

ADVENT DEVOTIONALS



2024

Birmingham UMC

A special thank you to EVERYONE who contributed to this devotional. At Birmingham UMC, we are building a community of people who are becoming deeply rooted Christian disciples. Sharing these devotionals with you this Advent season is one way we are doing that!

Managing Editor: Rev. Sam Halverson, Associate Pastor

Copy Editor & Designer: Meghan Walter, Director of Communications



15770 Birmingham Highway
Milton, GA 30004
(678) 942-1600
www.birminghamumc.org

We are glad you have taken the opportunity during this Advent season to prepare for the very real presence of Christ into the world and into your life. Our prayer is for this collection of devotions to help guide you in your Advent journey toward Bethlehem.

Advent is the beginning of the new Christian year, and the first Sunday of the Advent season is four Sundays before Christmas Day. This year it begins on December 1, and goes through Christmas Eve. Advent is a season of hope and preparation. God has promised a great leader - the Messiah - would be sent to earth to lead the nations into a greater understanding and following of the Kingdom of God. With Jesus' birth at Christmas comes the greeting and the song of the Angels, proclaiming God's promise fulfilled. The song continues to reach us even today, preparing us for what is to come.

Not only do Christians celebrate the preparation and hope for this promise of Jesus' reign, we also place our hope and preparation in Jesus' own promise of his return - a very real day in our future and a focus of our faith. Advent looks toward the fulfillment of Jesus' promise and looks at the many ways we are being made ready through the presence of God's Holy Spirit as we wait. We are called to prepare through self reflection and a recognition of not only our own lives, but the culture in which we live. With the Angels' announcement we reflect:

Where is peace?

How do I offer good will?

How can the rough places be made plain?

The devotions printed here are reflections of people whom God uses to prepare the hearts in and around Birmingham United Methodist Church. Some of this season's writers have been guests at the church; some are members; some are staff; some are very young; some... not so young. All have given their thoughts and a part of themselves to help us prepare for the coming of Christ into the world - now and in the promised future. We hope you will set aside a few minutes every day to read the suggested scripture and devotion for that day and spend some time in prayer. It will help you prepare the way of the Lord.

Waiting is not always easy; in fact, in a world of division and trouble such waiting can be frustrating and even disheartening. May the reflections gathered here for you this season be food for your soul as you realize God's presence with you through this Advent journey.

God Shows Up!

The First Sunday of Advent

Suggested Readings

Jeremiah 33:14-16, 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13, Luke 21:25-36

Jeremiah paints a picture of paradise lost. He writes this text in the midst of the siege of Jerusalem. The rightful king, Jehoiachin, is captive in Babylon. The monarchy seems on the brink of extinction. Jerusalem, the place God caused God's name to dwell, where prosperity was evident, people were numerous and communities were thriving, has now become desolate. The flocks and herds are gone, no human being to be seen and the city lays waste. For the exiles, the destruction of their beloved capital city and especially the temple was a terrible blow. There seems to be no hope at all. It was a time of fear, despair and tragedy.¹

These descriptive expressions of hopelessness found in the biblical text, remind me of the visible destruction and devastation left behind by hurricane Helene. For many their self-worth, value and *raison d'être* was tied to their possessions, the places they lived, worked and fellowshiped with friends and loved ones. How devastating to watch what took years to achieve be destroyed in the blink of an eye. When people lose everything, homes, possessions, and loved ones, what is left?

When faced with these endings to life as we know it, we naturally want an explanation, a way out. We want to avoid the pain and reality of these situations. I am a witness there have been times when I wanted to know where was God during my own life crises; the death of loved ones, robbery, and deferred hopes and dreams. When all seems lost forever, where is God?

Jeremiah's theme of encouragement and hope in the midst of horrible catastrophe and despair, comes at the entrance of another Advent season. Many have a difficult time believing in something new. After all, we know the story. We've heard it year after year. We sing the same hymns ad nauseam. What could we possibly see or hear that we have not seen or heard before? Philosopher Søren Kierkegaard says, "that life is lived forward, but it is only remembered by looking backwards."² When we remember challenges we faced in our past, we realize even during the worst crises of our lives, something new and fresh sprang forth that was rooted in the redeeming work of God. "Morning by morning NEW mercies I see!"³ God keeps God's promises reminding us "The days are surely coming..."

Jeremiah could envision beyond the ashes the image of life coming out of a stump. A new king will emerge from the line of David, who deals justly and rightly with all God's people. The old adage says, "the Old Testament is the New Testament concealed and the New Testament is the Old Testament revealed." God shows up in a manger in Bethlehem, at a wedding in Cana, among five thousand hungry people, in a funeral procession and anywhere God's people are sick and suffering. Just when we are at our weakest, life seems its hardest, there is nothing left, thinking it's all over, ready to give up in defeat and have hit rock bottom, we discover God is the rock at the bottom! It is through the life and work of Jesus, God continues to show God's self-revealing something new, powerful, promising, and wonderful.

As Christians and people of faith, this is why we live in hope and expectation. It is my earnest prayer, during this season of Advent, we experience the truth of these words with a new vitality and understanding trusting God will indeed show up bringing about God's will in God's time and God's way. Grace be with you.

PRAYER

God, we know you will show up this Advent. Open our eyes and open our hearts to the hope and expectation of this season.

Bishop Robin Dease
One Georgia Conference

¹ J. A. Thompson, *The New Testament Commentary on the Old Testament: The Book of Jeremiah*: Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1980.

² Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*. New York: Penguin Books 1986.

³ United Methodist Hymnal, *Great is Thy Faithfulness*.

When is Jesus Coming?

Suggested Readings

Isaiah 64:1-9, 1 Corinthians 1:3-9, Mark 13:24-37, Psalm 80:1-7

But, in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home.

2 Peter 3:13

Have you ever waited for a long time for something? Maybe for your birthday or for Christmas? Have you ever checked the mailbox daily for a gift you were expecting?

A long time ago people were waiting for Jesus to come back. People who were not Christians made fun of the people who believed in God's promise. But those who believed still waited and had hope in Jesus's return.

Sometimes our timing is different than God's timing. Even when it feels like we've waited a long time for something, we should be excited and trust in God. It may be even better than we expected!

PRAYER

My prayer for this season is from one of my favorite Phil Wickham songs, "Manger Throne:"

*Glory be to you alone
King who reigns from a manger throne
My life, my praise, everything I own
To Jesus the king on a manger throne.*

Matthew Moon (age 9)

God's Guidance

Suggested Readings

Psalm 90:2, Samuel 7:18-29, Revelation 22:12-16

The four themes of Advent are hope, peace, love, and joy. While we celebrate these four themes mostly at Christmas, what a wonderful world this could be if we practiced each daily!

Each day is a gift from God in which to be happy. I can choose what kind of day it will become by being the best person I can be. I choose to give love and trust in God's goodness for blessings received.

Especially during Advent, we need God's guidance in our daily lives. We need God's presence, love, healing, and forgiveness. We are not perfect people. We need God each day as we begin, asking in our prayers to show us how we can use our talents to serve others.

As we prepare for the holidays and the gifts to be given, we are reminded of the gift God gave us when he sent his only son from heaven—the greatest gift ever to have—Jesus born on Christmas Day.

In Revelation 22:13, Jesus said,

I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End.

PRAYER

Dearest Heavenly Father, we are thankful for your blessings and are grateful for each day we are given to make this gift of life the best we can. Help us to fill our world with love, and give us the strength and courage always to follow you.

Marilyn Boughton

Overwhelming... I Said It!

Suggested Readings

Psalm 90, Isaiah 1:24-31, Luke 11:29-32

I'm just going to say it: December is OVERWHELMING!

As a busy Mom and our Children's Director, my to-do list is like an extreme sport this time of year: overflowing and in overdrive. I know I'm not alone! It's really important for all of us who feel overwhelmed with all of these things today to pause and make sure we carve out time with our Holy Father. During the Advent season, my favorite ways to prepare my heart for Jesus and truly rest from the busyness are when I'm praying, reading Scripture, and listening to Christian Christmas music.

Psalm 90 is titled "A prayer of Moses, the man of God." The beginning of this Psalm reminds us that God is our constant, as he has been forever and as he will be forever. God is the only place we can truly rest when our heads are spinning!

Psalm 90: 1-2 says,

"Lord, you have been our help, generation after generation. Before the mountains were born, before you birthed the earth and the inhabited world—from forever in the past to forever in the future, you are God.

Further into this Psalm in verse 14, a request is made to God for guidance. The reminder of God's love, gracious influence, and glorious presence can and should change our mindset instantly.

*Fill us full every morning with your faithful love
so we can rejoice and celebrate our whole life long.*

The more I spend time with God, the less overwhelming my long to-do list becomes. I am reminded that God is in control and God's faithful love is all I truly need. I am thankful for the hope and peace I feel from our mighty God. God turns my negative, overwhelming burdens into positive, overwhelming spiritual joy. I can rejoice and celebrate this season for him!

How can you make sure to be overwhelmed by God's love this season? What spiritual practices or Advent traditions make you feel God's love and presence?

PRAYER

Dear Lord, Thank you for your eternal presence. Help us to turn to you when we are overwhelmed by the distractions of the world. Fill our hearts with your overwhelming love this advent season. Amen.

Page Timmerman

Director of Children & Family Ministries, Birmingham UMC

In the Quiet

Suggested Readings

Luke 1:68-79, Malachi 3:5-12, Philippians 1:12-18a

In Luke's passage, Zechariah's first words after months of being mute are to praise God. He proclaims that God is a God of fulfilled promises. Zechariah prophesies the coming of a savior who will redeem his people, Israel.

In the verses leading up to this, Zechariah doubted when the angel Gabriel appeared and told him that he and Elizabeth were going to have a child. Zechariah and Elizabeth were old, and Elizabeth had not been able to have children. Zechariah doubted God's angel, Gabriel, when he said God had answered Zechariah's and Elizabeth's prayers to have a child. As a result of his doubt, Zechariah became mute until his child was born.

John the Baptist, Zechariah's and Elizabeth's son, grows up and prepares hearts and minds for the coming of the Messiah. The Messiah who redeems us, and brings light, hope, peace, and joy to our hearts and lives.

I wonder if Zechariah reflected on God's promises in his time of quiet? In the quiet, I reflect on God's promises to me. Where are the areas of darkness in my life Jesus wants to bring light? God promises to always be with me. He is still at work even in the silence and waiting. Just like the morning sun brings new hope each day, Christ's coming brings light, hope, and peace to the areas of darkness, struggles, and joys in my life. I thank God for the light of Jesus who gives me hope and peace that truly surpasses all understanding.

Are we trusting God's promises for us? I pray God fills you with hope as you experience his peace, and love in the silence.

PRAYER

Dear God, Thank you for the gift of your son, Jesus Christ. Thank you for the hope and light you brings to our lives. Thank you for being a God of promises fulfilled. Help me share your light and love with everyone I meet. Make your joy shine through me today and always.

I love you God. Amen.

Denise Baird

In the Light

Suggested Readings

Luke 1:68-79, Malachi 3:13-18, Philippians 1:18b-26, Titus 3: 3-7

The job of 20 plus years was gone.
That relationship finally ended.

My brother passed...
Suddenly.
And I found myself in darkness.

I sought refuge in the trappings of man and self-sufficiency.

The darkness intensified.
A year passed.
Finally despairing and bereft of hope, I fell to my knees. Weeping, I laid my life on the altar. Deep within, a hope was kindled, and the tiny mustard seed was planted.

Soon afterwards, an angel entered my life.

Her dreams were intact, and she had a heart for God. She reminded me of family, loyalty, and laughter. We fell in love, and I began to apply myself to her dreams. This angel led me to church and into the light. This angel is my wife.

It's always the darkest before the dawn, and how true that was with me. The wait can seem long, but looking back, I can see I was being shaped and made ready to receive a gift I could not earn—my salvation. I've now become a joyful servant to my family, my church and my fellow man. I live now, grateful in the sunlight of God's grace.

PRAYER

Heavenly Father, thank you for allowing me to become convinced that a life run on self-will is doomed to fail, and that with you, I may become that which I could never be on my own. Amen.

(Bud) Newton Anglin

The Final Word

Suggested Readings

Luke 1:68-79, Malachi 4:1-6, Luke 9:1-6

Malachi, what an ending to the Old Testament! In Genesis, we begin our journey as humans with the sad story of our failure, and with God's very first promise of a coming seed. As our story unfolds, it becomes clear that we continue to fail miserably at meeting God's standards. But God faithfully reminds of us of the promise of a coming One—through Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Judah, and David. Even though Israel fails and goes into captivity, God brings Judah back from Babylon and the nation is reestablished, the temple is rebuilt, and the law is read to the people. Zerubbabel, the seed of David, continues the messianic line; Joshua is the rightful high priest through the Aaronic line. Ready to keep his word, God had not forgotten.

But the failures continue. About 100 years later, the wall around Jerusalem was still broken down, and the people were choosing to follow the pagan gods and pagan culture around them. Malachi 2:17 says, "You have wearied the Lord with your words;in that you say, 'Everyone who does evil is good in the sight of the Lord and he delights in them'."

Thankfully, those sad words are not the end. God has the final say. He promised us "The Sun of Righteousness" who was coming to heal us (Malachi 4:2) and a coming messenger who would prepare the way before the Lord. (Malachi 4:5) The years passed, and the promises were on hold for four hundred years before the announcement of the birth of a son—the promised messenger—came to Zachariah. What a miraculous story! In our reading from Luke 1, Zachariah is absolutely certain of who their son, John the Baptist, was to become and what he was called to do. God had not forgotten the promise. John was to prepare the people for Jesus—"The Sun of Righteousness," our great healer.

Our story with God is a story of love, not because we are so sweet and lovable, but because God knows exactly who we are and loves us unconditionally. God does not change his holiness and righteousness to accommodate our ideas of righteousness, nor does God expect us to meet these holy standards by ourselves. Our story is a testimony to the faithfulness of God who comes to us with healing. God changes us so we can be with him and walk with him.

PRAYER

Father, I am good at failing. I struggle to understand your righteousness. Thank you for your healing that I may put on your righteousness in Christ by faith. Help me remember your faithfulness and to live boldly in your promises, knowing that no matter what happens, you will have the final word.

Phebe Dickens
Pianist, Birmingham UMC

Preparing the Way

The Second Sunday of Advent

Suggested Readings

Luke 1:68-79, Malachi 3:1-4, Philippians 1:3-11, Luke 3:1-6

One Sunday morning, a neatly dressed man disrupted a worship service in a suburban church. Right in the middle of the service, the man stood up in the balcony and shouted in a clear voice, "I have a word from the Lord!" Immediately alert and overzealous ushers sprang into action and escorted the man out the front doors of the church and into the street.

Thomas Long of Princeton Seminary, commenting on this event, says, "There's a kind of irony here. Week after week, those of us who preach stand in the pulpit and announce implicitly or explicitly, 'I have a word from the Lord'. No one complains (not usually anyway). No alarmed ushers bound into the pulpit to drag us away. But let a stranger stand up in the balcony with a word and all decorum breaks loose." An unexpected voice from an unexpected source.

Now, in all probability, the fellow in the balcony was maybe running a quart or two low on reality. But let's not miss the point of the story! Maybe, just maybe, the man was Isaiah, with a true and disturbing word from the Lord, or perhaps he was Ezekiel, half disturbed, half prophet, visionary and eccentric. We'll never know. The point here is that God's word often comes from the balcony!

It surprises us...

disturbs us...

embarrasses us...

coming from people and places we least expect it.

John the Baptist was one of those balcony kinds of people. Dressed in wild animal skins, eating locusts and wild honey, John the Baptist would unquestionably stand out in any congregation. Yet this was the man God chose to announce the coming of the Messiah. "A voice crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way for the Lord; make his paths straight'."

During this season of Advent, you and I are preparing our hearts to celebrate Christ's coming. We are buying our gifts, putting out our brightly colored lights, baking special treats for family and friends, attending Christmas parties and special events. Instead of joy and hope, we are overwhelmed and exhausted.

John Ortberg once asked his mentor, Dallas Willard, “What do I need to do to be spiritually healthy?” After a long pause, Dallas shared, “You must ruthlessly eliminate hurry from your life.” John wrote those words down and waited for more insights from Dallas. “That’s a good one. Now what else is there?” Dallas answered, “There is nothing else.”

That’s it! Slow down, pause, listen, anticipate, prepare the way for the Lord; make his paths straight.

PRAYER

Holy God, in this season of Advent may I discover times to be alone, to be quiet, to be still to hear and experience your holy Word and presence. Amen.

Rev. Dr. Doug Gilreath

Northeast District Superintendent of the North Georgia Conference

Unspoken Words

Suggested Readings

Psalm 126, Isaiah 40:1-11, Romans 8:22-25

On a recent trip to Florida, my two sisters and I took our 90-year-old mother to visit some friends. Miscommunication and a cell phone on silent mode, resulted in being an hour late for the visit. One sister brought Mom into the restaurant where they were meeting, and shortly came out to the car, letting us know the friends were very upset. They were saying unkind things to Mom and demanding yet another apology. They were staying no longer to visit, as they already wasted an hour.

I went into the restaurant with my other sister, intending to rescue my mother from these two mean-hearted friends. My sister reached them first and proceeded to give them each a hug and tell them how good they looked. She asked after their families and sat down at the table. I stood there with a mouth full of unspoken words as I watched the ice melt from these ladies.

How quick I was to retaliate to defend my mother. How quick I was to judge. I most likely would have ended their friendship had I spoken first; but with a few kind words from my sister, all was forgiven, and they enjoyed a lovely visit.

As I contemplate today's verses, I see how far I've fallen from the way God intended me to be—loving and kind. My instinct to react rather than reflect leaves me longing for the day that, through faith, I will be restored to full life, free from all sin as God planned.

PRAYER

Most precious Father, as I wait in anticipation for the redemption of my body, I pray you will fill me to the measure with the Holy Spirit. I want to be your hands and feet to serve you as best I can as long as I can with all the love I have. Amen.

Dianna Allstadt

The Majesty & Glory of Your Name

Suggested Readings

Psalm 126; Isaiah 19:18-25; 2 Peter 1:2-15

Oh, how I love to look into the night sky! When choir rehearsal ends in the dark and the full moon shines on my way home, I sometimes think of childhood memories of the few Christmas Eves I spent with my Irish grandfather. We sometimes sat on the front steps and found constellations. He shared his knowledge and his love for me by marveling at the sky.

Did God's people see those same skies? Did Mary and Joseph even have the energy to look up towards Bethlehem at the star we've heard about, or were they just as determined as we think of them to wearily get to shelter? However they journeyed to the birth of our savior, Mary and Joseph trusted God to get them there. They believed in God's promises and trusted them to be fulfilled.

When I search the heavens, my search is really for God in my little life. I'm always struck by my faith in God's Christmas promises, and as the words to the choral anthem, *The Majesty and Glory of His Name*, sing:

*When I gaze into the night sky, and see the work of your fingers, the moon and stars
suspended in space,
Oh, what is Man, that You are mindful of him?
You have given Man a crown of glory and honor.
And have made him a little lower than the angels.*

There have been many Christmas Eve candlelight services when I have set up Holy Communion for the 11 o'clock service and been almost the last one to leave after the 7 o'clock candlelight service. On those nights when the skies are clear, I have always had the presence of God's heavens and God's promises to amaze me and to lead me home.

I'm writing these Christmas thoughts in October. Of course, the magnificence of the birth and life of Jesus is always with me; however, the news lately in the sky has been about Comet c/2023, which has been visible just after sunset in our area. It is 130,000 miles across with a tail that is 18 million miles long. Somehow astronomers know that the last time this comet came near enough for anyone to see was 82,000 years ago. Humans were barely here. But God has been here all along!

PRAYER

Heavenly Father, giver of all, your wonderful gift of all in the heavens and on earth cannot be explained. May we realize that your love is to be shared, and may we humbly try to love as Christ loved us. Amen.

Leslie Thompson

Is That All There Is?

Suggested Readings

Psalm 126, Isaiah 35:3-7, Luke 7:18-30

Nothing good ever comes without a wait, and the arrival of our Savior is no different. By the time Advent comes our way, we will be firmly entrenched in our regular schedules of school and work, and might not even be thinking of good things to come. But now it is December 11, and Christmas is only two weeks away.

Many of us are fortunate enough to know what Christmas will hold. Most often this season will include a few parties, meals with friends and family, beautiful decorations, beloved music, wonderful food, presents, and perhaps even some travel. But like Peggy Lee asked in her 1969 hit song, "Is That All There Is?"... Well, is it?

Let's look a little more closely at the verses referenced above. Let's see what awaits us, what is promised to us.

Psalm 126 states that God will restore our fortunes. Our mouths will, once again, be filled with laughter, and we will be filled with joy. The verses in Isaiah indicate that the parched land will be bursting into bloom. But Luke's Gospel, still brimming with good things, like the restoration of physical health, is where the Old Testament gives way to the New. While we may desperately wish to have the things promised earlier, the physical well being and the financial security become as nothing in light of the arrival of our Savior who has picked us as his own for full and complete redemption and salvation. So, Peggy Lee, I'd say no. There is more to come.

PRAYER

Holy God, may we spend this season in joyful anticipation and share the reason for our hope with at least one other person. Amen.

Todd Harkleroad

A Generous Community

Suggested Readings

Isaiah 12:2-6, Amos 6:1-8, 2 Corinthians 8:1-15

As we enter this Advent season, we are reminded of the profound hope and trust we can place in God's promises. Isaiah invites us into a relationship of assurance: "Surely God is my salvation; I will trust and not be afraid." This trust is not rooted in our circumstances but in the steadfastness of God. In moments of uncertainty, we can draw from the well of salvation, rejoicing in the knowledge that God is our strength.

In the reading from 2 Corinthians, we see a beautiful picture of equity and generosity. The Macedonian churches, despite their trials and poverty, overflowed with joy and generosity. Their example teaches us hope is not just a feeling but an action. It compels us to give and serve others, especially those in need. The Apostle Paul emphasizes how our abundance can support others, creating a cycle of mutual care and equity among believers. This is the essence of Christ's love: sharing our blessings so no one is in need.

As we prepare our hearts for the coming of Christ, let us reflect on the ways we can embody hope and trust in our communities. How can we offer support to those facing hardships? In what ways can we be generous, recognizing that our resources are not solely for our own benefit, but for the collective good?

PRAYER

Gracious God, as we await the celebration of Christ's birth, fill our hearts with hope and trust. Help us recognize your presence in our lives and the lives of those around us. May we be inspired by the generosity of the Macedonian churches and strive for equity in our communities. Teach us to share our blessings, ensuring that all have what they need. Thank you for your faithfulness and the joy of salvation. May we sing your praises and proclaim your name in all the earth. Amen.

ACTION STEP

This week, consider a specific act of generosity you can extend to someone in need. Whether it's donating to a local charity, supporting a friend, or volunteering your time, let your actions reflect the hope and trust you have in God's provision for all.

Chris Moss
Director of Youth Ministries, Birmingham UMC

Christmas is Approaching...

Suggested Readings

Isaiah 12:2-6, Amos 8:4-12, 2 Corinthians 9:1-15

So many of us have experienced the loss of loved ones. It is so difficult for us to look forward to the holiday season when we are grieving. Memories fill our hearts and minds.

Psalms 121 begins: "I lift my eyes to the hills- where does my strength come from? My help comes from the Lord. The Maker of heaven and earth."

Christmas is Approaching...

Christmas is approaching once again
But it has changed so from the happy expectations of yore...
Life has overwhelmed my soul,
Sadness has encroached upon my heart,
And The only part of Christmas my heart desires,
Is the Worship of the Birth of Jesus...
I wish I could forego all the earthly trappings,
And just go to the stable...
Sit in the cold crisp air,
Marvel at the Star,
And Behold the Baby in the Manger...
Imagine the conversation of Mary and Joseph!!
Imagine the Awe...Did they really know??
The Birth of the Savior!
Peace...

PRAYER

Dearest Lord, let us be comforted to know you watch over us and our loved ones.
Amen.

Teri Baldwin

God's Timing

Suggested Readings

Isaiah 12:2-6, Amos 9:8-15, Luke 1:57-66

As we journey through the Advent season, we're reminded of the waiting that often precedes the fulfillment of God's promises. In Luke 1, we read about Elizabeth and Zechariah, a couple who waited not just months but years for a child. God had promised Zechariah that their son would play a pivotal role in preparing the way for the Messiah, yet that promise wasn't without challenges. Their faith carried them through silence and anticipation until, finally, John was born. Through this story, we witness how God's timing, though often different from ours, is always purposeful.

In Isaiah 12:2-6, we're called to trust in the Lord, to find our strength and song in God as we wait. This passage encourages us to remember that even when we can't see the fullness of God's plan, God is always at work, preparing a way forward. The joy that comes with the realization of these promises is a reminder that, in all things, God's faithfulness never wavers. Even in seasons of waiting, we can find comfort in God's promises and look forward with hope.

During Advent, as we anticipate the celebration of Christ's birth, may we be encouraged by the examples of faithfulness throughout Scripture. May we lean into the beauty of waiting, knowing that God's promises are not just distant hopes but firm assurances. Let's prepare our hearts to receive the joy and peace God offers, trusting in God's perfect timing.

PRAYER

Lord, help us to trust you in every season of waiting, knowing that your promises are sure. Fill our hearts with peace and joy as we draw near to you. Amen.

Peyton Jamison

The Power of Prayer

The Third Sunday of Advent

Suggested Readings

Zephaniah 3:14-20, Isaiah 12:2-6, Philippians 4:4-7, Luke 3:7-18

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Philippians 4:4-7

Billy was an apprentice machinist at a small company in North Carolina and part-time youth leader at the local United Methodist church. Billy was 23. I was speaking at his church regarding church renewal. In a meeting with their committee we talked about prayer. They urged me to talk to Billy.

Not long after Billy was hired at his company, tensions arose about wages and working conditions. Anger and threats of doing destructive things to equipment and products spread. It was about to boil over. Billy asked several of the long time workers to come in early and meet together for prayer. The first day only two people came. Within a few days, however, the number grew to fifteen. By the third week, company officials met together and responded to employee requests, exceeding the requested raises.

Billy was new, he had no official status, and he was the youngest person in the company. He had no seminary training, or higher education. He said he learned to pray about things from his mom and dad!

I think he must have read this scripture, too.

PRAYER

Lord, you know the anxious situations in our lives. Remind us of your everlasting presence and peace that only you can bring. Even when things feel overwhelming, let us remember to give you thanks.

Rev. John Wolfe

Pastor Emeritus, Birmingham UMC

Wonderful Counselor

Suggested Readings

Isaiah 11:1-9, Numbers 16:1-19, Hebrews 13:7-17

*For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders,
and he is named
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*
Isaiah 9:6

Whenever I read or hear this passage prophesying the coming of Jesus I am drawn to two names: Prince of Peace and Wonderful Counselor. In my mind I hear Amy Grant's "Emmanuel" (for those "mature" enough to remember the tune). And as a mental health therapist my heart is especially pulled toward the title of Wonderful Counselor.

As a therapist I endeavor to facilitate hope, peace, enlightenment, healing, and guidance for my patients. I help them transition from the darkness of despair in their lives to the light of hope. Jesus also offers these things, so much more abundantly and in infinitely deeper and eternally more healing ways. It is often beyond our mortal understanding. Jesus brings life to our death, healing to our sin, and salvation to our lostness.

This is the gift: what the light of Christ can do in our lives when we trust him. Jesus said these words about himself and us, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life." (John 8:12)

So, throughout this Advent season (and into the new year) expectantly look for the light: the light of hope that is Jesus Christ our Lord and savior, the Prince of Peace! Wonderful Counselor!

PRAYER

Lord Jesus, help us to walk in your light, so that we can choose goodness, kindness, compassion, mercy, forgiveness, hope, and love. Amen.

Derek Struchtemeyer
Licensed Professional Counselor

More About You, God

Suggested Readings

Isaiah 11:1-9, Numbers 16:20-35, Acts 28:23-31

A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a branch will bear fruit. The spirit of the Lord will rest on him.

Isaiah 11:1

Like us, many get caught up in the hustle and bustle of the holidays preparing for the Christmas season. We've all been there with the mad dash between Thanksgiving and Christmas to decorate the house, shop for gifts, and attend many holiday parties, right?

Often we overlook the purpose of this joyous season shadowed by the stress and exhaustion we impose on ourselves. For this season, take time to soak in the miraculous birth of Jesus by reminding yourself of the hope his birth brings.

Consider this prayer: Lord, none of this is about me. How might I make this more about you?

How might I use this season to better glorify Jesus and the promise of hope, peace, joy, and love during my quiet time, family dinners, gift giving, and worship during Advent?

PRAYER

None of this is about me, God. Help me make this season and every day more about you. Amen.

Dave & Patti Wagner

Lesson of the Prodigal Son

Suggested Readings

Isaiah 11:1-9, Micah 4:8-13, Luke 7:31-35

With the season of Christmas upon us, it can be easy for us to get caught up in the things of this world such as going shopping, family traditions, and spending time with loved ones. We can often get so caught up with all the things we have going on around us that we forget about what truly matters in this season. The things I mentioned aren't bad things; they can be great things. If we put them before celebrating the birth of our savior, we are missing the whole reason we celebrate Christmas.

1 John 2:16-17 says, "For all that is in the world – the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and the pride of life – is not from the Father but is from the world. And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever."

The parable of the prodigal son sticks out to me at this time of year. This story is a parable Jesus speaks of in the Gospel of Luke describing a prodigal son who leaves his father and tries to find success on his own. He ends up being unsuccessful and decides to return to his father. Like the prodigal son, we can often go out into the world and give it all of our attention. Luke 15:13, "Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living." We can try to live in this world and see all of the things that it has to offer us and fill us with. We will try and try to be filled with these things, but at the end we will be left feeling unfulfilled.

Luke 15:14 continues, "When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need." Just then the prodigal son realized, the only thing that would fill his need was his father, just as that is where we are able to find our fulfillment. When the prodigal son finally returned home, his father said to him, "For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!" (Luke 15:24) And they began to celebrate. In the same way, when we remember to put God first in our life it pleases God!

PRAYER

Dear God, as we are in this time of Advent, help us all to remember to keep our focus upon you and to put you first in our lives. The world will try to absorb and take all of our attention but when we keep you as the cornerstone of our life, we will find fulfillment that we cannot find anywhere else. Amen.

Henry Gilmore
BUMC Youth

Guide Me to What is Right & Just

Suggested Readings Psalm 25:1-10

I am thankful for the Psalms, and when I read one like the one in today's reading from Psalm 25 I am reminded I need to read and pray the Psalms more often. What a wonderful way to begin a season of searching, waiting, and preparing for the coming of the Christ. What a beautiful prayer as we reflect on our own search for God's guidance.

It is so easy for us to let anger, frustration, and fear overshadow our lives. We can't seem to escape it. We try to find some way to cover it up, but it remains. In our anxiety, we act out our fears in unhelpful ways. Far too often our actions go against the ways God has taught us to live. We feel the pressure to give, and at the same time a resentment in giving. We feel the push to be present for people in need, and yet want to run and hide. We are called to wait for Jesus' return, but we are tempted to sit idly by in such waiting rather than live out God's Kingdom.

Psalm 25 is a beautiful prayer asking God to forgive us and help us become more like those God calls us to be. Out of trust, the psalmist cries,

Make your ways known to me, Lord; teach me your paths. Lead me in your truth - teach it to me - because you are the God who saves me.

He asks God to forget all past sins, and looks toward a future where God's leadership will guide him in what is right and just. Our prayer this season can be the same.

PRAYER

Help us, Lord. Heal our wounded spirits. Free us again to look to you for hope. Let us see the many ways in which you are present to us: guiding, healing, loving, and encouraging us. Forgive us for our fears and our stubbornness. Bring us again to your light, for we ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Rev. Sam Halverson
Associate Pastor, Birmingham UMC

Look for the Good

Suggested Readings

Psalms 80:1-7, Isaiah 42:10-18, Hebrews 10:32-39

During the storms of our lives we tend to forget all the good God has already given us: our friends, our family, our homes, abundant access to food and water. By routinely looking for the good God has blessed you with, you can bring peace to yourself and to your mind. That inner peace will help you think more clearly so you can better tackle whatever challenge comes your way.

“Always give thanks to God the Father for everything” (Ephesians 5:20). Gratitude is the cure for fear and worry. Try this: every morning, after rising, remember three new things you are grateful for, and thank God for them. The more you look for the good, the more good you will find.

God is like a secret admirer in your life, constantly doing things to help you and make you smile; however, sometimes challenges come up and we forget all the gifts God has given us. Take time daily to remember the blessings God has given you.

PRAYER

Lord, thank you for this day. I pray you will reveal to me more blessings you have given me, so I can love you more and do your will. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Jaden Keeton

Jesus, Mary's Baby

Suggested Reading

Psalm 80:1-7, Isaiah 66:7-11, Luke 13:31-35

My favorite choral work for Christmas is “Candlelight Carol” written by John Rutter. Do a quick search and listen to this beautiful song for yourself! I’ve pulled the most meaningful lines for me:

*How can you measure the love of a mother?
Or how can you write down a baby's first cry?
...Nations proclaim him their Lord and their savior
But Mary will hold him and sing him to sleep
...Godhead incarnate and hope of salvation
A child with his mother that first Christmas Day
...Gloria, gloria in excelsis Deo!
Angels are singing “The Christ child is born”*

I have come to realize there is nothing as special as the bond between a mother and her child. Like Mr. Rutter writes, it is immeasurable—like trying to capture on paper the swell of emotions a mother feels when hearing her baby’s first cry. It is remarkable to ponder that Mary felt just like any other mother when her child was born. However, we quickly take this child born to Mary and placed in a manger for ourselves – after all, *he* is Christ who will bring salvation to the world! Does Mary realize the significance for us all?! But the fact remained that Jesus would be a baby, Mary’s baby. A child who needed to be tended, comforted, fed - and it would only be Mary, his mother, who could best “hold him and sing him to sleep.”

The visceral instincts of motherhood are as real today as they were for Mary that first Christmas night. The significance of God’s gift of motherhood is no coincidence. The gift of such a bond, such love, such nurturing can only be expressed with joy.

How then do we express our joy for Christ’s birth? Perhaps it is in comforting, reminiscent memories of our own mother? Perhaps it is shared in the cries and laughter of children? Perhaps it is in the proclamations we make alongside the wise men as we herald beloved carols each Christmas season? I understand there is no specific answer, but Mr. Rutter eloquently expresses how I feel, so I will join along with the angels in song and this **PRAYER** of thanksgiving:

“Gloria, gloria in excelsis Deo! The Christ child is born!” Amen.

Parker Holloway
Organist, Birmingham UMC

Giving Birth to Miracles

The Fourth Sunday of Advent

Suggested Readings

Micah 5:2-5a, Luke 1:46b-55, Hebrews 10:5-10, Luke 1:39-45

Fourteen or fifteen-year-old Mary is visited by the Angel Gabriel and told she is going to have a son. She is incredulous, and asks Gabriel how this can be since, “I am a virgin.” Gabriel shares with her: “Mary, this is of God. The Holy Spirit will come upon you.”

What?!!!!? The Scripture continues, “God’s power will overshadow you and this child you will have will be holy. Don’t be afraid. You are to name this son Jesus. He will be the Son of God.”

But wait, there’s more, “And your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren.”

With that Mary’s socks are blown off. Gabriel told her, “Nothing will be impossible with God.” What Mary said next is so beautiful...

“Then let it be done with me according to what you say.” However, Mary needed to go see her relative, Elizabeth.

We learn Mary goes with haste to the hill country of Judea to Zechariah and Elizabeth’s home. The minute Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, her unborn baby, who is John the Baptist, leaped in her womb we learn. Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. Elizabeth confirmed what Mary had been told and called Mary the “mother of my Lord.” Imagine the conversation these women had. They both were giving birth to miracles.

What a joy filled response comes out of Mary’s mouth. She breaks out in the song of praise we know as *The Magnificat*, “My soul, my soul magnifies the Lord.” She shares that this “mercy is for all generations.”

What I am struck by in this passage from Luke is that both of these women understood God’s words to them, because they were listeners to God and knew when God was speaking to them. Mary, in Luke 1:47 declares, “My spirit rejoices in God my savior.” She claims God as her savior; and because Jesus came to make his dwelling place in our hearts, so may we.

PRAYER

Oh Lord, we are overwhelmed with your gift to the world. Oh Mary and Elizabeth, thank you for being listeners and followers. We claim anew Jesus as our savior.

Rev. Judy Wolfe

Pastor Emeritus, Certified Thanatologist/Pastoral Counselor

Continual Praise

Suggested Readings

Psalm 113, Genesis 25:19-28, Colossians 1:15-20

From the rising of the sun to its setting the name of the Lord is to be praised.

Psalms 113:3

When we consider the birth of Jesus (like the rising of the sun) to his death on the cross (like the setting of the sun) our scripture passage encourages us to praise the Lord.

Consider: how can we focus on praising the Lord during Advent specifically?

Telling the story of Christ birth

Singing songs of his birth

Celebrate by giving gifts to others in his honor

As Christmas approaches and Advent quickly comes to an end, let's continue to keep in mind the joy of praising the Lord every day and not just during this season.

PRAYER

We thank you Lord for the gift of Jesus. Help us to live with hearts that praise you continually. Amen.

Paxton Holloway

BUMC Youth

Your Voice is a Gift

Christmas Eve

Suggested Readings
Psalm 80:1-7, Luke 2:1-14

When we think of Christmas, it is special to us all because of the birth of Jesus. One of our favorite Christmas songs is written by Phil Wickham called "Face of God."

We encourage you to listen to it and see why we love it so much!

Here is one verse:

*Gloria! I hear the angels singing,
Gloria! All of the Heaven's ringing,
Gloria! The Savior of the world is in her arms.
She's staring at the Face of God.*

Our voices are a gift we use to worship Jesus.
We are lucky to have Jesus Christ in our hearts.

Colossians 3:16 tells us...

*Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly,
Teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom,
singing Psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness
in your hearts to God.*

PRAYER

Dear Jesus, Thank you to our savior for being born on Christmas and for forgiving our sins so we could live eternal lives. Happy Birthday, Jesus. We love you! Amen.

Kiersten (8) and Collins (6) Gangi

Beautiful Feet and Lifted Voices

Christmas Day

Suggested Readings
Isaiah 52:7-10, Psalm 98

You have beautiful feet! That may seem a strange thing to say on this Christmas day. But let me repeat: You have beautiful feet – and so does every believer who shares the good news of Christmas!

But it's not because the appendages attached to our ankles are unusually attractive or we've treated ourselves to an expensive pedicure. According to the prophet Isaiah, everyone who announces the good news of God's salvation has beautiful feet.

I first found out I had beautiful feet many years ago, when I told my pastor that I felt God was calling me to become a candidate for ordained ministry. "You have beautiful feet," he said, and he shared with me a devotional based on Isaiah 52.

Since then, I've learned that having beautiful feet is not an exclusive attribute of Methodist ministers or professional preachers. God blesses all believers with "beautiful feet" because we're all called to be God's messengers, proclaiming the good news of God's salvation to the world!

But wait, there's more! Not only does Isaiah say God's messengers have beautiful feet, he also encourages us to sing together, lifting our voices in celebration of God's salvation! Likewise, Psalm 98 invites everyone on earth to "make a joyful noise to the Lord." In fact, all creation is invited to join the act: roaring seas, singing mountains, and waves that clap their hands! No wonder this psalm inspired hymn-writer Isaac Watts to compose "Joy to the World!"

Christmas means all of God's messengers everywhere are called to "make a joyful noise," celebrating the salvation ushered into the world by the birth of Jesus Christ. We are all called to proclaim peace, to celebrate salvation, to glory in the good news of God's coming.

Through the birth of the babe of Bethlehem, God himself has come to live among us, to teach us, to heal us, and to save us from our sins. Through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ – God has “bared his holy arm.” Our Savior has rolled up his sleeves, gone into battle, and won the victory “before the eyes of all the nations!”

So, on this Christmas Day, let us join the mighty chorus of celebration. Let us burst forth into singing, bringing the good news of God’s great love to everyone everywhere! Let us get up on our “beautiful feet,” and “go, tell it on the mountain that Jesus Christ is born!”

PRAYER

Holy God, thank you for coming to earth in the birth of your son, Jesus Christ. Empower us to share the good news of your saving grace with everyone everywhere. Amen.

Rev. Mike Morgan
Senior Pastor, Birmingham UMC

SPECIAL EVENTS in December

1

10 a.m. Hanging of the Greens Worship Service
11:15 a.m. Advent Wreath Workshop
3:30 p.m. Scenes & Songs of Christmas

8

11:15 a.m. Children's Gingerbread Party
5 p.m. Youth Progressive Dinner
5:30 p.m. Organ & Piano Christmas Concert

15

4 p.m. Broadway at Birmingham:
Christmas Edition

22

2 p.m. Caroling to Church Members

24

4 p.m. Family Service "The Unrehearsed Pagaent"
6 p.m. Traditional Candlelight Christmas Eve
11 p.m. Carols & Communion Christmas Eve