

ADVENT

A CALENDAR OF DEVOTIONS

2025



Jan Turrentine

First Sunday of Advent	2
Second Sunday of Advent	15
Third Sunday of Advent	28
Fourth Sunday of Advent	40

Copyright © 2025 Abingdon Press
All rights reserved.

No part of this work may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying and recording, or by any information storage or retrieval system, except as may be expressly permitted by the 1976 Copyright Act, the 1998 Digital Millennium Copyright Act, or in writing from the publisher. **Permission is granted for local church use only.** *Purchasers may use a combination of printed copies or emails but total usage is not to exceed the level purchased. For these purposes, one printed copy of the entire piece is equivalent to one email address usage.* Requests for additional permissions can be addressed to Rights and Permissions, The United Methodist Publishing House, 810 12th Avenue South, Nashville, TN 37203 or emailed to permissions@abingdonpress.com.

978-1-7910-3721-5 (Download—up to 50 emails)
978-1-7910-3722-2 (Download—51-100 emails)
978-1-7910-3723-9 (Download—101-250 emails)
978-1-7910-3724-6 (Download—251-500 emails)
978-1-7910-3725-3 (Download—over 500 emails)

Scripture quotations from the Common English Bible.
© Copyright 2011 Common English Bible. All rights reserved.
Used by permission.

MANUFACTURED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Sunday, November 30

ISAIAH 2:1-3

This is what Isaiah, Amoz's son, saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.

In the days to come

*the mountain of the LORD's house
will be the highest of the mountains.*

*It will be lifted above the hills;
peoples will stream to it.*

Many nations will go and say,

*"Come, let's go up to the LORD's mountain,
to the house of Jacob's God*

*so that he may teach us his ways
and we may walk in God's paths."*

Instruction will come from Zion;

The Lord's word from Jerusalem.

Just as the faint light from the first candle on the Advent wreath anticipates the fuller glow of all the candles yet to be lighted, the opening verses of Isaiah 2 anticipate a future God's people could scarcely imagine. Isaiah's prophecy opens with words of doom and divine disgust. Chapters that follow are full of dire warnings and judgment that cloud the promise of hope and peace. Still, the hope for peace would be realized, the prophet said, but not before many things happened and everything changed. The reign of God will bring peace through Israel to the entire world, and with that peace will come justice; physical, spiritual, and emotional health; protection; and productivity.

The prophet Isaiah painted a scene of reversals. Zion, home of "the Lord's house," was by no means the highest peak in the area, yet the day is coming, the prophet said, when it will "be lifted above the hills," drawing people from "many nations" to the temple, eager for instruction in God's ways. The "house of Jacob's God" will

become the faith school for everyone, even those indifferent to God or actively opposed to God and God's people. Eager to "walk in God's paths," they will flock to the temple to receive the Lord's word.

The season of Advent is for God's people today a season of reversals. As people who are learning God's ways and want to walk in God's paths, we're called to slow down and wait patiently while the world around us rushes anxiously. We're called to quiet reflection and prayer amid noise and clamor. We're called to live simply and gratefully and give selflessly while others grab for everything, come away unsatisfied, and struggle for more. We're called to love unreservedly and indiscriminately, following the example of the one whose birth we anticipate. We're called to remember God's gift of salvation and live into the hope it instills.

This Advent, how will you live differently in order to reflect the light of Christ within you?

Transforming God, reverse my thoughts, words, and actions when I stray from your path so that I walk faithfully in your ways. Amen.

Monday, December 1

ISAIAH 2:4-5

*God will judge between the nations
and settle disputes of mighty nations.
Then they will beat their swords into iron plows
and their spears into pruning tools.
Nation will not take up sword against nation;
they will no longer learn how to make war.*

*Come, house of Jacob,
let's walk by the LORD's light.*

You've probably seen them: everyday household items we might normally toss after use that have been cleverly repurposed into something serviceable. Paper towel tubes become storage containers for light-duty extension cords. Pull tabs from canned drinks serve as hangers on the backs of picture frames. Old electric toothbrushes scour grit and grime from hard-to-reach crevices. The rubbery inside of a tennis ball cut in half easily twists open jar lids and bottle caps. An old wooden door, trimmed, sanded, and stained, becomes a beautiful coffee table. Useful in their first iteration, the items are cleverly transformed and given a second life. It takes some effort, often some old-fashioned elbow grease, but the end results are well worth it.

The prophet Isaiah promised repurposing of epic proportions, but this was no simple DIY project. He described something only God can do. Swords and spears, instruments of war, destruction, even death, will become instead life-giving, life-nurturing gifts. How? God will settle disputes between the nations to such a degree that they no longer even know "how to make war" (Isaiah 2:4). War will be a thing of the past.

That's what happens, the prophet said, when God's people follow God's ways and "walk by the Lord's light" (verse 5). It's an image of peace, a promise of a secure life when all people, all

nations, come to know Israel's God and walk in God's ways.

What are we to do with this promise? Isn't it unrealistic given the current climate in which we live, one of general mistrust, cynicism, divisions, conflicts, and hopelessness? Do we dare claim this promise and cling to this hope?

We can, and we should, if we trust God. God will do what God has promised. In the meantime, God's people should "walk by the Lord's light" and help nurture pockets of peace that instill hope in others. Little by little, as agents of hope, we help bring God's kingdom on earth when we replace harmful thoughts with hopeful ones; harsh words with words that heal; destructive actions with those that are constructive, helpful, and nurturing. When we walk in the Lord's light, we have no need for swords and spears. Plows and pruning tools, though, will be quite handy.

Reconciling God, help me carry your peace and light into the world and work to create an environment that reflects your kingdom vision and values. Amen.

Tuesday, December 2

ROMANS 13:11-14

As you do all this, you know what time it is. The hour has already come for you to wake up from your sleep. Now our salvation is nearer than when we first had faith. The night is almost over, and the day is near. So let's get rid of the actions that belong to the darkness and put on the weapons of light. Let's behave appropriately as people who live in the day, not in partying and getting drunk, not in sleeping around and obscene behavior, not in fighting and obsession. Instead, dress yourself with the Lord Jesus Christ, and don't plan to indulge your selfish desires.

Years ago, I visited Stratford-upon-Avon, the birthplace of William Shakespeare, along with its unavoidable gift shop. There I purchased a clock inscribed with one of the poet's quotes: "Make use of time, let not advantage slip." It was a perfect keepsake for a time-conscious, task-oriented person whose job involved strict schedules and deadlines.

It's one thing to know the time of day. It's quite another, however, to recognize critical moments in time and consider them from an eternal perspective. It's what biblical writers called *kairos*, the time appointed by God when everything comes together to achieve God's purposes.

While we are not fully capable of understanding or recognizing this, we can live with an awareness that the present moment and how we act in it matters.

The Apostle Paul wrote the letter we know as Romans to a community of Christians he had never met. His letter touched on several themes, including the faithfulness of God across time and how followers of Jesus are to live faithfully. He wrote to believers who anticipated Christ's return at any moment. They were expectant, hopeful, and perhaps even a little anxious. Romans 13:11-14 is

full of images and detailed instructions to people who knew “what time it is” (verse 11). “Wake up from your sleep,” Paul said, and see that “the night is almost over.” People of faith live in the light that has begun to dawn. In the presence of that light, there is no room for actions that belong in the darkness.

The time is near, Paul said, when God’s kingdom will come in its fullness, and its light will drive away the present darkness. It was true for Christians living in the first century. It is true for us today. The light has begun to dawn. As people dressed themselves “with the Lord Jesus Christ” (verse 14), God calls us to live differently, “behave appropriately” (verse 13), and walk in the light of Christ.

Eternal God, keep me conscious of time and guide my feet on the path illuminated with the light of Christ. Amen.

Wednesday, December 3

MATTHEW 24:36-39

“But nobody knows when that day or hour will come, not the heavenly angels and not the Son. Only the Father knows. As it was in the time of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Human One. In those days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark. They didn’t know what was happening until the flood came and swept them all away. The coming of the Human One will be like that.”

People have speculated for centuries about the second coming of Jesus. Some have gone so far as to pinpoint the exact date and time of Jesus’s return. So far, they’ve all been wrong. First-century Christians believed that Jesus would return at any time, and many grew anxious because it had not yet happened. It was easy to lose hope when their expectations were not realized.

If we’re honest, most of us would probably admit that we do not wake up each day and immediately wonder if the day will bring Jesus’s return. As Christians, we believe he will return, but it is likely not at the forefront of our minds much of the time. Perhaps it should be. Or at the very least, we should live as though we anticipate it. Jesus’s statement in Matthew 24:36 that no one except God knows when he will return was in response to a question his disciples asked in verse 3. They wanted to know both when that would occur and what sign would alert them to his return. It will happen, Jesus said, as people are going about their lives, eating, drinking, getting married, working.

Rather than wonder and worry about when Jesus will return, we should live in ways that reflect our belief that it will happen and our commitment to preparing for it. We should live with hope and anticipation, working for peace; advocating for

justice; offering mercy and forgiveness; going the extra mile; keeping our word; loving unreservedly, even our enemies; praying faithfully. In other words, we should live in ways that reflect the values and priorities of God's kingdom. Jesus painted a clear picture of kingdom living in his Sermon on the Mount. Rather than sitting idly and waiting for Jesus's return, we should continue to live according to these teachings. As we do, we help usher in God's kingdom.

It's human nature to wonder when Jesus will return. As his followers, however, we have a new nature—Jesus's nature. This identity calls us to embrace his priorities and carry out his mission, leaving no time to wonder and worry.

All-knowing God, help me live with hope and anticipation as I live in ways that help bring your kingdom on earth. Amen.

Thursday, December 4

MATTHEW 24:40-44

“At that time there will be two men in the field. One will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding at the mill. One will be taken and the other left. Therefore, stay alert! You don’t know what day the Lord is coming. But you understand that if the head of the house knew at what time the thief would come, he would keep alert and wouldn’t allow the thief to break into his house. Therefore, you also should be prepared, because the Human One will come at a time you don’t know.”

At the café where I volunteer, alarms beep throughout the day. Located on a wall at our workstation, they are different colors, coded with different letters. Their beeps alert staff to specific tasks needing immediate attention. One of them indicates that a customer’s coffee or tea order is ready. Another reminds us to check trash cans and empty them as necessary. The others, too, serve specific purposes. They keep us on task.

Jesus’s discourse in Matthew 24 is full of teachings, warnings, and illustrations about the second coming, but his message in its simplest form is this: “Stay alert! Be prepared!” (verses 42, 44). We cannot know what day the Lord will return, he said. If, for example, a homeowner knows what time a thief will try to “break into his house” (verse 43), he will stay on guard, prepared to prevent the thief from entering. I will return, Jesus said, at a time you cannot know.

*Infinite God, keep me focused, alert, and prepared.
Amen.*

Friday, December 5

PSALM 122:1-5

I rejoiced with those who said to me,

“Let’s go to the LORD’s house!”

Now our feet are standing

in your gates, Jerusalem!

Jerusalem is built like a city

joined together in unity.

That is where the tribes go up—

the LORD’s tribes!

It is the law for Israel

to give thanks there to the LORD’s name,

because the thrones of justice are there—

the thrones of the house of David!

Perhaps it has happened to you: the birth of a child, the view of the Grand Canyon or the ocean from an overlooking cliff, a shooting star, a stunning sunrise or sunset. Something so amazing and indescribable happens that it takes your breath away. That’s the sense we get in reading Psalm 122, which captures the joy and excitement God’s people experienced as they went to the temple in Jerusalem to worship and give thanks. Anticipation had been building, and finally they were at Jerusalem’s gates.

When my congregation returned to in-person worship following the COVID pandemic, I experienced something similar. My fellow worshippers and I couldn’t wait to go into the sanctuary. We walked swiftly and purposefully toward its doors. Once inside, the sunlight coming through the stained-glass windows seemed brighter than it ever had been, and the colors more brilliant than ever. We crowded into the rows, shoulder to shoulder, and sang loudly and heartily. Never has my worship been more joyful. We had been through a difficult time, and it was good to be in the Lord’s house and give thanks for God’s presence and provision. Life had been hard,

but never had God abandoned us. We had, in fact, experienced God in new ways.

A trip to Jerusalem for God's people was long, tiring, and often treacherous, but whatever difficulties they encountered along the way were quickly forgotten once they reached the city's gates. In Jerusalem they experienced unity and community with fellow Israelites as well as a sense of God's presence, instruction in the ways of God, and administration of justice. And with justice came the assurance of peace. Would everything in their lives, their villages, their tribes, even Jerusalem, always be peaceful? No. But living within the reign of God assured them, and assures us, of the peace of knowing that God is with us, for us, beside us, before us, behind us, surrounding us. In union with God, regardless of the problems we face, the suffering we may endure, we have peace because God is with us.

That's the promise and hope of Advent: Emmanuel. God with us. And for that we give thanks.

Gracious God, thank you for your unfailing presence and the peace your presence affords. Amen.

Saturday, December 6

PSALM 122:6-9

Pray that Jerusalem has peace:

“Let those who love you have rest.

Let there be peace on your walls;

let there be rest on your fortifications.”

For the sake of my family and friends,

I say, “Peace be with you, Jerusalem.”

For the sake of the LORD our God’s house

I will pray for your good.

The justice of Psalm 122:5 paves the way for the peace of verses 6-9. Our English word peace falls short of fully communicating the meaning of the Hebrew shalom we find in these verses. While shalom includes the absence of war and conflict, it also embraces ideas of completeness, safety, welfare, health, prosperity, tranquility, contentment, and friendship, both with humans and with God. God’s shalom brings perfect unity between Creator and creation. Though sin has broken the peace God desires, it is not a permanent breach.

The psalmist called worshippers specifically to pray for peace for Jerusalem, believing that its destiny shaped that of the rest of the world. Jerusalem’s temple, where God’s people believed God dwelled, symbolized God’s covenant and held the promise of worldwide peace and blessing. It was a place of unity for all of Israel’s tribes. It was their spiritual home. Jerusalem was then as it is now home to division, conflict, and violence, yet the call to pray for its peace came with expectation and hope. Despite how things look, despite the dark places of our lives and in our world, peace is possible because God is present.

What are we to make of this call to “pray that Jerusalem has peace” (Psalm 122:6)? We can begin by recognizing the psalmist’s linking of prayer, peace, and rest. We can pray that God’s

peace takes hold in our hearts, where God resides. We can then build bridges instead of walls when division threatens. We can respond thoughtfully rather than react vengefully when conflicts arise. We can work for the common good, for the safety, wellbeing, and wholeness of everyone. We can live as though we believe peace is possible, because it is when God's people live within God's will and reign.

Israel's prophets spoke of the coming Messiah, the Prince of Peace. As he was preparing his disciples for what he and they were about to face, the Messiah assured them, "Peace I leave with you. My peace I give you. I give to you not as the world gives. Don't be troubled or afraid" (John 14:27).

God's peace is within us. God calls us to carry that peace beyond us.

Peacemaking God, remind me that the darkness of the world cannot dim the reality of your presence and your peace. Replace my doubt with confidence and my fear with courage to carry your peace everywhere I go. Amen.

Sunday, December 7

ISAIAH 11:1-5

A shoot will grow up from the stump of Jesse;

a branch will sprout from his roots.

The LORD's spirit will rest upon him,

a spirit of wisdom and understanding,

a spirit of planning and strength,

a spirit of knowledge and fear of the LORD.

He will delight in fearing the LORD.

He won't judge by appearances,

nor decide by hearsay.

He will judge the needy with righteousness,

*and decide with equity for those who suffer in
the land.*

He will strike the violent with the rod of his mouth;

by the breath of his lips he will kill the wicked.

Righteousness will be the belt around his hips,

and faithfulness the belt around his waist.

Ask people what they expect in a leader, and they name qualities like accountability, integrity, transparency, and humility. Leaders need to have good communication skills, practice active listening, take advice from others, and avoid making decisions in a vacuum. They should not only have vision but should also motivate and inspire others to achieve that vision.

In a beloved text reflecting humankind's desire for justice and peace, the prophet Isaiah promised salvation in the form of a king with unprecedented leadership qualities and characteristics. Ancient Israelites saw in this promise a new king for Jerusalem from David's line, one who would govern fairly and righteously. Christians see in Jesus Christ the fulfillment of this promise, as one on whom the Lord's spirit rested and in whom the Lord's spirit lived. Wisdom, understanding, planning, strength, knowledge, fear of the Lord—certainly Jesus demonstrated

these attributes unlike anyone before him or since. Gospel accounts of his encounters with people show how he accepted them as they were, didn't "judge by appearances" but judged "with righteousness." Especially drawn to those who were suffering, Jesus blessed them, healed them, and restored them so they could thrive. No stranger to opposition, Jesus didn't resort to physical violence; instead, he listened and engaged in earnest dialogue.

Jesus meets all the requirements for a leader of the highest caliber. But he's more. He's the Savior, the one through whom God's kingdom has come, is coming, and will come in final victory, establishing justice and righteousness forever.

We don't have to wait to see it. In fact, we can be part of bringing it to pass. Each time we choose to respond as Jesus would, with love, acceptance, and understanding; when we act with wisdom; when the Spirit of the Lord within us works through us, we help bring in the just and righteous kingdom of God, a place of peace.

Saving God, help me live faithfully and righteously and reflect your Spirit living within me. Amen.

Monday, December 8

ISAIAH 11:6-10

*The wolf will live with the lamb,
and the leopard will lie down with the
young goat;
the calf and the young lion will feed together,
and a little child will lead them.*

*The cow and the bear will graze.
Their young will lie down together,
and a lion will eat straw like an ox.*

*A nursing child will play over the snake's hole;
toddlers will reach right over the serpent's den.
They won't harm or destroy anywhere on my holy
mountain.*

*The earth will surely be filled with the knowl-
edge of the LORD,
just as the water covers the sea.*

*On that day, the root of Jesse will stand as a signal to the
peoples. The nations will seek him out, and his dwelling
will be glorious.*

The word picture the prophet Isaiah painted—predatory animals living serenely alongside meek, domesticated animals, all being led by a vulnerable child unafraid to play near snakes—was famously captured in oil on canvas by the nineteenth-century Quaker minister and painter Edward Hicks in a series called *Peaceable Kingdom*. Among the painting's sixty-two versions expressing this theme are some that include a shattered tree trunk alongside the animals, representing the split that had occurred in the 1820s within the Society of Friends (Quakers). The tree, however, was not felled. Despite the noticeable deep fissure, it still stood with the vulnerable animals and children near other animals who could easily injure or kill them, a symbol of hope for peace.

The weak and vulnerable characters in Isaiah's picture are no accident. Peace is a fragile state, easily disrupted or destroyed. But notice that peace is possible when the parties involved submit

to vulnerability. No flexed muscles or angry growls; no threatening roars or dangerous hisses. Peace is possible where justice and righteousness reign (Isaiah 11:1-5). Security follows, allowing children to play free from harm because “the knowledge of the Lord” fills the earth (verse 9). The Lord’s spirit, knowledge and fear of the Lord, righteous judgment and equity for the suffering, an end to violence and wickedness—these pave the way for the peace the world craves, the peace that comes only from “the root of Jesse,” the “signal to the peoples” (verse 10).

Isaiah didn’t use the word “peace” in these verses. He didn’t have to. His description is so vivid, so accurate, so clear, there’s no mistaking his meaning. Shalom—wellbeing, wholeness, health, salvation—is impossible apart from God. But with God, in God’s final reign, it’s a sure thing. We can depend on it. And in the meantime, we can nurture it by allowing the spirit of God to inform our thoughts, infuse our words, and animate our actions.

Peace-loving God, make me an instrument of your peace. Amen.

Tuesday, December 9

ROMANS 15:4-6

Whatever was written in the past was written for our instruction so that we could have hope through endurance and through the encouragement of the scriptures. May the God of endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude toward each other, similar to Christ Jesus' attitude. That way you can glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ together with one voice.

Years ago, an acquaintance adopted a delightful older child from Russia. She was curious, smart, perceptive, and beautifully fluent in English. Upon seeing a Bible in her new home, she picked it up and said with great pride and confidence, "This! This is the story of God!"

She was right. The Bible is the story of God and God's redemptive plan for everyone. We may disagree about interpretations, hold to different doctrines, or prefer one translation over another. But we can all recognize that within its pages, the Bible holds stories of God's miraculous work throughout history to provide salvation to everyone. The Bible shows us how we can become a part of the covenant community God first established with the Israelites. In it, we find all we need to experience salvation and live faithfully in relationship with God and others.

Beyond the quiet walls of our hearts, this season can be noisy and confusing. But when we ground ourselves in the message of salvation we find in Scripture, we can find and then offer to the world the hope we all seek.

Delivering God, help me develop an attitude like Jesus and offer your message of hope. Amen.

Wednesday, December 10

ROMANS 15:7-13

So welcome each other, in the same way that Christ also welcomed you, for God's glory. I'm saying that Christ became a servant of those who are circumcised for the sake of God's truth, in order to confirm the promises given to the ancestors, and so that the Gentiles could glorify God for his mercy. As it is written,

Because of this I will confess you among the Gentiles,

and I will sing praises to your name.

And again, it says,

Rejoice, Gentiles, with his people.

And again,

Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles,

and all the people should sing his praises.

And again, Isaiah says,

There will be a root of Jesse,

who will also rise to rule the Gentiles.

The Gentiles will place their hope in him.

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in faith so that you overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

One of the warmest welcomes I have ever received came from an elderly woman living in a rugged, sparsely furnished home in a remote village in China. I was there with a group touring the country, visiting schools, churches, hospitals, and other institutions. But on this day, we were invited into the home of this woman. She spoke no English, and we spoke no Chinese, but our guides facilitated a conversation that forged a bond founded on our shared Christian faith. The things that could've separated us—ethnicity, language, culture, economics, education, life experiences, interests, priorities—didn't matter. The only thing

that mattered was that we were part of the same family, the family of God.

The “so” that begins Romans 15:7 completes the thought Paul began in Romans 14:1, where he wrote, “Welcome the person who is weak in faith—but not in order to argue about differences of opinion.” Many differences existed between the Jewish and Gentile Christians in Rome, differences that threatened their unity. None of these differences mattered, Paul said. Instead, he counseled, “Welcome each other, in the same way that Christ also welcomed you, for God’s glory” (15:7).

Although my visit with my Chinese Christian friend happened many years ago, I’ve never forgotten the joy on her face, the delight she expressed in welcoming us. So many things could’ve separated us, but we held in common the only thing that matters. She was full of “hope by the power of the Holy Spirit” (verse 13). As I learned more about the struggles she had overcome and those with which she lived each day, I realized that “the person who [was] weak in faith” (14:1) was not her.

Welcoming God, teach me to welcome others as Christ has welcomed me. Amen.

Thursday, December 11

MATTHEW 3:1-4

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the desert of Judea announcing, “Change your hearts and lives! Here comes the kingdom of heaven!” He was the one of whom Isaiah the prophet spoke when he said:

The voice of one shouting in the wilderness,
“Prepare the way for the Lord;
make his paths straight.”

John wore clothes made of camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist. He ate locusts and wild honey.

For a while when I was in elementary school, I had to wear corrective shoes. They were ugly and clunky, and worse, they were unlike anything any of my friends wore. I felt like the first and only thing people saw when they looked at me were my unattractive shoes. To make matters worse, they didn’t correct the problem. For good or ill, people often draw conclusions about us based on what we wear. If we want to stand out in a crowd, wearing unusual clothes will likely make that happen.

John the Baptist stood out not only because of his wardrobe—“clothes made of camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist”—but also because of his diet: “locusts and wild honey” (Matthew 3:4). Matthew’s clear description of John’s clothing and diet was intentional, tying him in unmistakable ways to the Hebrew prophet Elijah, who also wore “clothes made of hair with a leather belt around his waist” (2 Kings 1:8). John’s nutritional choices marked him as a wilderness-dweller and connected him with those who were poor and had to rely on the limited food sources available and affordable to them.

As it turns out, the oddly dressed John played a unique role in God’s plan for salvation. People ignored him and his message at their own peril. He was not someone with whom they

would've socialized. He would have stood out at their dinner parties, made the other guests uncomfortable, and probably have been ill at ease himself. He separated himself from others in clear and unusual ways. Like the Savior he anticipated who came as a helpless baby born to poor parents from an unknown village, John was not what most people were expecting. Perhaps some had been waiting so long they had stopped expecting at all.

Physical appearances rarely tell the whole story. The best news can come from the most unlikely sources. A wilderness-dwelling, locust-eating man God sent with the promise of deliverance. A tiny baby who was and is that deliverance.

Get ready, John said. Prepare yourselves. God is about to act.

Surprising God, help me see and hear you through the messengers you place in my life. And use me as a messenger of your deliverance. Amen.

Friday, December 12

MATTHEW 3:5-12

People from Jerusalem, throughout Judea, and all around the Jordan River came to him. As they confessed their sins, he baptized them in the Jordan River. Many Pharisees and Sadducees came to be baptized by John. He said to them, “You children of snakes! Who warned you to escape from the angry judgment that is coming soon? Produce fruit that shows you have changed your hearts and lives. And don’t even think about saying to yourselves, Abraham is our father. I tell you that God is able to raise up Abraham’s children from these stones. The ax is already at the root of the trees. Therefore, every tree that doesn’t produce good fruit will be chopped down and tossed into the fire. I baptize with water those of you who have changed your hearts and lives. The one who is coming after me is stronger than I am. I’m not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. The shovel he uses to sift the wheat from the husks is in his hands. He will clean out his threshing area and bring the wheat into his barn. But he will burn the husks with a fire that can’t be put out.”

When I moved into my home over twenty years ago, I provided very specific directions when people visited. It was in a newer development, and little else was around it at that time. Those who ended up in my subdivision either intended to be there or were lost. It was by no means the wilderness, but it was remote and not well traveled.

That’s the striking thing about those who went to see John. He was in the desert, the middle of nowhere. Those who went to see him, people from “Jerusalem, throughout Judea, and all around the Jordan River,” did so intentionally (Matthew 3:5). John’s response to them was immediate: they confessed their sins, and he baptized them. But his response to the Pharisees and Sadducees—two groups who would later regularly spar with Jesus—was quite different. He called them “children of snakes” (verse 7) and

warned them against relying on their ancestor Abraham to escape judgment. They wanted to be baptized but seemed to think that their religious pedigree allowed them to bypass the important step of repentance. John demanded proof that they had “changed [their] hearts and lives,” which would be evident by the “good fruit” they produced (verses 8, 10).

It’s one thing to say we are sorry for sins we have committed. It’s quite another to repent; to change our life’s direction; to think, speak and act in ways that lead us away from sin rather than toward it.

Forgiving God, help me show evidence of my changed heart and life. Amen.

Saturday, December 13

PSALM 72:1-7, 18-19

God, give your judgments to the king.

Give your righteousness to the king's son.

*Let him judge your people with righteousness
and your poor ones with justice.*

*Let the mountains bring peace to the people;
let the hills bring righteousness.*

*Let the king bring justice to people who are poor;
let him save the children of those who are needy,
but let him crush oppressors!*

*Let the king live as long as the sun,
as long as the moon,
generation to generation.*

*Let him fall like rain upon fresh-cut grass,
like showers that water the earth.*

Let the righteous flourish throughout their lives,...

*Bless the LORD God, the God of Israel—
the only one who does wondrous things!*

*Bless God's glorious name forever;
let his glory fill all the earth!
Amen and Amen!*

Years ago, when I worked with youth at church, I condensed a Bible study take-away for them as being as simple as ABC: attitudes affect actions; beliefs influence behavior; choices have consequences. Those truths come to mind as I read Psalm 72. Righteousness and justice bring peace. It's that simple. The reverse is also true. When righteousness and justice are absent, so is peace.

Verse 1 tells us that this psalm was originally a prayer for Israel's king. It was probably used at the coronation of many kings in Jerusalem and would therefore have been familiar to God's people, who believed their kings to be divinely chosen agents of God. Part of a king's responsibility was to make sure the people stayed faithful to the covenant God had made with them and lived according to God's laws. Kings were also expected to rule with

God's righteousness and justice. The repetition of righteousness and justice in these verses is intentional, reinforcing how essential these are to God's will. So is the repetition of references to the poor, the needy, and those who were oppressed, those whom God holds especially close. God wills justice and righteousness for everyone, including the powerless and voiceless. Unless and until that is the case, things are not the way God intends.

The kings of Israel and Judah fell far short of the qualities we find in Psalm 72. But Jesus possesses them all, and more. He is the King of kings; the Prince of Peace; the one who comes especially close to the poor, needy, oppressed, powerless, and voiceless; the one who perfectly accomplished God's will. We follow him faithfully when we hold ourselves and those in leadership accountable and work to extend righteousness and justice to everyone, creating an environment where all can live in peace.

Just and righteous God, give me the courage to speak and act on behalf of the powerless and voiceless, paving the way for peace. Amen.

THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Sunday, December 14

ISAIAH 35:1-4

*The desert and the dry land will be glad;
the wilderness will rejoice and blossom like the
crocus.*

*They will burst into bloom,
and rejoice with joy and singing.
They will receive the glory of Lebanon,
the splendor of Carmel and Sharon.*

*They will see the LORD's glory,
the splendor of our God.*

*Strengthen the weak hands,
and support the unsteady knees.*

*Say to those who are panicking:
"Be strong! Don't fear!
Here's your God,
coming with vengeance;
with divine retribution
God will come to save you."*

Children's shoes, clothes, and toys, spread carefully on a sheet in my neighbor's front yard to dry in the sun, declared a victory none of us could see yet wanted to believe. It was the most poignant statement of resilience, hope, and faith I've ever seen, and it came following an unimaginable disaster.

Unprecedented rainfall and subsequent flooding ravaged my Nashville neighborhood on May 1 and 2, 2010. I watched in disbelief as a garage door, ripped from someone's home, rushed down the raging river my street had become. Fearful parents carried children on their shoulders in chest-high water toward rescue boats that would take them to higher ground. Those who left their homes didn't know when they could return or what they would find when they did.

Days passed, and the water began to recede, leaving noticeable watermarks as high as rooftops

in some cases. Many houses were destroyed and later razed, save the outer brick walls. Recovery would take months, even years. Eventually the sun came out, and the ground, while not dry, no longer held standing water. The neighborhood soon buzzed with the sights and sounds of repairs—buckets, towels, mops, brooms, saws, hammers. People worked until they could no longer stand. They were not just physically weary; they were soul-tired, too. And that's when my neighbor proclaimed her faith with her front-yard display. Things were bad, but they would get better. And they did. Her children again played with their toys and rode their bicycles and thrived despite what their family and so many others had experienced.

God's people had languished in exile for decades when Isaiah proclaimed the message of hope, deliverance, and salvation we read in Isaiah 35. They were weak and weary in body, mind, and spirit. Had God forgotten them? Would they ever see their homes again?

"Be strong! Don't fear!" Isaiah told them. "God will come to save you" (Isaiah 35:4). Hold onto this promise and share it with those whose faith is faltering, he said.

Sometimes we don't have to say anything. Our simple actions, demonstrations of faith in God's promise of salvation, can instill hope in others.

Rescuing God, embolden my faith so that others find hope in your promises. Amen.

Monday, December 15

ISAIAH 35:5-10

*Then the eyes of the blind will be opened,
and the ears of the deaf will be cleared.
Then the lame will leap like the deer,
and the tongue of the speechless will sing.
Waters will spring up in the desert,
and streams in the wilderness.
The burning sand will become a pool,
and the thirsty ground, fountains of water.
The jackals' habitat, a pasture;
grass will become reeds and rushes.
A highway will be there.
It will be called The Holy Way.
The unclean won't travel on it,
but it will be for those walking on that way.
Even fools won't get lost on it;
no lion will be there,
and no predator will go up on it.
None of these will be there;
only the redeemed will walk on it.
The LORD's ransomed ones will return and enter Zion
with singing,
with everlasting joy upon their heads.
Happiness and joy will overwhelm them;
grief and groaning will flee away.*

People on social media occasionally post videos of babies as they are fitted for the first time with glasses or hearing aids. After some initial squirming and resistance, their faces light up and broad smiles appear as they recognize their parents' faces or voices. That moment in time marks the fulfillment of their parents' long-held hopes and dreams. Life for those children will never be the same, thanks to the intervention, skill, and treatment of parents and medical professionals. The children don't know they need help, but when they get it, they respond with unrestrained delight.

The case was different for God's people in exile. They knew they needed help, and they knew they could not help themselves. The drastic reversals of Isaiah 35:5-10 are possible because of God's salvation, promised in verse 4. God will deliver you, the prophet promised, and your joy will be overwhelming and everlasting. He painted a picture of contrasts we find in other places in his prophecy: limitations replaced with abilities; dry ground, deserts, and wilderness transformed by healing waters and filled with vegetation; danger supplanted by safety; grief and groaning borne away by happiness and joy. God's people, the "redeemed" and "ransomed ones," will return to Zion via "The Holy Way," reserved just for them (verses 8-10).

Sometimes we're like babies who don't know they can see or hear more clearly until technology intervenes and shows them they can. Other times we're like the ancient Israelites, trapped in circumstances from which we see no way out. In any case, we worship and serve a God who can deliver us, turning groans into songs and grief into joy.

Redeeming God, lead me on The Holy Way and accept my songs of praise. Amen.

Tuesday, December 16

JAMES 5:7-8

Therefore, brothers and sisters, you must be patient as you wait for the coming of the Lord. Consider the farmer who waits patiently for the coming of rain in the fall and spring, looking forward to the precious fruit of the earth. You also must wait patiently, strengthening your resolve, because the coming of the Lord is near.

Well into her senior years, my grandmother kept a vegetable garden. She prepared the soil, planted the seeds, watered the plants, pulled weeds, and faithfully waited. There were no shortcuts, no workarounds. She did her back-breaking job using only hand tools and then waited as the seeds, soil, water, and sun did theirs. Her patient waiting was rewarded with a beautiful harvest.

Once she planted those seeds, she could've walked away. But she didn't. She tended to the plants daily until harvest time, trusting the God whose hand guided the entire process. She waited with patience, but also with decisive actions. She couldn't do God's job, but she could participate in the process by doing hers.

The Christians who first received the letter from James anticipated Jesus's return at any moment. His coming is near, James said, but patient waiting strengthens resolve and builds confidence in his return. As you wait, trust God, who controls the process and the outcome.

Now, well into this season of Advent, we too wait with patience, confident that the Christ who came as a baby has come to live within us and will come again in final victory.

Promise-keeping God, help me wait with purpose and patience. Amen.

Wednesday, December 17

JAMES 5:9-10

Don't complain about each other, brothers and sisters, so that you won't be judged. Look! The judge is standing at the door!

Brothers and sisters, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord as an example of patient resolve and steadfastness.

With Christmas Eve a week away, anticipation builds. Unfortunately, so does frantic activity. Traffic snarls; store checkout lines seem endless; clerks are harried; shoppers are stressed. Patience seems to be in short supply.

Patience is immensely important during these days. When the Bible speaks of patience, however, it is more than the ability to wait without becoming annoyed. Rather, it involves living with complete confidence that no matter how difficult things are, God will deliver on God's promises. Interestingly, when we live from this posture, our patience grows and extends to other areas of our lives, including work, family, friendships.

As James closed his epistle, he called out the wealthy who were mistreating day laborers (James 5:1-6). He encouraged those Christians who were being oppressed by the wealthy to be patient as they waited for the return of the Lord, reminding them of the endurance and steadfastness of the prophets.

The call of our culture in these days leading up to Christmas is to hurry, to race toward the finish line. The call of Advent is to slow down, stop, and wait. Saying yes to this countercultural call takes "patient resolve and steadfastness" (verse 10). It's unlikely we will be handed opportunities to slow down and wait during Advent, but we can create them for ourselves.

Patient God, help me slow down, stop, and wait, confident in your coming. Amen.

Thursday, December 18

MATTHEW 11:2-6

Now when John heard in prison about the things the Christ was doing, he sent word by his disciples to Jesus, asking, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?"

Jesus responded, "Go, report to John what you hear and see. Those who were blind are able to see. Those who were crippled are walking. People with skin diseases are cleansed. Those who were deaf now hear. Those who were dead are raised up. The poor have good news proclaimed to them. Happy are those who don't stumble and fall because of me."

A surefire way to be disappointed during the holidays is to have unrealistic, unclear, or unfounded expectations. Social media posts, television commercials, and Christmas cards and letters paint pictures of happy families enjoying quality time. We see them decorating trees, baking cookies, drinking hot chocolate by warm fireplaces, exchanging gifts, playing in the snow. It's easy to assume that this is how Christmas looks for everyone, and when ours don't look like this, we can become discouraged, disappointed, and full of doubt. Have we done something wrong?

The fact is, even the closest families disagree sometimes; the cat climbs the Christmas tree and knocks it down; the cookies burn; people get sick, causing plans to change. Things don't always turn out like we expect them to. But perhaps that is because our expectations are unreasonable.

The uncertain John we meet in Matthew 11 is very different from the rugged, blustering, but confident man we find in Matthew 3 who announced the coming of the Messiah. This later John expressed doubts and questions about Jesus's messiahship. Had he been wrong about Jesus? Did he misunderstand? And now he was imprisoned, facing death. He had to know. Had all his effort

been misdirected? Was Jesus “the one who is to come, or should we look for another?” (Matthew 11:3).

Perhaps John’s question was born from unclear expectations. If it were, he was no different from so many others who expected a military ruler who would conquer the Romans and restore Israel to its former glory. Instead, Jesus showed great compassion for individuals, healing them of diseases, restoring their mobility, hearing, and sight, even raising some from death. “The poor,” Jesus said, “have good news proclaimed to them” (verse 5). Jesus was not what people expected.

Let there be no misunderstanding, Jesus said. My actions reveal who I am. Don’t allow your misconceptions about who the Messiah should be prevent you from recognizing him and welcoming him into your life.

What do you expect at Christmas?

Amazing God, align my expectations with your promises, and prepare me to welcome the Messiah into my life. Amen.

Friday, December 19

MATTHEW 11:7-11

When John's disciples had gone, Jesus spoke to the crowds about John: "What did you go out to the wilderness to see? A stalk blowing in the wind? What did you go out to see? A man dressed up in refined clothes? Look, those who wear refined clothes are in royal palaces. What did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. He is the one of whom it is written: Look, I'm sending my messenger before you, who will prepare your way before you.

"I assure you that no one who has ever been born is greater than John the Baptist. Yet whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he."

Christmas trees in windows, wreaths on doors, lights strung along rooflines and through tree branches, and inflatable figures on lawns suggest that within the walls of those homes are happy families. Sadly, that is not always the case. Outward appearance does not reveal inner turmoil, dysfunction, loneliness, or grief, and neither can it make these disappear.

Appearances rarely tell the whole story. That was certainly the case with John the Baptist. The rugged, wilderness-dwelling man who dressed in clothes made from animal skins and ate locusts and wild honey looked exactly like the prophet he was. Steadfast, strong, and confident, he was no "stalk blowing in the wind" (Matthew 11:7). Those who flocked to him in the wilderness should not have expected to see someone dressed in "refined clothes" (verse 8). Though the wilderness was not a desirable destination, people were clearly drawn to him and went out of the way to find him. John not only looked and acted the part of a prophet, he also fulfilled prophecy. Jesus said he was "the one of whom it [was] written: Look, I'm sending my messenger before you, who will prepare your way before you" (verse 10; see Malachi 3:1; 4:5).

But John was even more. He was a great person, Jesus declared, greater than anyone who had ever been born. His greatness came because he fulfilled his unique role in history. That was true for John, and it can be true for everyone else as well. John didn't get to experience the totality of Jesus's life, death, and resurrection and what they all mean. We do. Social standing, wealth, education, success, or any of the other qualities by which the world defines greatness mean nothing in God's kingdom. Even the very least in God's kingdom, Jesus said, are greater than John because they have repented, experienced salvation through Jesus, and claimed their identity in relationship with him.

That's good news for you and me. It's good news for the world.

Guiding God, help me take my unique place in your plan. Amen.

Saturday, December 20

PSALM 146:4-9

*Their breath leaves them,
then they go back to the ground.
On that very same day, their plans die too.*

*The person whose help is the God of Jacob—
the person whose hope rests on the LORD
their God—
is truly happy!*

*God: the maker of heaven and earth,
the sea, and all that is in them,*

*God: who is faithful forever,
who gives justice to people who are oppressed,
who gives bread to people who are starving!*

The LORD: who frees prisoners.

The LORD: who makes the blind see.

*The LORD: who straightens up those who are
bent low.*

The LORD: who loves the righteous.

*The LORD: who protects immigrants,
who helps orphans and widows,
but who makes the way of the wicked twist
and turn!*

An old sermon illustration describes how a man placed his young son on top of the porch railing of their house, stood below it, and encouraged the boy to jump. “I’ll catch you!” the man promised. So, the boy jumped. And he fell not into his father’s arms, but to the ground.

“You promised to catch me!” the little boy cried. “Why did you let me fall?”

“I did this to teach you an important lesson,” the man replied. “Never trust anyone.”

What a horrible thing to do to a child! Of course, it’s likely just a concocted story, but it does caution us to consider where we place our trust.

The writer of Psalm 146—maybe David, a prophet like Haggai or Zechariah, or someone else—said essentially the same thing: “Don’t trust leaders; don’t trust any human beings—

there's no saving help with them!" (Psalm 146:3). Interestingly, if the writer was David, he was a king, yet he advised against trusting someone in his own position. The other possible writers were leaders, too, and as prophets, they wanted people to believe them, to trust them. Don't do it, the psalmist said, but with a caveat: You can always trust God. God alone can and will help you, save you, and deliver you. God will give you what you need: justice, sustenance, freedom, healing, protection. "The person whose help is the God of Jacob—the person whose hope rests on the LORD their God—is truly happy!" (verse 5). The word translated "happy" here is more commonly translated "blessed." But still—oppressed, hungry, imprisoned, blind, disabled—blessed? Happy?

Yes, the psalmist said, not because bad things do not happen to us, because they can, and they will. Blessed, the psalmist said, because when these things happen, God is with us. We are not alone. The worst things that can happen to us are no match for God.

Ever-present, always-faithful God, help me trust in you alone. Amen.

FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Sunday, December 21

ISAIAH 7:10-16

Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz: “Ask a sign from the LORD your God. Make it as deep as the grave or as high as heaven.”

But Ahaz said, “I won’t ask; I won’t test the LORD.”

Then Isaiah said, “Listen, house of David! Isn’t it enough for you to be tiresome for people that you are also tiresome before my God? Therefore, the Lord will give you a sign. The young woman is pregnant and is about to give birth to a son, and she will name him Immanuel. He will eat butter and honey, and learn to reject evil and choose good. Before the boy learns to reject evil and choose good, the land of the two kings you dread will be abandoned.”

As a child, I could imagine all sorts of things, not all of them helpful. I was especially good at thinking of worrisome things that could happen. I would often ask my mother, “But what if...?” and fill in the blank with whatever less-than-desirable thing I had thought of. This tendency grew to the point that my mother finally gave it a name: what-iffing. “That [whatever it was] is not likely to happen,” she would say. “You are what-iffing again.” Then she would redirect my thoughts to other possible, more positive outcomes, reminding me of this verse: “Whenever I’m afraid, I put my trust in you” (Psalm 56:3).

Still, I sometimes would ask, “How do you know? How can you be so sure?”

King Ahaz was afraid of what might happen, and with good reason. Israel and Syria had threatened to combine forces and invade his kingdom of Judah. Fresh off his commissioning as a prophet, Isaiah was sent to tell King Ahaz not to be afraid. God even told Ahaz to ask for a sign to help alleviate his fears, but Ahaz refused, which

Isaiah interpreted as lack of trust. God will give you a sign anyway, Isaiah told him, in the form of a young woman, then pregnant, who would give birth to a son and name him Immanuel, meaning “God is with us.” The child’s name reflected her confidence in God’s presence in the face of the looming threat.

In narrating the events of Jesus’s birth, Matthew’s Gospel refers to Isaiah 7:14, leading many Christians to understand it as a prophecy of the coming Messiah but sometimes overlooking its significance for Ahaz. Debates about whether Isaiah’s words were about a young woman giving birth to a son at the time of Ahaz or only about Mary giving birth to Jesus miss the point. Isaiah’s prophecy may have been both immediate and future-oriented.

The point is that God was with Ahaz; God was with God’s people. And God is with us.

Immanuel, I put my trust in you. Amen.

Monday, December 22

ROMANS 1:1-7

From Paul, a slave of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for God's good news. God promised this good news about his Son ahead of time through his prophets in the holy scriptures. His Son was descended from David. He was publicly identified as God's Son with power through his resurrection from the dead, which was based on the Spirit of holiness. This Son is Jesus Christ our Lord. Through him we have received God's grace and our appointment to be apostles. This was to bring all Gentiles to faithful obedience for his name's sake. You who are called by Jesus Christ are also included among these Gentiles.

To those in Rome who are dearly loved by God and called to be God's people.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

My faithful but old, bulky treadmill recently refused to start, and the repair would have cost more than a new one. The space-saving replacement I ordered came fully assembled (almost). Eager to use it, I unpacked it; located the instructions, a few screws, and a screwdriver; and got to work. Thankfully, everything was included, just as the manufacturer promised. And had the instructions been difficult to understand, I could have watched an online video. Soon it was in place. I had everything I needed. It was all right there in the box. But I still had to unpack it, attach a couple of parts, plug it in, turn it on, and start walking.

In the opening verses of Paul's letter to the Romans, it's all there—the whole story, everything we need to know about God's plan of salvation, summarized in a few powerful verses. God's promised good news, foretold by the prophets, recorded in Scripture. God's good news, God's Son, from the line of David. God's good

news, resurrected from the dead by the power of the Holy Spirit. God's good news, Jesus Christ our Lord. Through him, we have everything we need: God's love, grace, and salvation; identity as God's people; and "peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (Romans 1:7).

It was good news for Jews who had long anticipated the promised Messiah. And that good news extended beyond the Jews to include "all Gentiles," all "who are called by Jesus Christ," all "who are dearly loved by God and called to be God's people" (verses 5–7).

It was good news then, and it is good news now for us, for everyone. God has given the world this matchless gift. We have the whole story. We have everything we need. All we need to do is receive the gift.

Gift-giving God, we thank you for the good news we celebrate. Amen.

Tuesday, December 23

MATTHEW 1:18-25

This is how the birth of Jesus Christ took place. When Mary his mother was engaged to Joseph, before they were married, she became pregnant by the Holy Spirit. Joseph her husband was a righteous man. Because he didn't want to humiliate her, he decided to call off their engagement quietly. As he was thinking about this, an angel from the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, don't be afraid to take Mary as your wife, because the child she carries was conceived by the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you will call him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." Now all of this took place so that what the Lord had spoken through the prophet would be fulfilled:

Look! A virgin will become pregnant and give birth to a son,

And they will call him, Emmanuel.

(Emmanuel means "God with us.")

When Joseph woke up, he did just as an angel from God commanded and took Mary as his wife. But he didn't have sexual relations with her until she gave birth to a son. Joseph called him Jesus.

With just one more step, my foot would've landed directly onto a coiled, venomous water moccasin, its open mouth displaying its cottony color. It was the most terrifying experience I've ever had.

My dad had purchased a small airplane and kept it in an airport hangar next to a lake. Eager for my mother and me to see it, he drove us to the airport, and we crossed a field to reach the hangar. As we walked side by side, my mother suddenly flung her arm across my body, preventing me from taking another step. We were speechless, but she somehow got my dad's attention. Using a large tree branch, he tossed the snake well away from us.

The biblical admonition “Don’t be afraid” or “Fear not” didn’t enter my mind. I was petrified.

Fear, doubt, horror, confusion—these are all natural emotions. God created humans to feel these and so many more. Scripture affirms that Jesus, fully human and fully divine, also experienced emotions, including compassion, sadness, and anger.

The “angel from the Lord” (Matthew 1:20) who appeared to Joseph didn’t simply tell him not to be afraid. He told Joseph not to be afraid to act, to do the noble and honorable thing, the thing that would lead to the fulfillment of Scripture. Joseph was able to do what the angel encouraged because he trusted God, Emmanuel, “God with us” (verse 23).

Don’t be afraid to do the righteous thing, the angel told Joseph. Don’t be afraid to take the next right step, God tells us, because Emmanuel, God, is with us.

Abiding God, thank you for your presence. Amen.

CHRISTMAS EVE

Wednesday, December 24

ISAIAH 9:2-7

The people walking in darkness have seen a great light.

On those living in a pitch-dark land, light has dawned.

*You have made the nation great;
you have increased its joy.*

*They rejoiced before you as with joy at the harvest,
as those who divide plunder rejoice.*

*As on the day of Midian, you've shattered the yoke
that burdened them,*

*the staff on their shoulders,
and the rod of their oppressor.*

*Because every boot of the thundering warriors,
and every garment rolled in blood
will be burned, fuel for the fire.*

*A child is born to us, a son is given to us,
and authority will be on his shoulders.*

He will be named

*Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Eternal Father, Prince of Peace.*

*There will be vast authority and endless peace
for David's throne and for his kingdom,
establishing and sustaining it
with justice and righteousness
now and forever.*

The zeal of the LORD of heavenly forces will do this.

One of my friends is an iconographer and creates beautiful images of biblical events, saints, and other people, including Mary and Jesus. The end results are mesmerizing—the figures and scenes seeming to come to life on the canvas, but the process is long and tedious. Iconographers spend hours focused a board or canvas on which they have transferred a line drawing. To this they add layer upon layer of egg tempera, causing the figure or scene to change colors and textures many times. When an icon is completed, it seems

illuminated by a light from within. But before that can happen, the figure must become very dark, the result of numerous layers of pigment, highlights, and floats. For the light to come through, the darkness must first be present.

That's the thing about light. We appreciate it most when darkness has surrounded us. The darker the darkness, the greater the brightness of the light.

The prophet Isaiah, who had earlier employed imagery of darkness and “the anguish and doom of banishment” (Isaiah 8:22), moved in chapter 9 to a hopeful, joyful song that promised light in place of darkness and freedom in place of oppression and burdens. Peace, justice, and righteousness will permeate the lives of those who had walked “in a pitch-dark land” (Isaiah 9:2), thanks to a child who would become king. “He will be named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace” (verse 6), names Christians later came to apply to Jesus.

In churches around the world tonight, candlelight, faint at first, will gradually overcome darkness until a warm glow fully illuminates worship spaces. From there, worshippers carry not only their lighted candles into the night but also the light of hope, peace, joy, and love of Christ from within.

Light of the World, we worship you. Amen.

CHRISTMAS DAY

Thursday, December 25

LUKE 2:1-14

In those days Caesar Augustus declared that everyone throughout the empire should be enrolled in the tax lists. This first enrollment occurred when Quirinius governed Syria. Everyone went to their own cities to be enrolled. Since Joseph belonged to David's house and family line, he went up from the city of Nazareth in Galilee to David's city, called Bethlehem, in Judea. He went to be enrolled together with Mary, who was promised to him in marriage and who was pregnant. While they were there, the time came for Mary to have her baby. She gave birth to her firstborn child, a son, wrapped him snugly, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the guestroom.

Nearby shepherds were living in the fields, guarding their sheep at night. The Lord's angel stood before them, the Lord's glory shone around them, and they were terrified.

The angel said, "Don't be afraid! Look! I bring good news to you—wonderful, joyous news for all people. Your savior is born today in David's city. He is Christ the Lord. This is a sign for you: you will find a newborn baby wrapped snugly and lying in a manger." Suddenly a great assembly of the heavenly forces was with the angel praising God. They said, "Glory to God in heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors."

Luke's familiar account of Jesus's birth needs little verbal commentary. But how we live our lives in response to this news speaks volumes.

Our Savior is born! That changes everything.

Loving God, may my life declare the good news of Jesus. Amen.