

At Home with the Gospel Writers

A Devotional Guide for Advent 2026

Highland Presbyterian Church
Winston Salem, North Carolina
www.highlandpres.org

Cover Art
Scott Miller, ceramic
Audrey Nelson, photograph

2026 Advent Season Calendar

First Week of Advent: Hope

Sunday, November 29:

9:30 a.m. Christian Education

11:00 a.m. Worship

Wednesday, December 2:

6:00 p.m. Fling Fellowship

6:45 p.m. Advent Vespers

Second Week of Advent: Peace

Sunday, December 6:

9:30 a.m. Christian Education

11:00 a.m. Worship

Third Sunday of Advent: Joy

Sunday, December 13:

9:30 a.m. Christian Education

10:45 a.m. Pre-Worship Caroling followed by Worship

3:00 p.m. Caroling Shared with Members in Need

Fourth Sunday of Advent: Love

Sunday, December 20:

9:30 a.m. Advent Potluck Breakfast

11:00 a.m. Worship with Brass Quintet

4:00 p.m. *A Christmas Story for All:*
An Intergenerational Christmas Pageant

Christmas Eve

Thursday, December 24, Christmas Eve Worship Services:

4:00 p.m. An Acoustic Christmas

7:00 p.m. Candlelight Worship Service

Christmas Day

Friday, December 25:

Joy to the World, the Lord Is Come!

Dear Friends,

There is something special about being welcomed into someone's home. We settle in, listen to stories, and begin to see the world through someone else's eyes. Each home offers its own perspective, traditions, and ways of making room for others.

This Advent, we invite you to make yourself at home with the Gospel writers. Over four weeks, we'll visit Mark, John, Matthew, and Luke. Each of them welcomes us into the story of Jesus in a different way. Mark calls us to watch, prepare, and respond. John invites us to ponder the mystery of the Word made flesh and the light that shines in the darkness. Matthew reminds us that God enters our complicated human stories. And Luke shares a story overflowing with surprising joy, courageous faith, and good news for the overlooked.

Throughout this season, members and friends of Highland offer their own reflections on these ancient and living stories. Their words invite us to wonder, reflect, and discover something new about God's presence among us.

Our hope is that these devotions become part of your daily Advent rhythm. Take a few moments to read, pray, and make room for the One whose coming we celebrate.

As we visit these four Gospel homes, may we discover that the good news is not simply a story from long ago, but a living story of hope, peace, joy, and love still unfolding among us.

We rejoice in the gifts of this season and look forward to sharing it with you.

Peace,
Randy, Debbie, Courtney, Heather, Chris, Susan, Haley, Tina, and Gidget

Christmas at Mark's House



Cora Eberle

Sunday, November 29

Mark 1:8

Earth. Wind. Fire. Water. Life. Breath. Joy. Sorrow. Peace.

The elemental things that move us. This is how I have felt and experienced the Holy Spirit.

Most recently, I have felt the Holy Spirit through the birth of our first grandchild, a precious baby girl. Joy in new life and the promise of a new generation.

I have also experienced the Holy Spirit doing the thing that I love, in the place that I love, but then nearly losing my life. I went back seven weeks later to the place that has brought me so much joy–the Blue Ridge mountains and the Blue Ridge Parkway–to sit on a grand, old stump and wait for the Holy Spirit to come. It did not take long. Moments. In stillness I immersed myself in the bright sunshine, the wind, and the glorious autumn foliage. And then I told God my sorrows, my fears, and my hope for healing. I said a prayer of thanksgiving for all the gifts of my life–family, friends, church, striving to live a good life. And I said a prayer for peace in the world and love for our neighbors. The Holy Spirit surely comes…when we listen and seek to feel the presence of our Creator God.

And in this Advent season as we sing our favorite Christmas hymns, may we feel the Holy Spirit through music, light, scripture, beauty and love, in our hearts and souls.

"Joy to the World, the Lord is come,
Let Earth receive her king;
Let every heart prepare him room,
And heaven and nature sing."

~ Elizabeth Skinner

O Holy God, we watch and wait expectantly for your Spirit's presence during this Christmas season. Help us to prepare for your coming. Brighten our spirits and bestow upon each of us a renewed faith to do your work in the world. Amen.

Monday, November 30

Mark 1:9–15

There is something both exciting and intimidating about a new beginning. Whether it's a new job, a new home, a new relationship, or simply a new season of life, we often step into unfamiliar territory with a mixture of anticipation and uncertainty.

We may not know exactly what lies ahead, but we hope we're headed in the right direction.

In Mark's Gospel, Jesus begins his ministry with a remarkable reminder. As he emerges from the waters of baptism, a voice from heaven declares, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” Before Jesus has preached a sermon, healed anyone, or gathered his disciples, he is reminded that he is beloved. What a wonderful thing to remember as we begin something new! Our worth isn't measured by what we accomplish, how quickly we find our footing, or whether we have all the answers. We are already loved by God.

Of course, Jesus' journey doesn't immediately become easy. The Spirit leads him into the wilderness before his ministry begins. But God's love goes with him. As we begin this Advent season, may we remember that wherever life leads us, through new opportunities, unexpected challenges, or unfamiliar places, we do not travel alone. God's love is already there, welcoming us into whatever comes next.

~ Tina Hicks

Loving God, thank you for being present in every new beginning. When we feel uncertain, remind us that we are beloved. Give us courage to step into new opportunities, patience when the path is unclear, and faith to trust that you are with us along the way. Amen.

Tuesday, December 1

Mark 2:1–12

At Highland's Fall Forum 2026, David LaMotte spoke and sang. One of his songs, *God of the Movements and Martyrs*, has this excerpt from the lyrics: "God of the worn and the wounded / Let us be healed by the truth / When doorways are blocked / We will lower our friends through the roof." Clearly alluding to this Mark 2 story, LaMotte gives words to undergird and fortify those who are working in a committed group to bring about change against the odds.

Throughout his ministry, people came to Jesus to be healed. Individuals petitioned him to heal others: their child, their servant. But in this passage, four men carry their paralyzed friend to the home where Jesus was teaching. The crowd was so thick they couldn't get into the house. Undaunted - and expecting a miracle - they climbed to the roof, tore through it, and lowered their friend down through the hole they had made to place him at the feet of Jesus. The text explicitly says that Jesus healed the man "When he saw their faith."

It's not the point, but can you imagine the reaction of Jesus (the skilled carpenter), his listeners, to say nothing of the homeowners, as first they heard the overhead banging and then they became covered in the dust, dirt, straw, wood, and whatever that was coming down on their heads? I doubt they saw faith and healing in the mess – at least at first.

The point of both this scripture and of LaMotte's lyrics is that there is hope and strength in community that may not or cannot exist in a single individual. This scripture does not paint a picture of the patient, silent-night waiting we commonly associate with Advent. Rather, it illustrates hope and even expectation that when believers work together with faith and action (and faith IN action) God's Kingdom can be realized.

~ Rita Ennis

God, help me find in community an amplification of my faith, find strength where I am weak, find hope where I have despair. Help me be an agent of your grace and power when I work together with others. Amen.

Wednesday, December 2

Mark 4:26–32

The tiny mustard seed, the smallest of the small. And yet it grows into a magnificent shrub that provides a home and shelter for the birds.

We are like those tiny seeds, whose voices and actions may seem small, not big enough to make a difference, but they do. When all the seeds are sown together they rise up and grow into a community of faith, hope, and purpose.

Sometimes you may think that one small act of kindness, one small word of caring, encouragement, or praise may not make a difference. You may struggle with the right thing to say or write in a card. I know I do. But when I have faith to move forward, I often find that it has a positive impact. Ever been faced with a situation or life circumstance where you didn't know how you were going to get through it? Keep the faith. Trust that God will guide you through, with small acts of kindness from others, a supportive family and community, and His everlasting love. Small, faithful steps.

Be like a mustard seed. Be brave, plant the seed, take root, experience its growth, and have faith that you can make a difference in the world. One small act of kindness, one reassuring word spoken, one small action can make amazing things happen.

As we move through this season of Advent with great anticipation, may you grow in your faith journey as the mustard seed grows into something strong and nurturing. Have faith that even the smallest of things can make a difference.
Put your faith into action, persevere in your faithfulness, and have hope for the future, one mustard seed at a time.

~ Leslie Kamtman

Gracious God, we are thankful for this beautiful world that you have given us to take care of. Grant us the wisdom and courage to preserve and protect it, from the smallest mustard seed to the largest mountain. Help us to be like a mustard seed, grow in our faithfulness, help others, and do your will. Amen.

Thursday, December 3

Mark 5:21–43

We tend to assume that when Jesus is on his way to do something important, we should probably stay out of the way. And surely saving a dying twelve-year-old girl qualifies as important! Her father, Jairus, has begged Jesus to come quickly. Time is running out. The crowds are pressing in. Let's get moving!

But then someone interrupts. A woman who has been bleeding for twelve years reaches out and touches Jesus' cloak. Twelve years! That's as long as Jairus's daughter has been alive. We might assume that Jesus would keep moving. After all, there's a little girl waiting, and this woman has already been suffering for years. Couldn't she wait just a little longer?

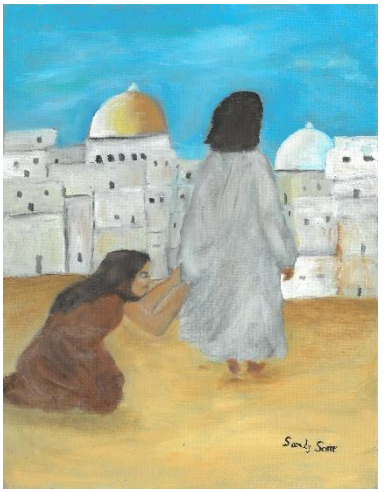
But Jesus stops. He notices her. He listens to her. And he calls her "Daughter."

The woman who hoped to slip unnoticed through the crowd is seen, heard, and restored. Meanwhile, Jairus receives the terrible news that his own daughter has died. Surely it's too late now. Or so everyone assumes. But Jesus isn't finished. By the end of this story, two daughters have been restored to life and community. One was twelve years old. The other had suffered for twelve years. Neither was forgotten, and neither was beyond the reach of God's love.

Advent reminds us that God's love doesn't always follow our schedules, priorities, or assumptions. Sometimes grace comes in the interruptions. Sometimes hope arrives when we've decided it's too late. And sometimes the good news is simply this: God sees us all.

~ Heather Ferguson

Gracious God, forgive us when our assumptions keep us from seeing others as you do. Open our eyes to those who are overlooked, our hearts to unexpected interruptions, and our lives to the surprising ways your love makes all things new. Amen.



Sandy Scott

Friday, December 4

Mark 8:27–35

Mark sat down opposite me at his kitchen table in his spartan yet tidy home, setting two mugs of hot tea in front of us.

"Mark, I have to admit that this passage sounds kind of threatening - doesn't God want us to have happy lives? I don't understand what you mean by denying ourselves and losing our lives."

He sips his tea, then responds. "You love Christmas, yes? Tell me what you love about Christmas."

"I love the decorations and music and food and all of that, of course. But what I really love is that there is such an atmosphere of love and joy. People are kinder to each other, they think of those who are in need and try to find ways to help them. I love that families make the effort to gather together to celebrate, and that we reconnect with friends we haven't seen in a long while."

Mark nods in agreement, then asks, "And why only at Christmas? Why do people not do these wonderful things all year round?"

I falter, not wanting to admit what I'm thinking.

"I embrace what you've said about Christmas, Glenn, and I certainly want everyone to enjoy it. But all of what you said is not meant to be ignored until Christmas comes - we are meant to love this way all the time." I know what's coming. "But living this way is hard," he continued, "very hard, and it costs us money, and time, and energy, and status, and more. The world looks at this kind of love and calls it foolish, wasteful, weak, and tells us to strive instead for personal gain and prestige." He looks intently at me. "We are called to deny that striving and take up the joyful work of sharing love not just at Christmas, but throughout the year." He reaches out and grabs my hand. "But never forget, Glenn, that God is with us every step of the way!"

~ Glenn Otterbacher

God of Christmas and all year, help us to share the love and joy of this season - and then keep going. Amen.

Saturday, December 5

Mark 13:32–37

In this chapter of Mark, Jesus discusses the second coming with the disciples, and while he quickly shuts down any notion of being able to guess the exact day or time of his return, he encourages the disciples to remain watchful and attentive.

Jesus illustrates this with a very short parable: "It's like a man going away: He leaves his house and puts his servants in charge, each with their assigned task, and tells the one at the door to keep watch." The servants aren't told to "sit quietly and don't do anything until I get back." Rather, they are active in their waiting–that's what stands out to me the most (probably because I have a hard time sitting still, so this call to not sit idly is great news for me).

During Advent, a season marked by waiting, what would it look like for us to actively wait? The servants in the parable continued "each with their assigned task" while they waited for their master to return home. What are some of your gifts and how can you use them to do God's work in this world while we wait for all kinds of good to return?

~ Hannah Duane

Lord, be present with us in our waiting. Open our minds and prepare our hearts to notice how you show up in the world. Help us to bring more kindness and love to our neighbors as we long for your return when all will be redeemed. Amen.

Christmas at John's House



Cora Eberle

Sunday, December 6

John 1:1–5

I entered John's home on Christmas Eve and discovered an unusual manger scene. In John's manger scene the Angel's shining light is focused on Jesus and it has many shepherds and kings traveling away from the babe, each holding or carrying a radiant lantern. I asked John what he was trying to tell us about the birth of Jesus.

He answered with a riddle:
"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God; all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."

I asked John, what is the Word? He answered, "Have you not heard? The Word is Love and all you have to do to be free is to say the Word, to say Love! Jesus is born to show us the light and the only Word he is thinking of is Love!" Okay, I responded, but what does that have to do with all those people walking away from Jesus with lanterns? John exclaimed, "they are going out into the world spreading the Word Jesus is thinking, spreading the light of the WORD, spreading the light of LOVE. The meaning of Christmas, John says, is about us being Jesus' light shining in darkness, so that darkness does not overcome LOVE!"

~ Jim Gallaher

Dear God, as we celebrate Christmas this year help us focus on Jesus' birth giving us his message that since the beginning the Word and the Light are Love. Help us be like Jesus and every chance we get let us show everybody the Light and the Word is Love! Amen.

Monday, December 7

John 1:6–14

"He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light." John 1:8

John the Baptist had an important calling, but it wasn't to be the light. It was to point to it. I love that John makes this distinction!

I wonder how often we forget that distinction. We live in a world that encourages us to accomplish more, do more, be more. We can begin to believe that making a difference requires something extraordinary, that we need to have all the answers, say exactly the right thing, or somehow be the light that someone else needs. But John reminds us that the light is already coming into the world. Our calling is to bear witness to it.

Some of the most meaningful moments I've experienced in ministry have been surprisingly ordinary. A young person finding the courage to speak up. Someone making room for a person who feels left out. A conversation where someone feels genuinely heard. These moments rarely come with great fanfare, but they reveal something of God's presence among us. Sometimes in the busyness of trying to make good things happen, I need the reminder that God is already at work. My task isn't always to create the moment, but to notice it, celebrate it, and help others recognize it too.

This Advent, as we prepare to welcome the Word made flesh, perhaps we can practice paying attention. Where is God's light already shining? Who is reflecting that light in ways we might overlook? And how might we bear witness to it through our own words and actions?

We don't have to be the light. We are invited to point toward the One who is.

~ Courtney Stevens

God of Light, open our eyes to the ways you are already at work in the world. Free us from the need to have all the answers or accomplish everything ourselves. Give us the grace to recognize your presence in ordinary moments, the courage to name it, and the generosity to help others see it too. May our lives bear witness to the light of Christ. Amen.

Tuesday, December 8

John 1:35–42

"Come and see." I love how simple Jesus' invitation is in this passage. When two of John's disciples ask where Jesus is staying, he doesn't launch into a sermon, perform a miracle, or try to convince them of who he is. He simply invites them to spend the day with him. And that is enough. Andrew leaves that encounter so moved that he immediately goes to find his brother Simon and tells him, "We have found the Messiah."

What stands out to me is how ordinary this beginning feels. There is simply an invitation to come closer, to spend time, to be curious, and to see for themselves. I think back to when I first became really involved in church. In the 5th grade, a friend invited me to audition for her church's summer musical. I didn't know anything about her church, or what I was getting myself into, but I liked to sing! By the end of that first rehearsal, I remember thinking that I needed to stay here. What started as an invitation to sing turned into a community, friendships, and a place where my faith could grow.

I wonder how often we underestimate the power of a simple invitation. We can sometimes feel like we need the right words, the perfect opportunity, or a complete understanding of our own faith before sharing it with others. But Jesus didn't ask these disciples to understand everything about him before they chose to follow; he simply welcomed them in and made space for them to experience his presence. Maybe we are called to do the same: to invite others in, while also remaining open to the unexpected ways God might meet us through new people, experiences, and places.

As we move through Advent, may we remember that sometimes the greatest way to share the community of Christ is simply to leave the door open and say, "Come and see."

~ Haley Chapman

God of invitation, thank you for the people who have opened doors for us and helped us find our way into Your community. Help us to recognize opportunities to extend that same kindness to others. Remind us that we don't need all the answers to share your love. Give us open hearts, welcoming spirits, and the courage to simply say, "Come and see." Amen.

Wednesday, December 9

John 3:16–21

There is so much conflict in the world around us. Political battles fill our screens, wars bring sadness and suffering, and people sometimes even use Scripture to justify unjust actions. With so much darkness, it can be easy to overlook the goodness in the world and the quiet ways people are making a difference. I keep coming back to verse 19, which says, "And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil." This verse reminds me that even when darkness seems to surround us, God's light is still present. Sometimes we just have to look a little harder to find it.

When I started college, I was nervous about fitting in and finding a faith community like the one I had at Highland. I wasn't sure I would find another group where I felt so welcomed and connected. To my surprise, the group I've found at college has been everything I hoped for and more. I've made close friends, shared wonderful experiences, and found people who bring so much joy into my life. These friendships have reminded me that God's love is still at work in the world, even when the news makes it difficult to see. The people I've met have brought light into my life, just as Jesus came into the world to bring light and love to all of us.

As we journey through Advent, I hope we can look beyond the darkness and recognize the hope, peace, joy, and love that God continues to bring into our lives. Sometimes that light appears in the simplest places, like a friendship, a welcoming community, or someone who makes us feel that we belong.

~ Jacob Patton

Dear God, thank you for the love and light you bring into our world. Help us to recognize the goodness around us, even when life feels dark. Bless us with friendships and communities that reflect your love, and help us share that same love with others wherever we go. In your name we pray. Amen.

Thursday, December 10

John 4:1–42

The Samaritan Woman at the Well is my favorite Bible story. For eight years in Asheville, NC, my car's license tags read LVNG H2O, referring to the spiritual Living Water Jesus offers the woman at Jacob's well. During the Women's Movement I wrote a poem, The Liberator, about how Jesus treats the Samaritan woman with dignity and respect, in a culture where women were second-class citizens. In 2011, for my two-year spiritual direction program, I created a portfolio portraying The Samaritan Woman at the Well in art history. A favorite entry is a fresco discovered in a Rome catacomb, showing a man sitting next to a woman at a well. Circa 320 CE.



Pierre Mignard, 1681

Every time I read The Samaritan Woman at the Well story I draw closer to Jesus. In the presence of Jesus, women feel seen. They feel heard. Jesus turns the ancient world's cultural norms upside down. He engages in a theological dialogue with a marginalized Samaritan woman at noon, when Jews and Samaritans were ardent enemies. After Jesus tells her he knows she has been married five times, and that the man she is living with is not her husband, he does not scorn her. Instead Jesus says by believing in him she will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, eternal life and spiritual nourishment through his Living Water. When the Samaritan woman realizes Jesus is the Messiah she runs back to her town. Because of her testimony, countless come to believe. In the Eastern Orthodox tradition the Samaritan woman is called St. Photini (enlightened one). Many Christians believe she was the first evangelist.

So do I.

~ Jane Sobie

Loving God, help us be the Light of Christ in a world thirsty for social justice. Fill our hearts with compassion for the marginalized, the poor, sick, and hungry. Amen.

Friday, December 11

John 8:12–20



Scott Miller

This luminary draws from Jesus standing in the temple during the Feast of Tabernacles and declaring, "I am the light of the world." During that festival, great lamps illuminated the temple courts, and Jesus declared that the true light stood among them. I threw the vessel on the wheel and, at leather-hard, carved a cross through its center with rays spreading outward. The deep blue glaze evokes night and stillness, while the unglazed edges allow the raw clay to frame each opening. Unlit, it is a dark vessel. With a light inside, the cross and rays come alive. The cross is not painted on the surface but cut away, and that empty space is where the light shines through. That felt true to me: the light that changes us comes through the place of sacrifice.

Jesus spoke the words "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life" (v. 12, NIV) in the temple treasury during the Feast of Tabernacles. At that festival, enormous lamps lit the temple courts so brightly that people said every courtyard in Jerusalem glowed. Against that backdrop, Jesus made a startling claim: the festival lights pointed to something, and he was what they pointed to. His light is not something we admire from a distance. It is something we follow. To walk in his light means our path is lit one step at a time, even when we can't see far ahead.

The religious leaders challenged his testimony, but Jesus answered that he did not stand alone. The Father who sent him testified with him, and he knew where he had come from and where he was going. Even then, verse 20 tells us no one seized him, "because his hour had not yet come." Jesus was not at the mercy of his critics or circumstances; he walked in the Father's timing. Whatever darkness we face, the light of Christ is not fragile or easily put out. It is anchored in the Father's purpose and offered freely to anyone willing to follow.

~ Scott Miller

Lord Jesus, you are the Light of the world, and we thank you that no darkness can overcome you. Help us to follow you day by day, trusting that your light will show us the next step even when we can't see the whole path. Like the Father who stood with you, be our witness and our confidence, and let your light shine through us to those around us. Amen.

Saturday, December 12

John 8:12

In the "old days," before phones became cameras I used a 35mm film camera. You who remember those times know about f-stops, depth-of-field, light and their interrelationship with one another. For those of you who don't know the details of photography know that when it is dark, and you don't have a flash, your pictures will not be sharply focused. Additionally, not much beyond the subject you are shooting will even be discernible.

To take a picture with sharp clarity and a deep field of view, where everything from the foreground of your subject to the distant background can be discerned, you need light and plenty of it.

One way to achieve more light, even when it is dark, is to open the camera shutter for a long exposure, which allows even the dimmest of light to build up over time while entering the camera lens.

The darkness of evil in the world may at times seem overpowering, and the image of life blurry, and what is beyond today is in the shadows. The Gospel of John reminds us that we need what the light Christ offers.

Our "exposure" to Christ, who is the Light of the World, clarifies and deepens our understanding of who we are, whose we are, and what we are called to be and to do. There are many ways we can extend our exposure to Christ starting with our worship and extending out like the rays of the sun into our homes, workplaces, and community.

~ Joe Blankinship

"Oh, Light of the World," may we this Advent develop patient habits of opening ourselves to the Light that has the power to overcome all darkness. Amen.

Christmas at Matthew's House



Cora Eberle

Sunday, December 13

Matthew 1:1

In starting with Jesus' genealogy, Matthew tells us that if we want to know who Jesus is, we need to know who his people are. What an astonishing assortment they are! Among his grandparents and great-grandparents and 15th great grandfathers and 29th great grandmothers are kings and resident aliens, models of righteousness and embodiments of total depravity; the wisest of the wise, and the most foolish and manipulative there ever was.

Part of Matthew's purpose here is to prepare us for the rather strange circumstances of Jesus' birth, and of his life and ministry. Jesus' unusual birth? There are plenty of unusual moments with this family (though none quite like this one). His willingness to associate with sinful folk? Well, just look at who his people are. His wisdom and faithfulness? He comes by it honest.

But Matthew has something additional in mind. If God can work through this odd assortment of saints and crooks, righteous ones and rapscallions, to bring us Jesus…then surely God can work with us, and with our families, to bring about hope, and peace, and joy, and love, as we witness this most astounding birth that is taking place.

Our families—whatever our stories, or our histories—are well within reach of God's redeeming mercy. Our church families are people and places of brokenness and grace, in which, and through which, God can and will be at work for sake of good. This is the good news of Emmanuel, God with Us.

~ Randy Harris

How grateful we are, O God, for your coming to us in Christ, and for your willingness to work with us in all our brokenness and beauty, our foibles and our faithfulness. May our family of faith continue to receive and to share your blessing. Amen.



Claire Eberle

Monday, December 14

Matthew 1:18–25

I'm in a season of life where I often feel a lot like Joseph. Many of us grow up imagining the familiar picture: the marriage, the house, the job, the dog, the car, the kids. Joseph likely held those same hopes. His life was coming together just as he expected—until suddenly it wasn't. In a single moment, everything changed. His bride-to-be was found to be with child, and the child was not his. We often move quickly past this part of Scripture, but before God ever spoke a word of reassurance, Joseph was already revealing the kind of man he was. He was described as just, and even in his own hurt, he sought to protect Mary rather than expose her. Without divine instruction, he chose gentleness in the middle of heartbreak. I can't help but wonder if this is part of why God chose him—because God knew Joseph's heart was already shaped for the sacred task of raising the King of the world.

After the angel appeared, Joseph still had a choice. He could walk away quietly and pursue the life he once imagined, or he could stay and embrace a future he never planned—one filled with uncertainty, sacrifice, and holy responsibility. Joseph didn't know the ending of the story the way we do. All he knew was that God had called him, and he obeyed. He put on his wedding ring, stood beside Mary, and stepped into a life he never expected.
I find myself drawing inspiration from Joseph. I don't know how my own story will unfold. I know it won't look exactly like the dream I once pictured—but it will be my dream, the one God is crafting with intention and care. Just as God did for Joseph, God is painting something intricate, purposeful, and uniquely mine. My role is simply to follow where God leads.

~ Caitlin Harris

God, thank you for the story of Joseph, for the reminder that you work in the quiet places where our expectations fall apart and our hearts feel uncertain. Teach me to carry the same gentleness he showed, even when my plans shift and my dreams look different than I imagined. Help me trust that you are present in every unexpected turn, shaping a future that is intentional and good. Give me the courage to follow where you lead, even when I cannot see the ending. Strengthen my faith so I can stand with integrity, compassion, and obedience, just as Joseph did. Lord, paint my life with your purpose, and help me embrace the story you are writing for me. Amen.

Tuesday, December 15

Matthew 2:13–23

I love dreams and stories about dreams. My family will tell you that I enjoy vivid, detailed, technicolor dreams frequently; and they seldom disappear like will o' the wisps upon my waking. I regularly share my dreams with a childhood friend who shares my experience of vivid and specific dreams. In fact, she frequently sees my mother in her dreams, and she regularly reports that "Miss Patsie looks really good."

This passage from Matthew, in which dreams direct Joseph to action, calls me to reflect on the importance of dreams in our modern lives. I wonder if we rather sophisticated people of the 21st-century have lost our respect for dreams. If it was good enough for the Magi, and for Joseph (in this passage), perhaps we, too, ought to take our dream life seriously.

We once thought that dreams originated in the subconscious, but modern science asserts that our dreams reflect concrete experiences, fears, ideas, and concerns. Knowing this, we ought to consider them valuable resources, like specific experiences, memories, or relationships. As we look for ways to hear God speak in our daily lives - through scripture, meditation, worship, and our fellow humans - let us not overlook that huge chunk of a 24-hour span which might provide a fresh word from or about God.

Entering this Advent season, I am pledging to be attentive to quiet whispers like dreams, being bold like the Magi and faithful like Joseph.

~ Annie Jenkins

Dear God, you who care about my whole life, awake and asleep, help me pay heed to the ways you are speaking to me. Make me sensitive to my entire world, knowing that all of it is from you. Amen.

Wednesday, December 16

Matthew 2:1–12

Years ago, Debbie preached on this passage from Matthew. In her sermon she referenced the James Taylor song *Home by Another Way* which I encourage you to listen to this season and closely examine Taylor's amazing lyrics. I believe they are for such a time as this.

Debbie spoke about the Magi faithfully following the bright star and worshiping the newborn King with awe and wonder. They bestowed, as we well know, an interesting assortment of gifts on the new family. The wise men were then warned in a dream to return home by a different route to avoid another encounter with the paranoid Herod who was willing to slaughter innocents to retain his throne. They heeded the wisdom from their vision and took an alternative way home so Herod was thwarted this time.

After church that Sunday, as I started up the trusty minivan, my son Thomas asked me if we were going home by a different way. I was flabbergasted! He had sat quietly during the service - a miracle in and of itself - and absorbed Debbie's words, encouraging us to be open to a different route that would still lead us where we needed to go and perhaps help us avoid danger, evil, and temptation. In today's turbulent world, are you and I capable of experiencing the anticipation and amazement that the Magi did as they followed the star to the Christ Child? Can we humble ourselves before the newborn babe offering our assorted gifts and unwavering devotion? And do we have a deep enough faith to take another way home if needed?

I will close with a few lines from James Taylor's beautiful ballad:

> Maybe me and you can be wise guys too and go home by another way
> We can make it another way, Safe home as they used to say
> Keep a weather eye to the chart on high and go home another way

~ Carrie Swing

God, may we encounter the Christ Child anew with wonder and awe this Advent season. Strengthen us for what is ahead on our paths and instill in us the wisdom to choose the right way. Amen.

Thursday, December 17

Matthew 3:1–12 and Mark 1:6

John wore clothing of camel hair with a leather belt and ate locusts and wild honey, Matthew tells us. His attire and intake paint a rugged and austere image for us – nothing expensive or complicated. John's lifestyle would have been simple and uncomplicated, and he called others to join in and share his focus of turning away from sin and turning toward God.

This passage jumped out at me in November because of the description of John's clothing made from camel hair. When I read it, I had just seen camel hair in Carolyn Walker's camel collection which is on exhibition at MUSE Museum in Winston-Salem. Carolyn is Scott Walker's mother, and she collected camels for decades. (Part of her camel Christmas ornament collection is pictured below. The exhibit runs through January 3.)

One camel in the exhibit is made from real camel hair. That camel looks rough but strong, a reminder of the endurance and perseverance those animals have. The camel hair figurine sits on a shelf like the others which are made of a wide variety of materials – jade, brass, porcelain, wood, stained glass, and whimsical feathers, among others. The camel hair camel in that collection is austere – plain and unadorned like John the Baptist – different from the others, like John the Baptist was different from those around him.

John's life modeled simplicity, and in his ministry he called the people to strip down to the basics. He hoped they would set aside their fanciful lives or excessive desires, cast off their familiar and comfortable relationship with sin, and turn to face God, repenting of their sins, and seeking spiritual cleansing.

I think John the Baptist would have been drawn to Carolyn's camel hair camel. This year I feel like I am too. Take me back to the basics of this season – time with family coming in from afar, soul-stirring music, small actions to live into God's hope of justice and love, candles piercing the darkness, and a baby's cry to remind us of God's choice to live as one of us.

~ Debbie Layman

Rather than simply adding more and more to our Christmas preparations, God help us remember the gift of simplicity, for after all you spoke through John the Baptist, and then chose to come among us as a helpless baby. Amen.



Friday, December 18

Matthew 11:2–6

The Gospel of Luke posits that when Elizabeth greeted Mary, her unborn child (the future John the Baptist) 'leaped in my womb for joy.' Elizabeth and Mary are referred to as kinswomen – the startling and joyful sensation that Elizabeth experienced suggests an even deeper and more mysterious bond between John and the Jesus who-is-becoming.

The Bible tells us that John the Baptist roamed the desert landscape of Judea, that his garb and his diet were unusual (camel's hair, locusts, wild honey), that his voice cried out 'prepare the way for the Lord.' John baptizes Jesus in the River Jordan. In John's Gospel, he also proclaims Jesus to be "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world."

All this points to John having a very sure sense of Jesus' identity and purpose. Why, then, do we hear him question: 'Are you the Coming One?'

Consider John's circumstances. With his revolutionary talk and his ardent followers, John has greatly shaken Herod. Having publicly denounced Herod's marriage as unlawful, John is thrown into prison, facing death.

Who among us would not question the beliefs that had brought us to such a place? Who would not feel doubt, despair? Who would not crave reassurance, confirmation?

To me, John's question is a raw and authentic prayer: 'Are you the Coming One?'

~ Jan Morgan

Lord, help me to trust in your coming, your being, your presence. Amen.

Christmas at Luke's House



Cora Eberle

Saturday, December 19

Luke 1:5–25

Zechariah and Elizabeth were "upright in the sight of God, observing all commandments and regulations blamelessly." Zechariah was a priest. Elizabeth came from a long line of priests. They prayed. They read Scripture. They were "good church people." But they wanted a child. For years they continued to live faithful lives. But still, no child.

Faithfulness doesn't erase long seasons of waiting. Even people who love God and want to serve God feel the weight of unanswered prayers and growing older. Waiting stretches out and hope thins.

One day when Zechariah was working in the temple, the angel Gabriel appeared. Finally! Good news! Their prayers had been answered, and Elizabeth would bear a son, John, who would prepare the way for the Messiah.

Did Zechariah jump for joy and burst into songs and prayers of praise and thanksgiving? Hardly. After years of hoping and seeing nothing change, belief was out of reach.

Zechariah made the mistake of underestimating God. Gabriel suggested Zechariah just be quiet for a while and watch God work. For months he couldn't argue or explain or talk about his anxiety. He was forced to quietly wait and watch as God's promises unfolded.

How often do we struggle to believe God's goodness because our circumstances seem impossible? Good news rarely arrives on our timetable, and it almost always asks us to stretch our faith beyond what seems logical. When we choose to be quiet and wait, we make room to recognize the miracle when it finally happens - and the readiness to believe it.

~ Penny Russ

Loving God, when waiting wears us down or when your answer feels too good to believe, steady our hearts in your promise. Prepare us this Advent season to welcome you with trust and hope. Amen.

Sunday, December 20

Luke 1:26–38

There are moments in life when God steps into our ordinary circumstances and invites us into something extraordinary. Sometimes the invitation comes quietly, unexpectedly and sometimes it comes in the middle of plans we had all figured out.

That's exactly what happened to Mary. She was living life in an ordinary town, engaged to Joseph, looking forward to her future, and probably imagining what her life would look like. But then an angel appeared with a message that would change everything for her....

Just imagine being Mary; confused, afraid, and wondering what all of this could possibly mean. She didn't know what people would think of her, how Joseph would respond, or what the future would hold. But what makes Mary's story so beautiful is not that she understood everything, it's that she trusted the One who did. Mary didn't say, "Lord, let me figure this out first." She simply placed her life in God's hands.

During Advent, we are excited for the coming of Jesus, but the chaos of the season often makes us forget the heart of the story that we are supposed to be celebrating. Before there was a manger, there was a young woman who said yes to God. Before there was a Christmas celebration, there was an act of quiet surrender.

How often have you quietly surrendered? Maybe this season finds you uncertain. Maybe life hasn't turned out the way you imagined. Maybe you're carrying questions, burdens, disappointments, grief, or fears about what comes next.

My wish for each of us this Advent is that we can all slow down long enough to hear God's voice and to surrender to it. Sometimes the most beautiful thing we can offer God is not our understanding, our accomplishments, or our carefully made plans, it is simply our answer "yes".

~ Gidget Payne

God, please guide us with your presence through this season. Thank you for the gift of your son, your sacrifices and his. May we venture through this season with the light of hope in what often seems dark. Amen.

Monday, December 21

Luke 1:39–56

"I'm bursting with God-news! I'm dancing the song of my Savior God!" Luke 1:46 The Message

Advent reflection prepares us for Christmas joy! The Song of Mary from the Gospel of Luke beckons us into fresh anticipation of the incomprehensible Love Gift of Our Lord Jesus Christ. We are not merely invited but dramatically compelled in love to taste and see the power and beauty of the prophetic promises of all the ages: Emmanuel ~ God with us! The Mystery of the Incarnation that transformed Creation for all time and ushered in the Kingdom of Heaven springs from the young girl Mary, who humbled and completely embraced God's call on her life. This is the model of faith for all the ages!

We, who are created in the image of God, are restored as Children of God in the Love Covenant of our Savior and Messiah, Jesus Christ! We are anointed with the Holy Spirit to live in the power of God's Holy Love! How can we not "burst with God-news" and "dance the song of our Savior God"? "How can we keep from singing," for "Love is Lord of earth and heaven!" How can we drag our feet when we are compelled in the joy of salvation to "dance, dance, wherever we may be," for Christ is Lord of the dance of all worlds and will dance with us for all Eternity!

~ Susan Bates

God of Love, Gracious Jesus, and Holy Spirit, be real to us in this season of waiting and wondering. Give us deeper, sweeter, and stronger promptings of your Truth and Grace. Let us desire to love, follow, and serve you in renewed faith, that our world may know that you are alive and moving to create your Kingdom of Love in the earth! In Jesus' name and by the power of the Holy Spirit, Alleluia, Amen!

Tuesday, December 22

Luke 1:67–79

In Luke's Gospel, Zechariah breaks months of silence with a song of praise. He proclaims God's promise of salvation, mercy, and deliverance, culminating in the beautiful image of a new dawn that will "give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace" (Luke 1:79).

For centuries, Christians have sung of that same longing in the Advent hymn "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel." Its ancient words give voice to a people awaiting freedom from captivity, the end of sorrow, and the coming of God's peace.

The hymn's repeated call to rejoice is striking. We sing of rejoicing while still surrounded by darkness, injustice, and division. Like Zechariah, we proclaim God's promises before their fulfillment is fully visible. Perhaps this is one of the gifts of Advent music. We do not sing because the world is already at peace. We sing because we believe God's light is breaking into it. And as we prepare to celebrate Christ's coming, we are called not simply to await that light, but to carry it into a world still longing for liberation, mercy, and peace.

~ Chris Gilliam

O God of Light and Mercy, shine upon those who dwell in darkness and under the weight of oppression. Break the bonds of injustice, comfort those who mourn, and guide our feet into the way of peace. May the songs we sing become the lives we lead, bearing witness to your coming kingdom of love. Amen.

Wednesday, December 23

Luke 2:19

These words from the Gospel of Luke follow the story of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem. A host of angels has appeared to the shepherds and exhorted them to make their way to the manger to pay homage to the Christ child. When they do, they proclaim what they have beheld and share the message they have received. As the gospel writer recounts, Mary treasures and ponders these words in her heart. We are offered similar insight into Mary's psyche later in Chapter 2 of Luke, when Mary, Joseph, and an adolescent Jesus visit Jerusalem and become separated. His parents ultimately discover Jesus in the temple, conversing with scholars. As with the shepherds' visit, this encounter leaves a lasting impression on Mary, and she "treasured all these things in her heart" (Luke 2:51).

As a parent to four small children, I can relate to Mary's impulse to cleave to certain words and experiences during the early moments of her son's life. Bearing witness to a new life entering the world is surely among the most sacred of human experiences, when the boundaries between the mortal and the divine are at their thinnest. When the shepherds appeared to worship her newborn son, Mary, exhausted from labor yet awash with the warm glow of new motherhood, must have powerfully sensed God's presence through their words and actions. Perhaps Mary felt echoes of the shepherds' visit years later when she encountered the adolescent Jesus in the temple, another compelling attestation to his messianic identity.

As we journey through Advent, making our way, like the shepherds, to welcome the Christ child, what new words might we hear and treasure in our hearts? What familiar words might we call forth from the treasure troves of our hearts to ponder anew this season? What other experiences might we, like Mary, add to the treasures we store and ponder in our hearts?

~ Chad Archer

O God, you fill our lives with words and experiences that awaken us to your presence among us. Open our ears that we might hear the words you speak. Open our hearts that we might add your whispered words of love, justice, and mercy to the treasure troves of our hearts, so that, when we are discouraged or dismayed, we might call them forth, ponder them anew, and rise refreshed and restored to live out your gospel. Through Christ our Lord, the Word made flesh, we pray. Amen.

Thursday, December 24

Luke 2:1–7

Throughout Advent, we've imagined ourselves as guests in the homes of the Gospel writers. We've listened to their stories, considered their perspectives, and discovered different ways they invite us to encounter Jesus.

Tonight, our journey brings us to Bethlehem.

There is no grand welcome awaiting Mary and Joseph. No beautifully prepared guest room, no elaborate celebration. Instead, the Savior of the world is born in humble circumstances and laid in a manger.

We spend so much of this season preparing. We decorate our homes, plan gatherings, wrap gifts, and make room for the people we love. Yet the Christmas story reminds us that God doesn't wait for everything to be perfectly arranged before showing up. God enters the world in the midst of ordinary life, with all its uncertainties, inconveniences, and imperfections. Perhaps that is the invitation of Christmas Eve. Not to create the perfect celebration, but to open our hearts to the surprising ways God comes among us.

As you prepare to celebrate Christmas, take a moment to consider:

- Where have you experienced God's presence this Advent?
- What might you need to set aside to make room for Christ?

Who in your life or community might be longing for a place of welcome and belonging?

~ Courtney Stevens

Loving God, you came among us not in grandeur, but in humility and love. Open our hearts to welcome you, our eyes to recognize you, and our lives to make room for those who need your grace. Amid the busyness and beauty of this holy night, help us remember the gift at the heart of Christmas: Emmanuel, God with us. Amen.

Friday, December 25

Luke 2:8–20

The angels have sung. The shepherds have hurried to Bethlehem. And there, just as they were told, they find Mary, Joseph, and the child lying in the manger.
But the story doesn't end there.

Luke tells us that the shepherds made known what had been told to them about this child. Then they returned to their fields, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen.

They didn't stay at the manger. They went back to their ordinary lives, but they carried an extraordinary story with them.

Over these weeks of Advent, we've visited the homes of Mark, John, Matthew, and Luke. Each has welcomed us into the good news of Jesus Christ, sharing a different glimpse of God's love made known in the world.

Now, on Christmas Day, it's time for us to carry that story home. The good news was never meant to remain in Bethlehem, confined to the pages of scripture, or celebrated only within the walls of a church. It is a living story, one we are invited to share through the ways we love our neighbors, welcome strangers, seek justice, practice compassion, and bear witness to God's grace.

So, wherever Christmas finds you today, whether surrounded by family and friends or enjoying a quieter day, may you know that you have a place in this story. And like the shepherds, may you go forth rejoicing, ready to share what you have heard and seen.

~ Courtney Stevens

A Christmas Blessing
May the hope of Christ sustain you, the peace of Christ surround you, the joy of Christ fill you, and the love of Christ shine through you. May your home be a place of welcome, your life a witness to grace, and your heart always open to the surprising ways God comes among us. Christ is born! Glory to God in the highest, and peace to all God's people. Amen.