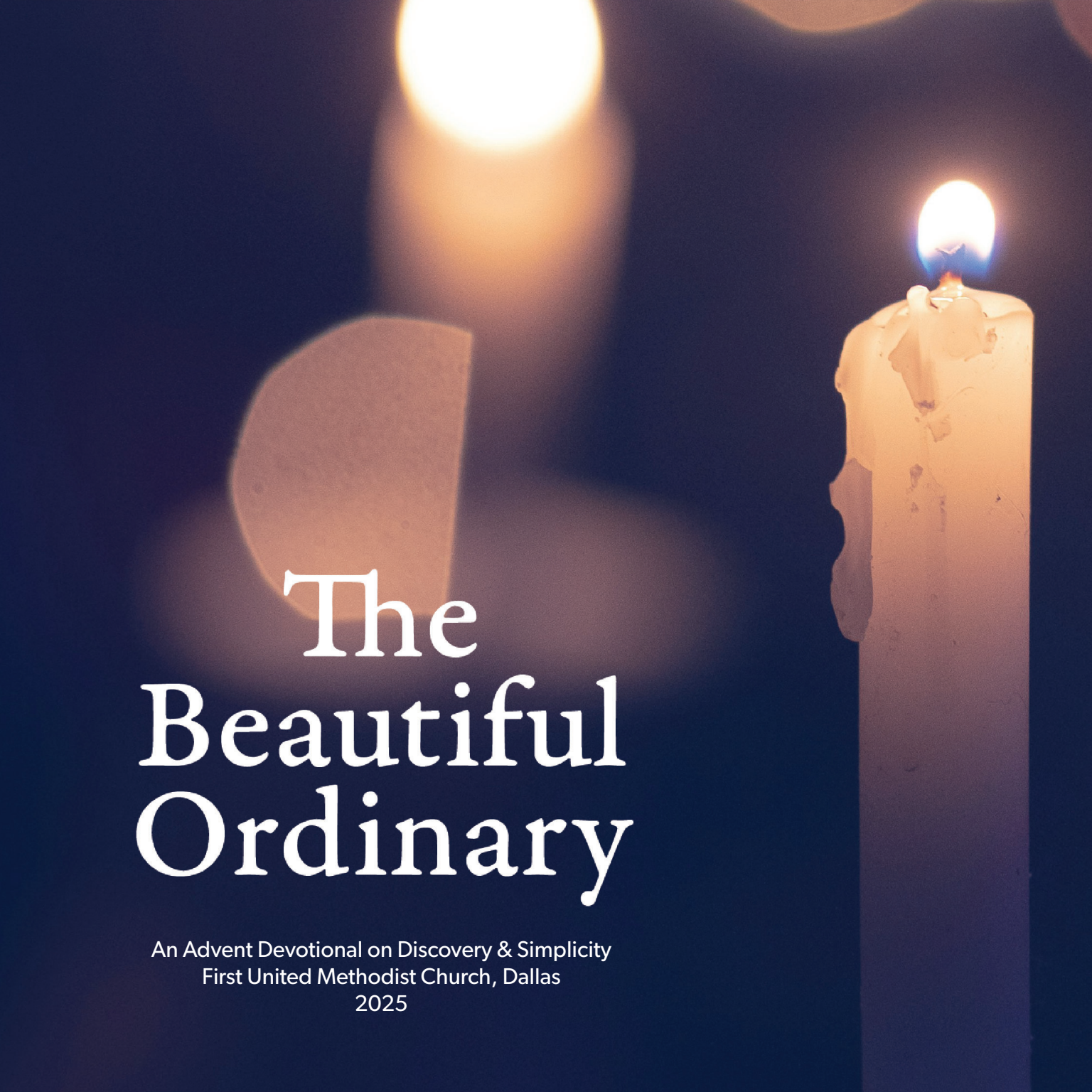




The Beautiful Ordinary

An Advent Devotional on Discovery & Simplicity
First United Methodist Church, Dallas
2025

The Beautiful Ordinary: An Advent Devotional

Friends,

Advent has a way of arriving right in the middle of everything. The season does not wait for our calendars to slow down or our hearts to be perfectly still. It comes into the rush and the noise and the constant pressure to keep moving. And somehow, in the middle of all of that, God chooses to show up.

That is the heart of this devotional. It is a gift from the people of our church to one another. Every reading, every prayer, every reflection comes from someone in our community. Laity and clergy together. People who live full and complicated lives. People who know joy and heartbreak. People who are learning, just like you, how to see God at work in the ordinary moments of each day.

The theme guiding us this year is *The Beautiful Ordinary*. Advent is often portrayed as grand or cinematic, yet the story we are preparing to celebrate is deeply simple. A quiet birth. A tired couple far from home. A barn that smells like animals. Shepherds who were mostly ignored. It is a story rooted in real life and real humanity, overflowing with the small and sacred details that reveal God's love.

My hope is that this devotional helps you stop for a moment and breathe. That it invites you to rest, to pay attention, to let the Spirit open your eyes to the beauty already around you. Not perfect beauty. Ordinary beauty. The kind that shows up in laughter at the dinner table or a small act of kindness or a moment of silence that feels like a gift.

As you move through these days, may this guide become a companion. May it help you notice the way God keeps choosing what is small, quiet, and easily missed. And may you find yourself surprised by grace in the places you least expected.

Blessings to you this Advent. I am grateful to share this season with you.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Mitchell Boone". The signature is stylized with a large, prominent "B" and a cursive "Boone" at the end.

Rev. Mitchell Boone
Senior Minister

Week One – Hope Begins Small

READ: Isaiah 11:1–10

CONSIDER:

Isaiah's words open Advent with an image both tender and resilient: "A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots." It's such a strange place to find hope, not in the flowering tree but in what looks like a dead stump. For the people of Israel, the stump was a symbol of what had been lost. The monarchy that once promised stability had fallen into corruption and failure. Their nation, threatened by the Assyrians, had been cut down. The landscape of their faith looked bleak, stumps where mighty trees once stood. And yet, Isaiah insists that life is not over. Something green is stirring beneath the surface. The promise of God is not gone. It's simply hidden, waiting to be born.

Isaiah 11 was written during a time when despair came easily. The prophet spoke to a people who had grown tired of waiting for justice and weary of trusting in leaders who disappointed them. Into that exhaustion, Isaiah paints a picture of a different kind of ruler, one who will come from the line of Jesse, the father of David, but who will not resemble the kings they had known. This new leader will not rule with might or manipulation. He will be guided by the Spirit of the Lord, a Spirit of wisdom, understanding, counsel, and fear of the Lord. His power will not be measured in military strength but in righteousness and

compassion. He will judge with fairness, defend the poor, and bring peace so complete that even the natural world will be healed. Wolves and lambs will rest together. Children will play without fear. The whole creation will be reconciled.

What Isaiah describes is not a return to the old order but the birth of something entirely new. A new creation growing out of what appeared to be lifeless. That is the heart of Advent hope. It does not depend on the old systems being restored, but on God doing something fresh and unexpected. Hope begins small, and it begins again.

For Christians, we read Isaiah's vision with an awareness of its fulfillment in Christ. Jesus becomes that tender shoot from Jesse's line, the new life emerging from Israel's broken story. Yet the truth Isaiah tells is not only predictive. It is descriptive of how God always works. God's hope rarely arrives in power or spectacle. It comes as a whisper, a seed, a newborn cry in the night. It comes through the slow work of grace that changes hearts and communities one act of mercy at a time.

In the Wesleyan tradition, we speak of prevenient grace, that quiet grace of God that goes before us, awakening life where we thought none was left. Prevenient grace is the green shoot pushing through the hard soil, the stirring of the Spirit that nudges us toward faith before we even realize what is happening. It reminds us that God's hope is never

absent, even when unseen. As the novelist George Eliot wrote, God's grace is "ever at work in the soul, though the soul be ignorant of it." In that sense, the stump of Jesse is not just ancient history. It's the story of us. Every place in our lives that feels cut down, exhausted, or fruitless may actually hold the roots of new creation.

Think of how often God's renewal begins this way — quietly, in small and ordinary moments. A church starts a new ministry not with a large grant but because one member notices a need and decides to act. (Ask a longtime member of First UMC Dallas about the early days of the feeding program that would become Crossroads Community Services!) A friendship begins to heal after years of silence because one person makes the first phone call or sends a text to thaw the ice. A community torn apart by division begins to mend when someone chooses to listen instead of shout. These are small things, but they carry the weight of the kingdom. They are mustard seeds that grow into something larger than we could ever plan.

Isaiah's vision widens from the stump to the whole world, to a peace that seems almost impossible. Wolves and lambs, leopards and goats, children and serpents all at rest together. It is a breathtaking picture of creation reconciled. Of course, Isaiah's poetry is not naïve about the realities of the world. He knows what wolves and lambs are. But he also knows the nature of God, and he dares to imagine a world shaped by that nature, a world where violence is replaced by trust and fear by belonging.

John Wesley believed that this vision was not only about a distant heaven but also about the transformation of the heart and community here and now. The peaceable kingdom begins wherever love reigns, wherever we refuse to let hate have the last word. When a family forgives. When a church opens its doors wider. When compassion outweighs fear. Every small act of hope is a glimpse of that future Isaiah saw.

We see this pattern again and again throughout Scripture. In Jeremiah 33, another prophet speaks of a branch that will spring forth in righteousness. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus compares the kingdom of God to a mustard seed, the smallest of all seeds that grows into a tree where birds make their nests. Hope begins small. It is often unnoticed until it takes root. Even Paul, writing to the Romans, reminds us that "suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us" (Romans 5:3-5). Hope grows from struggle, not in spite of it.

Perhaps that's why Advent begins not with joy or peace but with hope — because hope is what enables all the others to flourish. Hope is what allows us to keep watching for light when the night feels long. It's the courage to believe that God is still working, even when the evidence seems to suggest otherwise. It's what lets us keep praying for peace, keep laboring for justice, keep choosing love in a world that often rewards cynicism instead.

In our own lives, we can name the stumps. A loved

one's illness that feels unending. A loss that rocks and reshapes our world. A relationship that seems beyond repair. A sense that the future is uncertain. These are real places of ache and exhaustion.

And yet Isaiah insists that even here, God is not done. There is life beneath the bark, sap running through old roots, grace waiting to sprout. The hope of Advent is not that everything is fine. It's that God is present and working even when everything is not.

There's an old story about a gardener who walks through her winter yard, pruning her roses down to almost nothing. To the untrained eye, it looks like destruction. But she knows that cutting them back is an act of trust in what's still alive. She believes in roots she cannot see. Advent faith is like that, believing in what is hidden, tending to what looks dormant, trusting that spring will come again.

So as we begin this season of waiting, perhaps we might look around and ask: where is new life quietly pushing through? It might be in a person you've written off, or a part of yourself you thought was gone. It might be in the church, learning again what it means to hope. It might even be in the wider world, in every small act of mercy, in every gesture of justice, in every simple "yes" to goodness.

When we light the candle of hope this week, we remember that light itself begins small, just one flame in the dark. But a single flame can light another, and then another, until the whole room

glows. Hope multiplies when it is shared. It does not eliminate the darkness, but it changes what the darkness can do.

And so Isaiah's vision becomes both promise and invitation. God's new world begins in hidden places — in hearts willing to trust, in hands willing to plant, in communities willing to believe that the story isn't over yet. The same Spirit that rested on the shoot from Jesse still moves among us, stirring life out of what we thought was finished.

As we go into this first week of Advent, may we pay attention to the small things: a kind word, a moment of quiet prayer, the courage to keep showing up. These are the seeds of hope planted in ordinary soil. And one day, as Isaiah promises, the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

The world does not change in an instant but it does change when people of faith begin to notice where the shoots are breaking through. God's story has always begun that way - in gardens and deserts, in stables and hearts, wherever someone dares to believe that even now, life can grow again.

So we begin here, at the stump, looking for green.

SHARE:

- Share your name and one small thing in your life that has recently given you hope.
- When have you seen growth or renewal that began almost imperceptibly?

DISCUSS:

What images or emotions stand out to you in Isaiah 11:1–10?

What does this passage teach us about how God works in times of desolation or decline?

How might this “slow hope” shape the way we approach our personal challenges or our church’s future?

Where do you see signs of God’s quiet renewal today?

How can this group support you and pray for you this week?

TRY THIS:

Each day this week, pause to name one small sign of hope—a green shoot in the stump of your own life.

CLOSING PRAYER

(or pray in your own words):

God of small beginnings, you plant hope like a seed in the soil of our ordinary days. When the world feels cut back or barren, help us to notice where new life is quietly breaking through. Teach us to trust the slow work of your Spirit—the conversations that heal, the kindness that restores, the faith that dares to believe in what is not yet seen. As we go into this week, make us people who nurture hope in our homes, our work, and our city. May every small act of patience and courage bear witness to your coming kingdom. In the name of Christ, our hope, we pray. Amen.

Sunday, November 30

Isaiah 11:1-10

- 1 A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse,
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.
- 2 The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him,
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the spirit of counsel and might,
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.
- 3 His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord.
He shall not judge by what his eyes see
or decide by what his ears hear,
- 4 but with righteousness he shall judge for the poor
and decide with equity for the oppressed of the earth;
he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,
and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.
- 5 Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist
and faithfulness the belt around his loins.
- 6 The wolf shall live with the lamb;
the leopard shall lie down with the kid;
the calf and the lion will feed together,
and a little child shall lead them.
- 7 The cow and the bear shall graze;
their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.
- 8 The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's
den.
- 9 They will not hurt or destroy
on all my holy mountain,
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord
as the waters cover the sea.
- Return of the Remnant of Israel and Judah
- 10 On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the
peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling
shall be glorious.

Hope rarely starts with fireworks. It begins, as Isaiah says, like a shoot from the stump of Jesse, a fragile green sprig pushing through what looks like lifeless wood. The people of Israel had seen their line of kings cut down, their nation scattered, and their faith stretched thin. Yet Isaiah dares to imagine something new growing from what was left, a tender sign that God is not finished.

That's what hope is: not denial of what's broken, but the quiet conviction that God is still at work beneath the surface. Hope is slow. It takes root in waiting, in prayer, in acts of courage that seem too small to matter. It is the teacher who keeps believing in her students, the neighbor who checks in on someone who's lonely, the person in recovery who refuses to stop believing that healing is possible.

In Advent, we remember that the Savior of the world began as a baby - helpless, small, dependent. God's redemption often begins that way too, in small gestures, in seeds of mercy, in faith that sprouts quietly through the cracks.

So this week, pay attention to the small green shoots. In the ordinary, the overlooked, the barely beginning. Hope is already growing.

Rev. Monica Frazier
Associate Minister of Adult Ministries & Care

Monday, December 1

Psalm 130:5-8

I wait for the Lord; my soul waits,
and in his word I hope;
6 my soul waits for the Lord
more than those who watch for the morning,
more than those who watch for the morning.
7 O Israel, hope in the Lord!
For with the Lord there is steadfast love,
and with him is great power to redeem.
8 It is he who will redeem Israel
from all its iniquities.

There are places in the secular and sacred worlds where hope by illustration is so passive it sounds as though we are practically helpless to its experience— we only need to wait for God to fill us with it, allow ourselves to be anchored by it, and then rejoice! Reduced to a prescriptive ingredient for a sunny disposition. The reality of hope is that it's gritty. It is less afternoon sun and more warm ember that you really have to stir the ashes to find. Hope is meditative, a true practiced art. It is our work to keep choosing hope over and over in a world that feels darker, colder, and fractured. As a person naturally inclined toward cynicism and skipping ahead to the end, hope acts as the ultimate in spiritual discipline. Hope is the light that keeps me dreaming, imagining a life and time that is better beyond what I know. It keeps me from simplifying my life in pursuit of avoiding disappointment, even when there's no immediate tangible reward. Hope rarely leads to immediate positivity or desired outcome and guarantees little, but the discipline to keep scanning for that light on the horizon keeps us pressing forward in the warmth of a God who sees more than we can.

Erin Chapman-Meyer

Tuesday, December 2

Mark 2:1-5, 11-12

When he returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that he was at home. 2 So many gathered around that there was no longer room for them, not even in front of the door, and he was speaking the word to them. 3 Then some people[a] came, bringing to him a paralyzed man, carried by four of them. 4 And when they could not bring him to Jesus because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him, and after having dug through it, they let down the mat on which the paralytic lay. 5 When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, “Child, your sins are forgiven.”

“I say to you, stand up, take your mat, and go to your home.” 12 And he stood up and immediately took the mat and went out before all of them, so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, “We have never seen anything like this!”

Sometimes it feels like hope has to be this huge, powerful thing — like we’re supposed to believe without any doubt, pray with total confidence, and expect instant miracles. But honestly? Most of the time, hope starts really small.

In Mark 2, a few friends brought a paralyzed man to Jesus. They couldn’t get in the house because it was packed, so they climbed up and literally cut a hole in the roof just to get him close to Jesus. That’s kind of wild. But here’s the thing — they didn’t know exactly what Jesus would do. They just believed he could do something. That tiny bit of hope moved them to act, and Jesus noticed.

Then, in Mark 11, there’s this random moment where Jesus is hungry and goes to find a fig tree. It’s such a normal, human moment — but even there, hope shows up. Sometimes our hunger, our longing, our “something’s missing” feeling is actually the first spark of hope that pushes us to look for Jesus.

Advent is like that. It’s a season of waiting, but also of hoping — not in some huge, fireworks kind of way, but in the quiet, everyday ways: lighting a candle, saying a small prayer, choosing to believe that God is near, even when it’s dark.

Hope doesn’t always start loud. Sometimes it’s just a whisper that says, “Maybe God’s not done yet.”

Ellen Bailey, 11th grade

Wednesday, December 3

Romans 15:13

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

What a blessing this is. Before Paul offers this verse, he urges the believers in Rome to carry one another's burdens, to build each other up, and to accept one another just as Christ has accepted us. Christ came as a servant so that all might glorify God together. Paul was clear that Jesus' message was for both Jews AND Gentiles: all means all. No one is excluded from God's joy or peace.

Read without context, though, this verse can feel like pressure—especially in a season that rushes from one thing to the next. Halloween decorations quickly lead to the stringing of Christmas lights, so we often feel behind before the season gets started. I read the word “overflow” and wonder if I'm showing enough hope or joy to the world. My non-Methodist upbringing often emphasized doing more to demonstrate faithfulness, but Paul's invitation is really about trusting in God more. Paul reminds us not to find fault in ourselves or others, but to remember that goodness already lives within us through Christ.

And then comes the mystery: the Holy Spirit. Hope isn't something we can create on our own. It's a gift, poured into us by God through the Spirit. Even when I feel only a small flicker of hope in this divided world, the Spirit turns that spark into overflow. That is truly unexpected, amazing, and a gift available for everyone. Because of the Spirit's power, hope overflows for all. Thanks be to God!

Brian Tanis

Thursday, December 4

Luke 1:5-25

5 In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was descended from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. 6 Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. 7 But they had no children because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.

8 Once when he was serving as priest before God during his section's turn of duty, 9 he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord to offer incense. 10 Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. 11 Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. 12 When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified, and fear overwhelmed him. 13 But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. 14 You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, 15 for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. 16 He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. 17 With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord." 18 Zechariah said to the angel, "How can I know that this will happen? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years." 19 The angel replied, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. 20 But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur."

21 Meanwhile the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering at his delay in the sanctuary. 22 When he did come out, he was unable to speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the sanctuary. He kept motioning to them and remained unable to speak. 23 When his time of service was ended, he returned to his home.

24 After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she remained in seclusion. She said, 25 "This is what the Lord has done for me in this time, when he looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people."

Confession time – I am not a patient person. My grandmother used to say, "Allyn, I think you were behind the door the day the good Lord was passing out patience." But over the years, I have been improving in the patience department because I am learning an important lesson – God's timing is perfect.

I feel sure that Zechariah and Elizabeth must have been incredulous when Gabriel said they would have a baby boy in their old age. They had waited faithfully and patiently through the long years, hoping and praying for a child, and now, when they were both seemingly too old, God was telling them that the time was finally right. Really, God? Unbelievable!

So often in my life I have been waiting anxiously for answers to my prayers or worries. And, of course, I have wanted those answers in the time frame that worked best for me, as I have often explained to God. But in life events large and small - each time that God has said "wait" or "not now" - he has shown me that his timing is perfect. Just like Elizabeth and Zechariah, I have learned that God's timing is absolutely worth waiting for ...hours, days, or years... in trust and patience.

Thank you, Lord, for helping me to grow in patience, and for your infinite patience with me.

Allyn Carrell

Friday, December 5

Isaiah 40:31

but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength;
they shall mount up with wings like eagles;
they shall run and not be weary;
they shall walk and not faint.

Our scripture today takes us to the book of Isaiah where we see the prophet ministering to the Israelites living in exile in Babylon. Jerusalem had been destroyed and many of the nation's people had been taken captive. Ravished, weary, and disheartened, the people are questioning whether God even still cares for them. In verse 31, God, through Isaiah, provides words of lasting endurance and a promise that can't yet be seen. Isaiah states "but those who hope (wait) in the Lord will renew their strength" and provides examples of the outcome that only could be provided by the Holy One.

As I reflect over the past year, and even at various times across my life, I can certainly relate to the Israelites. The brokenness I felt after hearing loved ones' words when I spoke my truth. The uncertainty experienced when a career move that I once dreamed of didn't quite work out. In these moments, all hope seems to have vanished and the darkness is consuming. We turn to God crying out for direction, for a next step. And then we wait. Suddenly, a small glimmer of hope appears, often in ways unexpected, but over time, our strength is renewed.

One of my favorite songs during the Advent season is "Light Of The World (Sing Hallelujah)" by We The Kingdom. One of the verses sings "Through clouds He will lead us, straight into glory. And there He shall reign, forevermore." Advent reminds us that God's promises are worth waiting for. The same God who renewed the strength of a weary Israel still renews ours today. Whatever darkness or doubt we face, may we hold fast to the hope that Jesus, our "Light of the World," is coming, bringing renewed strength, renewed joy, and everlasting peace.

Landen Oster

Saturday, December 6

Psalm 27:13–14

I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord
in the land of the living.
14 Wait for the Lord;
be strong, and let your heart take courage;
wait for the Lord!

Advent reminds us that hope often begins in quiet, hidden places—like a manger in Bethlehem, or a whispered prayer in the dark. David’s words in Psalm 27 speak to a deep confidence that God’s goodness is not just a distant promise, but something we can experience in this life, even in the midst of hardship.

Growing up, both of my parents struggled with alcoholism. My teenage years were marked by instability and emotional pain. For a long time, I didn’t understand how those experiences shaped my behavior and relationships. It wasn’t until my thirties, through counseling and support groups, that I began to see clearly. In that journey, I encountered God’s grace—not as a dramatic rescue, but as a quiet, steady presence that brought healing and hope.

Hope didn’t come all at once. It began small—in honest conversations, in moments of clarity, in the gentle encouragement of others. Over time, those small beginnings grew into a deeper trust in God’s goodness.

David encourages us to “be strong and take heart.” That strength comes not from ourselves, but from the assurance that God is near. As we wait during Advent, we do so with confidence: hope is growing, and we will see the goodness of the Lord.

Gracious God, thank You for the quiet ways You plant hope in our hearts. In seasons of waiting, help us to be strong and take heart, trusting that Your goodness is near. May the small beginnings of hope in our lives grow into deep faith and lasting peace. Amen.

Tom Martin

Week Two – Joy Is Found in Quiet Places

READ: Luke 1:39–56

CONSIDER:

When we hear the word joy, we often picture noise—bells ringing, laughter spilling over, lights blazing, and crowds singing. But Luke’s story of Mary and Elizabeth paints a different picture. It is not loud. It is not public. There are no trumpets, no crowds, no fanfare. Instead, joy shows up in the stillness of an ordinary home, tucked away in the hill country, where two women share a sacred conversation.

Mary has just received world-altering news - she will bear the Messiah. Her life is about to turn upside down. Yet her first response is not to announce it, but to seek connection. She sets out to visit her cousin Elizabeth, an older woman now miraculously expecting. These two women, standing on the edges of society—one too young, the other thought too old—meet in a moment that shimmers with divine presence.

When Mary greets Elizabeth, the child in Elizabeth’s womb leaps for joy, and Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, exclaims, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!” (Luke 1:42). In that small, hidden room, joy ripples outward, embodied, relational, and holy. This is not joy born of comfort or certainty. It’s the kind of joy that rises up even when life feels

uncertain. It’s joy born of recognition. God is here, and we are part of it.

Theologian Frederick Buechner once wrote, “Joy is not the absence of sorrow but the presence of God.” That is what Mary and Elizabeth discover. Joy does not wait for perfect timing or tidy outcomes. It breaks in through the cracks of ordinary life, through conversation, through relationship, through noticing what God is doing in someone else.

Mary’s response—the Magnificat—is one of the most profound songs in all of Scripture. It is poetry born not from privilege but from trust. She sings of God’s mercy overturning systems of power, of the hungry being filled, and of the lowly lifted up. Her joy is not naïve. It is prophetic. It names the world as it is and proclaims the world as God intends it to be. Joy, in Mary’s song, becomes an act of resistance against despair. It is what happens when faith looks injustice in the eye and sings anyway.

This is a joy that transforms. It is rooted in relationship, but it stretches into justice. When the proud are scattered, when the hungry are fed, when those long ignored are seen - this, Mary sings, is what joy looks like when it grows legs. It is no coincidence that this moment between two women—private, tender, and Spirit-filled—becomes the birthplace of a revolution of love.

John Wesley understood this kind of joy deeply. He often said that holiness and happiness are bound together, that joy is the fruit of a heart fully alive to love. Joy, for Wesley, was not a fleeting emotion but the evidence of grace at work—the Spirit shaping our capacity to love God and neighbor more fully. In Mary and Elizabeth, we see that grace embodied. Their joy grows not from ease but from attentiveness, not from success but from surrender. They are awake to what God is doing, and that awareness becomes their song.

Wesley also believed that God’s work in our lives is often quiet, subtle, and persistent, preparing hearts, softening tempers, and creating space for joy to take root. That’s how joy comes to us too. It doesn’t always announce itself with fireworks. It grows slowly, like light before dawn, through the steady practice of noticing. Paying attention is the first step.

In our modern world, where noise and comparison often drown out stillness, this story feels like a gentle correction. We are trained to measure joy by applause or achievement. Yet Advent whispers another truth - that the deepest joy often happens where no one is watching. It happens when a nurse hums softly over a patient’s bed, when a friend leaves a meal on a doorstep, when someone sends a note that simply says, “I’m thinking of you.” These moments rarely make headlines, but heaven takes notice.

Joy also grows when we recognize God’s work in others. Elizabeth could have met Mary with suspicion or self-focus, but instead she blesses her. Her recognition amplifies Mary’s joy. That is still how joy works. It multiplies through affirmation. When we name God’s goodness in someone else, when we celebrate what they carry, joy expands. In a divided world, that kind of encouragement becomes holy resistance.

Mary’s song continues to remind us that joy and justice belong together. Her words magnify the God who lifts up the lowly, fills the hungry, and topples the powerful. Joy, then, is not just emotional. It’s ethical. It’s what we feel when love is put right, when wrongs are made right, when grace takes shape in the real world. It’s why the angels will later sing to shepherds on a dark hillside, because this kind of joy belongs to ordinary people. This is our “Beautiful Ordinary.”

Still, Luke is clear: joy begins small. Before angels sing or magi arrive, there is this quiet visit between two faithful women. A greeting. A leap. A song. God’s work begins in whispers before it grows into choruses. The joy of the incarnation doesn’t enter the world in spectacle but in simplicity, in two women recognizing that God is near.

As you move through this second week of Advent, pay attention to the quiet places where joy might be waiting. Maybe it’s in the laughter that bubbles up unexpectedly around the dinner table. Maybe it’s in the gratitude you feel after a long day’s work. Maybe it’s in the peace of a morning walk,

or in the smile of someone who remembers your name. These small moments are not trivial. They are thresholds—tiny annunciations of God’s joy breaking into our world.

Joy, like love, is both gift and calling. It requires participation. Mary sings, Elizabeth blesses, and God’s joy multiplies. So this week, may we join their song, not with fanfare or noise, but with hearts attuned to the quiet ways grace is at work around us. Because in the hush of daily life, God is still speaking, still moving, still bringing joy to birth.

SHARE:

- When have you experienced deep joy in a quiet or ordinary moment?
- What simple thing brings you joy right now?

DISCUSS:

How does Mary's song redefine joy for you?

Why do you think Luke highlights this encounter between two women as the birthplace of praise?

How does Mary's joy challenge cultural ideas that joy depends on success or comfort?

What would it look like for you to "magnify the Lord" in your own ordinary life?

How can the group support or pray for you this week?

TRY THIS:

Each day this week, pause in silence. Name one ordinary moment that brings you joy and give thanks for it.

CLOSING PRAYER

God of gentle joy, you meet us not in noise or performance but in the quiet moments of presence and grace. Thank you for the ways joy surprises us—in a word of encouragement, a shared meal, a song that stirs our hearts. As we leave this space, help us to listen deeply and live attentively so that we might notice your joy blooming in unexpected corners of our lives. Let our laughter, our gratitude, and our compassion become quiet reflections of your love made known in Christ. Send us out as bearers of joy to those who need it most. Amen.

Sunday, December 7

Luke 1:39-46

39 In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, 40 where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. 41 When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit 42 and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. 43 And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? 44 For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. 45 And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

46 And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord."

There is something powerful that happens when two friends, who love and respect each other, get together. Joy and celebration, vulnerability and authenticity, words of encouragement and of care. The blessing of seeing and being seen by another person without judgement. Grace abounds.

In the first chapter of the gospel of Luke, after two different angelic annunciations, a couple of soon-to-be-mothers gather and greet one another. Elizabeth, the older of the two, already 6 months pregnant, has just spent months in seclusion. She has not seen or been with another person since she conceived, preparing in privacy to bring a life into the world. Mary is only a month or so pregnant, if that. She isn't quite sure what to make of what she was told by the angel. How is it possible that the baby she will give birth to will be the Son of God?

Mary journeys from Nazareth to Elizabeth's house in a hill country town outside of Jerusalem. There is a buoyancy to Mary's visit, even though it would have taken her days to journey so far. She enters Elizabeth's house, calls her name, and Elizabeth is immediately filled with the Holy Spirit. Her friend, her cousin, has come to visit, and she experiences a profound moment of clarity and joy. She proclaims Mary and the child she will bring into the world as blessed. And she knows that this child will be the Lord.

After months of isolation, Elizabeth is visited by Mary, and helps Mary to understand the blessing she is and will be to the world. Mary finally gets it. She responds by magnifying God and rejoicing in her savior. In the quiet simplicity of a home, these two women, bound by blood, are now bound by their joy in God's promise.

Rev. Elizabeth Moseley, Senior Associate Minister of Discipleship & Culture

Monday, December 8

Philippians 4:4-7

4 Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. 5 Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. 6 Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. 7 And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

In the busyness of everyday life, it can be difficult to locate a sense of steady peace. What does peace look like in a world filled with carpool and school pickups, flurries of emails, text messages, and Zoom calls, and an unending news cycle? It's easy to believe that steady peace lies just on the other side of a silent retreat or a long, quiet vacation—but the reality is that neither of those is on the table on a regular basis, much less during a bustling holiday season.

As a more accessible alternative (though I wouldn't pass up the chance for some long hikes in the mountains), I find myself repeating small rituals that remind me daily of God's grace and presence: sipping my first cup of coffee in a quiet, dark house; listening to a favorite song in my headphones while I walk into my office; tucking in my daughters one more time before I head to bed. The calm I experience in these moments doesn't negate the frustration or overwhelm that creep in more often than I'd like, but I know it makes me more resilient.

As Christmas approaches, I'd prefer to skip the stress of the list making and gift buying, but I know I can't. Instead, I'll build up my reserves of peace in the form of a Spotify Christmas playlist, wrapping gifts while watching *White Christmas*, and adding a little extra peppermint mocha coffee creamer to my cup.

Meggie Gilstrap

Tuesday, December 9

Luke 19:1-9

19 He entered Jericho and was passing through it. 2 A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich. 3 He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. 4 So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. 5 When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today." 6 So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. 7 All who saw it began to grumble and said, "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner." 8 Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, "Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor, and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much." 9 Then Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he, too, is a son of Abraham."

Zaccheus shows that Jesus loves everyone, even if they were bad people. The text says "When Jesus came to that spot, he looked up and said, 'Zachceus come down at once. I must stay in your home today.'" This shows that Jesus is open to everyone. The Zaccheus story in Luke 19:1-9 makes me feel loved and cared for. That also makes me feel happy that Jesus loves and cares for everyone.

Eve Willis,
3rd grade

Wednesday, December 10

Psalm 100

- 1 Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth.
- 2 Serve the Lord with gladness;
come into his presence with singing.
- 3 Know that the Lord is God.
It is he who made us, and we are his;
we are his people and the sheep of his pasture.
- 4 Enter his gates with thanksgiving
and his courts with praise.
Give thanks to him; bless his name.
- 5 For the Lord is good;
his steadfast love endures forever
and his faithfulness to all generations.

As a musician, the Psalms always speak to me, but maybe this one more so than some others, because it's a call to praise the Lord, and I feel like I do that best in music. This verse has been set to music by a whole slew of composers over time, including Mozart (and his Dad), Vaughn Williams, Purcell, Handel, Rutter, and Britten, to name just a few. I personally resonate with verse 2: "Worship the Lord with gladness; come before Him with joyful songs." For me, I truly find the "gladness" in worship when I'm singing. Those big major works, especially the Requiems by Mozart, Brahms, Verdi, and Faure, have been profoundly influential in my singing life. As a young tenor, the Oratorios of Handel's "Messiah" were fixed in my repertoire. Later in my career, the Benedictus movement from the Bach b minor Mass and the "Ingemisco" from the Verdi Requiem became favorites of mine to sing. I feel like I give the most "Praise" when singing liturgical works. It's that "other" feeling you get when you hear the choir nail the anthem on Sunday morning, like not just joy or a feeling of being uplifted...it's the thing that gives you goosebumps and even will long after when you remember it. I am a firm believer that music, the organization of sounds and overtones, especially from the singing voice is a Divine creation.

Will Whitmire

Thursday, December 11

Matthew 13:31-33

The Parable of the Mustard Seed

31 He put before them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; 32 it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.”

The Parable of the Yeast

33 He told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with[a] three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.”

Not much seems more insignificant than a grain of mustard or a pinch of yeast, yet Jesus uses them as powerful symbols. Although they may show up in different settings— one agricultural and one domestic — they have one very important thing in common. They both require patient waiting. Once the seed has been planted and the yeast has been incorporated into the flour, there is nothing that the planter or baker can do except wait for the desired outcomes. And what is produced? A shrub large enough to shelter birds and their nests. Loaves of bread to feed the hungry. Their yield is beyond expectation.

Advent is like this. This season asks us to wait in quiet hope while the world around us clamors for immediate results. Our souls must find ways to rest in quiet contemplation as we watch for and anticipate the coming of the tiny and vulnerable Christ Child, born in such seemingly insignificant circumstances. What wonders such patience will yield. This year may we wait expectantly, knowing that what God is doing is so powerful, so transformative, that it has, and will continue to, change our lives and the lives of the entire world.

Dianne Boone

Friday, December 12

John 15:9-11
(The Living Bible)

9 “I have loved you even as the Father has loved me. Live within my love.
10 When you obey me you are living in my love, just as I obey my Father and live in his love. 11 I have told you this so that
you will be filled with my joy. Yes, your cup of joy will overflow!”

Jesus speaks these beautiful words so simply! Each word is so easy to understand. Perhaps we pass them by and dismiss them too quickly. We need to read them slowly and to let each word sink into our whole being—our mind, our soul, and our spirit.

We need to take the time to perceive, to truly become aware of Jesus’ statement of the magnificence of His revealing words! We need to breathe in the moment to realize, to suddenly become aware of the absolute truth and the deep substance of his simple statement. We need to see with our eyes, taste with our senses, and renew our mind with the greatness of the grasp, to understand the absolute magnificence and encompassing power of Jesus’ words with a complete and renewing sense of awe.

Jesus could have left us with only these few words, and we would still know him as our Lord and Savior! These words are the basic simple rules for a Christian believer. Please read these words over again! Read and meditate on them until you feel the awe and the release they bring into your heart and into your full being. Notice the reward that Jesus gives as an assurance to all who believe in Him, who trust His words, and who obey and follow His teachings!

My late husband and I both had many family members and friends who lived deep and beautiful Christian lives. We also had the privilege to host numerous persons in our home who were missionaries—both Americans and persons from other cultures. We got to see each of these dear family members and friends live out their daily lives—ofttimes under the best of circumstances, but sometimes under deeply adverse situations—but ultimately, they lived each day with a great knowledge, understanding, and a deep sense of joy! They all knew and practiced Jesus’ way of living!

And to be truthful—it is the only way to live! Living Joyfully makes for a wonderful lifestyle! “Yes, your cup of JOY will overflow!”

Rosemary Schoolfield

Saturday, December 13

Psalm 30

- 1 I will extol you, O Lord, for you have drawn me up
and did not let my foes rejoice over me.
2 O Lord my God, I cried to you for help,
and you have healed me.
3 O Lord, you brought up my soul from Sheol,
restored me to life from among those gone down to the
Pit.
4 Sing praises to the Lord, O you his faithful ones,
and give thanks to his holy name.
5 For his anger is but for a moment;
his favor is for a lifetime.
Weeping may linger for the night,
but joy comes with the morning.
6 As for me, I said in my prosperity,
“I shall never be moved.”
7 By your favor, O Lord,
you had established me as a strong mountain;
you hid your face;
I was dismayed.
8 To you, O Lord, I cried,
and to the Lord I made supplication:
9 “What profit is there in my death,
if I go down to the Pit?
Will the dust praise you?
Will it tell of your faithfulness?
10 Hear, O Lord, and be gracious to me!
O Lord, be my helper!”
11 You have turned my mourning into dancing;
you have taken off my sackcloth
and clothed me with joy,
12 so that my soul may praise you and not be silent.
O Lord my God, I will give thanks to you forever.

As a new mom, there is a lot of weeping. A LOT. More than I ever had pre-motherhood. I mourn many things from my past: freedom, independence, quiet... but then in those rare moments of quiet, there is joy. So much joy. I have prayed to God since I was a little girl to allow me the gift of becoming a mother. Every time I see my daughter, my heart dances. Every time I think of my daughter, my heart dances. God has given me a beautiful gift, and I will continue to dance, while holding my daughter in my arms and both of us are held in God's arms.

Marissa Hanback

Week Three – Love Takes Root in Ordinary Lives

READ: John 1:1–14

CONSIDER:

John opens his Gospel with a hymn to the eternal Word (Logos). Before creation, the Word existed with God and was God (John 1:1). The cosmic scale of this prologue is staggering. The source of life and light, the eternal companion of God, is present before anything else. And yet, in verse 14, the narrative narrows dramatically, “The Word became flesh and lived among us” (John 1:14). The Greek verb *eskēnōsen* is vivid—it means “pitched a tent” or “tabernacled.” God did not merely observe humanity from a distance or send angels to communicate the divine will. God moved in, literally pitched a tent in our neighborhood, and joined life on its own terms.

This is radical, scandalous, and profoundly tender. The incarnation insists that love is not an abstract idea. It is embodied presence. God chooses vulnerability, taking on skin and story, entering the fullness of human limitation to redeem it from within. For the early church, this was simultaneously shocking and glorious. The holy God was no longer confined to the temple or to cosmic realms. God now dwelt in human ordinariness. From shepherds in the fields to a young mother in a small town, God’s holiness chose proximity over spectacle, presence over pomp.

The Word becoming flesh teaches us that love thrives in closeness. As we live in a world divided by fear, suspicion, and hostility, the incarnation reminds us that it is difficult to hate up close. When we sit with someone who disagrees with us, care for a neighbor we might not otherwise notice, or serve those whose experiences differ from our own, we encounter the divine example of God’s presence. Proximity softens hearts, breaks down barriers, and creates space for love to grow. God shows us that transformation begins when we enter ordinary life, fully present, attentive, and willing to be vulnerable with one another.

From a Wesleyan perspective, the incarnation illustrates the journey of sanctifying grace. John Wesley taught that Christian perfection is not moral flawlessness but perfection in love, our hearts gradually shaped and perfected by God’s grace to love more fully. Every act of care, patience, and humble presence is part of this process. The Word dwelling among us models this path - love is patient, persistent, and incarnate. Ordinary actions like encouraging a struggling child, holding a hand in fear, listening to a friend in sorrow, all of this participates in God’s work of perfecting love in the world.

Wendell Berry captures this rhythm beautifully: “It may be that when we no longer know what to do we have come to our real work, and that when we no longer know which way to go we have come to our

real journey” (The Art of the Commonplace). Love often grows quietly, steadily, in ordinary spaces. God’s kingdom unfolds not in spectacle, but in attentiveness, care, and the persistence of small, faithful actions. Like slowly flowing water carving its way through a cavern of rock, sanctifying grace moves us along a path of ordinary practices, where love is honed and deepened in our relationships and communities.

Scripture reinforces the significance of ordinary love. Paul reminds us that love is patient, kind, and bears all things (1 Corinthians 13:4–7). Hebrews encourages generosity and sharing what we have as pleasing to God (Hebrews 13:16). Micah exhorts us to walk humbly, do justice, and love kindness (Micah 6:8). Each passage our members reflected on for this week reminds us that God’s work often unfolds quietly, in repeated, humble acts of love.

In everyday life, the incarnation looks like ordinary actions made holy. A teacher staying after class to encourage a student who feels invisible, a co-worker bringing someone a cup of coffee on a stressful day, or a friend listening without judgment to someone processing grief—these acts, often unnoticed, reflect the same God who tabernacled among us. They show that love can bridge divides, ease burdens, and transform relationships simply by being present. Advent invites us to notice these moments and participate in them faithfully.

This week, reflect on where God is calling you to incarnate love in ordinary ways. Who needs your presence, your listening, your care? How can you move closer to someone you might otherwise keep at a distance? By showing up, drawing near, and acting with humility, we participate in God’s ongoing work of sanctifying grace. In ordinary acts, love takes root, hearts are transformed, and the beautiful ordinary becomes holy.

The incarnation reminds us that God’s love does not demand grandeur or recognition. It asks for presence and faithful participation. When we live close enough to care, we find it hard to hate. And we open ourselves to God’s ongoing work of perfecting love in our hearts and in the world.

SHARE:

- Share about a person whose love made an ordinary part of your life feel sacred.
- Where have you seen God's love "take root" recently?

DISCUSS:

What does it mean for you that "the Word became flesh"?

How does John's cosmic introduction deepen your understanding of Christmas?

How can we practice embodied love in our daily routines?

How might this passage challenge our tendency to spiritualize faith rather than live it?

How can the group support or pray for you this week?

TRY THIS:

This week, let love take root through an act of embodied compassion: cook for someone, visit a neighbor, or offer presence where it's needed.

CLOSING PRAYER

Gracious God, you pitched your tent among us and showed us that love is not a distant idea but a presence made flesh. Open our eyes this week to see where your love is quietly at work and where you are calling us to participate. Teach us to act with patience, humility, and faithful care, trusting that even the smallest gestures can reflect your holiness and bring life to those around us. Perfect us in love, Lord, through the ordinary rhythms of our days, so that our hearts may grow in compassion and our hands may become instruments of your grace. May we walk humbly with you, noticing the sacred in the everyday, and allow your love to take root and flourish in our homes, our neighborhoods, and our communities. Amen.

Sunday, December 14

John 1:1-14

1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was in the beginning with God. 3 All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being 4 in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. 5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overtake it.

6 There was a man sent from God whose name was John. 7 He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. 8 He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. 9 The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

10 He was in the world, and the world came into being through him, yet the world did not know him. 11 He came to what was his own,[c] and his own people did not accept him. 12 But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, 13 who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

14 And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son,[d] full of grace and truth.

John begins his Gospel not in Bethlehem, but before time itself - before creation, before form, before sound: “in the beginning was the Word.” This Word, who is Love embodied, is the very pulse through which life began to sing. When the Word took flesh, it entered quietly, born into the rhythms of ordinary life, into a world that had long ceased expecting wonder from such places.

John says this Word “made [a] home among us” - a phrase that can also be translated as “pitched [a] tent among us.” Divine presence chose the texture of everyday existence, dwelling under the same sky and dust as everyone else. Love came close enough to be touched, to share hunger and laughter, to live and breathe within the fragile beauty of being human. This is how divine glory unfolds - as companionship, presence, and grace moving through human lives.

When John writes of light shining in the darkness, he evokes a light that fills the night from within - steady, patient, and alive. This light glows in the midst of ordinary life, illuminating faces and moments where the world least expects divinity to appear - a meal shared, a child comforted, a stranger welcomed. Every act of compassion carries the radiance of this incarnate Word.

As we draw near to Christmas, we remember that the mystery of incarnation continues. The Word keeps taking root - in every heart open to Love's presence, in every community that embodies grace and truth, in every moment where light quietly softens the night.

Monday, December 15

1 John 4:11-19

11 Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. 12 No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us, and his love is perfected in us.

13 By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. 14 And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world. 15 God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. 16 So we have known and believe the love that God has for us.

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. 17 Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. 18 There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. 19 We love because he first loved us.

This scripture calls us to respond to God's love by receiving and then reflecting love out into the world. God's love is embodied within us, and it is ours to freely share with others. What an incredible gift we have been given! Our words and actions, as simple as they may be at times, are opportunities every single day to show love to others. In fact, it may not even require words, our presence is often the most powerful reflection of God's love.

In thinking about times when I felt God's love through the actions of others, I am reminded of when friends brought meals after our children were born, when co-workers stepped in to ensure the work would be manageable, when family members continued to show up in seasons of need, and when strangers offered unexpected kindness.

In this season of Advent, may we practice a love that keeps us connected, listens, forgives, and restores. May we remember that the love we share with others was first given to us by God. We embody that love and have the opportunity to share it. As we move through this season, may our lives quietly testify that God's love still enters the world through ordinary people like you and me.

Mary Nichols

Tuesday, December 16

Luke 10:25-37

The story of the good Samaritan is a story most of us are familiar with. We must love our neighbor and be like the Samaritan. See the guy on the road and help him regardless of his background. Maybe it's hard but you gotta do it. The story of the good Samaritan is a straightforward story but not an easy one. The story of the good Samaritan expands what it means for someone to be our neighbor. Our neighbor is not just the people who live near us or pray with us, or look like us, or use the same Uno rules as us. It's quite literally everyone. In much earlier Jewish tradition, the duty we have to love and care for others was restricted to one's community. Here, Jesus expands "love thy neighbor" to include both a lost and weak stranger and a Samaritan. The Samaritans were a people that descended from Israelites, but were decidedly outsiders to the Jewish community. Jesus shows us that God's love comes from everywhere and is in everybody. A Samaritan, someone who would be considered an unbeliever to the priests who left the injured man, is the one who is moved by God's compassion and love to care for the injured man. You can put labels on people, place borders around people, throw people into categories and water them down, but no matter what lines on a map you fall between, no matter where you are in your faith and where you come from in your faith, we all are loved by God and called by God to be good Samaritans in this world and care for our neighbors.

The good Samaritan teaches us that there is no ideal person to carry and share God's love. It's easy to have an expectation of the kind of hero a moment needs. It's nice to picture some action hero, or some benevolent priest, or whatever other figure there is to look up to, coming in and fixing our problems, making right what was wrong, and healing wounds. In so many ways

we are still waiting on that hero. 771,480 people are without a place to call home in America, according to a 2024 study. Wars and conflict shape every corner of the globe, and people go hungry (especially with SNAP being cut off). The good news is we don't have to rely on some idealized hero, we are all capable of being good Samaritans. You don't have to feel like the right person for the job to be the person who heals wounds.

I'm going to be honest with you: I have not stopped and bandaged a wounded traveller while walking from Jerusalem to Jericho. I have however re-shingled houses, and built a 32-foot wheelchair ramp with youth on mission trips. Now I have no good reason for why I should be trusted with power tools, but there is no ideal person to carry and share God's love into the world. If there are houses and homeowners in Little Rock, Arkansas, or San Antonio that need some love, I'm happy to be a good Samaritan. Mission trips capture a good part of what it means to be a good Samaritan, they put us in new roles, in new spaces and helping new people. I have no business building things in Little Rock, but because our youth group went out and worked with the great people at Ozark Mission Projects, the lives of 3 homeowners and their families are better.

Love isn't a neatly packaged, rational thing, so the good work that comes from God's grace isn't going to be neatly packaged and run along the correct borders. God's love runs across every social class, country, language and way of being, and through people like us, and a lot more people who are not like us. This love can, does, and will find the wounded and care for them.

Linus Watt, 12th grade

Wednesday, December 17

Micah 6:6-8

“With what shall I come before the Lord
and bow myself before God on high?
Shall I come before him with burnt offerings,
with calves a year old?
7 Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams,
with ten thousands of rivers of oil?
Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?”
8 He has told you, O mortal, what is good,
and what does the Lord require of you
but to do justice and to love kindness
and to walk humbly with your God?

As the parents of two boys, we are familiar with activity. There is a lot of movement at our house: kids running around, trying to get out the door for school or church or activities, riding bikes, playing instruments, singing, yelling, dancing, resisting going to bed. Sometimes we wonder: what are you going to do with all that energy? This verse from Micah plainly shows us where to channel our energy, what we should do. Don't just talk about justice: do it. Ease the path for someone else, take risks to lift people up, give of your time and privilege to fight the systems that oppress others. Love kindness. Don't just be polite or considerate while gritting your teeth or silently judging. Delight in generosity and compassion. Cherish consideration, thrive on mercy. It's easy for the Advent season to be consumed with harmful energy: stress about time and money, materialism, endless comparison, and other capitalistic distractions. Justice and kindness are not the work of the chosen few, the spiritually complete, those without doubt or questions or fatigue; doing justice and loving kindness are the ways we can be in step with God. This is how our faith is rooted and nurtured, and this is how we can humbly walk alongside God, bringing God's love closer to all.

Lauren and Chris Dowdy

Thursday, December 18

Romans 8:37-39

37 No, in all these things we are more than victorious through him who loved us. 38 For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, 39 nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

The Romans scripture absolutely states that nothing at all can separate us from the love of God.

Two years and four months ago when David and I were both seventy-seven and had just celebrated our fifty-sixth wedding anniversary, David received an unexpected and devastating diagnosis of pancreatic cancer, stage four. With treatment, his life's expectancy was ten months to a year. This news rocked our world and our dreams for continuing to live into old age together. We cried, we railed, we despaired, we were angry, despondent, and we ran through these emotions sometimes daily, certainly weekly. We thought it was important to feel everything we felt (and talk about it together, too). We grieved.

Not that we don't continue to grieve our loss, but it does not dominate us. It is now two years and four months into a long journey of intensive cancer treatment, learning to live each day focused on the present and with an attitude of gratitude for each and every day.

Though we have always known God loves us, we know this at no time in our lives more so than these last two-plus years. We have keenly experienced the unwavering and inseparable Divine Love of God. We have been wrapped in the love of the Divine Mystery expressed through the love of family, dearest of friends, marvelous neighbors, our long engaged faith community and on and on. The persistent and ongoing prayers, calls, cards, visits, the expression of care, love and concern have all been unbelievable.

David and I are absolutely convinced that through this Divine Love (as expressed through people in our lives) and excellent medical care, David is living a remarkable, extended quality of life beyond all expectations. Through this experience, we are assured that nothing ever separates us from the Love of God. We are enfolded by it.

David and Betty Black

Friday, December 19

Colossians 3:12-14

12 Therefore, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. 13 Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. 14 Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.

My grandfather carried a small notepad with him to jot down thoughts and reminders so that he would not forget them. Some of the notes were left on the notepad, others taped in key locations. One was even taped to the dashboard of his car which read "Stay Alert!" I always thought that one was funny and slightly worrisome at the same time. For me, this scripture passage is worthy of a reminder or two for my own personal notepad and dashboard. Not only is Paul reminding us to be all the things - compassionate, kind, humble, patient but also to exemplify this love and forgiveness. It's what we wear, and do, and who we are as followers of Jesus Christ.

Chris Mabile

Saturday, December 20

1 Corinthians 13:1-8,13

13 If I speak in the tongues of humans and of angels but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. 2 And if I have prophetic powers and understand all mysteries and all knowledge and if I have all faith so as to remove mountains but do not have love, I am nothing. 3 If I give away all my possessions and if I hand over my body so that I may boast but do not have love, I gain nothing.

4 Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant 5 or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable; it keeps no record of wrongs; 6 it does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth. 7 It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. 8 Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end.

13 And now faith, hope, and love remain, these three, and the greatest of these is love.

Most of us associate this scripture with weddings. It's an appropriate thing for couples to remember and honor in the days, weeks, and years that follow. I think of my own wedding day and others when it's been recited, but also remember my paternal grandparents, Olie and Genevie Erickson, who kept it in a frame on their family room wall.

Their marriage was loving, and they extended that love to family, friends, and neighbors - especially during the holidays and Advent season. Last month we met my parents, brother, and niece for lunch and, for whatever reason, I was reminded of how their love endured all things.

We were talking about high school principals and my dad said when he was a freshman, his school got a new one. Because they were new in town, the principal and his wife were guests at my grandparents' house for Thanksgiving dinner. In fact, not a holiday went by without someone outside the family having a spot at their table. Some were regulars, others we'd meet for the first time.

But all of them didn't have to eat alone or lack for conversation on a day when families and friends were gathering in love for God and each other. Just as Paul spoke of the Gift of Love in his letter to the Corinthians, my grandparents shared their belief in enduring love with their community. In this season, I hope we find love in our hearts and minds and spread it to others.

Tom Erickson

Week Four – Peace Meets Us in the Middle of the Mess

READ: Matthew 1:18–25

CONSIDER:

Matthew's nativity centers not in the song of angels or the adoration of shepherds, but in the silence of one man's decision. Joseph - steady, faithful, and kind - is caught in a storm of confusion and heartbreak. The woman he loves is pregnant, and not by him. The law is clear, the options limited. He plans to end the engagement quietly, to preserve both dignity and compassion. Then, as night folds over his worry, a dream interrupts. An angel speaks into his fear: "Do not be afraid" (Matthew 1:20).

This divine message doesn't offer an escape from his dilemma. It invites him deeper into it. No thunder, no spectacle, just a whisper in the dark, a word to trust what he cannot yet see. "The child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit." God does not remove Joseph's uncertainty. God meets him within it.

In that quiet, ordinary decision—to stay, to trust, to name the child Jesus—Joseph embodies the paradox of Advent peace. Peace is not the absence of conflict, but the presence of courage. It does not erase fear, but steadies the heart to act faithfully within it. The Hebrew roots of peace, *shalom*, speak not only of calm but of wholeness, of right relationship between God, neighbor, and

self. Joseph's peace is relational, lived in the messy intersection of law, love, and grace.

In this way, Joseph stands within the long lineage of faithful Israel. Like Abraham, he trusts the promise without the proof. Like David, he obeys in the shadows of uncertainty. His yes to God echoes through time, a reminder that divine peace is born not in perfect conditions but in persistent faith. When Joseph names the child "Yeshua," meaning "God saves," he is naming his own hope, that God's saving work begins in the small and ordinary, in households and hearts willing to listen.

John Wesley often spoke of holiness not as moral perfection, but as "holy tempers"—habits of the heart shaped by grace into love, patience, gentleness, and trust. Joseph lives that holiness not in a sanctuary, but in a family crisis. He doesn't preach peace, he practices it. He lets grace form his response where certainty cannot. This is holy imagination—the courage to see God's possibility within human impossibility.

In our hurried, polarized world, this kind of peace feels almost revolutionary. We are trained to prize control, to react quickly, to speak loudly. But Advent peace moves differently. It whispers when the world shouts. It listens before it speaks. It waits when everything else rushes. It is slow, steady, and rooted in relationship.

You can glimpse Joseph's peace in the quiet corners of modern life: when a caregiver sits beside a hospital bed through the night, simply holding a hand; when a teacher notices a struggling student and speaks a word of encouragement instead of frustration; when a friend chooses to forgive rather than retaliate; when a congregation takes time to listen across difference, to resist fear, to stay at the table. These are not dramatic gestures but daily ones, ordinary acts of fidelity that bear the weight of God's peace in the world.

Parker Palmer writes, "Community is not just about being with others; it is about being for others, in ways that are real, practical, and sustaining." Joseph models this so well. He becomes peace for Mary and for the Christ child, anchoring their vulnerability with quiet strength. He shows that peace is not a mood but a movement, a choice to stand with others when it would be easier to step away.

True peace also makes space for unknowing. Joseph cannot see the full picture, yet he walks forward with faith enough for the next step. That's how peace often works, not as a guarantee but as grace for the journey. We experience it not when every question is answered, but when we entrust our uncertainties to the God who still speaks in dreams.

Advent invites us into that same kind of peace. Not passive, not naïve, but practiced—cultivated in the tension between what is and what is

promised. When we choose presence over withdrawal, patience over haste, listening over reaction, we embody Emmanuel "God with us" at work in our own neighborhoods.

Joseph reminds us that peace is not found in perfection but in participation. It grows as we cooperate with grace, as we let love take the lead in our relationships and responsibilities. His story teaches us that the birthplace of peace is often the human heart aligned with divine purpose.

As you move through this week, consider where you are being called to trust again, to wait, to stay, to forgive. Maybe peace looks like choosing curiosity instead of judgment in a family conversation. Maybe it's taking a breath before sending that sharp email. Maybe it's sitting in silence long enough to sense God's whisper: "Do not be afraid."

The incarnation assures us that peace is not an escape from the world's noise but the quiet strength to love within it. Christ does not calm every storm, but he calms us in the midst of it. The baby born in Bethlehem grows to speak peace to wind and wave, to those cast out and those caught in fear. His peace still speaks, softly yet surely, through the faithful lives of people like Joseph... and through us.

So let us live peace into being. Let it take shape in our speech and schedules, our homes and habits, our listening and loving. Because peace, like love, is not simply given. It is grown, nurtured through

the grace of small, steadfast acts of faith.

SHARE:

- Share a time you found peace in the middle of confusion or fear.
- What helps you stay centered when life feels chaotic?

DISCUSS:

What stands out to you in Joseph's story?

How does his example expand your understanding of peace?

What might it mean to listen for God's voice in your own uncertainty?

Where might our church or world need Joseph's kind of peace today?

How can the group support or pray for you this week?

TRY THIS:

Practice holy listening this week. Spend five minutes a day in silence, breathing slowly, repeating: “Be still and know that I am God.”

CLOSING PRAYER

God of peace, you enter our confusion and chaos not to erase it, but to dwell within it. Teach us, like Joseph, to listen for your voice in the midst of uncertainty and to trust that your presence is stronger than our fear. As we leave this gathering and step back into the noise of our world, center us in your stillness. Help us to be peacemakers in our families, our church, and our community, to carry calm where there is conflict and compassion where there is pain. May your peace guard our hearts and guide our steps until the whole world rests in your love. Amen.

Sunday, December 21

Matthew 1:18-25

18 Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be pregnant from the Holy Spirit. 19 Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to divorce her quietly. 20 But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. 21 She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” 22 All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

23 “Look, the virgin shall become pregnant and give birth to a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,” which means, “God is with us.” 24 When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife 25 but had no marital relations with her until she had given birth to a son, and he named him Jesus.

As I reflect on this scripture, I imagine Joseph as a young man who falls in love with an even younger woman and who wants nothing more than to be faithful and kind, work as a carpenter, and start a family with his true love. How painful it must have been to discover that Mary was pregnant.

In the spirit of Advent’s call to wait, what if instead of rushing ahead, we sit with Joseph as if we were his childhood friend?

Imagine sitting with him in an empty coffee shop late at night, listening as he talks, rants, or breaks down in heartbreak. What feelings of betrayal must have cut him to the bone? What dreams of the future must have felt shattered? We say nothing that would make it worse. There is nothing that could make it better. We simply sit, so he does not bear this burden alone. Eventually, he tells us of his plan to divorce her quietly, and we get him home so that he can rest there on the couch.

But much can happen in a single night. Morning comes, and he wakes us, eyes bright with purpose. “I had a dream,” he says. “God does not want me to abandon Mary. This child will need me. And even if I am wrong, how wrong can it be to love?”

What would it be like to witness not the angel or the vision, but the transformation of Joseph’s heart?

Almighty God, in the midst of the challenges of our lives, reveal to us your dreams, your visions, and your voice, that we may hear you call and respond in the transformation of our hearts. Amen.

Monday, December 22

Mark 4:35-41

35 On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, "Let us go across to the other side." 36 And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. 37 A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. 38 But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion, and they woke him up and said to him, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" 39 And waking up, he rebuked the wind and said to the sea, "Be silent! Be still!" Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. 40 He said to them, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" 41 And they were filled with great fear and said to one another, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?"

Mark 4:35-41 is a verse that reigns very true in my life as a senior in high school. Right now I feel like I am in the eye of the storm with college applications, school, and just life in general, and leaning on church and God to get through these busy times. The storm in the verse represents feeling overwhelmed and unsure of what lies ahead. As I am entering a time in my life that is full of the unknown and change, this verse resonates with me even more. The reminder that regardless of how bad the storms may seem, God is always with you to help find a way out of the chaos. I have always leaned on this church and youth community but have even more in these times of uncertainty. Knowing that regardless of what I am going through I have these people and this place, and no matter where I go this stays the same. This verse embodies the fact that if you have faith in God and lean on him when you need it you can make it through the storms no matter how rough they may seem.

Vivian Winton, 12th grade

Tuesday, December 23

John 14:27

27 Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.

Lucy's Sand Tarts

Lucy Holcomb, beloved wife, mother, and longtime member of White Rock UMC, was notoriously cheap. At Christmas, she baked about 100 Sand Tarts for her large extended family, and they were the prized cookies of the season. On Mother's Day over two decades ago, she announced that she wasn't making them anymore and offered the recipe to us all. Hector accepted. A week later, it arrived on a handwritten 3x5 card. We've gradually widened the circle of recipients—now baking over 2,400 and gifting them in bags of 10. That double-framed card still hangs in our kitchen.

The process is delightfully messy: flour and powdered sugar dust the counters, butter and vanilla leave drips, pecans crunch underfoot (our pets wait hopefully). But through weeks of mixing, rolling, baking, and packaging, we pour love—and peace—into each Sand Tart. We pray for people as we bake, remembering their joys, struggles, and stories. When asked, “What makes these so light and tasty?” we often reply, “Love.”

As Advent winds down and the chaos of the season peaks, we turn to Jesus' words in John 14:27: “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you.” Spoken just before the Crucifixion, this promise of peace—through the Holy Spirit—was unimaginable to the disciples in their coming storm. Yet it's the same peace we can grasp today.

It may arrive quietly: in a treasured ornament, a worn stocking, or yes—even a perfect Christmas cookie. But it's real. And it meets us right in the middle of the mess. Want to follow our baking adventure?

#LucysSandTarts

Merry Christmas!

Hector Garcia and Craig Holcomb

Wednesday, December 24 - Christmas Eve

John 1:1-13

Many of us will gather tonight to worship—anticipating Christ’s birth, remembering the story we know so well, and reflecting on how God is still at work in our lives. We’ll sing familiar carols, hear the words of Scripture, and lift candles high in the soft glow of a holy night. There’s nothing quite like that moment—the hush, the harmony, the warmth of light dancing across the faces of friends and strangers alike. It’s enough to make you weepy, really, when you think about the abundance of love it takes for God to send us Jesus—the Light that shines in the darkness.

Some of us come tonight because it’s what we do. It’s part of our rhythm, the thing that makes it feel like Christmas. Others come because it’s what we need. In the chaos and noise, we’re looking for something steady to hold on to—truth, love, peace, joy, gentleness, hope.

The good news of the Gospel is this: Christ, the Light of the world, has come for all of us. John writes, “What came into being through the Word was life, and the life was the light for all people.” When we light our candles tonight, it isn’t just a beautiful tradition—it’s a reminder of something real and radiant. We hold that light in our hands, and then we share it with one another. The room brightens because we each take part in carrying and giving the light. That’s the miracle of Christmas: the light multiplies when it’s shared.

One of my favorite songs to play on repeat during Advent is Josh Garrels’ “May You Find a Light.” I hear it differently on Christmas Eve, when I look out at a sea of candles and think of the weary travelers he sings about—“There are weary travelers, searching everywhere you go. Strangers who are searching, longing deeply to be known. May you find a light to guide you home.”

Because that’s what this night is. A night for travelers, for searchers, for the joyful and the grieving alike. A night when the light of Christ reminds us that we belong—to God, to one another, and to the hope that never fades.

And when the candles are blown out and the year ahead begins to unfold, that light remains. It goes with us into the ordinary days and uncertain seasons, into the moments of laughter and loss. Christ’s light does not flicker out when Christmas ends—it steadies us for the road ahead.

May you find that light tonight. May you carry it home. And may it shine through you in all the places that need a little more warmth, a little more grace, and a little more joy.

And of course—don’t forget to capture that candlelight glow on your annual Christmas Eve photo (we all do it!). Be sure to tag us @fumcdallas so we can share the light together.

Rev. Anna Bundy Hagler, Associate Minister of Communications & Community

Thursday, December 25 - Christmas Day

Luke 2:1-20

2 In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. 2 This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. 3 All went to their own towns to be registered. 4 Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. 5 He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. 6 While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. 7 And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no place in the guest room.

8 Now in that same region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9 Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 10 But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid, for see, I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: 11 to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. 12 This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." 13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

14 "Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"

15 When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." 16 So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph and the child lying in the manger. 17 When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child, 18 and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them, 19 and Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. 20 The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, just as it had been told them.

We love to make Christmas sparkle. We need it too. The world is too brutal, too lonely, too full of headlines that make us numb. We need one morning that tells us light still wins. I like to imagine this day as heaven breaking open, angels shouting, the whole universe singing itself awake. And maybe that's true.

But Luke keeps dragging us back to earth. A couple far from home. No crib, just a feeding trough. No midwife, just panic and sweat. Shepherds who smell like sheep. It's all so human. It's all so close to the bone. And maybe that's the point. God does not wait for a perfect world to show up. God steps straight into the mess. Into the cries and the fear and the blood and the straw. The holy comes to us in flesh and need and vulnerability.

The angel's sign is almost laughable. A baby wrapped in rags. But that's the revolution. God is born in the cracks of the empire, already turning the world right side up. I still long for Mary's Magnificat to come true. For the proud to fall and the hungry to be filled. I ache for that justice. But maybe this is how it begins, not with thunder or power or cosmic wonder, but with a heartbeat.

So pause, my dear friends. Take in the quiet. Love has taken on flesh. God is with us, right now, in the dirt and the light of it all. And even the smallest thing is holy again.

Rev. Mitchell Boone, Senior Minister

Notes

Thank you to all of our writers who made this devotional possible!
We are so grateful that you were willing to share your God-given gifts.





December at FUMC, Dallas

Parents' Day Out

December 6, 9am - 3pm

Need to do some Christmas Shopping? We will host kids (infant - 6th grade) for you to have a day out! \$70 per kid and we will even have a Christmas Present Wrapping Station for you to check that off your list, too! Register today!

First Gifts Christmas Market:

Magnifying God's Love One Gift At A Time

December 7, 9am - 1pm

Shop with a purpose! First Gifts is a gift market that benefits our community partners. Featured gift items – whimsical socks, tamales, Costa Rican coffee, chocolate from Honduras, cookie mix, cornbread mix, Christmas ornaments, candles, and more!

An Evening of Lessons & Carols

December 14, 5:30pm (No morning worship or programming)

Let your hearts be lifted by the beautiful music of Christmas interwoven with words of scripture telling the story of Jesus' birth. Music for the service will be provided by our Chancel Choir, Orchestra and Carillon Youth Bell Choir.

The Longest Night Worship

December 18, 6:30pm

For those experiencing grief or loneliness this Christmas season, we will gather for a night of worship to remember that God's light shines even in the darkness.

Christmas Eve

11am, Children at the Manger

3pm, Modern Worship

5pm, Traditional Candlelight



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