

Advent Devotionals



Stories Written By
Soapstone UMC
2024

THE BALLAD OF THE INN-KEEPERS WIFE

It was many and many a year ago,
And the light was swiftly waning.
The inn was raucous with revelers
And loud with their complaining.
Outside, where twilit clouds were rolling,
I saw a man, his arm consoling
A woman who was nine months swollen-
And her face was creased with paining.
My husband opened the heavy door
And shook his shaggy head
"We've not one empty room," he said,
Nor a single unpaid bed.
But I tugged his sleeve and whispered low,
"Behold this woman; you surely know
You cannot, must not
force them to go. Her time has arrived," I pled.
Oh, my husband's voice is hard and stern,
And his brows are thick and black,
But his heart is wide as an open gate,
And his goodness knows no lack.
"I've neither room nor a place at table,"
He muttered; then, "But if you're able,
Bed yourselves down in my stable--
Though it's bare and cold as a shack.
As they shook our hands so gratefully,
The woman swallowed her moan:
And I led them down to a stable stall,
Cleft out of the hillside stone.
We fashioned a bed from a pile of straw,
And she lay down quiet and set her jaw.
I tried to deny the pain I saw
As I left them there alone.
Back in the inn, as I carved the meat and served the flasks
of wine. My heart remained in the cold, dim stall
With an ache I could not define.
As I served the folk in that noisy room,
I felt the familiar clasp of gloom
Reminding me of my empty womb
And the child who would not be mine.
Seeking the dark and solitude,
I left in a blur of tears.
The rollicking laughter of the crowd
Was mockery in my ears. I stared at the cradle my husband had made,
Lying still and empty beside our bed,
Its unused blanket overspread--
And my road was suddenly clear.

Lifting the blanket into my arms,
I recalled the hours of weaving
From the softest wool of the youngest lamb,
In the time of my believing.
Now I folded it and breathed a prayer,
Crept swiftly down the steep back stair,
And fled
into the wintry air-

I had left behind my grieving.
Nearing the stable, I heard the chime
Of an infant's plaintive cry:
My heart leapt high as cattie lowed,
Sweet as a lullaby.

Then from the doorway I beheld
Mother, Father, newborn child,
And through the window, starlight spilled
From a suddenly brilliant sky.

The blanket clutched against my breast, I walked
into the stall and gazed at the babe in his father's
arms, A drowsing miracle.
"This was woven," I whispered, "with love and
prayer for the babe I know I shall never bear; May
it shelter yours from the chilling air." Then I
turned, for my eyes were full.

But, feeling a hand upon my arm, I looked in the
father's face.
"We have known your kindness twice this night,"
He said, and then he raised
The sleeping baby, snugly wrapped
Into my wondering arms; I wept
As I cuddled the child, and my heart was swept
To a moment of purest grace.

The mother rose from her childbirth bed
And came to where I stood; "We can repay your
gift," she said, "Only with gratitude.
carried this child; we gave him his name,
But your love has made a compelling claim;
He is yours and ours. throughout all time." She
bowed--and I understood. Since then, I've recalled
how in that stall I knew myself as mother.

And I've heard of the man our child became,
How the people 'round him gather
As he teaches the truth of God's design:
Love, not blood, is the tie that binds. In this family
of humankind
We belong to one another
In every season, every
weather, We are One within the other.

Introduction

Greetings Soapstone,

We invite you to an encounter with the spirit of God as you explore the pages of this devotional book written by the community of Soapstone United Methodist Church. This devotional offers stories and reflections from the lives of our church family. The devotional focuses on Advent, a season of anticipation, reflection, and hope.

Advent marks the beginning of the Christian calendar and invites us to prepare our hearts for the celebration of Christ's birth. The word Advent comes from the Latin *adventus*, meaning "coming" or "arrival." During these weeks leading up to Christmas, we remember not only the first coming of Jesus as a baby in Bethlehem but also His promised return as King.

In the hustle and bustle of the holiday season, it's easy to get caught up in the busyness—decorations, shopping, and countless commitments. Yet, Advent offers us a sacred pause, a chance to slow down and refocus on the true meaning of Christmas. It is a time to prepare—not just our homes, but our hearts—for the greatest gift ever given: God's love in human form.

This devotional book is designed to guide you through the weeks of Advent, helping you meditate on Scripture, reflect on God's promises, and respond with faith and gratitude. Each entry includes a passage from the Bible, a short reflection, and a prayer to help center your thoughts on Christ.

As you journey through this Advent season, may you find time to be still, to listen, and to embrace the joy of God's presence. Let these moments of reflection lead you to deeper awe and gratitude for the miracle of Christmas.

Let's embark on this sacred journey together, preparing our hearts for Christ's coming—both in the manger and in the future glory of His return.

"Come, let us adore Him!"

The Care Campaign

This year, in place of Sunday devotionals during Advent, we invite you to participate in a new experience called the Care Campaign. On the Sunday page in the devotional book, you will find three challenges you can participate in. The challenges center around one of 4 themes: Creation Care, Encouraging People, Acts of Service, or Gift Giving. There are three challenges each week to allow participants flexibility to choose from different degrees of difficulty. The challenges will be identified as: Easier, Average, and More Difficult. You may complete one of every challenge each week.

Once you complete the challenges we ask that you send a brief summary of your experience to Pastor Damion so that we might share your experience with others. Thanks, and enjoy.

Care Campaign

Easy



Call someone you haven't seen in a while.

Moderate



Meet someone new (perhaps at church) and learn about them.

Challenging



Call someone you're angry with and forgive them.



December 2, Interpreting Dreams

by Rev. Dr. Damion Quaye

Genesis 40:5-8

One night they both dreamed—the cupbearer and the baker of the king of Egypt, who were confined in the prison—each his own dream, and each dream with its own meaning. When Joseph came to them in the morning, he saw that they were troubled. So he asked Pharaoh’s officers, who were with him in custody in his master’s house, “Why are your faces downcast today?” They said to him, “We have had dreams, and there is no one to interpret them.” And Joseph said to them, “Do not interpretations belong to God? Please tell them to me.”

Theme:

This short passage of scripture comes from the story of Joseph’s life in the book of Genesis. Much of Joseph’s story focuses on dreams. For the Egyptians, dreams were often considered messages from the gods, and dream interpretation was the work of magicians or diviners. Throughout the book of Genesis, God uses dreams to reveal God’s plans to God’s people.

In modern times, some still see dreams as divine messages from God. Some people still seek out those who can interpret or explain the dreams they have at night. However, that is not how we most commonly speak of dreams in the modern age. When we speak of dreams, we are often speaking about our aspirations, hopes, or expectations for the future. We dream of being healthy. We dream of being happy. While this view of dreams might differ from dreams outlined in Genesis, at least one thing remains true; dream interpretations belong to God.

It is by God’s grace and mercy that our lives are ordered, and God is uniquely equipped to help us discern how best to move forward.

Illustration:

For most of my childhood, I wanted to grow up and become an architect. I chose the college I attended because I was interested in their Landscape Architecture program. I was enrolled in that program for exactly one week.

I attended my first class and was given what I originally viewed as a simple assignment. I began my work by reviewing the assignment requirements. I discovered that the specifics of what was required were much more than I imagined. After a week of working on the assignment, I realized that I didn’t enjoy the work. I really didn’t enjoy the work. I imagined doing this for the rest of my life on a larger scale. I realized I couldn’t do it and I looked for a program I might transfer into.

What I didn’t realize was that God had plans for my life. I couldn’t have even imagined the path my life would take. I couldn’t foresee the places I’d work, or live, or study. I couldn’t anticipate the road I’d take or the place I’d end up. Today, I work in ministry full-time and that was not what I dreamt of as a kid. Perhaps God saw my dreams differently than I did.

Takeaway:

We long for control of our lives. We like to believe that we are building lives based on what we want for the future. However, we often don’t know ourselves as well as we think we do. Since most of us aren’t magicians or diviners, we must look outside of ourselves to understand our dreams. If we are smart, perhaps we look to God.

Prayer:

God teach me to trust you with my life. Teach me to see you at work in my hopes and my dreams. Remind me of your infinite wisdom and give me the courage to walk the path you lay before me. Amen.

December 3, The Bigger Picture

by Donna Mayo

Jeremiah 29:10-14

For thus says the Lord: Only when Babylon's seventy years are completed will I visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. For surely, I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, I will let you find me, says the Lord, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, says the Lord, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.

Theme:

Promised a future of hope, even in a moment of despair.

Illustration:

In these verses, God tells his people to "hold on" for seventy years. They have been exiled to Babylon, and God wants them to start over in this new land and be of good faith while living out these seventy years. During their time in Babylon God tells his people to pray and be faithful. And, at the end of the seventy years God promises to bring them home, and life will be restored to earlier good times.

In this story, God's people are in despair and feeling hopeless. One doesn't have to look very far today to see people who are in despair, and the types of despair and the degrees of despair are many. You may have a friend recently diagnosed with cancer or know a young couple who has been unsuccessful in trying to have a baby or have a child who is struggling with depression. Despair comes in all shapes and sizes. And, when we are in the midst of despair it is often very difficult to be of good faith and trust that everything will work out fine.

Our six-year-old granddaughter experienced despair recently when she didn't get one of several awards given out at her school quarterly for academic achievement, positive behavior, good citizenship, etc. Meanwhile, her older brother did receive an award. Though this may not seem like something that could create despair, she felt bleak. Her parents explained to her that she should continue her good behavior and hard work, and she will be in line for recognition in future award ceremonies. Six-year-old children, like many of us, sometimes don't really understand the concept of delayed gratification. Particularly when the delayed outcome requires us to be faithful through good times and tough times.

It seems these verses in Jeremiah are telling us to "hold on" and trust God is working for us, but I believe there is also something we can learn from these verses that doesn't have to do with delayed gratification. And that is the idea that, no matter what changes we face in our lives, we should try each day to live our best lives while glorifying God. Loving God and serving others might just make the seventy years wait seem shorter, and perhaps less meaningful because we are living our best lives.

Takeaway:

Our timeline is not God's, so even in the midst of despair he is with us.

Prayer:

Loving God, thank you for reminding us that you have our plans and welfare taken care of. When our despair is weighing us down, we come to you to take it from us and to give us hope.

December 4, What If I Missed It?

by Glenda Owens

Luke 1:12-17

When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

Theme:

Do you have them too? Those recurring dreams that delight or trouble our sleep for years? The one that keeps showing up for me started not too long after I graduated from college. In the dream, it's graduation day and I'm gowned and ready for the procession. Suddenly, my advisor pulled me from the line and informed me I could not graduate because I did not pass a required math class. But I couldn't recall it being on my list of classes and had never attended a single class. And I had missed it completely.

Illustration:

Zechariah and Elizabeth were 'righteous before God...and getting along in years.' But they had not been blessed with children. Being barren in ancient Israel was often perceived as a sign of God's displeasure. The irony of righteous people missing out on a blessing (like children) is woven throughout their story.

Even in their disappointment, Zechariah and Elizabeth continued to live blamelessly. And God showed up – big time. Zechariah was serving in his priestly duties, offering incense in the sanctuary of the Lord when Gabriel appeared to him – and Zechariah was terrified (angels seem to have that effect throughout the Christmas story...). But Gabriel came with an incredible promise, one that Zechariah found hard to believe. Not only would Elizabeth become pregnant, but they would have a son! A son who would 'make ready a people prepared for the Lord.'

Why is it that we are often not surprised when things don't line up with our expectations when bad news is all we seem to hear? And yet, when God shows up with great promise our initial response is terror and skepticism?

Takeaway:

Can we hold onto the example of Zechariah and Elizabeth, continuing to live blamelessly and walking in righteousness when the road is hard to follow?

Prayer:

God of all promises, we yearn for you to show up in our lives. Yet we fear we could completely miss your message, your messengers, when they come. This Christmas season, may we watch for you and embrace your promise as you lay to rest our fears. Even so, come Lord Jesus.

For Jesus and because of Jesus, Amen.



December 5, High Hopes

“Divine Comedy?” by Dr. Greg Van Buskirk

Genesis 18:12-15 So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, “After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I be fruitful?” The LORD said to Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh and say, ‘Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?’ ¹⁴ Is anything too wonderful for the LORD? At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son.” But Sarah denied, saying, “I did not laugh,” for she was afraid. He said, “Yes, you did laugh.”

Theme: Have you ever stopped to think if God has a sense of humor? I mean, beyond just the silliness of the duck-billed platypus.

Illustration:

Think about how much of our Christian tradition is premised on truly ridiculous (Latin, “laughable”) beliefs: God’s Salvation (Yeshua) is to come not through political, military, or otherwise prestigious channels, but through the birth of a powerless child in a Middle Eastern territory occupied by Imperial forces—a child whose teenage mother is an unwed virgin. That’s not the way things work in this world. Perhaps more ridiculous still is what we Christians witness about that baby: he is the Son of God, executed by the very occupying Empire, and yet resurrected in the power and to the glory of God. It’s absurd when you stop to think about it: virgins don’t have babies; dead people stay dead. Anyone saying otherwise would be considered a laughingstock—right?

Well, as it turns out, Jesus’ birth is not the only “laughable” birth story in the Bible. In fact, God’s original covenant with Abraham—that out of barrenness shall come fruitfulness, generations of blessing, everlasting covenant with God (Gen. 17)—is a promise premised in laughter itself. In today’s Advent reading, Sarah laughs at God when she overhears the absurdity of the promise that she, a 90 year old woman, is supposed to give birth. The ensuing conversation is nothing shy of humorous—not out of disrespect, but because it’s just too much to take in without...laughing!

So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, “After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?” The Lord said to Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh, and say, ‘Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?’ Is anything too wonderful for the Lord? At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son.” But Sarah denied, saying, “I did not laugh”; for she was afraid. He said, “Oh yes, you did laugh.” (Gen. 18:12-15)

I can’t help but chuckle myself when reading it. “I didn’t laugh,” Sarah backpedals, caught off guard by the absurdity of God’s promise. “Oh, yes you did!” God snaps back. Hilarious!

But why do we laugh? It’s practically useless, really. If anything, we show that we are letting our guard down and forfeiting our very breath to another. It’s an escape of oxygen, of breath, of spirit. And yet it’s one of the most binding human activities we know. To laugh together is to bond, to share spirit with one another.

Maybe that’s why the names in this story are so important. In the previous chapter (Gen. 17), we read about Abraham and Sarah’s changed names—from Abram and Sarai to Abraham and Sarah. I always thought about it as the Lord (Yahweh) “giving” to Abram and Sarai part of God’s own name—ha! and ah!—as part of their new, covenant identity. Not to mention that their promised son is to be named Isaac, which straight up means “laughter” in Hebrew (Yitzhak). In other words, the family of God’s original covenant with humanity is a family of laughter, a family of incredulity over the miraculous promise that is to unfold—not only for them but for the entire Creation.

And it is from this lineage, this promise, this divine comedy—not tragedy—comes a new people, a covenant people, out of whom shall come the Messiah, God’s Salvation. Yes, this plays out in a world marred and marked by fear, oppression, occupation, crisis—by tragedy—but it is one into which the Lord Most High descends, to laugh through an infant’s coos—to embrace the miraculous, the impossible, the ludicrous.

Takeaway:

“Is anything too wonderful,” too impossible, too ridiculous, too laughable, “for the Lord?” God asks Abraham and Sarah (Gen. 18:14). Forty-two generations later (Matt. 1:1-17), the definitive answer came to Mary: “For nothing will be impossible with God” (Lk. 1:37).

Prayer:

God of promise and of hope, open me to the marvelous work that you are birthing in our midst every day. Fill me with your joy, your laughter, in the face of what seems impossible. Amen.

December 6, The Villain in Us *"Can we be real?"* by Becky Fouts

Romans 7:18-19

For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.

Theme:

Sometimes it is important to acknowledge we are imperfect and ugly beings. Also, God's love is there even in those moments.

Illustration:

One of the hardest parts of being a Christian is to admit to ourselves that we are sinners. Not very Christmas-y, but stick with me. We are destined to sin regardless of our will. Paul, who wrote to the churches everywhere to bring them light and love and spread the good news that Jesus is, was and will always be, wrote these words. Why? I think he was being real. We need to hear this as much as we need to hear the good news.

Personally, there are days when I feel I AM the most horrible person. I am angry and snarky and growly. My thoughts are not thoughts that seek out scripture or prayer. My actions don't reflect the hands and feet of our Lord. The love that is in my heart is shaded by ugliness. I know, even then, it's temporary. That's my secret to getting through. I feel it's healthy to know these days can't be avoided, because we are human and we live with sin – even Paul knew it! To me, there are three important things to remember. A "sin" trinity if you will:

- God created us out of love (yes, there's that winning word)
- We fell from His grace through sin, and we continue to do so.
- God's love is SO BIG, SO STEADFAST, SO UNDENIABLE, that he gave us Jesus who wipes our slate clean. Every. Single. Day.

Even when I make mistakes, feel the wrong things, say the wrong things and do the wrong things, I don't have to continually beat myself up. I can have faith in the word, in our God and in his ever-forgiving Son. I know that I will continue to reach toward what is right. Even as I go through one of those days.

Takeaway:

In this season of hope and love, it's ok to acknowledge your personal darkness. Just remember, the light will always, ALWAYS shine through. Give yourself a little grace and know that God's love is yours through it all.

Prayer:

Dear gracious, forgiving and loving Father, we are so thankful for your love. We lean into you, even when we know we don't deserve you, your love or your forgiveness. Thank you for your Son, our Savior, who You gave freely to us, into a world that would be forever in darkness without Him. Stay with us as we learn to be better. Amen

December 7, Separating the Good from the Bad

Sheep or Goats? by Julie Brown

Matthew 25:31-46 ‘When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, “Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.” Then the righteous will answer him, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?” And the king will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” Then he will say to those at his left hand, “You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.” Then they also will answer, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?” Then he will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.” And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.’

Theme:

There will be a division—just like the shepherd divides the sheep from the goats—so we are told. The blessed, the sheep, will have a place at the right hand of Christ, while the goats will be herded to the left, to eternal fire. What makes the sheep so special? Both sheep and goats offer milk and meat, and both provide wool. During the time of Christ, the type of wool made all the difference. Sheep’s wool was white, fine, and delicate. Goat hair was dark, coarse, and rough. To the early hearers of the Word, sheep were more highly valued.

Illustration:

When it comes to the ‘end times,’ I want to be among the sheep. So, how can I be assured of a place on Christ’s right? Where will I stand at the reckoning? I will be accountable to our Lord and to myself. That tally is not just what appears in a public record. No, I have to answer to it all, even those private thoughts, the actions taken when no one is looking, the ulterior motives, the selfish decisions, and all of the unintended consequences.

According to Matthew, Jesus preceded this metaphor for the final judgment with guidance for his followers including the Sermon on the Mount, the call to receive the Kingdom as a little child, an exhortation to forgive seventy times seven, and multiple teaching moments through parables. The Disciples seemed eager to live out their calling, but they didn’t always get the lessons immediately. Often, I find myself sharing that same dilemma with the twelve.

WWJD, a popular acronym some time ago, was tossed around as a way to encourage better behavior. Maybe it is time to recycle that motif more explicitly as ‘What Would Jesus Have Me Do?’ Perhaps I can improve my value by being open to the guidance of the Holy Spirit, acting on my faith in a loving Father and in gratitude toward his Son’s self-less gift and promise.

My every day choices have consequences; so let me choose goodness, righteousness, and mercy toward my fellow man. Let me do what I can to demonstrate the love of God for anyone to see—even if I think I am invisible. I need to focus on that right hand of Christ, so I can be a sheep when the roll is called.

Takeaway: “He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” – Micah 6:8

Prayer: Heavenly Father, Let me work to honor you in all I think, say and do, not just some of the time. Thank you for your incredible love and sacrifice. Amen

Care Campaign

Easy



Donate to a charity that cares for the poor.

Moderate



Sponsor a family in need at Christmas (Angel tree, giving tree, etc.)

Challenging



Collect socks and deliver to a homeless shelter.



December 9, The Power of Forgiveness

"There ain't nothing you can do about it" by Katie Cable

John 3:16-17

"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him...."

Theme:

We are ALL forgiven and loved and in the words of a dear friend "there ain't nothing you can do about it"

Illustration:

Can you imagine a love so strong, so pure that is freely given regardless of the circumstances? A love so complete that, no matter our thoughts or actions, we are forgiven. God extends exactly that to each of us unconditionally.

Being a part of a big, "interesting" family, I can honestly say I love each person, even in our differences. And yes, I've been hurt by those same people just as I know I've hurt them. But knowing I am loved by the One who is love itself gives me the strength to forgive, again and again. It gives me the courage to keep showing up. Sometimes, I need extra prayer to get there, but I wouldn't trade my family for anything. God didn't intend for us to face life's struggles alone, and when we don't embrace the same forgiveness He grants us, we allow negativity and pain to consume us. Instead, I choose love. I choose forgiveness.

Takeaway:

Remember, always - especially in the darkest times - YOU are forgiven and loved, "and there ain't nothing you can do about it!" Pray each day for the strength to show that same forgiveness and love to others and yourself.

Prayer:

Forgiving God, there is no other love like yours. You forgive us freely each and every day. Remind us to forgive with our whole hearts and extend grace to others and ourselves. In Your loving name, Amen.



December 10, Transformed by Love
“No Room for Fear” by Jennifer Johnson

1 John 4: 17-18

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

Theme:

Just like the Father’s love cast out the fear of a young child his love also can cast out our grown-up fears.

Illustration:

I grew up in inner city Baltimore in not the best neighborhood. As long as my dad was there, I never noticed the police helicopters or the drug addicts living in our nearby woods because I knew he loved me and would protect me. But when I was 12-14, my father had a 2-year stay in the hospital due to having his heart rebuilt in a first of its kind surgery due to a congenital heart defect. It was during this time that I experienced true fear for the first time that I can remember. I self-appointed myself as being responsible for the safety and security of my family so as a young teenager I would stay up most of the night listening for danger and praying that no one would harm my family or me. It was during this time in my life that I began to realize that my father who had been very weak all his life was not who was keeping my family safe, but it was God watching over us. My dad was a minister who felt it was his mission to preach and live among the least of these which is why I grew up in a low-cost housing project in Baltimore. But my dad was also the one who time after time showed us what it was like to fully rely on God for all our needs. With his heart defect my dad never got to run and he was physically too weak to protect me but in his heart he had a strength unmatched because of how strong his trust in the Lord was. He taught us to fully rely on God for safety and protection. As a young child he taught me to pray and in the still small hours of the night I learned that perfect love casts out fear and that my God loved me and would protect me no matter where I lived. My dad lived his life as a constant prayer. This verse has reminded me of that small child who prayed and allowed God’s love take away her fear and to this day whenever I am nervous or afraid I try to always remember to give these fears to God in prayer. I try to remind myself of the safety and security that those prayers brought to my life as a child and how He still watches over me in all the years since.

Takeaway:

We only need the faith of a child to come to God with our needs and trust that His love can cast out our fears. When I hear this song it reminds me that God is in control of my life and I just need to trust everything into my Father’s hands.

Prayer:

Dear Lord, I come to you and lay all my fears and anxiety at your feet. I pray that your love will take away all of my fears.



So when I fight, I'll fight on my knees
With my hands lifted high
Oh God, the battle belongs to You
And every fear I lay at Your feet
I'll sing through the night
Oh God, the battle belongs to You
“Battle Belongs” By Phil Wickham



True Love
Created by Jennifer Johnson

December 11, An Unlikely Gift

"Where's the Baby Jesus" by Pastor George Freeman

Matthew 2:1-8

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him." When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written:

"But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel."

Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared.

He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."

Theme:

Advent is a time of preparing ourselves spiritually for the birth/rebirth of Christ in our lives. All during this season of the year we see streets lined with beautiful lights, gorgeous wreaths hanging on doors, homes adorned with Christmas trees surrounded with gifts to be opened, parties to be attended.....but where is baby Jesus in it all." Where do we find him?

Illustration:

Every year my mind and heart travel back to those early Christmas' when my father would sit in his chair next to the fireplace and the family Christmas tree; mother perched on her bench at the piano and us five kids would be sitting randomly on the living room floor. Mom would let each of us pick our favorite Christmas carol and together we would sing with gusto..seven different carols. (Mom and Dad included).

When the singing was over, Dad would open his Bible to Luke 2 and read the Birth Narrative, reminding all of us that Jesus birth in Bethlehem was at the very heart of our Christmas. After his reading from the Gospel of Luke, we all went into the dining room where Mom would present her annual Baby Jesus Birthday cake with one candle in the center....it was always delicious, especially when it was topped with our favorite vanilla ice cream.

After our annual Christmas Eve dessert we all piled into the car to go to church. Christmas Eve Candlelight Service has always been my favorite.....Our family always sat on the second row from the front. As the soloist would sing "O Holy Night" we would all go to the altar and kneel side by side to receive Holy Communion as a family. At the close of the service before the priest would give the benediction everyone in a beautiful tenor of reverence would sing, "Silent Night, Holy Night, wondrous star, lend thy light, with the angels let us sing, Alleluia to our King, Christ the Savior is Born, Christ the Savior is born!"

I am so thankful for rich family traditions that remind me over and over again about the incredible gift from God that began in that small out of the way town called Bethlehem of Judea. As you ponder your own special ways of preparing for Christmas, the question that begs for attention is, "Where is the Baby Jesus in it all? Where do you find Him? Where do you hope to find him this Christmas of 2024?" As he takes up residence in you anew this year, may your life be blessed with goodness and grace!

Takeaway:

May the star that shown over the manger in Bethlehem, be the same light that guides your path this Advent Season and fills you with mystery, wonder, peace and joy. Amen.

Prayer:

"O holy Child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray; cast out our sin, and enter in, be born in us today. We hear the Christmas angels the great glad tidings tell; O come to us, abide with us, our Lord Emmanuel!"
(O Little Town of Bethlehem)

December 12, A Peculiar Place *“Promise of an Eternal Ruler”, by Bill Tinkler*

Micah 5:2

But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days.

Theme:

Though the prophet Micah had been reminding the people of Israel that God was continuing to hold them accountable for their sinful behavior, he now reveals that God will send a Messiah from the humblest tribe and a most peculiar place to become the eternal ruler and good shepherd.

Because the people and leaders of Israel had become corrupt and wicked, Micah predicts the overthrow and downfall of both the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah. But, in the midst of such prophetic destruction, he also provides hope that a remnant will be spared and an eternal savior shall come to rule.

Illustration:

In the early 1970s Canadian Les Emmerson wrote a funny but poignant song entitled, “Signs, Signs, Everywhere a Sign” in which he mocks those who judge and discriminate against others who don’t look like “regular people” in society, don’t have much money, or don’t have the right clothes or cultural credentials. Especially during this recent presidential cycle, such negative and combative behavior seems to have become emblematic of our own political culture.

Have we as a nation, like the ancient Israelites, turned away from our faith in God who hates sin but loves us sinners? Has God been reduced to a “cosmic pushover,” while people adulate the rich and powerful, regardless of their corrupt behavior or willingness to manipulate others to get ahead? Do Micah’s prophecies of impending judgment and destruction of Israel and Judah apply to our own society? As we prepare our hearts again for the arrival of Jesus, perhaps now is the time to examine our own actions and behavior toward others.

Takeaway:

I try to live a life pleasing to God. Tim McGraw’s lyrics to the song, “Always Be Humble and kind” provide guidance for me in relationships with others. It is comforting to know there is a savior king who loves us, desires to commune with us, and wants us to follow him in areas of generosity, faithfulness, and forgiveness. John 15:5 sums it up well: “I am the vine, you are the branches. The one who remains in Me and I in him produces much fruit, because you can do nothing without Me.” (NRSV)

Prayer:

Heavenly Father, help me be a “connector” of people, lover of justice, and practitioner of mercy, as modeled by our savior and ruler, Jesus. Amen.

December 13, The Invitation

Anonymous

Luke 14:16-22

Then Jesus said to him, ‘Someone gave a great dinner and invited many. At the time for the dinner he sent his slave to say to those who had been invited, “Come; for everything is ready now.” But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said to him, “I have bought a piece of land, and I must go out and see it; please accept my apologies.” Another said, “I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to try them out; please accept my apologies.” Another said, “I have just been married, and therefore I cannot come.” So the slave returned and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and said to his slave, “Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame.” And the slave said, “Sir, what you ordered has been done, and there is still room.” Then the master said to the slave, “Go out into the roads and lanes, and compel people to come in, so that my house may be filled. For I tell you, none of those who were invited will taste my dinner.”’

Theme:

This parable is the story of a host and a banquet. The host represents God, and the banquet symbolizes the kingdom of God—a feast of grace, forgiveness, and eternal joy. The invited guests make excuses and reject the invitation. Their reasons may seem relatable. They include the normal challenges of daily life—work, family, and other responsibilities—but these excuses reveal misplaced priorities. Each excuse shows that the guests value other commitments more than the feast.

God’s invitation to each of us is open and inclusive. The parable emphasizes that God’s invitation is not limited to a select few. When those first invited decline, the invitation goes out to “the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame” (v. 21). God’s kingdom is open to all who will come, and He seeks out those who might feel unworthy or overlooked.

Illustration:

When I was 13 years old, I was invited to my first Bat Mitzvah. I was interested but also anxious. I didn’t know what to expect. If you’re not familiar with it, a Bat Mitzvah is a coming-of-age ceremony for a Jewish girl. It is held around her 12th birthday. After speaking with some of my Jewish friends about what to expect, I learned that Jewish families often spend thousands of dollars to plan this event. It includes a religious ceremony and a party. People arrive in dressy attire and bring expensive gifts.

At the time, my family didn’t have a lot of money. I wanted to go, but I was nervous. The more time I spent thinking about the expensive gifts others would bring or the fancy clothes I did not have, the more nervous I became. I decided I did not want to go. I learned that my friends were going. I learned that some of them weren’t even bringing gifts.

It was one of the most exciting events I had ever attended. I danced. There was a booth to make music videos. I laughed with my friends. There was a DJ. There were gift bags to take home, including a VHS copy of my music video. And yes, there were lots of expensive gifts and expensively-dressed people. I’m glad I went. In fact, I went to close to 20 more that year.

Takeaway:

Even though I was invited to the party, the more I learned about it, the less comfortable I felt showing up. I almost let my insecurities prevent me from experiencing something wonderful. For the characters in the parable, life got in the way of their invitation. I almost let my own pride get in the way. We must all endeavor to remember that God has invited us to the table, to the kingdom, and to the throne. If we don’t let things get in the way, we are always welcome.

Prayer:

Dear God, Thank You for inviting me to be part of Your kingdom. I am sorry for the times I have made excuses or put other things before You. Today, I say ‘yes’ to Your invitation. Help me to trust in Your plan, follow Your ways, and share Your love with others. Thank You for preparing a place for me at Your table. I am grateful for Your grace and the gift of being included in Your family. Amen.

December 14, Curiosity *“A Season of Curiosity”* by Glenda Owens

Luke 2:15-16

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.” So, they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger.

Theme:

“I wonder...” Who of us can’t remember some wonderful experiment we may have concocted as a kid? To be fair, some of those experiments may have come with unwelcome results, but living with a sense of wonder is still exhilarating.

With these two words – I wonder - incredible feats have been undertaken, ideas for amazing items have been born, beauty has been discovered, and radical relationships have blossomed to life.

Illustration:

What began as a quiet night of watching over flocks of sheep quickly became a night of indescribable wonder for a gang of shepherds. One angel (who was enough to terrify the shepherds) proclaimed the fulfillment of one of history’s greatest anticipations. In short order, a multitude of angels appeared in the skies – and then they were gone in the blink of an eye.

I’ve always wondered what truly drove the shepherds to go to Bethlehem that night. Was it that they had just experienced actual angels? Or maybe their terror cried out to be put to calm. Or maybe it was the message itself – a savior who was for them. Whatever it was, we can be certain the shepherds made that journey with some degree of “I wonder...”

- I wonder if we heard what we think we heard
- I wonder why a Savior would be born in a barn
- I wonder if this message is the answer to so many years of prayer

Takeaway:

In this Advent season, may we wait with a sense of curiosity of what is to come. May we look forward in anticipation that the coming Savior can reignite in our hearts that sense of wonder which leads to great discovery.

Prayer:

God of all creation, we want to know the joy of being surprised, the warmth of being included, and the absolute exhilaration of living with a sense of wonder. May we welcome you into our hearts and our homes as you answer our question of “I wonder...” For Jesus and because of Jesus, Amen.



Care Campaign

Easy



Spend time
(at least 20 min) out
in nature with a
friend.

Moderate



Roll your neighbors trash
& recycling bins to the
garage before your
neighbors come home.

Challenging



Help someone with
yard work.
(not your own)



December 16, Joy

“A Really, Really Big Joy” by Pastor Mitzi Johnson

Matthew 2:1-2

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, magi from the east came to Jerusalem, asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star in the east and have come to pay him homage.”

Theme:

Every year on Epiphany, we hear Matthew’s story of the Magi. It works as an exclamation point to that line from, “O Little Town of Bethlehem.” “Yet in the dark streets shineth, the everlasting light. The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.” Christ can be the focus of our fears as he was for Herod and for too many today, or he can be the focus of our hopes, a source of a “really, really big joy!”

Illustration:

Anyone who has ever traveled to the birthplace of Jesus knows that getting there takes some doing. You pass through a series of unnerving military checkpoints before finally arriving at the grand stone basilica, the Church of the Nativity, built in the 500s by the Byzantines. After you’ve waited in a long line and made it inside, the darkness is disorienting. Finally, you wind your way down a narrow staircase into a cave – a grotto they call it – where you get to the place you traveled so far to see: a silver star marking the place where Jesus was born. The caretakers, intent on keeping the line moving, only allow you to stop for a moment or two. The whole setting is so rushed and crowded, so different from any manger scene you’ve ever seen, you’d be forgiven for not feeling much of anything at all. Except for Jesus.

My friend Linda visited with her grandchildren as the culmination of a whirlwind trip of Israel and Palestine. They had wound their way through the checkpoints, the cramped Bethlehem streets, the vendors, the fancy church, and the lines. Finally, they were about 4 feet away from the silver star when she noticed her 10-year-old grandson sobbing – tears streaming down his face. Had his big sister had stepped on his foot? Said something to hurt his feeling? It wouldn’t have been the first time that had happened on their trip. “Luke, what’s wrong?” she asked. “Granny, he’s real! Jesus! He’s real.” He had seen the star, and he was overwhelmed with joy.

The wise men, too, had seen a star stop over that very spot. They had traveled a thousand miles across the Syrian dessert into Roman-occupied Palestine until they got to the little town of Bethlehem. They too contended with checkpoints, narrow streets, and vendors selling their wares. But when the star led them to Jesus, the original Greek text says, they “rejoiced with a really, really big joy.” They crumpled to the floor beside the oxen and the sheep worshipping the child and opening their treasure chest to give him gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh. Why? In the presence of Christ, it seems the thing to do.

Takeaway:

Final Thoughts - If hope in Christ leads us to joy, what does joy lead us to? It led the wise men and Linda’s grandson to worship. May this season lead you, even today, to worship with a really, really big joy.

Prayer:

Lord, in this season of Advent, help me live a life a life mindful of the coming of Christ that I may have hope and joy in a world without end. Amen. Amen.

December 17, Looking for a Sign

by Jessica Slessman

Luke 2: 10-12

But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.”

Theme:

There are signs everywhere around us, telling where to go, what to believe, and who to trust. We often look for these external signs to help us make our decisions. We decide whether to ignore them or to pay attention. In the end, external signs may point us in different directions, but it is God’s signs and promises that surround us, clearing the noise around us, so that we may see the path in which He chooses for us to follow.

Illustration:

One of my favorite Christmas movies is “A Charlie Brown Christmas”. This scripture brings me right back to my childhood, watching the scene where Linus, Charlie Brown’s best friend, takes a quiet stage to tell the Christmas story. His soliloquy comes after one Charlie Brown-related mishap after the other, including his pick of the world’s saddest little Christmas tree, and after the Peanuts gang failed attempt at a Christmas pageant, which falls apart over power struggles, insubordinate actors, and new characters invented for Jesus’ birth story like “The Christmas Queen”. The gang is so focused on the “noise” and the debate over the commercialization of Christmas that they just cannot come together and really see what the true meaning of Christmas is all about.

Linus, guided by his trusty blanket, emerges from the chaos and uses the scripture found in Luke to tell the story of the shepherds and the angels; the story of Jesus’ birth. In Luke 2:10-12, the shepherds were scared. They were fearful. An angel appeared to them and told them - lowly shepherds! - about the great news of Jesus’ birth. Amidst their fear, amidst their flock, amidst the chaos, the angel created a space for them to actually hear the news. At that moment, the angel quieted their fear and quieted the noise, so they could clearly see the sign that God put in front of them and to hear the great news. This was the sign that led them on the path to the manger and the sign that led them, as God wanted, to the path of witness for our newborn King and Savior.

Sometimes our lives are filled with chaos and noise. There are times when we are caught in fear and disbelief. There are times we miss the signs that God plants for us because we struggle to focus on Him. There are times we need an angel or a Linus to help us block the noise and give us the space and quiet so we can see and hear God’s signs that lead us closer to him.

And that, Charlie Brown, is what Christmas is all about.

Takeaway:

Go now, ready with quiet minds and open hearts to find and receive the signs of God’s promises of love, grace, and mercy in our everyday lives.

Prayer:

Dear Heavenly Father, thank you for your gifts of guidance. We pray that we keep our eyes open, our minds focused, and the noise quieted so we can see you amongst all the chaos. We pray that we grasp the signs you provide to help keep our hearts open to you and our feet steady on your path. Amen.

December 18, Divine Encounters

“Three in One”, by Bill Tinkler

Matthew 3:16-17

And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw God’s Spirit descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from the heavens said, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

Theme:

The Holy Trinity is both mysterious and necessary to reveal the three persons of God with a single intrinsic nature of caring for all people and creation. The alighting of the dove-like Spirit on Jesus as he rose from the baptismal water signifies not only a transition from John the Baptist’s ministry, but also Jesus’ identification with penitent people and His central role in completing God’s plan for salvation. From heaven God’s voice is clear in its declaration of love and approval of his son, Jesus.

We should first understand that Jesus was not asking to be baptized for repentance, as He never sinned. Instead, through baptism, Jesus shows His support for what John was doing, He identifies in a very human way with all penitent people, and He is honored by God as His beloved son. This scenario becomes the Great Reveal of God’s plan of salvation, not just for the Jewish nation, but for all people, even for those of us living today.

Illustration:

Though I knew dad was a WWII vet who fought in the Philippines, I never heard him talk much about his war experience. Like many in his generation, he was a far more demonstrative dad of his love for mom and us four sons than what came out in conversation. I can only imagine what kind of love our heavenly Father demonstrated in declaring his approval of Jesus, knowing that one day His only son would hang from a cross so that we could be forgiven and become a part of heaven.

Takeaway:

Never forget how much God loves you, how much Jesus sacrificed to save you, or how often the Holy Spirit may be nudging you to act in accordance with your faith

Prayer:

Father, help us rejoice in knowing how much you love us, how much your son Jesus gave up to save us, and how much the Holy Spirit will nudge us to abide in your will. Amen.

December 19, Modern-Day Shepherds

“Be a Shepherd” by Smith Raynor

Luke 2: 16-18 *(with some extra thrown in for context and just because the words are beautiful)*

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

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

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

Theme:

What did you want to be when you grew up...teacher, engineer, park ranger, doctor, fireman? How about shepherd? What path do modern day shepherds follow? Are you still growing?

Illustration:

I always think of shepherds as the strong, silent type who gently guide their sheep with a staff and were “sore afraid” at the angels’ proclamation of the birth of Christ. Yet, looking at the passage, we find that they were quite chatty— “using their words” — just like we tell young children. They used their words to glorify and praise God! They shared good news and listened to Mary.

In these uncertain times, we must use our words, spoken and written, to build bridges, not walls

- To show compassion and that we are listening
- To recognize and dismantle broken systems, large and small
- To be a vessel of nourishing joy
- To defend the oppressed and voiceless
- To be an ally
- To protect creation
- To encourage and love
- To build community
- To declare the worthiness of those who others believe are less

These words are praise songs to our Creator.

Takeaway:

God is already nudging you to use your words. What makes you mad or sad or glad? Use your words to praise God by defending, supporting and encouraging.

Prayer:

Holy God, help us to use our words to speak loving kindness to the least, the last and the lost. Amen.



December 20, When God Shows Up *“Jesus is the light of the world”* by Bill Poston

Romans 7:18-19

For I know that the good does not dwell within me, that is, in my flesh. For the desire to do the good lies close at hand, but not the ability. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.

Theme:

In Bible study this year, we are asking the question who is Jesus as defined in the New Testament gospels. We find Matthew, Mark and Luke, who share many of the same stories and even some of the same texts, write to different cultural audiences and accentuate a story of Jesus that speaks to their traditions. Each writer helps shape our personal understanding of who Jesus is.

Illustration:

In Genesis 1:2-3 we read, “the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light.”

In Genesis’ creation story, we find the Triune God present. We see God creator, the wind/breath of the Holy Spirit and the light/Word of Jesus. Through this Trinity, God breathes existence into creation speaking His word and lighting his world. When we read the first 18 verses of John’s gospel, we read the creation story again as John helps us see Jesus: Word, Life, Light.

In John 1:4-5, we read “What has come into being in him was life and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overtake it.”

What does this light of Jesus help us see? We can clearly see our path as illuminated by the light. When the light shines into the darkness, we can see the places to avoid. The light serves as a metaphor of guidance, compassion, truth, love and wisdom.

The gospels are like photographs, capturing the light reflected by Jesus into the image we see created by each writer. In Mark, we are struck by the immediacy of the story. He skips past the Christmas story to start with John the Baptist who baptizes Jesus. Then Jesus heads to the wilderness, selects his disciples and begins preaching, healing and exorcising in just his first chapter. Matthew connects Jesus to his Jewishness, comparing him to Moses, intensifying the demands of the law and sharing five sermons like Moses’ five books of Torah. Luke gives us the Christmas songs, the parables of the Good Samaritan and Prodigal Sons and Jesus’s sharing the Holy Spirit with his followers who serve as the church taking his story to the Gentiles and out into the world. In John, we celebrate the divinity of Jesus with the gospel’s “I am” statements and signs.

All gospels focus our attention on Jesus’ ultimate teaching, his resurrection. Teaching on the road to Emmaus, his loving appearance to Mary and his call to Peter to feed his sheep, the resurrected Jesus enlightens and inspires his followers to see him in a new light and carry that light into the world.

Takeaway:

Jesus be my guide, And hold me to your side. I will love you to the end.

Prayer:

Jesus, thank you for the many ways you help me to understand how I am to live in the world. Thank you for lighting a path and being a model for us to mature in our love as we make our way through the dark paths of our world. Help us to be in community as your church as we work to bring heaven to earth. AMEN

December 21, The Unlikely Person

Anonymous

Acts 9:38-41

The disciples sent two men to Peter in Lydda, asking him to come to them immediately. Peter went with them, and they took him to an upstairs room. Peter put the widows outside, knelt down, prayed, and said, "Tabitha, get up". Tabitha opened her eyes, sat up, and Peter helped her up. He then called the saints and widows to show her to be alive. This became known throughout Joppa, and many believed in the Lord.

Theme:

The Book of Acts describes the growth of the early Christian church using stories from the Apostles and other early Christian leaders. These stories include the preaching, teaching, miracles, and leadership of some of the most well-known Christians.

In the ninth chapter of the book, we find a different kind of story. It is a story of one dedicated woman, who is described as a disciple known for her good works and acts of charity. The story is unique because it is about a woman, because there are not a lot of details provided about who this woman is, and because of all the people who die in this journey, she one who is given the miracle of resurrection.

The natural question is, why her? It could just as easily be, why us? Given all the people who have lived, and all the generations before this moment, why have we been chosen to receive the gift of this day?

Illustration:

When I was in High School, I tried out for several roles in our semi-annual dramatic productions. Our theater director was fascinated by Gilbert and Sullivan musicals. Despite my repeated tryouts, I was never cast as much more than a background pirate (in *The Pirates of Penzance*). I wasn't sure if I wasn't suited for drama, or if I just wasn't a fit for Gilbert and Sullivan. In the last production of my junior year, the director decided that we would do the musical *Working* instead of Gilbert and Sullivan. I was both excited and nervous to try out. I'd finally get to try something new.

At the audition, I was asked to sing the Happy Birthday song in different styles and read a monologue. I did. After I left, I couldn't help but feel like I had bombed. The reading was fine, but I hated my vocal audition. I knew many people had tried out and there were more potential actors than parts in this production. I convinced myself that I didn't stand a chance.

On Monday morning, the cast list was posted. As I scrolled the list, I found my name and was surprised to discover that I had earned a real role in the production. The sign said my name next to the words, "Role: Al Calinda." I didn't know who that was. I later discovered that this character had the stage almost to himself for a chunk of the first act. I had a monologue, a solo, and backup singers.

As we began rehearsal and choreography, there were moments when I felt undeserving. The movements and planning seemed so extensive. I kept thinking, "all of this so that I can have a few minutes on stage in front of the audience." How did I deserve any of this?

Takeaway:

There are moments in many of our lives where we wonder, why us? How did we get this opportunity? Why have we been blessed in this way? The answer may be as simple as understanding that God sees us differently than we see ourselves. Even if no one else knows who we are, like Tabitha, God finds value in us. God sees enough good in us to give us a stage in front of a crowd of witnesses. God cares enough to send one of his most famous disciples to resurrect us, and Tabitha, from the grave. God loves us enough to send God's son into the world to redeem us. It may seem unlikely that God would do that for us, but God does. Perhaps we are more valuable than we think.

Prayer:

Powerful God, remind us who you are and that we are your creation. Help us to realize that everything you have made is good, and that includes us. Amen.

Care Campaign

Easy



Let someone go ahead of you through the checkout (even if they have more items than you).

Moderate



Take a Christmas ornament to a friend.

Challenging



Buy a meal for someone who is unhoused.



December 23, Holiday Peace

by Randy Ripper

Matthew 11: 28-29

“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.

Theme:

Jesus is calling all believers to come to follow him. He promises relief from our weariness and distractions. This peace is a state we all seek to enjoy, especially during this holiday season.

Illustration:

Letting go of our stress and responsibilities can be easier said than done. In our busy, over distracted lives today we may feel like there is too much going on to allow us to take time to focus on Jesus. We often have responsibilities that keep us moving too fast to take time to welcome his peace. We get overwhelmed by children in school, parents with failing health, jobs with demanding timelines, etc. He is telling us that we should again have faith in him. That he will provide that rest and peace in our hearts if we will just allow him. What can we do to open the door for Jesus to fulfill this promise?

Takeaway:

During this holiday season I pray that each of us will take a moment to accept Jesus' peace. A moment to let go of our burdens and the busyness of our lives and accept Jesus' promise of rest for our hearts.

Prayer:

Jesus, help us to better follow you, and please pass down your peace and rest for our souls.

Join us at Soapstone during Advent

This Advent, through topics of hope, faith, joy, peace, and love, we pray that God inspires you to be grateful always.

Find joy for your Advent journey through devotionals (self-study or in a group), concerts, caroling, worship (Sunday mornings and Wednesday evenings), and even a drive-through nativity!

Taizé Services — Pastor Mitzi and Pastor Damion invite you to enjoy the peace and beauty of candlelit Taizé-style services of meditation, prayer, and silence, Wednesdays, December 4, and 11, 6:30 pm at our Chapel, located at 10301 Old Creedmoor Rd.

Christmas with OTG — Soapstone's Ole' Time Gospel Group invites everyone to enjoy a traditional ole' time gospel sing-a-long at our Chapel, located at 10301 Old Creedmoor Rd, Saturday, December 7, 6:30 pm. Invite a friend or neighbor to join you, and bring a snack to share.

The Music of Christmas — This annual concert, held on Sunday, December 8, 4 pm, includes almost all of Soapstone's voice and instrumental ensembles as well as the choir. They are excited to share this wonderful presentation of some of our favorite music of the Christmas season.

Christmas Cantata — During both services Sunday, December 15, Soapstone's Cantata Choir and Orchestra will present "*A New & Glorious Morn*". Throughout this musical, musicians, singers, and readers share a powerful reminder of the transformative reality that, in Christ, the old is gone and the new has come.

Christmas Caroling — Rev. George Freeman invites everyone to join him in singing Christmas songs Sunday, December 22 at 4:30 pm. We will travel to see our home bound church families caroling together. We will provide songbooks and plan to sing some of the most familiar Christmas songs. Invite a friend to join you!

Drive Through Live Nativity — Soapstone UMC will share a Live Nativity on Monday and Tuesday, December 16 and 17. Please follow the signs and drive-through between 6:30 and 7:30 pm to experience depictions of Advent and Christmas Scriptures.

Longest Night: Light in Our Darkness — This service of lament and hope on the longest night of the year is for those who experience grief and sadness during a season of "good cheer." Please invite and accompany those who you know can benefit. Wednesday, December 18, 6:30 pm, at our Chapel, located at 10301 Old Creedmoor Rd.

Christmas Eve Services, December 24 — 3 Christmas Eve services with Holy Communion.

- 4:30 pm Family Christmas Eve Service, featuring a Spontaneous Christmas Pageant where all children are invited to join
- 8:00 and 10:00 pm Candlelit Services



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