

THE ADVENT ADVENTURE OF THE CHRISTMAS CHARACTERS



Joseph's Courage, the Shepherd's Song,
Mary's Joy, Simeon's Sight

2024-2025 ADVENT DEVOTIONAL

In Memory of **Carolyn Midkiff Strange**

For many years what you are holding in your hands as you read these words was the baby of Jim and Carolyn Strange. These collections of meditations from Bayshore members were the result of their labor. The enlisting, collating, compiling, printing, and distributing, was largely theirs. This means (or so I've been told) that it was largely the result of her organizational work.

When two years ago I asked Carolyn if she would like to resurrect this effort (after a hiatus) she responded enthusiastically. Or she let me twist her arm. Maybe a mixture of both. In any case she was thrilled at the result. There is something moving about a community sharing their faith and doubts, their ups and downs, their hopes and fears with one another in print.

As I'm writing this dedication to Carolyn, I'm also thinking about the homily I will deliver at her memorial service in five days. There is so much to celebrate. And there is so much to miss. She put a lot into 87 years. I sure wish she could have had a few more to do more.

Our theme this year is focused on the unique characters of our Advent story. As I think of Joseph's boundary bending courage, and as I sing the Shepherd's song of peace on earth, and of Mary's joy at the ultimate progress of the poor, and when I reflect on Simeon who could see the divine nature of the child he was dedicating... I will think of Carolyn. She lived out the Advent Adventure and our lives are better for it.

Scott L Stearman
Senior Pastor

THE ADVENT ADVENTURE

OF THE CHRISTMAS CHARACTERS

Dear Reader,

As we enter the season of Advent, I am deeply honored to continue Carolyn Strange's tradition of assembling an Advent devotional guide for our congregation. Her legacy has touched so many, and it is with gratitude for her legacy that we carry this tradition forward.

Our theme for the Advent devotional this year is: "The Advent Adventure of the Christmas Characters." The stories of Joseph, Mary, the Shepherds, and Simeon remind us of the profound meaning of this season, and the ways God speaks to us in both remarkable moments and in the ordinary rhythms of life.

The reflections within these pages have been lovingly written by members of our community, many of whom are writing for the first time. Each contributor has poured their heart into conveying what Advent means to them, offering fresh perspective on familiar scriptures. As you use this devotional, I encourage you to first read the scripture passage for the day, and then read the reflection. May this practice guide you as we await the celebration of the birth of our Savior.

The devotionals start with the first Sunday of Advent, December 1, 2024, and end with Epiphany, January 6, 2025.

With love,
Robert Koehler



SUNDAY, DECEMBER 1
1 THESSALONIANS 5:1-11

A TIME OF TENSION

by Rev. Chris Kravitz

There is a tension in Advent. We know Christmas is on the way, and Christmas celebrates the past event of Jesus' birth. But we also know that Advent is a time when we reflect on the arrival of God's good future.

Even in our celebration of Christmas, we testify that Jesus signals a new possibility for the future. Joseph, Simeon, the shepherds, and the magi all recognized this. But we see it perhaps most clearly in the song of Mary. After taking on her role as the mother of this promised child, Mary sings of God's deliverance for the poor and weak from the chains of the rich and powerful.

Advent is our chance to quiet our hearts and dream and long and sing and pray and hope along with Mary for a world of peace, liberation, and well-being for all.

First Thessalonians 5 reminds us that the light of God's future does not arrive as comfort to those who embrace the darkness of power and oppression. But we who follow Jesus are given a charge and an encouragement: "you are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness. So, then...let us keep awake."

Like the little twinkling lights of this season, we are surrounded by darkness and may feel too small to make a difference. But we watch. And we wait. And we receive the arrival of Christ anew. And we see the darkness dispelled around us.

MONDAY, DECEMBER 2

MATTHEW 21:1-11

“HOSANNA!”

by Jimmy Thomas

Before entering Jerusalem, Jesus instructed His disciples to bring Him a donkey and its colt, fulfilling the prophecy from Zechariah 9:9, which speaks of a king coming in humility, riding on a donkey. This image of Jesus as the humble King contrasts with worldly expectations of a powerful, conquering ruler. He does not enter Jerusalem with military might but with gentleness, showing that His kingdom is not of this world.

The crowds shout “Hosanna!” which means “Save us!” recognizing Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah. Their words reflect hope and anticipation of deliverance, though many likely misunderstood the kind of salvation Jesus would bring.

Heavenly Father,

Thank You for sending Jesus as the humble King, not in power or force, but in gentleness and peace. Help me to recognize Jesus as the true Savior who brings eternal salvation, not just temporary relief from life’s challenges.

Lord God, I lay down my expectations, my fears, and my desires before You, just as the people laid down their cloaks before Jesus. Teach me to welcome Him into my life with a heart full of praise, trusting in His love and the peace He brings.

Guide me to follow Him, not just in moments of celebration but also through trials and uncertainties. Let my faith be unwavering, grounded in the knowledge that He is the King who brings hope, redemption, and lasting peace.

All this I pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 3

MATTHEW 21:12-22

FAITH WITHOUT DOUBT

by Lisa Lekarczyk

When we ask God for something, we should do so without doubting God's ability to help or underestimating what He can do in our lives. In Matthew 21:21, Jesus explains to his disciples that if they had faith without doubt, they could do something as inconceivable as cast a mountain into the sea with only their words. We humans aren't very good at the concept of having faith without doubting, hesitating, questioning, over analyzing. I know I'm not. My mind is always working, overthinking, analyzing situations a million different ways, but that's not what God calls us to do. He calls us to have faith when we ask Him for something in prayer and that's it. It's as simple as that, but somehow our brains can't comprehend that simplicity. We are often unable to ask Him for something and then just believe that it will come to pass the way He intends it to.

As you read this scripture today and go to God in prayer, lay your concerns before Him then get out of His way and out of your own way. Try to silence the second guessing and overthinking. Take a few minutes and think about that mountain in your life. Just sit in the belief that God can do the unimaginable with that mountain if you only let Him.

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 4

2 PETER 3:8-10

GOD'S PROMISES

by Katie Daniel

Every human being is a child of God. I think this is hard for us to truly grasp sometimes. We like to categorize humans by their actions. Good people versus Bad people. Through the apostle Peter it is clear God wants ALL of His children to return to Him in heaven and gives us ample opportunity to follow Him. Operating through the lens that every person you meet is a child of God helps us to become more like Jesus. We do not know when the day of the Lord will be, but Peter reminds us that God experiences time in a different way than we do as humans. It is important for us to be ready for the second coming at any moment. That being said - we should not be using this as a fear tactic. All we can do is follow His word and spread His love to the world. Lead with empathy and act as the hands and feet of Jesus to all you encounter. As long as you are right with God, it truly does not matter when the day of the Lord will be. Do not get hung up on details that we are not meant to understand. God is the almighty promise keeper as evidenced again and again in scripture. His word never fails. This advent season I hope we can take joy in the birth of our savior and feel excitement over His second coming someday.

GLIMPSES OF GOD

by Tammy Snyder

Hurricane season 2024 has been like no other. Debby came in August, Helene showed up in September, followed by both Milton and then Oscar, the hurricane that impacted our Cuban neighbors in October. Despite the magnitude of destruction, people speak of having glimpses of God and experiencing God in the most unusual ways.

Unlike the Israelites mentioned in this passage from Amos, who refused to return to God, we can intentionally seek glimpses of God by daily practicing the St. Ignatius prayer of consolation and desolation. Here's a summary:

Consolation refers to those moments when you feel uplifted, at peace, or connected to God. As you sit in silence, reflect on ways God's love has touched your day—through nature, the kindness of others, or in your quiet moments of prayer. To discover your moment of consolation, ask yourself, "When did I feel most alive today?"

Desolation, on the other hand, is noticing a time when you feel sad, angry, confused, or disconnected. Sit in silence to discover your desolation, as well. To realize or notice your moment of desolation, ask yourself, "When did I most feel life draining out of me today?"

To engage children in the St. Ignatius prayer, consider offering them these questions: When were you happiest today? When were you saddest?

St Ignatius believed that these challenging moments can both help us grow in our relationship with God and deepen our understanding of ourselves.

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 6

MATTHEW 22:1-14

RSVP

by Dina Marshall

Reflecting on Jesus' words in the Parable of the Great Feast, I find myself contemplating the nature of invitations and responses and my own life and choices.

Am I like the initial guests in this passage who, despite receiving a gracious invitation, chose to ignore it? It's easy to get caught up in the busyness of life, prioritizing daily tasks over spiritual growth and service. This parable provides a wake-up call, reminding me of the importance of being attentive and responsive to God's call.

The idea of being prepared and willing to accept the invitation with gratitude resonates deeply. It challenges me to cultivate a heart that is open and ready to embrace God's grace. This means not only acknowledging the invitation but also living a life that reflects this acceptance—through acts of kindness, service, compassion, and faithfulness.

Am I living a life that honors His invitation? It's a reminder that the opportunity to be part of something greater is always there, waiting for our response. How we choose to respond can shape our spiritual journey and our relationship with God.

As I complete my service as Deacon Chair this year, I am so glad I said yes to the call. The opportunity allowed me to understand more about the needs of the church and staff, and it opened my eyes to the many acts of service our diaconate provides, often behind the scenes and always because they love God and love our church. It's been an honor.

We all have the invitation. Is your RSVP yes?

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 7

JUDE 17-25

WHAT TO DO WHILE WAITING

by Caren Hayward

Jude tells us in his little book what we can do while waiting for Christ's presence and love in our life. It is really quite simple:

- * Be on the lookout for people who corrupt and divide and don't have the Spirit of God.
- * Stay in God's Word (Bible Study)
- * Pray in and with the holy spirit.
- * Stay in the center of God's love, keeping your arms open and outstretched ready to share this love with others.

While I was growing up, my mother had framed a saying and hung it up in every house we ever lived in. The saying goes: "Only one life will soon be passed. Only what's done for Christ will last." This saying sums up what Jude is implying.

May you experience joy this advent season as you wait for God's love coming as baby Jesus. This is the unending life, the real life.

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 8

LUKE 1:57-67

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

by Sam Ciccarello

But his mother spoke up and said, "No! He is to be called John." They said to her, "There is no one among your relatives who has that name." Luke 1:60-61

My mother had three brothers, two of which were named Andrew and Frederick. My middle name is Frederick, and I have two cousins, whose middle names are Andrew and Frederick. My brother's name is Jim. He is named after my dad, also Jim, who was named after his dad. But his dad, my grandfather, was named Vincenzo. The Americanization of Vincenzo is Jim!

My brother's middle name is Ignazio. This was the first name of my mom's father. The American version of this is Nelson. There are some weird American versions of Sicilian names, but investigating that is, like your high school books used to say "beyond the scope" of this devotional. Hey! How do you get Bob from Robert? I digress.

My nephew, my brother's son, is named Jim. Surprised? My niece, my brother's daughter, is named Rita, after my maternal grandmother. Rita is also the name of another cousin, the daughter of Carmelo, my mother's other brother. Speaking of my mother, her given name was Provvidenza (Providence), but she was known as Ruby, and Providence became her middle name.

Whew!

What is the point of all this? Apparently, Sicilians have an intricate formula of nomenclature. You can see that there is a clear pattern of honoring your progenitors.

The Jews also had a well-developed system, evidenced by the reaction in the passage above. Can someone's name contribute to the way in which they live their life? Interesting question. More interesting is whether our names, odd, rare, or common, are written in the Book of Life.

MONDAY, DECEMBER 9

MATTHEW 22:23-33

THE GREAT I AM

by Mary McKenzie, WellBuilt Cities

This passage begins with the Sadducees asking Jesus a complicated question about Jewish law: If a woman remarries seven times, whose wife will she be at the resurrection?

But the concerns of Jesus are not about the applications of law after death; the concerns of Jesus deal with life. Jesus rebukes the Sadducees after they ask Him such an inane question and reminds them how God described Himself as He appeared to Moses in the burning bush: "I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." But these patriarchs had already passed on by the time God made this statement to Moses. If these patriarchs were dead, why didn't God say I WAS the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob? We can rest assured that our Lord remains the same, even if we change. Jesus is reminding the Sadducees that God is the great I AM, not the great I WAS.

I recently watched an interview with a father who passionately spoke on the importance of parents committing to an unchanging, dependable marriage. This unquestionable stability is the most precious gift parents could give a child. To wake every morning and know that your parents are an immovable rock provides a peace that passes understanding. And so it is with us and our heavenly Father - what a gift we have in knowing that God is the great I AM, the eternal presence that we can depend on as we navigate our lives in service to Him.

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 10

MATTHEW 22:34-46

SHEMA

by Teresa Blankenship

As we continue on our Advent journey, we are not reading about the expected birth of Jesus in this passage.

Instead, we advance to Jesus' life as he teaches; on this occasion he encounters the "experts of the law," the Pharisees.

In the previous verses, a conversation takes place between Jesus and the Sadducees, who don't believe in the resurrection. The conversation ends when they are silenced by Jesus.

This is a perfect segue for a group of Pharisees hearing that Jesus silenced the Sadducees, and one of them decides to test Jesus, asking, "Teacher which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" Jesus replied:

"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind, This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

Loving God may not be hard, but "who is my neighbor" seems to be the question. To me, the division in our world doesn't reflect loving God and loving our neighbor. If we love God as he instructs, it seems that loving our neighbor would come more naturally.

My understanding of the verse is that every human being is our neighbor. This commandment is repeated in both Testaments. God requires it of us. There are no more questions to ask: Jesus has made it crystal clear.

Who do we love?

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 11

MATTHEW 23:1-12

ESPECIALLY IN SILENCE

by Ben Kirby

When I was growing up, this passage of Matthew 23 was the topic of many sermons and Bible Studies. It's been one that made an impact on me when I was young, but I still find new meaning in it as I continue to learn and grow. In middle school, I was only able to understand that a Pharisee acting this way was problematic.

In fact, it took me until college to understand that verses 5-7 absolutely applied to me and the way I was approaching some of the aspects of my life. I was, on occasion, showing up to church or my other activities at church to show face and to be able to say that I showed face. "Everything they do is done for people to see." I learned that making time for God and my church community should be intentional. It should never be for my own checklist or just for others to see.

Humbling myself isn't a one-time realization and fix. Humbling myself before God is a lifetime commitment that I've chosen in order to become the servant He asks me to become. Especially when no one is watching, especially in silence, we must do everything we can to allow God's message and light to shine through our actions and words.

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 12

MATTHEW 23:13-26

IF ONLY YOU KNEW ME

by Janet Salyers

It is a wonderful gift to be known and loved. The reality is, we can be loved but not really known. We can be like the Transformer toys and change to suit the pleasure of the person or people we are wanting to please. Usually, this means we never really get familiar and comfortable with our real selves. This works on the surface. But true relationship isn't about the surface. True relationship can't be conjured or finagled. True relationship is from the heart. It's brave and vulnerable.

In today's scripture we get a very clear picture of Christ informing the Pharisees and religious leaders that they don't know Him. If they did, their hearts would produce different behaviors. "Woe to you" is a warning as well as a deep lament. Christ wants us to KNOW HIM. He yearns for us to not sing our hymns with minds that are somewhere else. He yearns for us to reflect on something from the sermon that spoke to us. He yearns for us to give our tithe with a grateful heart. He yearns for us to feel Him moving in us as we hear the organ and the piano and the beautiful music our church provides. He yearns for us to be present with our minds and hearts and spend time with Him.

May we bring the gift of our true selves to Him this season and receive the gift of His love and acceptance just as we are.

DIVINE DARKNESS

by Dustra Haynes (Waters Avenue Church)

Reading through the lectionary texts for this day, they seem like strange messages for a season of peace and joy. These dark, doom-filled texts, create for me a feeling of hopelessness in times of darkness.

And yet, that is the true beauty of Advent. Not just that there is light to be found in the darkness like when Haggai's people turn to God, but that God is in darkness. John tells those faithful in Thyatira to simply "hold to what you have." Sometimes, we are just left in the dark. But that is not to say we are left alone. The dark can be terrifying because it creates a feeling of isolation and uncertainty, until we realize that God IS--dark and light.

Advent is a precious time of God-made increasing darkness. A season that allows us to step out of the comfort and control of the long daytime and into the mystery and unknown of the night. And while darkness has been used to represent evil and danger in many ways throughout history, we can see God in the blackness of creation, the mystery of Samuel's calling, the shadow of Jesus' crucifixion, and of course, the isolation and night of his birth, when in darkness God became us.

So in times of darkness, when we feel like there is only evil or brokenness around, we can enter into the darkness knowing God is light, and dark, and with us, Emmanuel.

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 14

HAGGAI 2:1-9

THE GOLDEN RULE

by Robert Koehler

When my siblings and I were young, our mother often reminded us of the "golden rule," as spoken by Jesus in Matthew 7:12: "Do to others what you would have them do to you." While this is a guiding principle for life, us kids sometimes used it against each other, saying things like, "You made fun of me, so that must mean you want me to make fun of you." Childhood logic, of course!

I also remember hearing another, far less biblical version of the golden rule: "He who has the gold makes the rules." That saying always rubbed me the wrong way. It's a self-centered approach to life that completely contradicts the message of Jesus. But a few years ago, I found a verse in Scripture that provides the perfect counter to that worldly mindset. Haggai 2:8 says: "The silver is mine, and the gold is mine," declares the Lord Almighty.

This verse has become one of my favorites because it speaks to a profound truth: all glory belongs to God. We may strive to accumulate wealth and status, but we ultimately do not deserve any of the blessings He so generously pours out on us through Christ. Everything we have ultimately belongs to Him. During this season of Advent, we are reminded that we bring nothing with us into this world, and we will take nothing with us when we leave except our faith in Jesus. Our focus should be on giving God the glory He is due, and living with open hearts, knowing that He is the true source of all our blessings.

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 15
2 THESSALONIANS 2:1-3, 13-17

STAND FIRM AND BE ENCOURAGED

by Judy Richman

As we read through the Bible, we receive all sorts of information. Often it is in the form of encouragement. In 2 Thessalonians 2: 15-17, the Apostle Paul encourages us to “stand firm and hold fast” (NIV) to Jesus’ words.

Why? So, that in difficult times we can hold on to Jesus and His promises and receive hope for our future.

Lately, here in Florida, we have been affected by two hurricanes within two weeks of each other. Some of us felt the direct hit and damage. Some of us felt a hit through our associations with others and their pain. In either case, often devastating, how can we hold fast and to what do we hold?

Jesus tells us that He is always with us in the form of the Holy Spirit, which resides within us. Jesus knows our plight, hears our cries, sees our tears. Having suffered himself, Jesus stands by us in the bad times. Paul reassures us by telling us “. . . the Lord is faithful, and He will strengthen you and protect you” (2 Thess. 3:3) Through our personal belief in Jesus, we know He is here with us and gives us His strength. We are not alone.

As we experience Advent, whether we are in good times or bad, may we know that although the adventure of life may change daily, Jesus is our firm supporter and our encourager throughout.

MONDAY, DECEMBER 16

MATTHEW 24:15-31

JESUS CAME, JESUS IS COMING AGAIN!

by Penny Oliver

When reading today's scriptures about Christ returning again, visible to all, with power and great glory to gather his elect (Matthew 24:30-31), I also thought about when Jesus was born in Bethlehem. Christ came as a baby, innocent and pure. He didn't come to earth with a big fanfare, only revealed that night to a select few. The stable was probably filled with smelly animals being sheltered for the night. Mary and Joseph were anxious about the impending birth. Physically, they were on their own and probably scared.

"Jesus is born!", wrapped in swaddling clothes and placed in a feed trough. Now the quiet is filled with wonder, celebrated with just animals moving around and making sounds. Suddenly in the nearby fields, angels appear in the sky to announce to the lowly shepherds that the Messiah is born. The shepherds are awed and stunned to witness such a miracle and hurry to meet the Christ, a baby lying in a manger.

At Christmas, we celebrate the gift of His first coming with awe and wonder. Jesus is coming again!! Like the Jews had been told, are we also watchfully preparing for His coming and anticipating it? As the Bible says, "think on these things."

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 17

MATTHEW 24:32-44

BEING INTENTIONAL IN A DISTRACTING WORLD
by Randall Marshall

In this passage, Jesus tells us to learn from the fig tree (a symbol of being in tune with God's timing). Just as the fig tree gives signs of the coming season, so we, too, are called to be sensitive to the signs of God's presence and promises. His promise of return isn't something we can time or predict, so rather than focusing on "when," our energy should focus on "how" we live in the present.

Jesus also compares the time of His return to the days of Noah. People went about their lives, often distracted by everyday things (which I assume most of us are doing today), unaware of what lay ahead. This scripture is a reminder of the value of spiritual intentionality. Like the homeowner who doesn't know when he/she will be robbed, we, too, don't know when the Son of Man will return, and so, we're called to live accordingly and anchor our hope and actions in His promises.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, help me live each day with a heart that's prepared and expectant, attentive to Your signs, and faithful in all I do. Guard me against complacency and draw my focus back to You in everything. May I hold Your promises above all else, anchoring myself in Your truth even amid life's distractions. Let my life be a reflection of readiness and trust in Your perfect timing. Amen.

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 18

MATTHEW 24:45-51

CAT AND MICE

by Julie Webb

When reading this scripture, the saying “When the cat is away, the mice will play” comes to mind.

For example, if we say that God is the cat and we are the mice, we just have to remember that God is always watching. He is not watching us to “catch us,” but He is there watching as a loving and supportive Father. Though sometimes His presence might not always be in the front of our mind, we should know that we have God with us all the time no matter what.

When we claim ourselves as Christians, we need to remember that we are Christians all the time not just on Sunday mornings and Wednesday nights. If God is always with us, then we should always be able to show that He is part of our lives.

As a teacher there are times when I might not be at school. When a substitute is in the classroom, sometimes the students choose not to do the assignments that have been left for them. While that is their choice and that choice will be reflected in their grade, the assignment is not a heavy task or a punishment. It is simply a representation of my desire to further their love of music.

“When the cat is away, the mice will play.” But is the “cat” ever really away? Something to think about.

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 19
ZECHARIAH 4:1-14,
REVELATION 4:9-5:15, MATTHEW 25:1-15

ARE YOU READY?

by Sharon Hickenbotham

After reading the scriptures for today, I want to focus on Matthew 25: 1-15. However, we need to remember as pointed out in the Zechariah passage that God's purpose will always succeed. In Revelation, Jesus is on the throne and has authority in God's plan of redemption. Realizing this, think for just a moment about how patient *are you*? We live in a world that is fast paced. We want everything to happen instantly! Not only that, but how prepared are we when we have to wait? Waiting for a child to be born seems at times to be an eternity: do we have the room ready, clothes ready, etc. Are we mentally ready? We wait on many things in our lives both large and small.

God's people are waiting on his return. His return is not known. How patient are we? How prepared are we for His return? What do we do to be prepared? I think we need to read His word, pray and tell others the good news of Jesus Christ. Will we be like five of the ten virgins who were waiting patiently and prepared with enough oil?

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 20

MATTHEW 25:14-30

USE IT OR LOSE IT

by Sybil Samaha

I have struggled to see how to bring Advent meaning to the Parable of the Talents, when I was reminded of the song "The Little Drummer Boy." The drummer boy thought he had no gift to bring to honor the King; however, he did have his drum that he could play. The song tells us Jesus smiled at him when he played his best for him.

In the Parable of the Talents in Matthew, three servants were entrusted with a man's property (talents) while he went away. One man was given 5 talents, one 3 talents and one man was given 1 talent. Two of the men worked to invest the talents so their value increased. One man hid his in a hole in the ground (under the mattress perhaps?). The two that invested the talents increased their value and made the master happy. The master was angry with the lazy servant who hid the talent and did not increase its value.

Many of us think we have no talents that can be used for God, so we hide. But we are his greatest investment! He has given each of us remarkable abilities that can be used wisely for him. We can sit on our talents and hope they will be safe, or we can take a risk and invest our talents. It takes courage, and diligence, but the reward is great. In the end, all our resources are a gift from God to be used to bring him glory.

During the Advent season I hope you will bring your gifts to honor the King - pa rum pum, pum, pum.

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 21

MATTHEW 25:31-46

THE LEAST OF THESE

by Liz Kennedy

Today's scripture has particular meaning for David and me. We had the "privilege and gift" to visit a friend of a friend who was wrongly accused and in prison. It was this Bible passage that guided us. Not only were we his only visitors but he became a dear friend. It was a small act on our part but made a huge difference in our friend's life. I am always struck how the "small acts of kindness" we can often do are the best way we can show God's love. Don't ever underestimate the impact a smile, a friendly word and even a friendship can have on another person's life. Share God's love!

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 22

JOHN 3:16-21

I HAVE SEEN YOUR SALVATION

by Jim Neill

Advent invites us to reflect on God's redemptive work through Jesus while waiting with hope for the fulfillment of His future kingdom. I love the story of Simeon, a righteous and devout man, who encounters the Christ child in the temple. His story (Luke 2:25-35) illuminates the essence of faith and hope. The Holy Spirit promised Simeon that he would not die before seeing the Messiah. When he finally saw Jesus, he praised God:

*"Sovereign Lord, as you have promised,
you may now dismiss your servant in peace.
For my eyes have seen your salvation,
which you have prepared in the sight of all nations:
a light for revelation to the Gentiles,
and the glory of your people Israel"* (Luke 2:29-32).

This is the message of John 3:16-21, God's gift of love through Christ. Simeon holding Jesus echoes this divine love, revealing Jesus as the light that shines in the darkness (v. 19). The light of the world has arrived, illuminating the path so all can see.

As we reflect on Simeon's joy, we are reminded of our own call to see Christ in our lives. Just as Simeon held the promise of salvation, we are invited to embrace the light that dispels our fears and doubts. During this Advent season, may we open our eyes to the truth of God's love, allowing it to transform our hearts. Let us walk in the light, sharing the good news of Christ's coming with a world that longs for hope and redemption.

TRUSTING IN HIS PROMISES

by Robert Wilson

Even though we are believers, many of us struggle daily with trusting God's voice. We face situations where the odds seem stacked against us, convincing ourselves that there's nothing more we can do. Zechariah experienced similar doubt. When the angel Gabriel told him that he and his wife would have a son, Zechariah questioned how this could happen given their old age. His doubt, though rational by human standards, led to his being silenced until the promise was fulfilled.

Like Zechariah, in moments of doubt, God sometimes allows us to be "silenced" so that we can focus and witness His miraculous work in our lives. God calls us to push beyond what we see or think we know. Time and again, His Word and works manifest themselves with the perfect solution at just the right time. We're reminded that God's promises are sure, even when they seem impossible, and His Word always proves true—it never fails!

Be encouraged to stand firm in faith, even when the future feels uncertain. Surrender to His will, trusting that He is able to fulfill His purpose for us in ways far beyond what we can imagine. Selah.

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 24

CHRISTMAS EVE

LUKE 1:28-36

COURAGE REQUIRES FAITH

by Jane Ford

The story of the angel's announcement to Mary that she was to be the mother of Jesus, the Christ child, is familiar to all of us from childhood. It is a beautiful recounting of a sacred moment. Mary was chosen by God because she had "found favor" with Him. She was a young woman of character, high morality, and devotion. And after her surprise and shock at the angel's announcement, she accepted the path the Lord had laid out for her. It was an honor like none other, but it was also an overwhelming challenge.

By all accounts, Mary was a teenager, betrothed but unwed. The possibility that she would be ostracized by her family and community and rejected by her fiancée, Joseph, was strong. Who could believe such a thing? She must have wondered and trembled in thinking about what could lie ahead for herself and her child.

We see many instances in the Scriptures of people called by God to a path they do not want or, indeed, fear. Jonah had good reason to try to avoid going to Ninevah, if history is correct in depicting the city and culture as a place of intense animosity and violence toward others. It took a miraculous feat to persuade him, but he ultimately made the journey. Dietrich Bonhoeffer returned to Nazi Germany because he believed that he could not help re-establish Christian life there if he did not suffer the hardships of the people. How can such courage be understood? Perhaps it really cannot be analyzed or dissected.

I once read that someone approached Mother Teresa and asked her to tell him how she gained her courage. She replied, "I don't have courage. I have faith." It had to be faith that sustained Mary as she began her journey as the

mother of Jesus.

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 25
CHRISTMAS DAY
MATTHEW 1:18-25; LUKE 1:39-48

MERRY CHRISTMAS

by Rev. Dr. Scott Stearman

It's Christmas Day. It's filled with gifts, joy, food, family, phone calls, and hopefully, very little work. However, for this traditional Christmas to happen, there must be a great deal of preparation (days and days in fact). Often when December 25 arrives, so does fatigue.

This mirrors the first Christmas Day. Before that stable scene with donkeys and oxen and sheep and a manger, there are two scared people trying to make their way. It's good to remember they weren't all that different than us.

Matthew tells us about Joseph's fear of scandal and Luke tells us about Mary's fear of her new state. Joseph was a righteous man and did not want to expose Mary to public disgrace, so he intended to divorce her privately. Matthew tells us an angel spoke to him in a dream, "don't be afraid to take Mary as your wife"

Luke tells us that Mary didn't know what to think, and so ultimately needed God to speak through her cousin Elizabeth, who when filled with the Holy Spirit, said: "Blessed are you among women and blessed is the child you will bear!" It is after hearing this spirit-filled blessing that Mary sang her famous "Magnificat."

The point is worth remembering this day. Without a frightened Joseph and a scared young Mary willing to listen to God speaking in dreams and through family, we wouldn't be celebrating today.

Whatever God is birthing in your lives, watch and listen for that voice telling you to be not afraid.

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 26

TITUS 2:11-15

THE GIFT OF CHRIST

by Hal Scarle

In 2nd Samuel, David has a desire to create a permanent residence for God to reside and watch over his people. This desire was fulfilled by David's son Solomon who had the Temple in Jerusalem built.

In Luke, we read of the birth of John the Baptist, who in his ministry prepared the hearts of the people to both repent of their sins, but also to be receptive to the message that Jesus would bring to them.

The scripture in Titus provides us with guidance for living our lives in accordance with God's direction and encouragement. We will see ungodliness and face temptations, but through our faith in Jesus Christ we will have strength against sin and will have forgiveness when we fall short.

Through Jesus' teachings in the Bible, he has given us the needed direction for living our lives. The love of God and his desire to have a continuous relationship with us is exemplified by the fact that he sent his son to us in a relatable human form, who endured many of the hardships that the world offers and at the culmination of his teaching, was willing to accept a tumultuous death for the absolution of the sins of all those who believe. The birth and life of Christ is a magnificent gift from God to all mankind.

CHILDREN OF GOD
by Christina Koehler

Growing up as a Primitive Baptist meant following many rules—long dresses, stockings, and a particular way of living. I saw faith as a list of things I “had to do” to please God. But as I read the Bible more, I began to learn more about God’s love.

During Advent, we prepare to remember that God came down to adopt us as His own. We are not just followers; we are His cherished children. Being God’s children means we are uniquely loved and wanted.

Advent calls me to embrace this reality: I am wanted, I am known, and I am loved. This is the gift of being His child.

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 28

LUKE 1:39-56

CHOOSE JOY

by Melissa Scarle

The Angel Gabriel was sent by God to a young virgin, Mary. He told her she had been chosen by God, to bear His Son, through the power of the Holy Spirit. She also learned Elizabeth, her cousin, who was called barren and advanced in years, had conceived a son. Mary was shocked by this angelic visit and by all the news she had received. Gabriel said to Mary, "For with God nothing will be impossible" (v. 37).

"And why is this granted me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me" (v. 43)? "And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her from the Lord" (v. 45). Could Mary's deep faith have led her to complete confidence in the path God offered her? She had been visited by an angel delivering news from God that was unexpected, complicated, and frightening. Perhaps Mary felt a little unworthy to have been chosen to carry the Son of God. Her plans would be disrupted, and her life would be changed completely. What reaction would Mary have to God's plan? What would our reaction be?

"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden. For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed; for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name" (v. 47-49).

Mary chose joy.

May the beautiful witness of Mary inspire and encourage us to choose joy.

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 29

ISAIAH 59:15-21

LOCATING TRUTH

by Rev. William H. Scarle, Jr.

There are two life realities in this passage by the prophet Isaiah. The first is caught in verse 15 (ESV): "Truth is lacking, and he who departs from evil makes himself a prey." These are difficult days when those who reject truth often have the power to attack the righteous. However, there is a balancing reality. Verse 20 tells us we have a redeemer who will come to Zion. We celebrate the coming of the Redeemer who was born in Bethlehem and was declared King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

Our Redeemer has made clear that He is "The way, the truth and the life." He is the way to the God who created the universe and established unchanging truth in nature and morality. He is the way to the God who endowed humanity with certain inalienable rights: life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. We can follow Him knowing that he holds the truth. His burden is light, and we can find rest for our souls.

MONDAY, DECEMBER 30

1 THESSALONIANS 5:1-11

THE RIGHT PERSPECTIVE

by Jordan Rivait

It is a difficult time for all of us. Amy and I had Milton and Helene impact our homes in both Tampa, FL, and Banner Elk, NC. It is easy to become discouraged and lose hope when the world around us is so dark. BUT, our passage today reminds us of the light of heavenly hope. It reminds us that the things of this world are fleeting and temporary, and Jesus will come back for his children. In that moment, these worldly things simply will not matter. As some of you have heard me say recently, "it turns out rust and moth do destroy." We need to view our lives in the context of future events that are eternal and that we have hope in. We need to be active and purposeful in our spiritual walk and know that Christ will return! In 1st Thessalonians Chapter 5, Paul encourages us to encourage each other as the Day of the Lord will come and we need to be ready. The idea of spending eternity with our Lord is motivating and puts events on this planet in the right perspective. These negative events have brought Amy and I closer to God as he continues to work on us and wean us from this world. It is exciting and humbling and sometimes scary - but we look to the future, and it is going to be amazing. Where is your treasure?

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 31
1 THESSALONIANS 5:12-28

BUILD UP, NOT TAKE DOWN

by Scott McClelland

Now that I am retired, I can look back at my business life and reflect on what was good and not so good. When I do, I seem to forget what I did with projects or where I was - rather, I think of the people, some of whom I have lost track but many of whom I am still in contact with, actually with them becoming great friends. Some were colleagues and it is not so much of a stretch to remember them fondly. But some were bosses of mine and yet I have great fondness for them. How is it that my ex-bosses are friends?

I believe that this passage in 1 Thessalonians 5:12-15 is the key: "... we beseech you, brethren, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, to esteem them very highly in love because of their work...always seek to do good to one another and to all." I now see that the bosses I had that I now count as good friends, always were looking out for me and building me up. They may or may not have totally understood what I was doing, especially when I became one of them, but they always encouraged me and built me up.

So, I see this in two ways:

- 1) At church, everyone will grow in the spirit and live according to love when we uplift them and build them up, being "patient with them all" (1 Thess. 5:14).
- 2) At work, you will do better and enjoy your work more when you build up others you work with and get built up by the folks you work for. "...always seek to do good to one another and to all" (1 Thess. 5:15b).

These are things that are under your control. Strive to accomplish these tasks. I believe these things when accomplished will make your church and work lives much better, thereby creating a joyous and happy Advent. Finally, since this article is presented toward the end of 2024, make a New Year's resolution to build yourself up and uplift the folks who work with you and for whom you work.

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 1

JOHN 8:1-11

LETTING GO OF "WHAT WAS"

by Rev. Victor Chesmore

We are all familiar with the account of the adulterous woman found in the Gospel of John. When this woman was condemned and brought before Jesus, I could only imagine the fear that was in her heart as she looked up at the heavy rocks and angry fists hovering over her; rocks and fists that could easily and painfully have taken her life away. When Jesus looked at those gathered around her, he permitted whoever was without sin to cast the first stone. One by one, the rocks were dropped, the fisted hands were lowered and unclenched as the accusers walked away, leaving Jesus and this terrified woman alone. The accusations were gone, the accusers were gone, and this woman was freed from the fear and the burden of "what was."

Today marks the beginning of a new day, a new month, and a new year. Like the woman brought before Jesus, this day also offers us all a new beginning, where we, too, are relieved of "what was." We can forgive those who wronged or hurt us; we can ask forgiveness from those we feel we might have wronged; and we can move forward with a greater sense of hope and wisdom, leaving "what was" behind.

Today, I invite you to reflect on these words as you navigate the Advent days ahead: "Loving God, you are the creator of all things and behold, you make all things new with mercies that are new each day."

THURSDAY, JANUARY 2

LUKE 12:32-48

“THE GIVE” - BIG OR SMALL
by Greg Jones

In 1961, John F. Kennedy stood before the Massachusetts State Legislature and quoted one of my favorite verses from the Bible, Luke 12:48 - “To whom much is given, much will be required.” This verse has always both inspired me and caused me to inquire. What did Jesus mean exactly? Was he talking about financial giving, human kindness giving, spiritual giving? The list could go on and on. While there may not be a clear answer, there is no doubt that we can all do more. We can never do enough. Tithing, service, prayer, just to name a few. But there is no score card, no number or amount of good things one can do. I believe God has given us a conscience that provides us with an understanding of what is right and wrong and how to help others.

I read this verse in conjunction with the commandment, “love thy neighbor” (Leviticus 19:18). My wife likes to say that we are put on this earth to help others, in any way we can. I believe that is what JFK meant when he took the bold step to quote the Bible in a public building. Life is about giving back- no matter how big or small.

FRIDAY, JANUARY 3

ISAIAH 7:10-25

LOVE AND ENDURANCE

by Rev. Chris Kravitz

Today's selection from Isaiah contains one of the core Christmas texts. God gives King Ahaz a sign to show the divine testimony given to Ahaz is true: "The young woman is with child and shall bear a son and shall name him Immanuel." But what was this sign supposed to guarantee? The following verses lay out a time of struggle and disaster for Israel.

2 Thessalonians 3 reminds us that although God's people live lives of faith, many in the world do not. There are forces and people in our world who seek power and dominance, bringing calamity and suffering to so many.

We've just moved through the time where we celebrate familial ties, experience the love and joy of giving and receiving gifts, and embrace anew God's love in Jesus. But Isaiah, the letter to the Thessalonians, and many other places in Scripture confront us with the fact that the future will not be free from evil. We can't escape that, but our joyful hope is that we do have a shelter.

That shelter is the love of Christ displayed in Christ's Body. The concluding prayer in today's text from Thessalonians can be ours: "May the Lord lead your hearts to express God's love and Christ's endurance." Our Christ-like endurance in the face of all that is wrong in our world and our authentic display of God's love to others will bring not only our own selves, but also those to whom we display that love, into a joyful, sheltering home.

THURSDAY, JANUARY 4

ISAIAH 8:1-15

THE BIRTH THAT CHANGED THE WORLD

by Rev. William H. Scarle, Jr.

This is not an encouraging passage to read. It speaks of the conquest of Israel by Assyria. Israel is paying the price for idolatry and sin. It reminds us that there is a price to pay even by a covenant people for forsaking the Lord. The good news comes in the following chapter. "For unto us a child is born, to us a son is given"(9:8). In verse 17 of chapter 8, Isaiah speaks of his faith in a time of trouble. "I will wait for the Lord, who is hiding his face from the house of Jacob, and I will hope in him."

Fortunately, we are living in an age where we know the child who became the Savior of the world. We await his second coming. "Joy to the world! The Lord is come. Let earth receive her King."

FRIDAY, JANUARY 5

EPIPHANY EVE

2 PETER 1:1-11

PROMISES, PROMISES

by Dave Daniel

Do you struggle? Do you stumble?

If you are like me, we may spend valuable time worrying about things over which we really have no control. Our lists are usually long. Yet we can change our perspective.

In 2 Peter 1:3, Peter tells us that God has given us “everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us.” For me, I know that Jesus called me. Now, I’ve always known there was God. Even when I was a little child. I clearly remember sitting at the breakfast table and looking out the window and saying to myself... Wow! Another blue sky! Another whole day for me to go out and play with my friends. It was the realization that this place is all a gift as is my life itself! I’ve always wanted to live it to the full.

Peter further clarifies ... God’s promises are for you. If God promises you something, do you think that promise will be fake? Unfulfilled? Of course not. It’s God.

But we have our part to do - That is: Add to your faith, goodness. And to goodness add knowledge. And to your knowledge add self-control. Add to that, perseverance, then godliness, then mutual affection meaning compassion. And finally, to that Love. That’s a pretty complete package, and also requires a lot of attention and effort on our part.

Has God nudged you in a similar way? If so, have you replied?

SATURDAY, JANUARY 6

EPIPHANY

ISAIAH 9:1-7

MOVING TOWARDS THE LIGHT

by Rev. Dr. Scott Stearman

*The people walking in darkness have seen a great light;
(Isaiah 9:2a)*

Shortly following Hurricane Milton, the attendant blackout a not-so-distant memory, a friend mentioned an upside to the disaster. After the storm, and before electricity was restored, the stars in Tampa seemed so bright. I said, "Couldn't we have just gone to a planetarium?" "Not really the point," he said.

John uses this imagery of light shining through the darkness (more visible because of the darkness) in his prologue to his gospel. Light is used in both a literal and a figurative sense, of course. It is what allows us to see (as in where to put our foot for the next step) and it is what allows us to see (as in which way to turn in life's journey).

Epiphany looks both to the literal event when Magi followed the light of a star to find the Christ child. And it points us to the figurative light that allows each of us to find our way. It starts our calendar year with the recognition that we live in a universe of darkness, and if we are to live lives of love and light, we need insight, direction, wisdom, help.

And, of course, we need eyes to see the light. This Paul called "eyes of the heart" (Ephesians 7:18). With these eyes we look not to the sun or stars, but to the one whose person and principles shine and make a way known. We find that light in the stories of Jesus and in the reflection of his saints.

Looking upward in wonder and outward with eyes of the heart, may God guide us to hope, peace, joy, and love. That is what we all truly want to see this year.

NOTES

NOTES

**THE
ADVENT
ADVENTURE**

**A HUMAN YES
TO A DIVINE
CALL**

THANK YOU

A HEARTFELT THANK YOU TO ALL
OF OUR CONTRIBUTORS,
EDITORS AND PROOFREADERS
WHO MADE THIS DEVOTIONAL
POSSIBLE.

PLEASE REMEMBER TO THANK
THEM WHEN YOU SEE THEM IN
CHURCH!

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