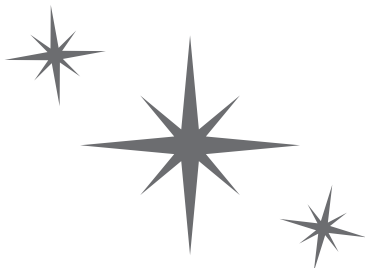
It is that fortune that is held in Trust for you and me. It is a fortune that provides a living hope for the present and a shield from the evils of the world. It is a fortune that when we reach the age of maturity will provide for our well-being for all of eternity. As a child of the Father I am thankful for such an inheritance which allows me to live in confidence without fear. I am glad to have such a Trust Fund. I appreciate Jesus's work that funded my Trust and can't wait to reach the age of maturity when I will inherit its full benefits.

QUESTIONS

- Do I have a Trust Fund that will not perish, spoil, or fade? Have I received the new birth that qualifies me as a child of God and a benefactor of such an inheritance?
- How does this promised inheritance benefit me now as I live out my life?
- How is it that this promised fortune will not perish, spoil, or fade?

Father, I accept your offer of a new birth as provided in the life-death-resurrection of Your Son, Jesus. May I be your faithful obedient child doing your will now and forever. I look forward to reaching the age of maturity when I will benefit from the fortune you hold in Trust for me.

Amen.



REVELATION 21:1-4

¹Then I saw “a new heaven and a new earth,” for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. ²I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. ³And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. ⁴He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.

Although resilience isn’t one of the fruits of the Spirit described by Paul in Ephesians, the ability to rebound from difficult circumstances may well be accomplished by applying faithfulness and self-control with no small amount of patience. We practice patience as we wait upon the Lord in Advent, we practice faithfulness by accepting Christ in our lives and through working God’s will on this Earth, and we practice self-control when we remember that our actions are the fruit we bear for the Kingdom.

God can gift us with resilience, but we can also work at developing it in ourselves. Among the many ways that we might do so, one method that psychologists suggest is to find things to look forward to. It may be easier to push through a difficult week if we have plans for the weekend, and we may bounce back faster from a medical procedure if we reflect on what we’ll be able to accomplish once we recover. If we have something to look forward to, we can be more resilient.

Being a Christian requires resilience. Sooner or later, our beliefs are challenged by the people and the world around us. As Christians, we have something to look forward to, and what a marvelous thing it is! Revelations echoes a promise that God also shared with Jeremiah (see our devotional on December 3rd) that we will one day dwell with Him in the New Jerusalem. God Himself will wipe our tears, and we will suffer no more! That is something to look forward to!

QUESTIONS

- What are the things in your day that you look forward to? Keep those in mind, and be sure to thank God for them in your prayers.
- Which of God’s promises might you recall when you are in need of Christian resilience?

Almighty Father, You who will wipe away our tears and remove our pain, help us to remember your promises as we await Christmas and the coming of your New Jerusalem. Strengthen our faithfulness and self-control, and increase our patience. When our faith is challenged, may our understanding of your promises grant us resilience. In all things, Lord, may Thy will be done.

Amen.

MATTHEW 2:1-11

¹After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem ² and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.” ³When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. ⁴When he had called together all the people’s chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵“In Bethlehem in Judea,” they replied, “for this is what the prophet has written: ⁶“But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.” ⁷Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. ⁸He sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.” ⁹After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. ¹¹On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

We are just a few days away from Christmas, a day we’ve been eagerly anticipating. Our journey through Advent is almost over. Hopefully the gifts have been wrapped, (or at least bought!), the meals and gatherings with family and friends have been planned, but most importantly, our hearts are ready for the coming of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Today our scripture passage is about the visit of the Magi or wise men, who arrived in Jerusalem, looking for the King of the Jews. But it wasn’t King Herod they were looking for. No, this King had his own star to lead the way and the Magi came to worship him. King Herod sent the Magi on their way with instructions to find the child and report back to him so he could worship him. Of course, Herod had no intention to worship this child, as he was threatened by his presence and by the idea that someone else was considered King of the Jews. When the Magi found the child, the first thing they did was to worship him. They also brought some really nice presents fit for, well, for a King! The Magi were warned in a dream not to return to Herod and instead went in a new direction and traveled home. I wonder what the Magi’s lives were like when they got home. They had quite the story to share about this little child who fulfilled prophecy, had a star to signal his birth, and would change the world. May we all continue to seek the Christ Child and look to God for direction in our lives.

QUESTIONS

- Have you ever felt a nudge from God, to change your direction or plans?
- What gifts will you give the Christ Child this Christmas? Your time, your attention, your devotion?

Thank you God for your Son, Jesus, who came to live among us, who gave his life so that we might have life everlasting. Help us to seek your direction and guidance in life’s journey and may we be a light in the darkness that leads to you. In Jesus’ name we pray.

Amen.

1 JOHN 5:11-12

¹¹And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. ¹²Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life.

In this season of Advent, and in our celebrations of Christmas, what kind of testimony are we sharing? We testify with our words, yes, but more loudly with our actions.

Sometimes, I'm sad to confess that others might hear my testimony as one that says, "Perfection and outward appearance are the most important things at Christmastime." Or someone might hear my testimony say, "my time is worth more than your time, because I don't have time to wait." Or perhaps they might receive my testimony that says, "If people can get the right stuff, the perfect gift, they will be happy." Those are often things, in the busyness of the holidays, that my life is communicating.

But obviously, that's not the testimony I'm called to give. My testimony, as John said, is that God has given us His son, and in Him I have eternal life, abundant life. That's what I believe. That's what I want to celebrate and remember and honor at Christmas.

The thing about a testimony is that it has to be shared. If it's not shared, a testimony is simply a personal belief. A testimony is a recounting, a telling, to someone else. Sometimes we testify with words, and mostly we testify with our actions, and with the way we live our lives.

So as I bustle through stores, or finish up all the busy tasks, or set the table, or wrap the gifts, I need to remember that my life is my testimony. It's not just my words, but it's also in the things I prioritize and in the ways I treat others.

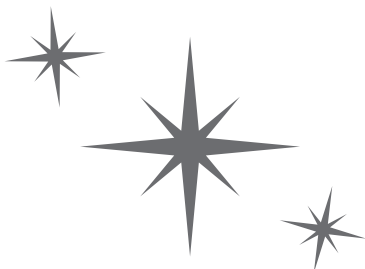
Because I am testifying to something, whether I mean to or not. And I want to testify to the life I have as a result of the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. So that others can find their way to that life, too.

QUESTIONS

- As an offering to the Savior, use the following page to write out your testimony, reflecting how your life is different because of the life you have received through Christ. What is your testimony? How have you received life through your relationship with Jesus? How is your life different because of Jesus?
- Is your testimony evident in the way you live your life? Would others know you follow Jesus if you didn't tell them?

Lord of my life, thank you for the new life you give me through Jesus. I want to testify to the beauty of life in You. Give me the courage to use my testimony, through words and actions, to point others to the eternal life found only in You.

Amen.





LIGHTING THE CHRIST CANDLE

Christmas Eve

JOHN 1:9-14

⁹The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. ¹⁰He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. ¹¹He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. ¹²Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—¹³children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God. ¹⁴The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

The true light...". That is how verse nine begins. John is making the claim that Jesus is that light that was true in the past, is true the present, and will be true in the future. This was a bold claim 2,000 years ago, and it is still a bold claim today. He also makes the claim that the world belongs to Jesus, but the world "did not receive him". Once again, this is a bold claim! And yet, it is at the heart of what we believe and who we are as Christians. We are a people of this light, and we must walk in that light. As verse twelve says, we are "children of God".

But why do we need to walk in the light? Why is it essential to our health as Christians and to our everyday lives? At the heart of the answers to those questions is the foundation that, like all light, Christ's light illumines. Christ's light exposes the world as it is, and, most importantly, how it can be! Christ's light corrects our blurry vision regarding how we are called to live, how we are to make decisions, and how we are to be the person God has created each of us to be. Christ's light puts things into perspective by shining the truth of eternity on the various aspects of our daily walk. It enables us to see God's direction for our lives.

Those last words of verse fourteen so brilliantly summarize Jesus and what he does for each individual and the entire world. John says that Jesus was "full of grace and truth". Think about that. All of God's truth and all of God's grace is embodied in one person. And when we allow this one person to be the center of our lives, we find that this light shows us the truth—the good, the bad, and everything in between. However, we also find that this light shows us the abundance of God's grace and the hope that flows from that amazing grace—new life, joy, peace, etc.

God's light is not a shade of light that emphasizes one side of His personality. Instead, God's light, embodied in Jesus Christ, is a light that encompasses it all. It encompasses all of His truth and all of His grace. It encompasses everything that made the world and everything that redeems the world. It is the source of life itself. And it all started with a little baby born in the humblest of places and placed in the humblest of cribs.

QUESTIONS

- Why is it important that the light of Jesus reveals both truth and grace?
- What truth is Jesus' light revealing in your life? What grace is revealed as well?

Lord, shine your light upon my life. Shine your light upon our world. Help me to see all that your light reveals. Most importantly, help me to see the fullness of your grace and your truth. This Christmas Eve, help me to see Jesus.

Amen.

Sunday, December 25, 2022
written by Lonnie Pittman

MATTHEW 1:18-25

¹⁸This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. ²⁰But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.” ²²All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: ²³“The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel” (which means “God with us”). ²⁴When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. ²⁵But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.



“Merry Christmas!”

Those are words that bring so much joy to so many people. It truly is a wonderful time of the year. Christmas has become a cultural phenomenon. Some of it directly relates and connects to the Biblical witness of Christ’s birth. Some of it is simply our cultural additions and traditions. With both realities, Christmas has become a staple of our calendars and our memories. Yet the first Christmas was something different. It was something uniquely joyful for the world.

One of the great hymns we sing this time of the year is “Joy to The World”. Believe it or not, many people think this hymn was meant to be a song about the second coming of Christ, but it fits as much at Christmas as it does for that glorious moment in the future. The term Immanuel means “God with us”. In reflecting on what Immanuel means for our lives, I can think of no other term that better presents the meaning of joy coming to the world. Jesus is our eternal joy—even here with us in the present moment.

Whether “Joy to the World” was meant to be a Christmas song or a song about the second coming, it does not detract from its impact and accuracy at all. In fact, the season of Advent looks to the second coming as well as the birth of Jesus. Both of these truths, one in the past and one to come, give us that joy that seems to permeate the Advent and Christmas seasons. I believe the reason for this is much greater than presents and turkey dinners (although those are nice!). I believe the reason for this joy is that we know the Christmas story is the very story that fulfills all our greatest needs and hopes. Christmas day is a reminder that God is for us and will always be for us—because God is with us.

When you have the joy of what is to come (our future reality in Christ) you will have joy in what is now as well (this very moment in time). Looking at the Scripture above, Joseph was understandably concerned. In his kindness, he decided to move forward discreetly. However, after the truth was revealed to him in a dream, he took Mary to be his wife. He knew what rumors may fly in the community. He knew people may openly mock his family. However, he also knew something much greater. He knew that joy was coming to the world! His knowledge of the future gave him the strength he needed for the present situation. The same is true for each of us!

QUESTIONS

- In what ways do you see the message of Christmas and the second coming of Christ connected? How do both bring joy into our lives? How do they give hope?
- How will you express the joy God has put on your heart this Christmas day and beyond? What actions can you take to share joy in an impactful way?

O Lord, on this Christmas day, I submit to your will. This submission is a joyful submission. In it, the author of life is represented. In submission I find the example of Joseph and the joy he had in serving you. Let Christmas be more than a day. Let Christmas be a foundation for many days of joy to come. Let Christmas spark a joy in my life that trusts in the stability you bring in the present and my certainty in you for the future.

Amen.

An Advent
Worship Series

DO NOT BE Afraid

Sunday Mornings
9 AM & 11 AM

NOVEMBER 27 - DECEMBER 25

Events

Breakfast in Bethlehem

DECEMBER 10 IN FAMILY LIFE CENTER

Tweens & the Tanglewood Lights

DECEMBER 2 AT
TANGLEWOOD

Youth Christmas Party

DECEMBER 11 IN THE
YOUTH COMMONS

Christmas Eve Services

2 PM

Family Christmas
Eve Service &
Nativity

ALSPAUGH WORSHIP CENTER

4 PM

Candlelight
Lessons, Carols, &
Communion

SANCTUARY

6 PM

Carols
& Candle
Lighting

ALSPAUGH WORSHIP CENTER

8 PM

Candlelight
Communion
Service

SANCTUARY