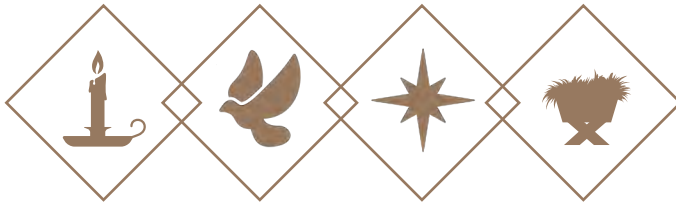




LIGHT
SHINES IN THE
DARKNESS



CORAL RIDGE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
2021 ADVENT DEVOTIONAL



Advent invites us to look back and forward to the coming of Christ in the world and in our hearts. The atonement—forgiveness of sins, adoption as children—for which humanity was waiting has already come through Christ. Yet we eagerly await His return, which is not yet here. The season of Advent has a wonderfully rich history that should guide our hearts into expectation, joy, hope, self-reflection, and ultimately a deeper sense of worship of Jesus.

The term “advent” derives from the Latin verb *advenire*, which simply means “to arrive” or “to come.” Throughout the first four centuries Christians understood Advent to have a dual reference to Jesus’ first coming into this world from his virgin mother as well as His second coming, but the earliest evidence we have of Christians considering “Advent” a season comes from the fifth and sixth centuries. Pope Leo I in the fifth century viewed the closing of the agricultural year in mid-December through a liturgical and theological connection to the end of time, the consummation of history, and thus, the second coming of Christ. However, it’s not until the councils of Tours in the sixth century that we find specific mention of the Advent Season in a threefold sense: as a season of Lent (of penitence leading to baptism), as a celebration of Christ’s birth and the victory over death in His crucifixion and resurrection, and as a season of anticipation of the second Advent of the royal, exalted Christ.

Despite a checkered reception at times, Advent has been seen throughout much of history as a season of anticipation. Like the ancient Israelites who awaited the coming of the Messiah, Christians both anticipate celebrating Jesus’ birth and all that means for us now while also eagerly anticipating His second coming in glory. For many Advent is a spiritual journey, a time of Christian self-examination, dedicating our hearts, minds, and souls afresh to the God who has already entered time to deliver us from sin and who will come again to establish His kingdom fully. This Advent season we find ourselves waiting yet again, but in a very different way. We remember that for Christians throughout the centuries, Advent has been a season of eager anticipation for what will be as well as deep sense of hope, joy, and God’s immanence through the Incarnation. Perhaps no better carol captures this sense than “O Come, O Come Emmanuel.” As we sing this song together, our voices join those of God’s people throughout history, recognizing the now-realized expectation we have in Christ’s first advent as well as the deep longing we all have for His second. Yet we should also experience these layers of anticipation, hope, and joy without losing sight of the historical call to penitence and self-examination so that we may live faithfully in light of the Gospel of God’s coming to meet us, redeem us, and restore us.

NOVEMBER

28

REVELATION 21-22

SUNDAY

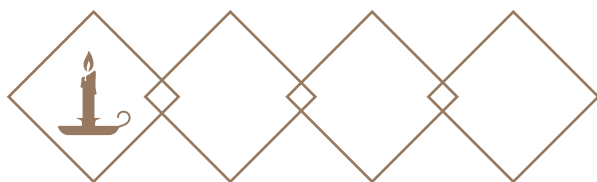
Author: *David Bibee*

In Advent, we look back and meditate on the hopes of God's people before Christ. We are branches extended from the same family tree. Their story is ours from beginning to end. But we also look forward in anticipation to Christ's second Advent. It is fitting that we consider the "first Adam" in order to help us understand Jesus, "the Last Adam" (1 Cor. 15:45). Adam is made from the dust. He is glorious. He's made in God's image. He received life directly from God's own mouth. But he is humanity at its baseline. Eve is made from Adam's own living body. In fact, even the word used when God "creates" Eve is different from when he "formed" Adam. It says that God "builds" Eve. Adam undergoes a sleep like death and God pierces his side, taking bone and flesh to build the bride—bone of Adam's bone and flesh of Adam's flesh.

You may have wondered why King Solomon describes his bride in the Song of Songs using architectural terms. She is described having towers and all the features of a garden paradise. She is described like Eden and the temple. Adam is a clay pot; Eve is a temple. It is the woman who is the glory of the man (1 Cor. 11:7). Eve is the picture of what humanity is destined to become — the collective bride of Christ. Together Adam and Eve were tasked to build a home of the world. Together Christ and his bride are building the eternal home for the world. The Bible has never been about going to heaven, but about transforming "earth as it is in heaven." The world was created to be God's temple. Because of our sin, God hid his presence within the tabernacle and temple. The great transition from the old covenant to the new is the location of God's dwelling place. Moses and David each received a "pattern" from God from which to build the tabernacle and temple (Ex. 25:9, 1 Chron. 28:19). These patterns were based on God's temple in heaven (Heb. 8:5). The first son of David built a temple made by human hands but following Christ's resurrection, "God does not dwell in temples made by hands" (Acts 17:24). In Revelation 21-22, John sees not only what the world will become (21:1-8), but a second vision—the pattern—of what the Church is already (21:9-22:5).

Jesus is the new Solomon. He is the true temple and he has "opened for us a new way, a living way, through the curtain—that is, through his own body" (Heb. 10:19). Jesus is "the cornerstone" of God's house who makes us "living stones [being] built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (1 Pet. 2:5). But don't miss this: Jesus makes us builders too. Paul describes himself as "a skilled master builder" before warning, "Let each one take care how he builds... For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 3:10-11). We are the city on a hill that is "born from above" (John 3:3). Where once we had hearts of stone, Jesus makes us to be living sapphires that gleam with his own Spirit. In sin we made wastelands of the world's gardens, but Jesus causes "streams of living water" flow from our hearts (John 7:38).

The coming of Christ marks a new chapter in God's story. What he accomplished gives each one of us direct access to God. We are his Temple. And he promises to act to bring life as we live for the glory of his name. The Church is the new Jerusalem and the world will become the new Jerusalem as Christ uses new Adams and Eves, remade in his own image, to do so.



NOVEMBER

29

MONDAY

GENESIS 3:15

Author: *Joel Satterly*

"And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike your heel."

It is in the third chapter of Genesis that we encounter the account of the fall of man. We read that man, having been created in the image of God, determines to return the favor. Instead of trusting God, our first parents sought to become like God and as a result, the idyllic shalom of Eden is shattered.

This one verse packs incredible truth in one place. We note the character of God on display – first judgement and then grace. Within the context of a curse, a promise lies. Notice that God speaks to the serpent first and in so doing announces the restoration of creation. The offspring of the woman (Jesus) will crush (defeat death) the serpent's head. God's judgement, then redemption. This is the Gospel.

Second, consider the word enmity. I am not sure about you, but I can't recall the last time I used enmity in a sentence or for that matter, heard anyone use it. Enmity comes from the same Latin root for enemy. God announces the beginning of hostilities – it is a declaration of war of a sort. There is a statement of violence – crushing and striking. There is an abrupt change to the world – from shalom to conflict. Yet there is also the promise of a future victory.

Third, apparently the serpent was known to Adam and Eve. Their conversation struck at the very nature of the created order. Somehow, they thought that the serpent was a trustworthy voice. Some level of familiarity existed which included a substantial amount of influence. There is a warning here about to whom we listen and place our trust.

Perhaps since we repeat this pattern time and again, we do not often read these verses with the weight they contain. Yet, we ought to camp on this just a bit. A broken world is not the way things are supposed to be. God pronounced His creation "very good." However, we thought there was a better way and sought to take over. Predictably, we made a mess. Providentially, God intervenes in the affairs of men and thankfully has made a way for our redemption and the restoration of all things.

Shalom is in fact returning and we get the first hint of it in Genesis 3:15 with the promise of redemption. At Christmas, we celebrate the fulfillment of the promise made. For this reason, Jesus came.

Thanks be to God.



NOVEMBER
30

TUESDAY

GENESIS 17:6-8

Author: *Dr. Rita Cefalu*

The Abrahamic covenant marks a major new development in God's restoration plans for creation. Genesis 17 opens with the Lord appearing to Abram, saying, "I am God Almighty; walk before me and be blameless that I may make my covenant between me and you and multiply you greatly" (Gen. 17:1-2).

This recalls the previous covenant recorded in Genesis 15, wherein Abram believed God's promise of numerous offspring and land inheritance and was declared "righteous" based on faith (Gen. 15:6; 1-21). God now takes the initiative to expand upon his prior promises, requiring of Abram a life of obedience. It's within this context that the particulars of the Abrahamic covenant are set forth:

Not only will Abraham become the father of a multitude of his own biological seed, but God intends to make him "the father of a multitude of nations" from which kings shall emerge. And Abram's name is changed to "Abraham" to reflect this new change in status. Moreover, the Lord promises to be the God of Abraham and his seed for generations to come and to grant them the land of his sojournings—for an everlasting possession (Gen. 17:4-8)!

Circumcision is given as the sign of the covenant, signifying a whole-hearted commitment to a life of obedience that springs from a justifying faith (Gen. 17:9-14). And Abraham's wife's name is changed (to Sarah) to reflect her new status. For Sarah too shall become the "mother of nations" from which kings shall also emerge (Gen. 17:16).

Looking back, these promises remind us of Genesis 3:15 and the expectation of a woman's seed who will restore the royal priestly status forfeited by Adam and Eve. And looking ahead, it would be centuries before Abraham's seed would become a multitude from which kings emerged, let alone nations! He and Sarah would have to wait until the time of David, who was a type of the one yet to come (2 Sam. 7:4-16). Indeed, the anticipated seed for which Abraham waited was ultimately Jesus, the Messiah (John 8:56).

It is only through his person and work that Abraham finally became the father of a multitude, a multitude that includes both Jewish and Gentile believers (Rom. 4:1-22; Rev. 7:9-10). And you and I are included in that multitude, if we, like our father, Abraham, have believed in the one "who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead ... who was delivered over because of our transgressions, and was raised because of our justification" (Rom. 4:23-25).

And not only that, but we also, like our father, Abraham, look forward to our eternal inheritance in the new creation. Because you see, there was something else that he was waiting for. Abraham understood that inheriting the land of his sojournings pointed to a much greater reality than simply the land of Canaan, "for he was looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God" (Heb. 11:10; 8-16).



DECEMBER

1

WEDNESDAY

DEUTERONOMY 18:18-19

Author: *David Bibee*

The Lord said to Moses: "I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their fellow Israelites, and I will put my words in his mouth. He will tell them everything I command him. And I will call to account anyone who does not listen to my words that the prophet speaks in my name."

"What does your dad do?" was always a funny question. My father, Keith, was a sign painter and that unexpected answer frequently caused eyebrows to curve in surprise. Obviously if you stop and think about it, somebody must be producing all the signs hanging about. But in the age of mass marketing and information overload, we naturally go about our day seeing thousands, but taking note of as few as possible; our glazed over eyes constantly spoken to, but hearing little. As a one-man operation, my dad could never compete with modernized print shops in the city. But he had no interest in the city, nor its best practices. Following his return from Vietnam, carrying the mental and physical wounds he sustained there, my parents left Southern California for a small country town seven hours north. As it happens, towns with only one stop light aren't the best locations for building a bustling sign business. But it was a place lacking the clamor and discord of the cityscape they were used to; absent the angry outbursts of hostile strangers and backfiring engines—noises too similar to other blasts he'd once heard, which echoed still, of other times surrounded by frightened and angry men. And in his low-tech shop, modest though it was, he could produce handcrafted masterpieces gilded with gold.

Growing up as I did, I was constantly looking for his signs and the telltale maker's mark on the bottom right—a paintbrush with three drips extended from the final "H." It fills me with delight to this day to find so many still hanging, a decade since he retired. His works are wondrous... I'm compelled to seek them out. I notice them and am delighted to tell others, "Come and see."

One could argue that the biblical story is about a prophetic God raising up prophets of his own. God speaks the world into existence and then creates image bearers who give voice to words never spoken before (Gen. 2:19). Hearing from the Lord and doing as God does, all people would have grown in maturity and wisdom. But Adam was a failed prophet. He didn't see the serpentine signs, and silently submitted to beastly lies. Moses once said that he longed for the Lord to make all his people into prophets (Num. 11:29). To shape the world well, we must see things clearly. We must become accustomed to God and his ways. With sin in the picture, constantly diverting our attention, the struggle is even greater. But Moses didn't have the power to make prophets of everyone. That task would be left for one to come. Not a mere prophet, but the subject of prophecy—the eternal Word was made flesh.

My Pa was a sign painter, but we're in the sign business too. All the former prophets "longed to see what you see ... and to hear what you hear" (Matt. 13:17). We possess the knowledge of something past generations only envisioned in dreams. We have seen the signs of the King and his kingdom, and his Spirit that fills us will supply us for every word we need and every work we must accomplish. In Christ, as the dawn of the new creation has come upon us, and through us still others will come to see "the excellencies of him who called [us] out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Pet. 2:9).



DECEMBER

2

THURSDAY

2 SAMUEL 7:11-16

Author: *Dr. Rita Cefalu*

With the Davidic covenant, we see something of the beginning restoration of representative kingship that was forfeited by our first parents (cf. Ps. 8; Gen. 1:26-28). Ever since Eden, we've been awaiting the advent of the promised seed who would crush the serpent's head and, in the process, suffer a crushing blow to his own heel (Gen. 3:15). Thus far, the seed promise has led from Adam to Seth to Noah to Shem. And from Shem to Abraham to Isaac and Jacob. And from Judah to Perez and now, to David. And with David, we also arrive at the everlasting covenant God makes with him and his seed after him.

2 Samuel 7 records David's decision to build the Lord's house (temple). In the ancient world, it was customary for kings to build temples for their god(s) after they had subdued their enemies. Apparently, David needed to be corrected in this regard. He was not the one in control. God was.

In fact, the Lord reminded David that it was he who had taken him from being a literal shepherd of sheep to become the shepherd (king) over his people, Israel. And it was he who had given David the victory over his enemies. Therefore, the Lord would build David's house—not the other way around—and David's unique seed would have the privilege of building the Lord's temple:

When your days are complete and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your [seed] after you, who will come forth from you, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever (2 Sam. 7:12-13; emphasis added).

Moreover, God promised to be a father to his son and to correct him with the rod of discipline, but would never remove his mercy from him, as he had done with Saul who came before David—his house, kingdom and throne would be firmly established forever (2 Sam. 7:14-16).

Now while Solomon may have been the first son privileged to build God's temple, it's clear from the historical account of his tenure that he didn't usher in the everlasting kingdom (1 Kgs. 1-11). That's because the covenant was promised to the unique seed of David, who, although sinless in the person of his deity and humanity, experienced the crushing blow for our iniquities and the chastening for our well-being, so that by his wounds we may be healed (Isa. 53:5), thereby restoring us to our royal priestly status. And who are now presently being built together to become his holy temple (1 Pet. 2:4-10).

Thus, the Davidic covenant anticipated the advent of Jesus, the seed whom God would raise from the dead and seat on his throne in the heavenlies (Acts 2:22-36)! This unique seed is more than David's son—he is David's Lord (Ps. 110:1; Matt. 22:41-46). And he is our Lord: Jesus, the Messiah to whom all God's promises are 'yes' and 'amen' in him (2 Cor. 1:20)!



DANIEL 7:13-18Author: *David Bibee*

Jesus had a nickname for himself: Son of Man. He refers to himself as the Son of Man more than any other title. Ordinarily we think of the title “Son of God” as being particularly impressive, but that title is applied to many people throughout the Bible. Jesus fulfills the role of the Son of God in an utterly unique way—he is God the Son—but the title itself was common. Son of Man, on the other hand, is extraordinary!

In Daniel’s day, God was in the business of communicating by dreams. Daniel is frequently called upon to interpret the dreams of the kings. In Daniel 7, Daniel is given a vision of King Belshazzar’s dreams. In it he sees four great beasts, terrifying to behold, which merge into one monstrous hybrid. The beasts are four empires beginning with Babylon, but they will not reign forever. Daniel sees that after the four beasts arise, God destroys them and their dominion and given to another: one “like a son of man” (Dan. 7:13).

Daniel sees one he presumes is just a man, who ascends “with the clouds of heaven” and is presented before God’s heavenly throne. And he was given everything: “dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion which shall not pass away” (Dan. 7:14). The four empires (Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Rome) would come, but they would all fall before the son of man, and the whole world will bow before him as well.

There’s a reason that Jesus came announcing that the kingdom was at hand. His the kingdom he was describing. Jesus told his disciples in secret, “there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom” (Matt. 16:28). Words like these were the last thing Jesus said before he is sentenced to die for them: “I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven” (Matt. 26:64). For the people of God, Jesus is their greatest dream made flesh. But for the “brood of vipers” in league with the ancient serpent, he is the thing of nightmares. But his kingdom is not like the kingdoms of this world. He does not conquer by killing but dying. On the cross, the fangs of the serpent pierced Jesus’ heel. But Jesus dies to make us free—at “the place of the skull”—crushing the serpent’s head beneath his feet (Matt. 27:33, cf. Gen. 3:15).

Today if sin entangles you and you feel like you’re the monster or you’re burdened by monsters yet roaming the earth, hear the good news: The son of Man reigns and “the saints of the Most High shall receive the kingdom and possess [it] forever, forever and ever” (Dan. 7:18)!



PSALM 110

Author: *David Bibee*

Many think that God's decision to enter covenant with Abraham and his descendants establishes a kind of permanent distinction between Jews and Gentiles, but this misses the point entirely, overlooking the beginning of the story. "From one man," Paul says, "[God] made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth ... so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out to him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us. 'For in him we live and move and have our being'" (Acts 17:26-28). God is not merely interested in relationship with one people, but all people.

God "made all the nations ... so that they would seek him" (Acts 17: 26-27). In sin, however, all the nations had gone astray. To resolve this, God chose Abraham in order to sow the seeds of a new society and culture—a different kind of people—so that all nations of Adam's fallen children might be reconciled. God's people were chosen to be "a light for the Gentiles" (Isa. 42:6).

When David's son Solomon built the temple, he understood its purpose. Solomon asked God to answer the prayers of any Gentile who prayed toward the temple, so that "all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you" (1 Kgs. 8:41, 43). The temple was to be a house of prayer for all nations. But the leaders of Israel had forgotten this calling. The court of the Gentiles had been turned into a marketplace, filled with vendors hawking wares, exchanging currency, and selling animals for sacrifice. It was only a good setup if your desire was to keep Gentiles away from the temple, rather than obeying God by inviting them near. When David's son Jesus saw how his temple had been perverted, he began throwing tables. With God's people fallen into darkness, failing to live a life worthy of the calling they received, a perfect king was needed set things straight.

Too often we imagine the gospel story as being like the story of King Arthur—an epic of the "once and future king." But that isn't it. The first verse of Psalm 110 is quoted more frequently in the New Testament than any other verse precisely because the apostles understood the gospel as being "the good news of the kingdom" that has already come (Luke 4:43, 8:1; Acts 8:13). On Pentecost, Peter proclaimed that the Spirit being poured out upon them was the evidence that God had seated Jesus upon the eternal throne, exactly as David prophesied here: "The LORD said to my Lord, 'Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool'" (Psa. 110:1).

In Christ, God has not merely crowned Jesus, but has also "raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places" (Eph. 2:6). All "peoples, nations, and languages [will] serve him" and his "dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away" (Dan. 7:14). His enthronement happens before things are set right, in order they will be set right. The Lord reigns "in the midst of [his] enemies" (Psa. 110:2). He strengthens us with bread and wine from his table in the presence of our enemies as well (Psa. 23:5). May we not forget who our Lord is, as God's people so often have. May we rush toward the darkness in this world with genuine hope, knowing that our king is not merely "once and future," but the one who was, and is, and is to come.



DECEMBER

5

SUNDAY

ISAIAH 9:1-7

Author: *Andrew Siegenthaler*

When most people hear the word counselor, they think of a therapist. But that's not what this title of Christ is about. It's not saying that Jesus is a wonderful therapist. The context of this passage is not psychological, it's political. It's about nations and wars and kingdoms and thrones and governments.

All great rulers surround themselves with wise counselors. Historians say one of the reasons for Queen Elizabeth's greatness was the wisdom of her counselor William Cecil. He always told Elizabeth what he thought was best for crown and country, even if it made her mad. She often let him have it with her infamous temper. But when Cecil died, Elizabeth said: "No prince in Europe had such a counselor."

King Jesus has no need for outside counselors because he himself is the Wonderful Counselor. He has a strategy for using you, the circumstances of your life, and even the huge events and forces swirling around you to advance the interests of his kingdom. The name Wonderful Counselor is not so much about Jesus giving you counsel and guidance for your life—although he certainly does that—it's about his perfect understanding and plan. He knows what he's doing. He's making all the right decisions. He sees the big picture and your little part in it. So, you can trust him. You can follow him. You have no reason to panic and look for help in other things.

Isaiah spoke these words at a dark time both spiritually and politically. Israel was divided into northern and southern kingdoms and on verge of civil war. But there was an even greater threat. The Assyrian Empire with its powerful military machine was on the march. In desperation, all the little kingdoms in the region started making alliances. The northern kingdom of Israel made an alliance with Syria. The southern kingdom of Judah, the house of David, was pondering alliance with Egypt.

Through Isaiah the Lord said to his people: Quit relying on political strategies to solve your problems! Depend on me. I'm not intimidated by superpowers. I'm for you. I will deliver you and work this out for my glory. In this context, Isaiah gave this prophecy of the coming Messiah, his reign and government. But the response of Israel was, The Messiah may be coming, but we need a Plan B to fall back on. We need these foreign alliances. We'd rather do things our way and keep our own counsel. They did, with disastrous results.

Here's the point of this passage for you. In dark times, in threatening times, when the clouds are gathering, you must trust the Wonderful Counselor. Will you trust Jesus? Will you believe he is working out all things for his glory and your good? Will you believe he is advancing his kingdom and building his church? If you do, you'll be free from panic and fear.



DECEMBER

6

MONDAY

LUKE 1:46-56

Author: *David Bibee*

Americans are uniquely steeped in a culture of individualism. On one hand, thank God for that! Recognizing the fundamentally Christian perspective that all people are made in the image of God, our constitution enshrined absolute protections for every individual, each endowed with inalienable rights by the Creator himself. Notice, it is the Creator who distributes rights, rather than governments. Governments are commanded to be God's servants that protect the rights and lives of their own people. This is all well and good and biblical. But individualism also has its downsides.

Each of us has an individual responsibility to God, our personal maker, and God intends each of us to become mature and faithful people that live in the world according to his purposes. But the way God works within the world is by joining individuals, one to another. It was not good for Adam to be alone. Adam was not capable of accomplishing God's purposes on his own. God created Eve to be that helper. In their union, they would be able to accomplish God's purposes together. But sin breaks bonds and severs connections. Sin causes us to live for the glory of our own name, seeking our own ends, without regard for anyone else. Like Cain, we kill our brothers. We lie and gossip. We covet and steal. We break vows and betray trust. From one family came all the families upon the earth, but sin has made us enemies.

God deals with us as a family. In Luke 1, Mary provides us with our family history, giving us hope for the future. She erupts in praise, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior" (Luke 1:46). God has done mighty things for those who fear him "from generation to generation" (1:50). He had spoken promises "to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever" and it is these promises that will be fulfilled in Christ (1:55). From the beginning with one family and throughout all generations, God was keeping the promise that one day there would come a son that would make everything right. Jesus is the only begotten Son of God and he makes all of us, male or female, to be like firstborn sons (Gal. 3:26, 4:6); that is, he makes all of us to be the heir of God's own inheritance. In the fall of our first parents, all humanity was alienated. In Christ, God adopts the wayward and makes them his own. In baptism, we emerge from heavenly waters, like a new birth, into the kingdom of God's Son. The many who were scattered, become one family. The church of all tribes is "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession" (1 Pet. 2:9).

Having peace with God, we are to become peacemakers that seek the lost, rather than casting them out in rejection. Strangers and former enemies become our mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers. But there are still others who will join us in God's family, which will outnumber the sands and stars. We carry the good news of peace and hope and we can rely upon the God who remembers his promises for thousands of generations that he will adopt even more, as we invite others to come and be reconciled to the Father. In Advent we praise God for having made us part of God's family and we look in anticipation to the day when God's full purposes will be realized: "to unite all things in [Christ]" (Eph. 1:10).



JOHN 1:1-18

Author: Joel Satterly

Every family celebrates holiday traditions. Some have been well established while others may be more contemporary. Often among those most closely held is the reading of the Christmas story. The beginning verses of John may not be readily identified as the traditional Christmas story—thanks to Charlie Brown, Luke’s narrative holds that spot. But in the Satterly household the reading of these verses in John 1 on Christmas morning became standard practice when our children were very young. We fell in love with this passage because it begins, not in a manger, but with the conception of the very cosmos. It features Christ as the central character and depicts Him in His most powerful form – The Word full of grace and truth.

The impact of these first verses in John’s Gospel became profoundly meaningful the first time we experienced Lessons and Carols, a Christmas service with origins in the late 19th century and made popular toward the end of World War I at King’s College, Cambridge. The service includes nine “lessons” – Bible passages concerning the Christmas story, each with a corresponding hymn. Traditionally John 1:1-14 is the ninth and final lesson and is read by the Provost of the College. Many years ago, I was asked to participate in a Lessons and Carols service and as Headmaster was assigned the ninth lesson. It sure stuck!

“In the beginning was the Word...” This announcement echoes Genesis as John proclaims the wonder of Christmas – the Word became flesh and dwelt among us! In the first verse he announces the divinity of Christ and His unity with the Father, links Jesus with the creation, and identifies Him as the “light of the world.” Not only that, John declares that Jesus is life – in Him and Him only. This marvelous passage captures the essence of the Gospel. In these few verses we see the Why; the reason; the purpose. Verse 12 captures this incredible reality, “to those who received Him, to those who believed on His name, He gave the right to become children of God.”

In the midst of our current cultural age with competing narratives and truth claims, the opening passage of John’s Gospel directs us to the one place with meaning and real significance. He points us to Jesus. There is no better Christmas story than that.

Thanks be to God!



DECEMBER

8

WEDNESDAY

MARK 1:14-15

Author: *Caleb Koornneef*

In my upbringing, family vacations usually took the form of a road trip to a particular destination. All eight of us would pile into the minivan, say a prayer for safe travels and head across the country to visit family and friends along the way. Much of the time was spent listening to audiobooks, playing the "Alphabet Game" or debating which movie to watch. One of our favorite places to travel was southern California where my grandparents had a second home. It was paradise to us! We loved getting invited to their oasis in the middle of the dry desert to spend time waterskiing, jumping off the dock, fishing, riding horses, playing fetch with the dogs, driving the golf cart, picking fresh grapefruits and lemons, and so much more. Whenever they invited us to visit, they didn't have to say, "Leave Colorado and come to California." To go to California is to leave Colorado. It's impossible to be in both places at once. Jesus says something similar in Mark 1:14-15, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel." In order to come to the Kingdom of God, you must leave your sin behind.

When Jesus says, "Repent," it means more than just feeling sorry for your sin. Repentance involves a change of direction. Feeling the weight of your sin is the beginning of the process, but by itself, feeling sorry doesn't turn you around. Repentance is the action where self-reliance turns into reliance on God. It's trusting less in yourself and more in God and his promises. This happens only by the conviction and leading of the Holy Spirit when we believe in the Gospel. There are lots of people who acknowledge the Gospel, but true faith is always accompanied by genuine repentance. We shouldn't think of repentance as a transaction where God offers forgiveness or faith in exchange for our apologies. Rather, repentance is the way in which we come to God and it goes hand-in-hand with believing the truth of Scripture.

Before we can repent or believe, we must be called. Just like my grandparents had to call and invite us to join them in California, God takes the first action by calling us out of places of darkness and sin into places of light and holiness. The Light of the World that we celebrate each year at Christmas is the same Light that proclaims that "the kingdom of God is at hand."

As the sun rises, it shines brighter and brighter until it is fully evident, giving light and life to everything it touches. In a more profound way, Jesus is the source by which the kingdom of God continues to shine and display God's glory in everything. What a gift! How will you humbly respond to the Gospel this Advent?



JOHN 3:1-21

Author: *David Bibee*

When I was very young, I heard somewhere that eating carrots helps develop night vision. I didn't much like carrots, but I envisioned that one day I'd achieve superhuman sight. Like them or not, I relentlessly devoured carrots at every opportunity. You can imagine my distress when I discovered all those optical-enhancing vitamins required cooking for the body to absorb them well, but I never cooked even one. They were all as useless to my goal as they were unpleasant.

Jesus was born in a time of great darkness. Rome was oppressive. The priests were corrupt. The pharisees trained hypocrites. Believing themselves to be wise, they saw themselves as bright exemplars of righteousness. The people were "harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd" (Matt. 9:36). In our passage today, Jesus speaks with Nicodemus about the arrival of the true light. "Unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God," Jesus told Nicodemus (John 3:3). It seems nonsensical—no man can be born a second time, as Nicodemus remarks. God knits us together within the formless darkness of the womb and we emerge into the light of life, never to return. But physical blindness wasn't the issue. Sin degrades our discernment, producing foolish thinking and still darker hearts (Rom. 1:21). As fallen people, we get easily accustomed to sin. When everyone around you do the same sinful things, it becomes very difficult to even notice that there is a problem. Every culture perpetuates its own values and holds up an image of "normal" and "the good life." To live out of step with your culture is incredibly difficult. When in Rome, do as the Romans do, as it were. But what if "the good life" held up before us is a pathway toward death? What if evil is called "normal"? What if insanity is called sane?

The great danger before us is that we will get so used to the evil around us, that we come to believe it isn't dark at all. Our eyes naturally adjust to the light available to us. Armed with nothing but a bucket of carrots, we delude ourselves into believing we have everything we need to find our way. Sin and darkness are deceptive and can give the impression that this is true. Darkness that at first feels oppressive eventually becomes lighter, and lighter still. But as our vision adjusts to darkness, light itself becomes blinding and uncomfortable. Darkness becomes like light and light becomes as darkness. Who needs the light, when dark sight is all you need? This was the true issue: "[T]his is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and the people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil" (John 3:19). But with God, darkness is the precursor of creation. The earth began in a state of empty, formless darkness, but burst into glory when God spoke light into being: "And there was evening and there was morning" (Gen. 1:5). In the biblical worldview, days don't begin with daybreak, but evening. Darkness and then light.

Christ Jesus came into the world to redeem the world. He came to make the blind see. He came to shine lifegiving light through every fog. While every power of darkness would rise to try to defeat him, he gives eternal life to everyone who trusts in him. Though your sins are like scarlet, they can be white as snow. Though you walk through midnight shadows, the Lord says, "I will lead the blind in a way that they do not know, in paths that they have not known I will guide them. I will turn the darkness before them into light" (Isa. 42:16).



DECEMBER
10

FRIDAY

MATTHEW 5:1-12

Author: *Dr. Sam Lamerson*

My birthday is coming up and it reminds me of other birthdays. One in which my children told me that they had a special gift, but I had to go with them to get it. When we arrived at the animal shelter, I was informed that there was a beagle who was on his last days. If I didn't adopt him he would probably not make it. No pressure though. His name is Tom and despite most beagle's obvious sin nature, I love him dearly, even when he climbs on the table and eats all the candy. Getting Tom was wonderful news.

What was the best news that you have ever heard? Let's leave out the Gospel as the most obvious answer (and the answer you would give to anyone in church) and ask for something else. Maybe it was when your spouse agreed to be married, or when your child was born. Maybe it was when you graduated or found your dream job. What news did you hear that made you think, "That is wonderful news."

N.T. Wright in his translation of these verses renders the word usually translated "blessed" as "wonderful news." What does it mean to be blessed by this wonderful news? The first twelve verses of the Sermon on the Mount use this word nine times, a sure clue that we should pay attention to it. These promises, often called the "Beatitudes" because of the Latin translation of the word "blessed," are indeed great news.

We are reminded that Jesus' preaching was always about the Kingdom of Heaven and that this Kingdom is both already here and not yet fully realized. It might help to think of the Civil War. General Lee surrendered to General Grant at Appomattox in April of 1865. For all practical purposes, the war was over, yet there were battles that continued to take place after the surrender. The fact that battles were still going on did not diminish the fact that the war was over.

God's Kingdom, defined well by one theologian as: "What our country would be if God made the budget," was inaugurated by Christ's work (healing, preaching, and eventually dying and being resurrected) and the battle over the evil one was won at the resurrection. Yet despite the victory of Jesus, Satan still causes problems.

The good news is that Satan, no matter what he does, has lost and cannot have victory as the Kingdom/Church goes forward. The bad news is that he continues to fight, but this will not last. At our remembrance of the Advent (the coming of our Savior) we look forward to the day when Jesus comes for the second time, when the Kingdom of Heaven will be fully realized in the New Heaven and New Earth. A time when all of those who are mentioned in the "Beatitudes" and all of those who are members of the Kingdom will be the recipients of this wonderful news.



DECEMBER

11

SATURDAY

MATTHEW 11:28-30

Author: *Dr. Sam Lamerson*

The heaviest burden in my life was not physical. Cindy was pregnant and the church that I worked for did not offer insurance. We were selling some of our belongings to pay the minimum that the doctor expected. This particular week, my father had passed away, and a couple of days later a car lost control and ran through the front of our house taking out not just the front door, but the entire front of the parsonage.

I remember once when Cindy was at a baby-shower and I was home alone. I began thinking, "I'm trying to minister to the Lord's people in a poor church, I've tried to obey God in what I am doing, and here I am with no money, no insurance, and no front of the house." It was as if the Lord spoke to me in that moment (note I say "as if" because I am Presbyterian). He said "If all that you have is me, is that enough? I have never forgotten that and I remember it every time I face difficulties.

Take a moment and think about what was the heaviest load that you have ever carried. For some of you it may be bags of concrete as you were building something. For others it may be the last few months that you carried your child before she was born. For others the load may have been financial or mental as you grew more and more concerned about some problem or member of the family. Now take a moment to remember putting that load down. Maybe the child was born, the financial problem resolved itself, or the member of the family came back to the Lord. Think about what a wonderful feeling it was to rest from that burden. In this passage, Jesus used the word "yoke." A yoke in the first century was a piece of wood used primarily to hold two animals (usually oxen) together so that they were both plowing in a straight line. Another use of the yoke was for people who could not afford animals. Sometimes they would place a yoke on their shoulders with a large bucket or receptacle on each side. This would allow them to use their entire body to carry the load. Thus, they could carry more though it was difficult. It would have been a wonderful feeling putting that load down.

To a first-century person who lived during Jesus' time, the yoke would have been not literal but religious. A teacher or rabbi would place certain constraints, rules, and regulations on his followers. Many of them were very strict. Reading the Dead Sea Scrolls shows just how strict. When someone joined the community, he or she took an oath that they would never eat food that had not been blessed by their leader. So, if you decided to leave you could either break your vow to God (a very serious offense) or you could starve to death. There are many such religious burdens that were placed by teacher and rabbis and Jesus wants his followers to know that his yoke is different. Jesus is saying that the last thing in his heart is to give us a hard time. He makes our yoke light because he has done the heavy lifting for us.

Jesus has obeyed every rule for us and he calls all of us who are tired of carrying our load to turn it over to him. When we think of the Christ-child during this season, let's not forget that he grew up, he became the God/man, he atoned for the sins of his people. Whatever burden you are carrying now, he stands ready to help. Think about turning your burdens over to the master who was born as a child but left this world a different place. A place where any one of us can find true rest. If all that you have is God, is that enough?



DECEMBER

12

SUNDAY

ISAIAH 11:1-10

Author: *Dr. Sam Lamerson*

For some of us the call of God on our lives brings us into difficult circumstances. The first church which I pastored was small and poor. I remember working really hard to bring in new members, praying that God would bless us, and spending hours in sermon preparation, yet nothing seemed to work. The church didn't grow, our finances were always on the edge, and a certain group in the congregation complained about how I wasn't doing my job because more people weren't coming.

At some point during that time, I decided to read through the book of Isaiah. Chapter six is the scene of the great throne room where Isaiah meets God (the New Testament tells us that it was actually Christ). God call Isaiah to the life of a prophet, telling God's people what they desperately need to hear. A little later in chapter six, God tells Isaiah that no matter what he preaches, the people will not listen, will not hear, and will not turn from their wickedness.

What a difficult call this was for Isaiah. Go on doing what God has told you, but you will see no results, there will be no growth, no outward signs that your ministry is a success. Isaiah asks one simple question, a question that we would all ask: "How Long?" God answers with a devastating answer. He tells Isaiah that the cities will lie in ruin and the people will be taken into exile because they did not listen. This is a pretty depressing call to ministry. Work as hard as you can, but you will see no results.

If this were the end of Isaiah's story then the news would be most miserable, but it is not. Later on, in the eleventh chapter, Isaiah is offered a small glimmer of hope. He is told in 11:1 that one day a shoot will grow from the root of Jesse, and he will make things right with the world. He will help the poor, treat everyone justly, and offer redemption of the entire world. He promises us a day when a cow and a bear will eat together, and a baby will play by the hole of a cobra.

We long for that day, but we know that one who was from the root of Jesse. His name is Jesus; it is him that we serve, and the results of our work belong only to him.



DECEMBER

13

MONDAY

MICAH 5:2, 4

Author: *David Bibee*

In Judges 17, we're introduced to a family of idolaters. At first, they appear to simply be errant Jews. They still worship God, but the son, Micah, is a thief. He robs his mother and then returns the money because he heard her utter a curse against the thief. The mother praises God for her returned money and immediately dedicates the full 1,100 silver pieces to the Lord. Then she takes the money, keeps most of it for herself, and instructs her son to make an idol out of the remaining two hundred pieces of silver. This is her act of service to God: swindling him out of roughly 80% of what she promised, all to build an idol, violating at least five of the ten commandments in the process. Her son has an entire collection of idols in their home. From the silver, he was even able to make a counterfeit breastplate styled after the high priest's ephod. Perhaps the son is rotten precisely because the whole family is rotten.

As if to give us hope, Judges tells us that a Levite from Bethlehem came to town, looking for a place to settle. Victory! The Levites know the law well and were tasked with teaching the people and assisting the priests. But the rot is deeper than we could have imagined. The Levite joins with Micah and his mother, taking on the role of priest for their home filled with images of demons. Micah is elated, "Now I know that the LORD will prosper me, because I have a Levite as a priest" (Judg. 17:13). Bethlehem, it appears, produces blasphemers and apostates. The people became wicked under the guidance of evil leaders, deluded into believing that their sin would result in God's favor.

Worship shapes who we are becoming. Faithful worship of the living God produces living hope and lively witness. Bowing to idols, on the other hand, produces nothing but despair. Idols have no power that we do not give them. They aren't alive. They cannot see, hear, or speak., and they make us to be blind, deaf, and dumb. It's not that they have power to change us, but that we change ourselves to conform ourselves to them. Why should Micah think stealing from his mother is wrong if her example to him has been to rob God? For that matter, why should our own children prioritize worshipping God if they do not see us prioritize worshipping God?

Jesus came not just to save individuals, but the whole world by saving individuals. If we give ourselves to the Lord and seek his kingdom first, we will inevitably be transformed into the image of Jesus (Rom. 8:28). But more than that, as we go on living, where we are will likewise be transformed into a new image—"On earth as it is in heaven." Our family will change, our apartment building will change, our city will change, as we change and go on living new lives. As if to show this, Christ demonstrates that the greatest good can come from places of historic evil. The same is true for every "Bethlehem" lurking in your heart.

The prophets have told us where the world is headed as the gospel goes into the world: then "the Lord of hosts [will say], 'Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my inheritance'" (Isa. 19:25). Jesus loves his enemies and redeems them, making them to be redeemers of those around them. From Bethlehem false priests once taught the people how to corrupt the world, but the true Shepherd from Bethlehem makes all things new.



DECEMBER

14

TUESDAY

LUKE 4:17-21

Author: *David Bibee*

When Christ was born, it is hard to overestimate how great the sense of anticipation was. These were the days when the Messiah was to be born. In fact, God even provided a timeline for when the “anointed prince” would come. It would take four hundred and forty-nine years (“seventy weeks” in prophet speak) from the time God’s people were allowed to rebuild Jerusalem until God would “put an end to sin” and “bring in everlasting righteousness” (Dan. 9:24). It was finally time and the people knew it. Indeed, the first thing Jesus says in his public ministry is just that: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:15).

It’s hard to imagine what it must have been like for them. The story of God’s people is long and difficult. Born in slavery but redeemed to freedom, they have had times of unimaginable greatness, richly blessed and abundant in righteousness. They had been chastised and exiled, suffering under the persecution of pagan overlords. They knew blessing and great distress. But God has always kept his promises.

In Luke 4, Jesus selected a passage from Isaiah 61 to read as a summary of his ministry. It may seem an odd passage to use given that they had already returned from exile. Isaiah 61 is a passage about Israel’s return from exile. It speaks of the restoration Israel and of the fact that all the nations will come to serve God and his people. All who were downcast and afflicted would be lifted up. All God’s people would be as priests in the world.

Jesus makes it clear to them that he was the fulfillment of these promises. God promised to bring in a year of Jubilee, rescuing his people and freeing all the oppressed. Many may have imagined that this was already fulfilled, but Christ declared to them that the fulfillment was in their very midst, right before their eyes. Seeing, they were blind. They knew Jesus. They knew his family. They knew a messiah was coming, but surely not him. His words, which should have brought them tears of joy, drove them into a murderous rage! As God once drove Adam and Eve out of the garden, the people “drove him out of the town” and sought to throw him from a cliff (Luke 4:29).

This is the true exile Jesus came to free us from. Not merely exile from a city or a land, but exile from God himself. How could we ever experience liberty if we cannot even see our chains? How could they hope for salvation when they cannot even recognize God in their very presence?

I do not know what chains ensnare you. I do not know what oppression you’ve caused or experienced. I do not know what blindness you are afflicted with. But the time is fulfilled. If you heard his voice today, do not harden your hearts. Come, be free, and join us in Jubilee!



DECEMBER
15

WEDNESDAY

LUKE 7:36-50

Author: *Caleb Koornneef*

Sometimes it's hard for us to understand the reality of debt. In our culture, we know debt is a real thing, but it's still tempting to take out a bigger mortgage than we need, buy nicer cars than we can afford, or just live the way we want to live despite the cost. Much of this is made possible by this wonderful thing called "credit." The "credit mentality" has unfortunately crept its way into the Christmas season over the years as we're flooded with ads and harkened to the commercialism of the holiday season. When November rolls around, I often say to myself, "I need to be better at doing this whole gift-giving thing—I'm going to make sure I have a list of gift ideas for my wife and family. I'm going to get everything ordered on time and I'm going to watch a gift-wrapping tutorial on YouTube this year so it doesn't look like all my gifts were wrapped by a 5 year old." It's very easy to get caught up in the "credit mentality" where product and performance take precedence over the act of giving and the gift itself. Jesus taught on this complex as well.

In Luke 7:36-50 as Jesus is eating dinner at a Pharisee's house. A woman who was notorious for her sin came in and washed Jesus' feet with costly perfume. She was so overwhelmed with gratitude that she wept and used her tears and long hair to wash and dry Jesus' feet. This probably freaked some people out! Imagine if you were the Pharisee and a strange, not-so-reputable woman interrupted your dinner with an important teacher. If I'm totally honest, I would (and often do) respond with grumbling and discontentment the way this Pharisee did. But Jesus doesn't scold anyone or make a bigger scene. He simply, responds with a short parable about debt, performance, and the gift of forgiveness.

We all have a debt to pay to God because we're all sinners. For some reason, we think that if we perform better than the person next to us that it's all okay. We say things like, "Well at least I'm not as bad that person" or "At least I've done more good than bad in my life." The fact of the matter is, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God..." (Romans 3:23).

While today's passage gives us a lot to think about concerning the weight of our sin and our vain struggles to perform, it also gives us great hope. Those who have been forgiven much, love much. Those who have been forgiven little, love little. The point is this: forgiveness of sins is a free gift



DECEMBER

16

THURSDAY

LUKE 11:14-23

Author: *David Bibee*

The Bible has several interconnected storylines. First, we see that God creates the world and intends for humanity to spread throughout the world and cultivate it. It is a kind of coming of age tale. The world and humanity are created in a state of immaturity and infancy. The world was not yet cultivated, beyond the original Garden. There were no “bush[es] of the field” and “no small plants of the field had yet sprung up—for the LORD God had not caused it to rain [and] there was no man to work the ground” (Gen. 2:5). The cultivation of the world is a collaborative work of God and human image bearers.

In Genesis 3, we see the emergence of two new storylines. The angels were created to be “ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of [us] who are to inherit salvation” (Heb. 1:14). But Satan and many other angels reject this role and seek to take away dominion from humanity and from God. In Genesis 3, we witness not only the fall of mankind, but first the fall of Satan, a heavenly prince. With the fall of many angels, Paul tells us that the overarching conflict is in fact in the spiritual realm. We do not “wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (Eph. 6:12). The demonic spirits have to be expelled from the world God created. But in sin, we too must be expelled from God’s presence. Jesus comes to redeem fallen humanity from its own sin and to break the stranglehold the ancient serpent had over us.

The conflict between the devil and the Lord come to a head in Christ’s life. Jesus tells his disciples, “Now is the judgment of this world. Now the ruler of this world will be cast down. But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself” (John 12:31-32). Jesus faces demons everywhere he goes because the coming of Christ into the world meant that the devil’s time was short. Jesus’ enemies believe themselves to be the truly righteous, but they are blinded. When Satan’s influence grows within us, he blinds us (2 Cor. 4:4). All his promises of wisdom—lies each one—bring only dark sight. While they claimed to be children of Abraham and children of God, Jesus says, “If you were Abraham’s children, you would be doing the works that Abraham did... You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father’s desires (John 8:39, 44).

Only Jesus has the power to cast away our demons. Only Jesus has the power to break the chains in which we have been shackled. Only Jesus has the power to bind Satan and his minions, and he promises to do just that. John tells us that Jesus came, John tells us, the “reason the Son of Man appeared was to destroy the works of the devil” (1 John 3:8). What works has Satan worked in your life? Which of his works is Christ calling you to destroy? May we flee from the serpent and his venom. May we run to Christ, the world’s new ruler, who crushes Satan’s head into the dust.



DECEMBER
17

FRIDAY

Acts 17:22-34

Author: *David Bibee*

Something that struck me recently was the fact that the creeds we confess are filled with statements about history, not simply doctrinal ideas. We confess that there is one God who created the world. We confess that Jesus is God's only begotten Son, that he became a man during the first century when Pontius Pilate was governor. We confess he truly died, was buried, and emerged from that grave alive three days later. We confess that, after this, he also ascended into heaven where he is presently seated at the right hand of his almighty Father. We confess that Jesus, now enthroned, also sent his Spirit upon his church, and will one day come again at the end to raise us up to new life.

Christianity is not a religion about what we want to happen. There are many things we may want or believe which have no basis in reality. We have delusional perspectives of ourselves. How many of you didn't realize you were terribly selfish until you moved in with your spouse? It's one thing to believe you are a gracious housemate, but actually being one is another thing entirely. The only way we can actually live in the world well is if we understand reality as it really is. We see very clearly throughout the scriptures and in our own day the kind of chaos that ensues from everyone doing what is right in their own eyes. All the more dangerous if we fail to recognize that ignorance is, in many ways, our way of life.

Christianity is about the news of what has actually happened and what that now means for us. The message of Christianity is that God himself became man, walked among us and he made the way to life known to us. Paul's sermon in Athens makes this point forcefully. In their own wisdom, the Athenians had erected idols throughout their city, including even altars to "an unknown god." This has the appearance of wisdom—if there are potentially hundreds of gods in the world, it's best to cover one's bases. Reminds me a bit of a woman who made the news a few years ago for claiming to be both a Christian minister and a practicing Muslim. Of course, to embrace one is to reject the other altogether, but the world in its wisdom only ends up more confused.

In Advent we celebrate the fact that God has made himself perfectly known to us in Jesus. Because God has made himself known, we also must boldly proclaim the news of what God has done. God overlooked the times of ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. There is coming a day where all of us will stand at the judgment and will be measured against Christ himself, and we know this because Jesus came back from the dead. And the one who defeated death is the Lord—there are no others.

This Advent, may we guard ourselves from ignorance. May we become people of the truth who joyfully proclaim it. May we boldly seek to invite others to know him, even as we have come to know him.



DECEMBER
18

SATURDAY

PSALM 2

Author: *Andrew Siegenthaler*

King David wrote this Psalm because he saw enemies plotting against Israel. He heard about armies being raised and schemes being hatched. Today we read news stories about the Communist Party closing churches and arresting believers in China, and stories about Christian moms and dads in Nigeria seeing their daughters snatched away and forced into marriage to Muslims. In secular Western countries and in the USA ,Christians face attempts to force them out of the public square.

So, believers look up to heaven in distress. And there is God the Father, seated on the throne. What's his response to these evil plots and schemes? Is he worried? Is he fretting? Is he wringing his hands? No. He's laughing! He's laughing in derision. He's laughing in scorn at these silly plots and schemes to oppress his people and throw off his rule. That picture of God laughing here may seem odd, but this isn't the only place. Other Psalms say:

"O Lord, you laugh at them, you scoff at the nations." "The Lord laughs at the wicked, for he knows their day is coming."

When you read news stories about the devastating effects of persecution on Christian brothers and sisters around the world, you ought to grieve and pray. Pray for God's mercy on them and the grace to endure, and for deliverance. Pray for the salvation of their persecutors. But you should also look at the most vicious mockery and persecution of the church and hear the sound of God's laughter. His laughter assures us that he is in control.

My dad had a little wooden sailboat when I was a boy. He would take it out on Wilson Lake on the Tennessee River. When the wind was strong the boat would lean so much that the gunwale would be just inches above the water. I was certain we were going to capsize and drown. But then my dad would laugh and let out a whoop and I would relax a little. Because I would know, with a little boy's confidence, that he had it under control.

The laughter of your Father in heaven should reassure you. He is saying: This is nothing. They think they are in control. How wrong they are. How vain. Don't be afraid, little flock. This is nothing for me. I'll give them their time to test my people with fire. But when I'm ready to put an end to their schemes, I'll do it in a moment. Many figures throughout history who have announced the end of Christianity—Diocletian, Marx, Lenin, Mao. Where are they now? And in a few decades, where will the current despisers of Christ be? They'll be gone.

Take heart in the laughter of your heavenly Father. He's in complete control and he's working out his purposes. What are God's purposes?



ISAIAH 35

Author: *David Bibee*

The state of the earth has been linked with humanity from the very beginning. God forms the dry land and then forms man out of the dust before breathing into his nostrils to give him life, then forming Eve from his flesh. Together they are given delegated authority to have dominion over the world. As we go, so goes the world.

Because of sin humanity is cursed and the world degraded. Instead of easy and joyful labor, God tells Adam, "[C]ursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you... By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground" (Gen. 3:17-19).

Sin makes wastelands of the world, even as it lays waste to human beings. The powers of this fallen world do all they can to anesthetize us to the carnage, calling dead image bearers mere "collateral damage," like superfluous details. The inconvenient truth is that God knows them all by name and hears the blood which cries out from the ground. But when the gospel is successful, Isaiah tells us that the nations shall make their swords into gardening tools (Isa. 2:4).

Growing up in a community that was rich in agriculture, you could smell when you were getting close to home. Isaiah 35 reminds me of that smell—rich soil, dark, pungent, and filled with worms. It speaks of the restoration of God's people in earthly terms because the restoration of God's people does restore the earth too. In judgment God had made them blind and deaf to his word, in judgment for their willful rebellion. But now they would be led on "the Way of Holiness" (Isa. 35:8).

The earth cannot thrive when God's people love evil. But when God's people are redeemed, the very wilderness and the cracked ground will rejoice, and the desert itself shall burst into floral displays. God would make rivers in the desolate places and "the redeemed shall walk there" (Isa. 35:9). Paul tells us that the creation "eagerly waits" for the day when our bodies are resurrected because the day of our resurrection is the same day "that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption" (Rom. 8:21, 23). Ultimate restoration is without question. You aren't responsible for that ultimate restoration. But you're responsible for your contribution to it. We're to be gardeners, which means we don't have a choice but to get dirty in the muck of this world.

If we continue along the path of destruction, our homes, families and communities will grow like gardens of thistle. We will continue to abide with evil and bloodshed, as the cursed ground is watered with human life. Or we can follow God along the Way of Holiness made open by Christ. In Christ, God makes gardens of our lives and equips us to help others thrive as well. In Christ, "everlasting joy" will be our inheritance and all "sorrow and sighing shall flee away."



DECEMBER
20

MONDAY

ROMANS 15:8-9, 13

Author: *Dr. Robbie Crouse*

Much of Advent is Israel specific. This season calls us to the many promises of God in the Old Testament. Advent songs often enter into the waiting of God's people, Israel, for the Messiah to come at last. Perhaps the most famous and greatest of these is "O Come, O Come Emmanuel." The haunting opening verse calls on God to come and "ransom captive Israel that mourns in lonely exile here until the Son of God appear." Each of verses of this great hymn focuses on a promise in the Old Testament for Israel. God promises "wisdom from on high," the wisdom that ordered creation and showed forth "to Thy tribes on Sinai's height" in the giving of the law. There is the promise of "the Branch of Jesse," who will "free Thine one from Sinai's tyranny." The hymn points to the "key of David" who will "open wide our heavenly home," "make safe the way that leads on high," and "close the path to misery." Two more Old Testament prophecies are of the "Dayspring from on high" and "the desire of nations," "the king of peace."

Singing "O Come, O Come Emmanuel" helps Christians to remember that God is a patient God. He makes promises, but he also calls his people to wait on him. Ultimately, God is a faithful promise keeper. "When the time had fully come, God sent forth his son, born of a woman, born under the law" (Gal. 4:4). "For all the promises of God are 'yes' in Christ" (2 Cor. 1:20). In our passage here in Romans 15, the apostle Paul emphasizes that Christ came "to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs" (Rom. 15:8). Much of the letter of Romans is Paul's exposition of our God demonstrating his faithfulness by keeping his promise of salvation. Despite human sin and even the unfaithfulness of his people, Israel, God himself kept faith and was truthful in what he promised.

Much of the Advent season reminds us of these Old Testament promises. It reminds us that Christ came as one of his own people, to Israel as a Jew. As Paul says, "Christ became a servant to the circumcised" (Rom. 15:8). This helps us understand why Jesus had to be born where he was in Israel. It explains why he said things like "salvation is from the Jews" (John 4:22) and "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel" (Matt 15:24). Jesus was not neglecting the world; by confirming the promises to Israel he would open up God's blessing to the world. That's what Paul says in the second half of Romans 15:9: "in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy." This was always the plan of God: "salvation to everyone who believes: to the Jew first and then also to the Greek" (Rom. 1:16). This is the story of the Bible. In order to reverse the curse of sin, God called Abraham and through his family to be the place of God's blessing. The Lord said he would bless Abraham and his line, not for themselves, but "so that you will be a blessing ... and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen. 15:2-3). By coming as Israel's Messiah first of all, Jesus opened up the spiritual blessings of Abraham to all nations—all who believe in Christ are "children of Abraham" (Gal. 3:29).

This Christmas we can give thanks that by being born in Israel under the law, Christ fulfilled all God's promises and extended God's mercy to all peoples. Those who were "once far off"—"alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world"—have been brought near (Eph. 3:12-13). This fulfillment of God's promises to us can then give us "all joy and peace in believing" so that we might "abound in hope" (Rom. 15:13). Rejoice! Rejoice! Immanuel shall come to you, O Israel!



DECEMBER

21

TUESDAY

2 CORINTHIANS 4:5-9

Author: *Dr. Robbie Crouse*

Christmas is all about darkness and light. This is true both literally and metaphorically. Literally, Christmas comes at the darkest time of the year (at least for those of us in the northern hemisphere). Today, December 21—at 10:58am to be precise—is the winter solstice, that time when the tilt of the earth is the greatest away from the sun and so the sunlight is at its minimum (again, in the northern hemisphere). For us in south Florida, we will have 10.5 hours of sunlight, our shortest day of the year (compare that to the summer solstice, June 21, when we have almost 14 hours of sunlight). Similarly, the holidays are also emotionally and spiritually dark for many people. Physical lack of light can actually cause depression itself, but at the least it can parallel our inward dreariness. Christmas is said to be “the most wonderful time of the year,” but that can make it all the more depressing for some. We’re supposed to feel happy and even sentimental, and that makes our loneliness and spiritual dryness all the more acute. Psychologists and counselors will tell you that Christmas and New Year are their busiest seasons for appointments.

But it’s in all this darkness that the true light of Christ shines all the more. The apostle Paul quotes the Genesis creation account to speak about how Jesus brings about a new creation in his incarnate life: “the God who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Cor. 4:6). Just as the beginning of creation was “formless and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep” (Gen. 1:2), so in our sin the creation has become so once again. But just as God caused light to pierce the darkness in the beginning, and so bring about a beautiful created order, God parallels that creative act in our salvation in Christ. “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; they that dwelt in the land of the shadow of death, upon them has the light shined” (Isa. 9:2). “Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord is risen upon you!” (Isa. 60:1) “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it” (John 1:5).

For Paul, the light of God is not an abstract concept, but the radiant face of Jesus Christ. The light that lightens our way is a person, a person who is not ominous or menacing, but God’s favor toward us. The face and countenance of Christ is promising, gracious, and sympathetic. Jesus is a treasure for us in our weakness, our “jars of clay” (2 Cor. 4:7). Just as light shines brightest in darkness, so his power and joy come out the most in the midst of our frailty and troubles. So, this Advent and Christmas, don’t feel like you need to sentimentalize the season. The time is dark, but the true light is already shining. As you put up Christmas lights outside, as you light a candle or look at your lighted Christmas tree, turn out the other lights and ponder how Christ can shine the darkness of our world. Know that through your weakness and frailty Christ is made known.

Forget tomorrow, my friend. Today is the day. Call out to Jesus and have life in his name!



DECEMBER

22

WEDNESDAY

COLOSSIANS 1:10-12

Author: *David Bibee*

I'm a person who loves to cook, but suffers from a terrible case of sticker shock. That is to say, I'm someone who aspires to make highfalutin cuisine, but ends up abandoning Publix, newly purchased chicken thighs in hand, after fleeing from the \$40 skirt steak I wanted. Even if I had the money, it wouldn't feel like I really had enough to justify it.

How often do you find yourself feeling ill equipped? You put in long hours at work, but perhaps you're still struggling to make ends meet. You're with friends and everyone else seems to have things together in a way you don't. You try to build relationships, only to find that you don't say the right things or don't connect like you wanted to. Particularly in an age of Instagram where we are regularly treated to perfectly curated (and manicured) photographs, it's easy to look around in bewilderment wondering, "What the heck is wrong with me?"

Advent is a season where we must meditate on that question because the bad news is that there's a lot wrong with each of us. Jesus wouldn't have come to do all that he did if that wasn't the case. This season is not merely about the remembrance of our lack, however. This season also calls us to celebrate the invasion of this world by the Light that "the darkness could not overcome" (John 1:5).

Our passage today from Colossians should encourage us. It is a good word to people made of dust. God has very high expectations of us. We are to live our lives in "a manner worthy of the Lord [and] fully pleasing to him" (Col. 1:10). It is as Jesus said, "You must be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt. 5:48). And I don't believe that Jesus was kidding—this is his actual expectation of our conduct at every moment. (Depending on how you responded to that last sentence, you may have even failed to be perfect even this very moment!) This is a tall order.

But God doesn't expect us to do any of this on our own. We are to live worthy lives that are fully pleasing to God because we are perfectly equipped to do so. We can have confidence that God will indeed produce that fruit in our lives because we are "strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy." Elsewhere Paul tells us that the power that is at work within us, to make us new people, is the very same power that raised Jesus from the dead, seating him above every power in heaven and on earth (Eph. 1:16-23). Your sense of inadequacy is lying to you. We have everything that we need.

He has not redeemed you to abandon you, but to make you fully alive and completely free., for God's strength is made perfect in our weakness. He will not fail to complete the work he began in you. In Christ, you are God's beloved child.



YOU CAN HAVE THE HOPE OF HEAVEN THIS CHRISTMAS

Heaven is a free gift.

The gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. Romans 6:23

We are sinners and cannot save ourselves.

For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. Romans 3:23

*On the one hand, God is love. 1 John 4:8b
But on the other hand, He does not leave the guilty unpunished. Exodus 34:7b*

God solved this problem by sending His son, Jesus.

For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life John 3:16

You receive the gift of heaven by faith.

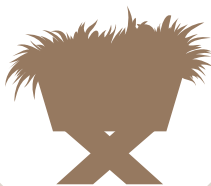
*Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved.
Acts 16:31*

If this is what you want,
you can pray right now:

"Dear Jesus, forgive my sin, and come into my life as my Lord Savior. Thank you for giving me the hope of heaven both now and forever.
Amen."

This is the promise of Jesus, He who believes has everlasting life. John 6:47b

**WELCOME TO THE
FAMILY OF GOD!**





CORAL RIDGE
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

DECEMBER

23

THURSDAY

REVELATION 21:3-5

Author: *Caleb Koornneef*

If you've been following the sermon series at Coral Ridge the past few months, you'll remember that we spent some time studying the book of Revelation together. There's so much to unpack in this amazing book and I'd encourage you to go back and listen to the sermons or the Revelation Sunday School class recordings if you're having a hard time making sense of things. We need the book of Revelation because it provides us with the perspective change to live "on earth as it is in heaven." It redirects "the hopes and fears of all the years" by pointing us to a new reality—the reality that Jesus has overcome sin and death and now reigns forever with his saints. The promise of God is a present reality, "Behold, I am making all things new." Jesus doesn't tell us that one day when he comes back he'll break out the plans and get started with the project of making all things new. By his Spirit, he is currently at work making all things new.

When we think about heaven, it's easy to imagine a place where we will go to escape all the problems that encumber us on this earth. The book of Revelation helps us to see that heaven is not so much a blueprint for how the Kingdom of Heaven should look—it's a glimpse into the reality of how the Kingdom of heaven does look. How wonderful it will be when there are no more tears, pain, mourning, or death! By God's grace, the pain and suffering we experience now are "not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed" through the resurrection power of Jesus (Romans 8:18). When he returns, there will be a great wedding feast where heaven and earth are joined as one, where God will forever dwell with his people, where every tear will be wiped away, and where former sinful and destructive things will all pass away. The book of Revelation is a gift by which we can lift our eyes heavenward and not be overwhelmed by the worldly perspective that we see around us.

We don't have to wait to be a part of God's Kingdom because as Jesus said, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand" (Mark 1:15). The incarnation of Christ that we celebrate every year at Christmas is the initiation of the Kingdom of Heaven that will last into all eternity! Because Jesus has tasted death on our behalf, we can taste eternal life now and eagerly await his second coming and the everlasting rest to come.



DECEMBER

24

LUKE 2:1-21

FRIDAY

Author: *David Bibee*

Do you ever have moments where you just get this burst of affection for someone? Moments where you feel compelled to say, smiling, "I just love you!" The story of Christ's birth in Luke always makes me feel like that. It's almost unthinkable to imagine that this, out of every possibility, was the way Jesus chose to be born into the world. Born in a trough like a wanderer without a home and celebrated by shepherds among cattle. Jesus was born in the days of tyrant kings who imagined themselves to be gods. Obscene wealth tends to give one a bit of an overinflated ego. Rulers, as God's servants, are supposed to work for the good of the people. For this reason, it should be unsurprising that God often selects Israel's rulers from among shepherds. Abraham had enormous flocks and herds. Moses had to become a shepherd for forty years before he could become the prophet who shepherded Israel. David fought lions and bears during his time as a shepherd in order to become the Goliath-slaying warrior king. The failure of Adam and Eve was in submitting to the beastly serpent, rather than ruling over him. Sin makes us into beasts ourselves. Sin "crouches" like a wild animal waiting to devour us (Gen. 4:7). In Jesus day, Israel's kings were jackals. The true leader feeds his sheep, but Herod fed on his sheep, presenting prophets like choice meat on platters for vindictive relatives (Matt. 14:1-12). Only a ruler born among the shepherds could possibly bring justice into a world that had grown so dark.

We worship a God who is humble, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love. What could a humble God even mean? Is not humility about lowliness? Are not the humble diminished? We misunderstand humility and lowliness as being inglorious, precisely because we don't grasp glory. Christ is humble, not humiliated. And his humility is his glory. God glories in pouring out lavish grace upon the neediest. God demonstrates his greatness in uplifting the downcast and seeking the lost. He has favor on the least of these who recognize their need but refuses to be an ornament for the self-righteous who take his name in vain, merely seeking to adorning themselves.

Angels announce to shepherds the birth of the son of shepherd king David who would rule "on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore" (Isa. 9:7). But in order to become a shepherd king like David, he would first need to become a shepherd slain like Abel. Only a king willing to die for the love of his people could ever lead them well. We have just such a king. He is not impressed by worldly ways, nor the pomp of earthly glory. He invites us to a new and better way. He finds us in the mud and muck of our sin, feasting in our self-made kingdoms that look to him as a pigsty, in order to make us glorious in his sight and according to his ways that are not our own—humility, righteousness, and faith.

No matter what your life may be like today, know this: I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For you Christ was born a child in the city of David. For you he was born to be Lord. For you he was born a Savior! Thanks be to God!

