



BEFORE  
THE DAWN

ADVENT DEVOTIONAL 2025  
WRITTEN BY MEMBERS OF OUR OWN CONGREGATION

*Make space for Christ this Advent—use this devotional for a daily moment of prayer.*

# Before the Dawn

## An Invitation into Advent's Sacred Darkness

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Dawn doesn't simply appear. It arrives slowly, quietly, preceded by the deep work of night. Before the dawn of Christmas, we are invited into the sacred darkness of Advent—those quiet, waiting hours when God is present and active long before the first light breaks. Drawing on the insights of Barbara Brown Taylor's *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, we remember that the darkness before dawn is not an empty pause or something to fear. It is a fertile place where seeds take root, bodies find rest, new things are formed, and God is able to speak to us in ways we might not hear in full daylight.

This devotional, lovingly written by members of our own congregation, offers a daily rhythm of pausing, praying, and preparing your heart for the coming Christ. May these reflections help you lean into the holy mystery of Advent—the quiet work God does before the miracle of Christmas morning.

### **The Care Campaign: Living Out Advent Together**

As part of this year's devotional, you are invited to spend six days each week in reflection and then use Sunday to live out your faith through The Care Campaign. Every Sunday page provides three simple yet meaningful invitations.

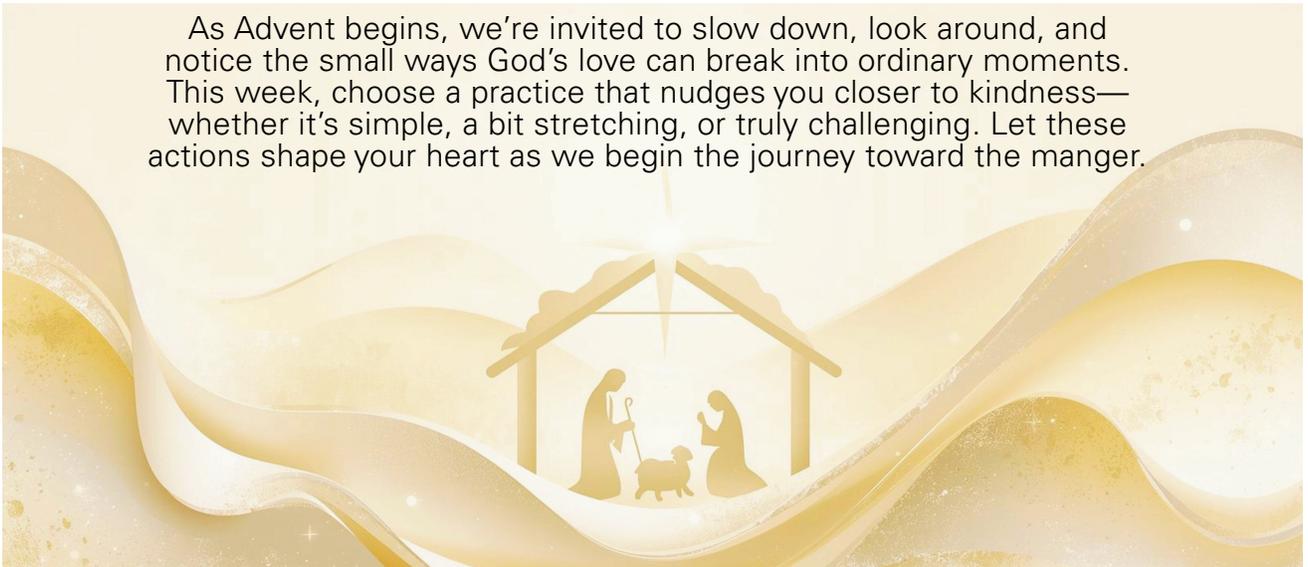
Choose one (or more!) and put love into intentional action. Then cut out the Advent shape at the bottom of the page, write your experience on the back, and bring it with you on Sunday.

Together, we will place these offerings in the cradle—the manger on the Narthex wall—as a visible sign of how our shared acts of care prepare the way for Christ.

# Care Campaign

Week of November 30

As Advent begins, we're invited to slow down, look around, and notice the small ways God's love can break into ordinary moments. This week, choose a practice that nudges you closer to kindness—whether it's simple, a bit stretching, or truly challenging. Let these actions shape your heart as we begin the journey toward the manger.



Write your experience on the Advent shape bring your Advent shape to place in the manger on the wall in the Narthex as we fill it with acts of hope.

## *Easy*

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



## *Moderate*

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



## *Challenging*

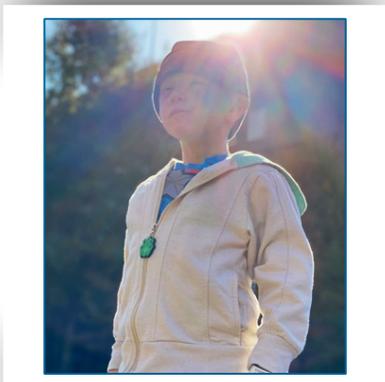
Do something important for your own well-being- Buy yourself something selfish.



## Light That Never Stops Coming Through

December 1

Jessica Slessman



Our faithful God promised light to come through the darkness through the birth of Jesus. Where can you see the light peeking through in the darker moments in your life?

### **Scripture:** Isaiah 9:2–7

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined. You have multiplied joy; you have increased their happiness; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as people exult when dividing plunder. For the yoke of their burden and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian. For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire. For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders, and he is called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Great will be his authority, and there will be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and maintain it with justice and righteousness from this time forth and forever. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will accomplish this.

**Reflection/Illustration:** When I was a child, I was desperately afraid of the dark. The one thing that could comfort me at night was the endless glow from the nightlight in my bedroom. I thought that fear was difficult, but then there was a season in my life when the word darkness took on new meaning. My son Luke was diagnosed with cancer. It felt as though all the lights had been switched off. The days were filled with hospital rooms, scans, testing, uncertainty, and fear—it was too much. There were more moments than I care to remember when I could hardly breathe under the weight of it all.

And yet, even there, light kept breaking through.

I'll never forget a photo taken of Luke during chemo—his little body was tired but fierce, and a beam of sunlight streamed directly through him. It felt like God was whispering, "I am here. You can be strong and brave within my light."

Isaiah's words speak right into that kind of place:

"The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined."

**Takeaway:** I think God's promise isn't that the darkness or our struggles will vanish right away, but that His light will never stop shining through it. That light is what is promised in this scripture- the light of Jesus, Wonderful Creator, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Jesus, who walks with us, Jesus, who never leaves us, Jesus, who comforts us when everything around us is so hard and we can't see a way out. Jesus is our eternal nightlight.

### **Prayer:**

Jesus, our Light and our Hope, thank You that no darkness is too deep for You.  
Help us remember that Your light is steady, faithful, and true—  
even when life feels uncertain. Shine through us today so others might  
see Your love in the midst of their darkness. Amen.



As followers of the one God, we are called to a world-changing mission and held to high standards. We need God's comfort as we travel the path he has set for us.

**Scripture:** Isaiah 40:1-5

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins. A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

**Reflection:** Isaiah seeks to comfort the Hebrews at a time when they face a demanding job. Babylon has destroyed Jerusalem, torn down its walls, salted its fields, and destroyed the Temple Solomon built to God. Hebrew leaders were forced into exile and supplanted by others in Jerusalem. In this culture, nations that soundly defeat other nations are thought to have defeated their gods. The prophets taught the Hebrews that God still loved them and that the catastrophe they endured was a result of their turning away from God. They needed to find their way back to God. They needed to flourish in exile, and one day they would return home to Jerusalem. It was a generation before they were ready to return. The Persians defeated the Babylonians, and the Persian King Cyrus encouraged the Jewish people to return. It would be a long journey. It would be hard work. They were to return to the rubble of their homeland and rebuild the city, rebuild its protective walls, rebuild the Temple, and rebuild the culture. They return destined to create the New Jerusalem. Isaiah offers words of care for Jerusalem and encouragement for those leaving what has become the comfort of exile to return to what will be the demanding work of rebuilding God's community in the Holy City.

**Illustration:** We need to recall Isaiah's words of comfort at Advent as we read Luke's story of the Annunciation when the angel appears to Mary, announcing she has been chosen to give birth to Jesus, and in him, the New Covenant. In the Magnificat, Mary sings of God's answer to the Hebrews with the birth of a son. For those who sit at the bottom of society's order as she does, she recognizes Jesus will bring a new order: lifting up the humble, filling the hungry, and being merciful to Israel. Not knowing the tremendous challenges facing her and Jesus, Mary sings of the comfort God is providing the Hebrews and the world with the arrival of Jesus. And when she receives the task from the angel, she responds by saying, "Yes: I am the Lord's Servant."

Mary is further comforted in the demanding life she will face by the words of her cousin Elizabeth: Blessed are you among women. Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!

**Takeaway:** As you see in these two stories —Mary, called to be the Mother of Jesus, who brings the New Covenant, and the Babylonian exiles returning to build the New Jerusalem —the tasks we are called to are not simple. But we are not alone. God and God's comforting people are there with us seeking to do God's will. We are asked to respond by saying yes: I am the Lord's Servant.

**Prayer:**

O God, we are a sinful people. But we are your people. We want to do the moral and right thing. We want to do what you have taught us. We want to do the work you set before us. As we attempt it, we bask in the comfort and community of your work. Amen.



“Waaaaay” before he was born, God’s people knew. Jesus would be the light – the brightest light - God’s light which shines even now on each of us. Draw near to that light and the love it represents.

**Scripture:** Isaiah 60:1-3

Arise! Shine! Your light has come; the Lord’s glory has shone upon you. Though darkness covers the earth and gloom the nations, the Lord will shine upon you; God’s glory will appear over you. Nations will come to your light and kings to your dawning radiance.

**Reflection:** I’m grateful to be here reflecting through words, and (just maybe) reminding someone who needs this just how much light there is. I pray my story and my personal interpretation of this scripture adds a little light to your day!

**Illustration:** I’m an Enneagram 9. If you’re not familiar, it’s a personality test made to help you know who you are and to understand and appreciate not only yourself but those (other Enneagram personalities) around you. 9 is the “peacekeeper”. For me, I need to give validation to both sides of a conflict, and compromise is my word of hope. When I can’t see a conflict resolution, I tend to shut down. So, that tendency is pretty BIG these days. What do I do? Sometimes, I shut down (boycott the news, disconnect from conversations, move myself upstairs when Dave is into the political happenings, and I “just can’t”). Sometimes I just “stress” – I let worry get me. I’m also a “have a hissy fit then get on with it” person, luckily. So, after the fit, the escape, or the shutdown, I seek out all of that LOVE found in my family, my friends, and my church. No matter how much I disagree, or show my ugly, or speak my fears, no matter where the dark tries to overcome me, God’s light comes through. Through friends, family, and church, I’m reminded what matters: who I am, how I am loved, and how Jesus was given to me, freely and out of that “biggest” love. What a Godly, forgiving, accepting, and eternal gift that is – and it’s not just mine. All of y’all have that! Remember it! His light has come and is shining even now. If you’re having that day, week, or even season, if you need help seeing it, find that friend, that family member, your church family, and let them help you see that light. Or, let’s have a coffee and see what we can see!

**Takeaway:** The message here (in Isaiah) is so full of HOPE. Written so, so long ago- relevant then- just as relevant today. That is the good news that we all can hold on to, no matter what darkness is present in our lives. In our messy world, you can fall back on this; we are part of the light, and the light is in us. We are chosen by God and loved by God. Nothing, NOTHING can change that, so...  
ARISE! SHINE!  
Your light has come!

**Prayer:**

God of the Biggest Love, Bring us peace. Keep us from the stress and worry that seems to be everywhere these days. And when we shut down or throw a fit, help us see. Your light as it shines through friends, family, and the church. And let Your light remind us that even in this messy world, the light is in us because we are loved by You.  
Teach us to shine, no matter what. Amen.



At times, we wonder where our help will come from. What hope do we have for a change in direction, in our life, in our community, or in society? The prophet Isaiah recognizes our ability to wander, even convincing ourselves that it is not our fault that we have distanced ourselves from the one place we need to be. Isaiah voices hope for a dramatic rescue of Israel from God...and then recognizes, just maybe, that they are the ones who have wandered. True hope can only be found by placing ourselves in the hands of the master potter.

**Scripture:** Isaiah 64:1-8

O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence—as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil—to make your name known to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence! When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect, you came down; the mountains quaked at your presence. From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him. You meet those who gladly do right, those who remember you in your ways. But you were angry, and we sinned; because you hid yourself, we transgressed. We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away. There is no one who calls on your name or attempts to take hold of you, for you have hidden your face from us and have delivered[c] us into the hand of our iniquity. Yet, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand.

**Reflection:** Isaiah's lament over the fate of Israel begins with a desperate plea for dramatic action from God, knowing that there is no god like the LORD God. This God shows amazing faithfulness and lovingkindness towards God's people, towards all who seek the one true God. There is just one problem – God seems to have hidden his face from Israel. Whose fault is that? Did Israel sin first, or maybe God hid his face first? Israel seems unwilling to admit responsibility for their sins, and that leads to further distance, to just desserts for their sins. This part of Isaiah's lament concludes with the recognition that Israel needs to place itself in God's hand, to be shaped by God like clay on a potter's wheel.

**Illustration:** A pattern for me in school, whether grade school or graduate school (in chemistry), would be to fall behind in my homework in a class. I always had an excuse: the teacher or professor wasn't clear, the assignment was too hard, there were too many assignments, there were too many distractions (whose fault was that?); on and on the self-justification could go. And yet, I love learning, and those courses were in subjects and schools that I had prepared all my life to study. And so, desperation would eventually lead me back to the professor's office (or teacher's desk) to confess my plight – and without fail discover that here was encouragement to submit what I had, to get back in the saddle – and there was usually some measure of grace from the professor. Homework still had to be made up, but there was grace. That grace from those wise teachers enabled me to begin again, without the guilt of the (perceived) terrible homework failure, and to fulfill the gifts for study and learning that I've generously received. I have to smile at all the trouble I caused myself. In the same way, we are often badly in need, like Israel in the scripture, needing to return to God, admit our failures, and once again (or for the first time?) receive abundant and astonishing grace. Like the prodigal child of Luke 15, we find a good Father, ready to embrace us. As Isaiah admits, we find ourselves best when we live into the hands of the Father shaping us. It's what we are made to be, and tremendous joy and freedom come from living in that shape.

**Takeaway:** Our hope for renewal rests on an unshakeable foundation of God's grace and salvation. Whenever – even every day – you find yourself further from home, further from the shape God intends – turn again towards home. Accept the embrace of the Father and become something beautiful in His hands.

**Prayer:**

Father God, you are the faithful one, always shaping beauty into my life, hard as the work may be. I confess that I stray, that I am in need of turning towards you. When I turn towards you, always I am embraced with forgiveness, encouragement, and renewal. Right now, I accept your embrace, offered freely through Jesus Christ the Son, and attested to by the Holy Spirit within me. Amen.



The Wizard of Oz begins with Dorothy trying to get her Aunt Em and others to listen to a story about how someone in her Kansas town had mistreated her dog, Toto. Dorothy feels bad because Aunt Em dismisses her pain and sadness by telling her to go away and find a place where she won't get into any trouble. Is there such a place? A place where sadness is no more?

### **Scripture:** Isaiah 65:17-25

For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy and its people as a delight. I will rejoice in Jerusalem and delight in my people; no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it or the cry of distress. No more shall there be in it an infant who lives but a few days or an old person who does not live out a lifetime, for one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth, and one who falls short of a hundred will be considered accursed. They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat, for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be, and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands. They shall not labor in vain or bear children for calamity, for they shall be offspring blessed by the LORD—and their descendants as well. Before they call I will answer, while they are yet speaking I will hear. The wolf and the lamb shall feed together; the lion shall eat straw like the ox, but the serpent—its food shall be dust! They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the LORD.

**Reflection:** In these verses, God promises us, his people, a day when we will live a life free of sadness and pain. We will experience the fruits of our labor, and our children shall be blessed. We will all feed together, regardless of our differences. These verses come together to provide us with a reason to look beyond our current struggles and know that our future will bring hope, joy, and peace of mind. We can know that “somewhere over the rainbow, skies are blue, and the dreams you dare to dream really do come true.”

**Takeaway:** Rainbows provide light and beauty after dark and ugly times. When you move through your tough days, remember how light often follows darkness. Remember the promise of restoration God gives us. And even when it seems too hard to continue, remember the scary times Dorothy and Toto experienced before seeing the light again. And maybe hum a few verses of your favorite rainbow song.

### **Prayer:**

God of grace and mercy, hear our prayer.

As we move through a world that is often filled with confusion, negativity, difficulty, and pain, help us to know you are with us as we walk through these tough times.

And, please be with us as we experience those moments of delight and know the future holds more joy and peace than we can ever imagine. Amen



**Scripture:** Jeremiah 33:14–16

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David, and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved, and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: “The Lord is our righteousness.”

**Reflection:** Jeremiah’s words come from a dark season in Israel’s life. Jerusalem is under siege, the future is uncertain, and hope feels thin. It is into that very darkness that God speaks a word of promise: **“The days are surely coming.”** Not “might come,” not “if everything works out.” Surely. God’s future is already on the way, even when God’s people cannot yet see it. God promises a “righteous branch”—new, unexpected life springing up from what looked like a dead stump. God promises justice where injustice has ruled, safety where fear has taken root, and a restored city where everything appeared ruined. And the name of this hope? “The Lord is our righteousness.” Not we are righteous, not our efforts or our systems—but the Lord. God will do what we cannot. God will set right what has been broken. During seasons when the world feels weary or unsettled, Jeremiah reminds us that God’s promises are not wishful thinking; they are anchors. We hold to them not because we are strong but because God is faithful.

**Illustration:** There was a point in my life when I was very busy, and I depended on my 1999 Cadillac Catera to get me from point A to point B. Each day, I drove for several hours. I would go to and from work, to church, to drop the kids off, or run errands. I would often fight stalled traffic the whole way. It was brutal. Until one day, in the middle of a trip, the car stopped moving. I was devastated. I instantly knew the car was done. I couldn’t afford another one. I didn’t think I could afford a major repair. But I needed transportation. I prayed in that broken car. Nothing happened.

The car was later towed to a mechanic who said that the entire engine needed to be replaced. The ENTIRE ENGINE! I prayed. Nothing happened. I needed God’s help. I tried to think of everything I could do to secure transportation or raise money for a \$4000 repair. I needed to do something. I couldn’t think of anything. I prayed. Nothing happened.

This happened at a point in my life when I thought I was doing the things God had asked me to do. I had made big changes to be available to God, and it seemed like God had abandoned me in this moment of crisis. I had forgotten God’s promise from Hebrews 13:5. “I will never leave you or forsake you,” God says.

Two days after that revelation, the mechanic called me to say the car had been recalled and they were replacing the engine for free. Imagine that! A brand new engine, and best of all, the mechanic called me... I hadn’t just prayed or anything.

What I didn’t realize was that, the whole time, God’s promise was already unfolding. There was nothing I needed to do. There was nothing I could do. And all that time that I thought nothing was happening, God was already doing what needed to be done.

**Takeaway:** *As you wait, trust this: God’s future is already sprouting. God’s righteousness is already unfolding. And the One who promises is the One who keeps promises.*

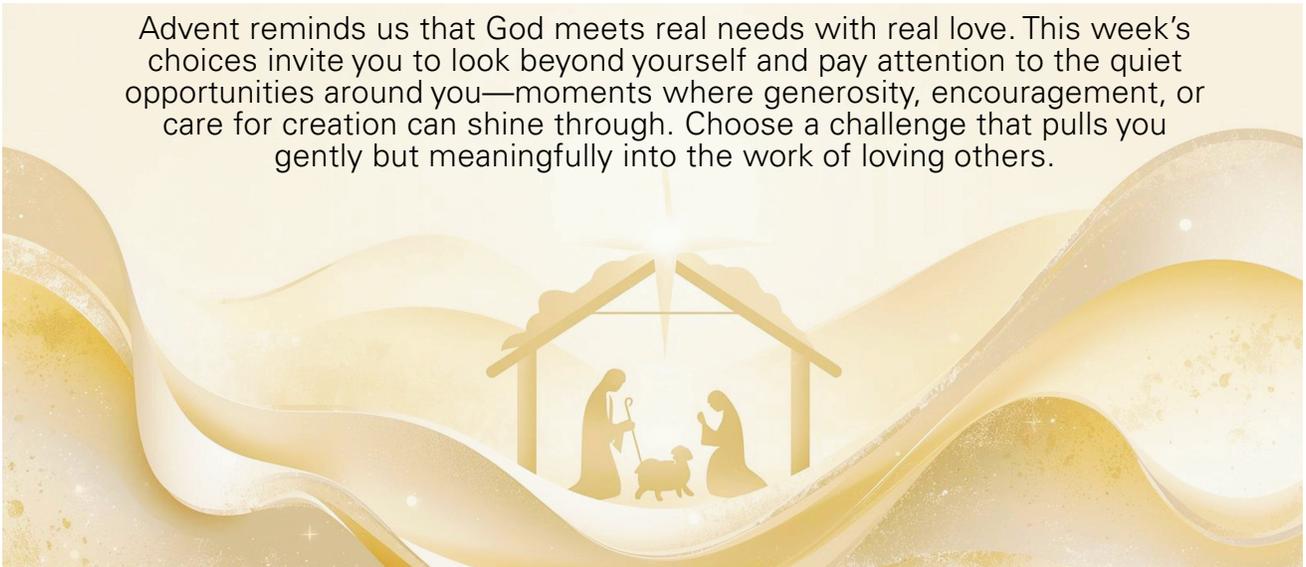
**Prayer:**

Lord, in the weary places of our lives, speak your promise again. Let hope take root in us. Teach us to trust your faithfulness and to live as people who know that your new day is surely coming. Amen.

# Care Campaign

Week of December 7

Advent reminds us that God meets real needs with real love. This week's choices invite you to look beyond yourself and pay attention to the quiet opportunities around you—moments where generosity, encouragement, or care for creation can shine through. Choose a challenge that pulls you gently but meaningfully into the work of loving others.



Write your experience on one (or more) of the Advent shapes and add it to the manger on the wall in the Narthex as we create a visual story of our church's shared kindness

## *Easy*

Help a Family in Need at Christmas. [purchase gifts, food, or discuss with them other ways to help



## *Moderate*

Write an encouraging letter to a friend or acquaintance.



## *Challenging*

Recycle your own trash. Everywhere you go for a week.





**We are:** Repeating the same patterns.  
 Rationalizing our choices.  
 Living in shame. Pretending we're whole.  
 Or—we choose to believe that:  
 He understands. He forgives. He heals.  
 He saves. And we are—truly—His  
 beloved child (daughter or son).

**Scripture:** Hosea 11:1-4, 8-9

When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. The more I called them, the more they went from me; they kept sacrificing to the Baals and offering incense to idols. Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk; I took them up in my arms, but they did not know that I healed them. I led them with cords of human kindness, with bands of love. I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks. I bent down to them and fed them How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? How can I make you like Admah? How can I treat you like Zeboiim? My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my fierce anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim, for I am God and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath.

**Reflection/Illustration:** Once again, we find ourselves in a familiar chapter of Israel's story. They're thriving, yet they turn away from God—breaking their covenant by worshiping idols. How many times have they repeated this pattern? How often have they tested the depths of His love? Time and again, they look inward or to the world around them for healing, for wholeness, for answers. And in doing so, they forget who they are: God's beloved children, made in His image. All He asks is that they worship and love Him.

*I see myself in their story.*

I've struggled with relationships for most of my life. In many situations—especially at work—I've felt misunderstood, focused more on outcomes rather than relationships, and unsure how to nurture connection. My intentions are good, but my need for control and my communication style often cloud them. This cycle has repeated itself for over 30 years. Whenever conflict arose, I would turn inward—blaming myself, questioning my worth, building walls, and deflecting accountability. And the pattern continued.

*But through it all, God's compassion never left.*

He waited patiently for me to discover the source of true self-love—Him. He reminded me that I am His beloved daughter. That His love is not earned, and it cannot be lost. There is nothing I can do to change that. I only need to believe it. Accept it.

And I'm learning. Slowly, I'm beginning to see that even though I'm flawed, I am deeply loved. God will never break His covenant with me—even when I break mine with Him. There is so much hope in that truth.

**Takeaway:** Lord, don't let us forget—You're always waiting to meet Your flawed, but oh-so-loved, little flock with compassion.

**Prayer:**

Lord, thank You for the gift of Scripture—for the ability to return to it again and again, and see Your unwavering love for Ephraim, Your tender name for Israel. It reminds me that, just like them, You will never stop loving me. Thank You for this Advent season and for the reminder of Your greatest gift to humanity: Your Son, our Savior. Amen.



Mercy! Don't we all need it... "If you, Lord,  
kept a record of sins, Lord, who could stand?"

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**Scripture:** Psalm 130

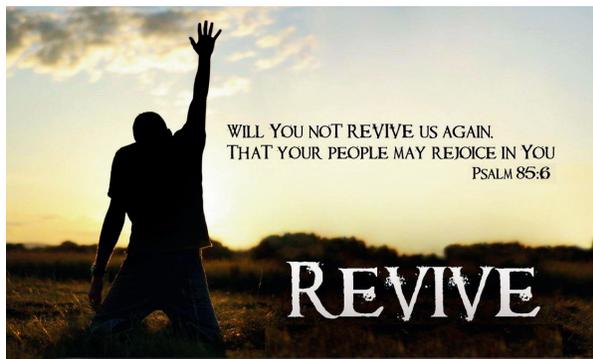
Out of the depths I cry to you, Lord; Lord, hear my voice. Let your ears be attentive to my cry for mercy. If you, Lord, kept a record of sins, Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness, so that we can, with reverence, serve you. I wait for the Lord, my whole being waits, and in his word I put my hope. I wait for the Lord more than watchmen wait for the morning, more than watchmen wait for the morning. Israel, put your hope in the Lord, for with the Lord is unfailing love and with him is full redemption. He himself will redeem Israel from all their sins.

**Reflection:** Mercy and forgiveness have the power to change lives! Forgiving others helps us let go of anger and find healthy ways forward. To be forgiven renews our sense of hope and frees us to live faithfully rather than being weighed down by guilt. Indeed, even those outside of the situation can benefit from our forgiveness, as we are better able to offer them a calm and positive presence and create a healthier environment for them. But with you there is forgiveness, so that we can, with reverence, serve you.

**Takeaway:** Stubborn anger hinders our ability to live out God's call on our lives, to be loving and kind and gracious to all of our fellow human beings. Forgiveness enables us to live more fully into this mission, demonstrating God's grace even to those we may not be overly keen to extend it to. No, it's not always easy, I myself have been wrestling with it a lot over the past couple years, but it is necessary.

**Prayer:**

God, help us to find the courage to forgive, even when it is difficult...to trust that it is not up to us to define what justice looks like, that you will work on people's hearts, and we don't need to take it upon ourselves to punish people for their wrongdoing. Give us the courage to do our part, but also to have the patience and grace, and wisdom to understand when to "let go and let God". Amen.



“Will you not revive us again, so that your people may rejoice in you?”

**Scripture:** Psalm 85:1-7

Lord, you were favorable to your land; you restored the fortunes of Jacob. You forgave the iniquity of your people; you pardoned all their sin. Selah You withdrew all your wrath; you turned from your hot anger. Restore us again, O God of our salvation, and put away your indignation toward us. Will you be angry with us forever? Will you prolong your anger to all generations? Will you not revive us again, so that your people may rejoice in you? Show us your steadfast love, O Lord, and grant us your salvation.

**Reflection:** Psalm 85 is a prayer spoken by people who have tasted God’s goodness but now find themselves in need again. The psalm begins with remembrance:

**“Lord, you were favorable to your land... you forgave... you restored...”**

Before asking anything of God, the psalmist recalls everything God has already done. Hope is built not on wishful thinking but on memory—on the faithful history of a God who has acted before.

But the psalm does not stay in the past. It moves to the honest present:

**“Restore us again... put away your indignation... Will you be angry forever?”**

This is not a polished or timid prayer. It’s bold. It’s vulnerable. It’s the prayer of people who trust God enough to speak from the heart. They know they need revival—renewal deep enough to change them, their community, and their world.

At the center of the psalm is a humble request:

**“Show us your steadfast love, O Lord, and grant us your salvation.”**

Steadfast love—hesed—is God’s covenant faithfulness, mercy that does not wear out. Salvation is not only rescue from trouble but restoration into wholeness and joy.

This psalm invites us to pray with the same honest courage.

Where do you need God to restore you?

Where do you long for revival—in your spirit, your relationships, your church, or your community?

**Takeaway:** *As we remember God’s past mercies, we gain strength to ask boldly for new ones. And we trust that the God who revived us before is more than able to revive us again.*

**Prayer:**

God of steadfast love, we remember your goodness and ask for renewal.  
Restore us where we are worn, revive us where we are weary, and let your salvation  
bring us joy once more. Amen.



In our world of AI, deep fakes, global threats, bluster and influencers, we lose our sense of wonder at small things. Today's scripture, recording prophecy spoken some 7+ centuries before the birth of Christ, contains the largest sense of wonder. Out of the smallest of places will come one who seeks God – not the triumph of his country or people, not his own wealth, not even the preservation of his own life. And the wonder lies not in the smallness of the birthplace, but in the universe-sized love that the One from Bethlehem shows for us. For God so loved the world (John 3:16).

**Scripture:** Micah 5:2-5a

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. Therefore, he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has brought forth; then the rest of his kindred shall return to the people of Israel. And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth, and he shall be the one of peace.

**Reflection:** *Working on the Word:* Micah's work as a prophet to Israel comes about 7 to 8 centuries before the time of Christ. The book of Micah contains at least three cycles of warnings to Israel paired with promises of pardon and renewal. The prophet's work reveals to the reader of their time (and to us?) the truth about their society, their nation, their faith – and then plays the movie forward. There will be consequences for Israel's disobedience – and understand, the violence associated with this will bring the death of thousands. And yet, beyond this tragedy, God does promise pardon and renewal for the nation, for the people to whom God has made a covenant. God promises good – but the trajectory may be long, because God chooses to work through his people. In Micah 5:2-5a, God promises that from the smallest of the clans of Israel, little Benjamin in dusty Bethlehem, miles from Jerusalem, from the roots of David's family, there will be one who seeks only God. Bethlehem is the home of Boaz, husband of Ruth, the Moabite. Boaz and Ruth, ancestors of David. After a time of pain like that of a mother giving birth, this one from Bethlehem will come; he will rely on God for his strength, not on weapons, not on appearance or loudness of voice. And this one will bring peace, shalom, to those who belong to him.

*The Word working on us:* God came down to the smallest of places, to the smell of hay and animals, to the amazement of lowly shepherds, came as the apparent child of an honorable man and a woman blessed by God. Apparent child, as Joseph and Mary had a secret – Mary was yet a virgin. And yet, even this small beginning was noticed: Herod brought terrible violence to this little place, hoping to kill an infant that might threaten his throne. Warned by an angel, Joseph, Mary, and Jesus were refugees for a time; little people, hoping to escape notice. This tiny, not quite insignificant beginning has one difference: "God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." (John 3:16).  
The wonder of it all.

**Takeaway:** *Delight in the wonder at the love for you, the love by the One who came from Bethlehem.*

**Prayer:**

Lord Jesus, you begin in such a small place, in such a small way that the world hardly noticed. And yet, you came as a ransom for my life and my neighbor's life and my family's life...and came that all who call on your name might have eternal life. Restore our sense of wonder, we pray. We pray now this largest of wonders, that coming to you, recognizing our poverty, you forgive and embrace, and we begin anew. What wonderful love is this, can it be? We ask all this in your name. Amen.



How many of us can remember the days of waiting for the big Sears Wish Book to land in our mailboxes each fall? Oh, the things we could dream and the places we could imagine! If we squeezed our eyes shut and really, really listened, sometimes it seemed like we could hear Santa opening our letters and reading our wish lists.

**Scripture:** Zephaniah 3:16-18

“Do not fear, O Zion; do not let your hands grow weak. The Lord, your God, is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory; he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing as on a day of festival.”

**Reflection/Illustration:** It is not hard to see that our world has changed dramatically since we waited for that Sears catalog. Dreams seem like a luxury to so much of the world, even to so many within our own communities. As we pay our bills, read the news feeds, and talk with friends, reasons for fear feel much more real than reasons to hold on to joy.

Dictionary.com defines advent as “a coming into place, view, or being; arrival.” When we think of “Advent,” most of us think only of the season of Advent – those four weeks between Thanksgiving and Christmas. And that season is so often lived at a frenetic pace – holiday parties, shopping, special projects, keeping secrets.

But I would offer to you that Advent is still a season of dreams, of longing, of hope, and of promise. Today’s Scripture is chock full of these very things. Zephaniah 3:14-20 is encouraging the nation of Israel, urging them to hold on to the promise of God in their midst – he’s rejoicing over them with gladness, love, and singing. It’s a story of three seasons of life:

- The past with its wars, exile, failures, and often unrealized longing for God
- The present, as they still face hardships and terrors from oppressor nations, and call out to God for rescue.
- And their FUTURE – which was beginning on that same day. **God IS** with them, in their midst. **He WILL** rejoice over them (and us) with gladness and singing. **He WILL** renew us in his love. **He WILL** save the lame and gather up the outcast. **He WILL** change our shame to praise – and **He WILL** bring us home.

**Takeaway:** This year, let’s hold on to Advent and its promise long after the parties and family meals, after the gifts are opened and exchanged, long after the decorations have been put away. Advent is a beginning, an arrival, a coming into view. Let’s be encouraged by the arrival of Jesus and emboldened by God who is in our midst as we step into the world with hope, courage, and joy.

**Prayer:**

May we not be afraid, for You, O Lord, are in our midst.

We thank You that You delight in us. We praise You that You rejoice over us.

Let this truth silence every lie of worry and shame. Let Your perfect, joyful love cast out all our fear.

Remind us of the past. Restore us in the present. Give us hope for the future.

Gather those who are grieving and those who feel removed from the festive assembly.

Turn their shame and burden into praise. Restore their fortunes, redeem their lost hope, and gather them to the place where they are honored and known.

In the Name of the One who brings the greatest salvation, Amen.



Methodism's founder John Wesley, talked about the importance of grace. Wesley described prevenient grace as God seeking us, being at every turn to offer opportunities for relationship. Once we enter that relationship, Wesley described the grace of justification, where we confess and repent our sins and receive pardon from God. Wesley describes sanctifying grace in terms of Christian perfection, seeking holiness of heart and life.

**Scripture:** Malachi 3:1-4

See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like washers' soap; 3 he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the LORD in righteousness. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD, as in the days of old and as in former years

**Reflection:** In the Bible, Malachi is the prophet whose book is at the end of the Old Testament. We turn the last page from Malachi 4, and we find the New Testament. It begins with Matthew tracing the family line from Abraham through King David to Joseph, the husband of Mary.

Malachi translates to the word messenger, and some Bible scholars believe it is the name the scribe and priest Ezra used as his pen name for these writings. Both books, Malachi and Ezra, describe the same period of time, after the Babylonian exiles had returned to Jerusalem and built the Second Temple. They both complain about the Temple's priests. Their writings condemn the priests for leaving Hebrew wives, remarrying non-Hebrew wives, and allowing the wives' foreign gods into their homes. In the Ten Commandments, God is clear in his first order: Have no other god before me. For Malachi and Ezra, this intermarriage threatens devotion to the One God. Malachi describes purity in terms of applying extreme heat to silver and gold to burn out the impurity. Likewise, God expects a fully refined devotion.

This sounds like John Wesley talking about sanctifying grace. Can we eliminate the sinful self in our life so that we more closely reflect the image of God and the breath of God our creator gave us? Paul describes our dying to self, so that we better reflect Jesus in our lives. Wesley talks about our becoming more Christlike as we mature in faith and seek Christian perfection, or maturity.

**Takeaway:** We are lucky to have the Old Testament that describes the struggle of the Hebrew people to live in covenant with God. The New Testament describes the life of Jesus in its gospels, the birth of the church in Acts, and the many letters that call us to be followers of Jesus. As Methodists, we have the extensive writings of John Wesley being cataloged at Duke Divinity School to shine the light on our becoming more holy.

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**Prayer:**

God is full of justice, mercy, and truth; so was man as he came from the hands of his Creator. God is spotless purity, and so man was in the beginning pure from every sinful blot. Free us from sin and backsliding as we mature in faith and seek to be more like Jesus, so that God will again pronounce his creation to be very good. Amen.

# Care Campaign

Week of December 14

As we move deeper into Advent, we're called to notice the people around us—the overlooked, the struggling, the faithful helpers, and even the strangers. This week, choose an action that helps you see others with Christlike compassion. Let these small steps of kindness widen your heart in a season that calls us to love boldly.



Write your experience on one (or more) of the Advent shapes and bring it to church and place in the manger on the wall in the Narthex. Together we'll fill the wall with acts of love.

## *Easy*

Tell someone who you don't spend a lot of time with how much they mean to you.



## *Moderate*

Buy a meal or groceries for Someone who is unhoused or experiencing food insecurity.



## *Challenging*

Write a thank-you note to someone you don't know personally who provides a service to you (waiter, mail person, etc.)



**Scripture:** Zechariah 9:9-12

Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war horse from Jerusalem; and the battle bow shall be cut off, and he shall command peace to the nations; his dominion shall be from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth. As for you also, because of the blood of my covenant with you, I will set your prisoners free from the waterless pit. Return to your stronghold, O prisoners of hope; today I declare that I will restore to you double.

**Reflection:**

During Advent, we wait for a King who comes in a way no one expects. Zechariah invites us to imagine this King—not arriving on a warhorse with displays of power, but humble and riding on a donkey. Advent reminds us that God chooses gentleness over force, peace over violence, vulnerability over spectacle. We are waiting for the One who breaks the weapons of war and speaks peace to the nations.

For every person living with disappointment, longing, and uncertainty, this promise was light breaking into shadows. Today, we look at a world filled with conflict, injustice, and weariness—and we dare to imagine a different kind of kingdom. We dare to believe God is sending peace.

Then Zechariah speaks a name tailor-made for Advent people:

**“Return to your stronghold, O prisoners of hope.”**

Advent hope is not wishful thinking. It is the promise that God is not finished, that the story is still unfolding, that the King of peace is on the way. We are “prisoners of hope” because hope holds us—even when our circumstances try to convince us otherwise. Hope keeps us anchored until Christ comes again. If we believe in the might and promise of God, then we are held captive by our hope. We cannot escape it. While we may struggle to find it sometimes, it is always there.

And God’s promise?

**“I will restore to you double.”**

Advent restoration is God’s abundant healing—joy that outlasts sorrow, peace that outshines fear, renewal that surprises us with grace.

As we light candles and wait for Christ’s coming, where is God calling you to return and find your hope again?

Where do you need to trust again that the humble King is drawing near?

**Takeaway:**

*May this Advent shape us into people who wait with expectation, walk in peace, and cling to hope that cannot be taken away.*

**Prayer:**

Come, Humble King. In this Advent season, draw us back to the stronghold of hope. Let your peace rule in our hearts, your promise steady our steps, and your light guide us as we wait for your coming. Amen.



Do you ever find yourself pondering a moment in time that caused so much heartache in a time when life felt already broken? Maybe words you wish you hadn't said or things you wish you'd done differently? A situation that you thought you had worked through and moved on from?

**Scripture:** Zechariah 12:10–13:1

“And I will pour out a spirit of compassion and supplication on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, so that, when they look on the one whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him, as one mourns for an only child, and weep bitterly over him, as one weeps over a firstborn. On that day the mourning in Jerusalem will be as great as the mourning for Hadad-rimmon in the plain of Megiddo. ... On that day a fountain shall be opened for the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, to cleanse them from sin and impurity.”

**Reflection/Illustration:** Grief. That's such a heavy word — and anyone who's ever felt it knows exactly how heavy it is. Grief makes us act in ways we normally wouldn't. It comes in waves, unpredictable and powerful, like the ocean itself.

Over the years, we've lost loved ones whose absence has changed our family forever.

“**Broken**” doesn't even begin to describe it. Even four years later, the ache remains. We've all said things we didn't mean — or maybe we did, but wish we hadn't spoken them aloud. In moments of despair, we've acted in ways that can only be described as unnecessary.

As I read this passage, I'm reminded of how amazing our God truly is. **His grace overflows.**

His forgiveness never runs out. And He loves us like no one else can — even when we're stubborn, especially when it comes to forgiveness.

In these past few years, I've had to lean hard on His Word through different Bible studies to get through some difficult seasons. Each one, whether it interested me at first or not, gave me little nuggets of truth to hold onto. Looking back, I can see how each study came in just the right order — as if God was mapping my growth step by step, pouring His grace into my heart through every page.

Most recently, I studied Gideon — and that one stopped me in my tracks. It made me take a long, honest look at myself. I needed that. I had convinced myself I was “over” certain hurts. Wrong.

God was only getting started. He still had words for me — healing words about forgiveness.

Through the Spirit of His grace, I found the strength to forgive: to forgive myself, to forgive those who had hurt me, and, hardest of all, to forgive God — for taking those I loved and for not mending what feels so broken in our family. This is still a daily battle, but a battle I will continue to fight with the gift of God's grace.

As the holiday season approaches, my prayer is to show up with a lighter heart — one full of forgiveness and love. If I keep my eyes on what is good and true, I can show unconditional love through His grace.

**Takeaway:** *Our brokenness may never fully heal, but maybe, just maybe, one day, those shattered pieces will form something more beautiful than before.*

**Prayer:**

Gracious God, thank you for your unconditional forgiveness. Pour out Your spirit of grace over and over again on each of us. Help us to keep our hearts and minds on what is good and true so that we may live a life that is overflowing with humble and kind. Remind us that the greatest gift of all is Your love. Amen.

## An Obscure Prophecy?

December 17

Bill Tinkler



As when King Ahaz ruled over the vulnerable southern kingdom of Judah, we live today in a time of political division and physical violence. How can we ever find peace when surrounded by godless nations, leaders who neither heed nor honor God, and fellow citizens who ignore the divine?

### **Scripture:** Isaiah 7:10-16

Again, the Lord spoke to Ahaz, saying, "Ask a sign of the Lord your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven." But Ahaz said, "I will not ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test." Then Isaiah said, "Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals that you weary my God also?" Therefore, the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son and shall name him Immanuel. He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted.

**Reflection/Illustration:** King Ahaz refuses to ask God to reveal His sign that Judah would be protected from the two invading kings of Aram and Israel, instead buying protection from the Assyrians to fight off these two enemies. Displeased with Ahaz's reticence to ask God for help, the prophet Isaiah reveals the sign from God to him anyway: a virgin-born son called "Immanuel" will be raised as a normal child, and by the time this son knows right from wrong, the two kings Ahaz fears will be gone.

Some scholars argue this prophecy has a double fulfillment, referring to an unmarried woman of the house of Ahaz who would give birth to a son, and by the time he could talk, the two invading kingdoms would be gone. Though plausible on a small scale, there is far more significance in the Virgin Mary's betrothal to Joseph in Matthew 1:20-23, in which Joseph is told in an angelic dream to marry her though she was with child, and to name the child Jesus (the Lord saves). Finally, as predicted by Isaiah, the people would give Jesus the title of Immanuel—God with us.

Why should we take note of this somewhat obscure prophecy in Isaiah that Matthew addresses in the New Testament? First, the announced child would be born to an unmarried virgin and grow up to bring peace and salvation. Matthew expands this significance to include not just a chosen tribe or nation, but all people, demonstrating how much the Lord cares for us all, regardless of cultural and ethnic differences. Second, as a living sign and testimony of God's love, we should give Jesus our undivided attention. That is truly worth celebrating!

**Takeaway:** Remember, Immanuel (**God with Us**) continues to protect and comfort us in the midst of external and internal threats. We just need to ask.

### **Prayer:**

Father, help me understand with awe, wonder, and appreciation how you have presented yourself throughout the ages as savior, king, and ultimately a living sign among us, providing grace, hope, and peace that are offered anew every morning.



Can new life come out of a stump?  
God ensured that it would,  
and his name is Jesus.

**Scripture:** Isaiah 11:1-10

A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit. The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him—the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord – and he will delight in the fear of the Lord. He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes, or decide by what he hears with his ears; but with righteousness he will judge the needy, with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth. He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth; with the breadth of his lips he will slay the wicked. Righteousness will be his belt and faithfulness the sash around his waist. The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together, and a little child will lead them. The cow will feed the bear, their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox. The infant will play near the hold of the cobra, and the young child will put his hand into the viper’s nest. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. In that day the root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples; the nations will rally to him, and his place of rest will be glorious.

**Reflection:** The shoot from the stump of Jesse refers to a descendant of Jesse, the father of King David. Jesus is a descendant of Jesse and David; thus, Jesus is the Branch from that lineage who will one day bear fruit (Isaiah 11:1). The metaphor suggests that although the royal line of David has been cut down by judgment and exile, it is not destroyed forever. From a stump, God will bring forth new life.

Isaiah 11:1-10 is a prophecy about the coming of the Messiah, a future leader who will be filled with God’s Spirit – the Spirit of wisdom, understanding, counsel, power, justice, knowledge, and fear of the Lord. He will be righteous, defeat evil, and protect the poor. The Messiah will also stand as a banner for all nations, showing that God’s salvation is not limited to Israel but extends to all peoples from every corner of the earth. And animals that were once enemies will live together safely and peacefully. This entire passage is a reminder that God’s promise of renewal and redemption is certain. Everything will flourish through the Prince of Peace. Alleluia!

**Illustration:** In 1937, composer Thomas A Dorsey wrote the song “There’ll be Peace in the Valley for Me.” The gospel song was originally written for Mahalia Jackson, and then later popularized by Red Foley and the Sunshine Boys in 1951. Elvis Presley’s 1957 version also significantly increased the song’s popularity. While on a train, Dorsey observed cattle, horses, and sheep grazing peacefully in a valley and was moved to ask why mankind can’t live in peace. Similar to Isaiah 11:6-8, Dorsey’s song lyrics state “beasts from the wild shall be lit by a child; the bear will be gentle, and the wolves will be tame; the lions shall lay down by the lamb.”

**Takeaway:** *As the Branch of Jesse’s root brings life and renewal, may you be rooted in His righteousness and bear the fruit of His love every day.*

**Prayer:**

Gracious God, thank you for the promise of a righteous King who brings peace, justice, and hope throughout the world. Guide us to live like him. Amen.



Sometimes those who appear the weakest among us are actually those who have true inner strength through their strong belief in God.

**Scripture:** Isaiah 35:1-10

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad; the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly and rejoice with joy and shouting. The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon. They shall see the glory of the Lord, the majesty of our God. Strengthen the weak hands and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who are of a fearful heart, "Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you." Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be opened; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert; the burning sand shall become a pool and the thirsty ground springs of water; the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp; the grass shall become reeds and rushes. A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way; the unclean shall not travel on it, but it shall be for God's people; no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray. No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it; they shall not be found there, but the redeemed shall walk there. And the ransomed of the Lord shall return and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

**Reflection:** My dad was the strongest man I've ever known—not because of physical power, but because of the quiet, unwavering strength of his spirit. Due to a birth defect, he was never able to run or lift heavy things. By the world's standards, he might not have been considered strong. But to me, and to anyone who truly knew him, he embodied a strength that surpassed muscle and motion. Through every challenge, he never lost sight of his Creator. His faith was not just something he spoke about—it was something he lived, especially in the face of adversity. Growing up, I remember a poster he kept in his room that read, "Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us" (Hebrews 12:1). That verse wasn't just a decoration—it was a declaration of hope. His dream was that one day, in heaven, he would run for the first time. That simple hope carried profound meaning. It was a vision of restoration, of promise, of the joy that awaits those who trust in the Lord.

My dad was the greatest witness to me of what it means to let God's strength shine through human weakness. He leaned fully on the Lord, and even in his most vulnerable moments, his faith never wavered. That, to me, is the definition of true strength.

I've always seen my dad as both the lion and the lamb. The lion, because of his courage and quiet resilience. The lamb, because of his gentleness, humility, and deep dependence on God. His life taught me that strength isn't about what you can lift or how fast you can run—it's about who you trust, how you endure, and the hope you carry in your heart.

**Songs**

*You Are My All In All* by Dennis Jernigan  
 You are my strength when I am weak  
 You are the treasure that I seek  
 You are my all in all

*The Warrior is a Child* by Twila Paris  
 They don't know that I go running home when I fall down  
 They don't know who picks me up when no one is around  
 I drop my sword and cry for just a while  
 'Cause deep inside this armor, the warrior is a child

**Takeaway:** Be strong and courageous in the Lord.

**Prayer:**

Lord God, You are our strength when we are weak, our courage when we are afraid. Thank You for showing us that true power is found in faith, not in physical might. Strengthen our hands, steady our steps, and speak peace to our fearful hearts. Help us walk the path You've prepared with joy and trust, knowing that sorrow will flee and everlasting gladness awaits. In Your name we pray, Amen.



**Scripture:** Isaiah 42:1-9

Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations. He will not cry out or lift up his voice or make it heard in the street; a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice. He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth, and the coastlands wait for his teaching. Thus says God, the Lord, who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and what comes from it, who gives breath to the people upon it and spirit to those who walk in it: I am the Lord; I have called you in righteousness; I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness. I am the Lord; that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to idols. See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth, I tell you of them.

**Reflection:** During Advent, we wait for the One whom God calls “my servant... my chosen, in whom my soul delights.” Isaiah’s vision is not of a loud or forceful ruler but of a gentle, Spirit-filled servant who brings justice without shouting, healing without crushing, and hope without fanfare.

Close your eyes. *Can you see what Isaiah sees?*

There is the Messiah who comes quietly, steadily—like a candle flickers in darkness. He does not break what is fragile or discard what seems weak. Instead, he tends to bruised hearts and rekindles wicks that are almost out.

*Can you see it?*

Each of us can likely recall a time when we needed rekindling, when our bruised hearts seemed to be on the verge of failure. Advent reminds us that God sees our weariness and meets us with tenderness, not judgment.

Isaiah promises that this servant will establish justice on the earth. Not the justice of winners and losers, but the justice of God—restoring what is broken, lifting the forgotten, setting prisoners free, opening eyes long shut to possibility and light. Advent pulls us toward this future, urging us to look for signs of God’s healing even now.

*Can you see it?*

God seals this promise with a declaration:

**“See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare.”**

*Can you see it?*

As you wait for Christ’s coming, where do you need the gentle touch of the One who will not break a bruised reed?

Where do you long for God to declare something new?

**Takeaway:** Advent is the season of new things—new hope, new mercy, new beginnings. Even before we see them fully, God is already speaking them into being.

**Prayer:**

God of gentle justice, as we wait for the coming of your servant, renew our hope. Strengthen what feels fragile, light what is dim, and open our eyes to the new things you are bringing to life. Amen

# Care Campaign

Week of December 21

In this final stretch toward Christmas, we're invited to clear space in our hearts—sometimes literally, sometimes spiritually. This week's practices encourage us to make room for peace, restoration, and reconciliation. Choose a challenge that helps you prepare your heart for Christ's coming by tending to the world around you and the relationships within it.



Write your experience on one (or more) of the Advent shapes and bring it to church and place in the manger on the wall in the Narthex. Together we'll fill the wall with acts of love.

## *Easy*

Pick up trash around your neighborhood or community.



## *Moderate*

Pick up trash around your neighborhood or community.



## *Challenging*

Call someone you're angry with and forgive them.





This year's Pilgrimage theme for our youth group trip was "What's Next?". It's a question many of us ask ourselves. It's a question many of us hear each Advent. Advent is a season of waiting, a season of anticipation, a season where 'what's next' is sometimes uncertain. Well, Advent calls us to sit in that uncertainty and be present when we can't see what's next.

**Scripture:** Luke 1:5-20

In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was descended from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. But they had no children because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years. Once, when he was serving as priest before God during his section's turn of duty, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord to offer incense. Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. 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." 18 Zechariah said to the angel, "How can I know that this will happen? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years." The angel replied, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur."

**Reflection:** This is evident in Luke 1:5-20. Here we meet Zechariah, a priest, a servant of the Lord who has waited for many years in the temple and many years for children with his wife, Elizabeth. They are now old and cannot have children on their own. Yet one day, while burning incense in the temple, he meets an angel, Gabriel.

Zechariah is troubled and afraid at the sight of Gabriel, who informs him that the Lord has heard his supplications. He'll not only have a child, named John, but also, this child will be the prophet of the Most High and go before the Lord to prepare his way. Yet because he doubts such a large declaration at such an old age, Gabriel tells Zechariah that he shall be mute until the child is born.

God's promise supersedes even a doubtful Zechariah and an unable-to-speak Zechariah. The silence only provides time for the miracle to fester, to grow on its own without further questioning, because ultimately, what Zechariah needs to do to make this pronouncement true is nothing anyway. The angel is the presence of what God can do despite human limitations. In reality, **humans often think that faith allows them to know what's next.** But Zechariah comes to realize that faith is part of the moment made possible by God's presence because, as humans living in the question, we seek certainty; yet scripture shows that God brings life to us in a space of stillness.

**Advent is a time of God working in silence; we just have to make sense of it in this moment of ease until we can find certainty in what's next.** Therefore, the theme "What's Next?" from Pilgrimage this year reminds us that we don't have to know what's next to take the next step. Even Zechariah learns from Gabriel's proclamation to listen while waiting in silence until his son is miraculously born.

**Takeaway:** *This holiday season, may we all take a moment to realize that even when we don't know what's next, God is already there, doing the work along the way.*

**Prayer:**

God, allow me to find solace and comfort in silence in this moment when I don't know what's next and trust that You're doing something great in Your timing and my patience. Amen.



God keeps His promises is a theme we are all familiar with. I identify the most with this statement when it comes from the story of Noah and the bow that was placed in the clouds as a reminder of His promise. What does Noah's story have to do with an Advent devotional, you ask? As we again return to acknowledge the journey of Jesus' birth, we find that other promises were made, and Mary believed.

**Scripture:** Luke 1:26-38

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to the town of Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, 'Greetings favored one! The Lord is with you.' But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the most high, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.' Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?' The angel said to her, 'the Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power, of the Most High will overshadow you: therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God.' And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.' Then Mary said, 'Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.' Then the angel departed from her.

**Reflection:** In 1991, our baby was conceived, a son. Just like Mary, we trusted that God was all over this pregnancy. This baby would be a "rainbow" baby, a child conceived after having a miscarriage. Our belief that this child would be born healthy and strong was powerful. We had faith that this boy was going to be special. Ryan was born healthy and strong and was so loved. He was special! We were thrilled.

Sadly, 4 months after his birth, he passed away from SIDS. We were perplexed, just as Mary had been about how she would bear a son, we couldn't understand how one morning he was fine, and the afternoon of the same day, he wasn't. We couldn't grasp that this baby, who had been so wanted and was so loved, was no longer physically with us. There are not enough words to describe how we felt. We couldn't understand why. We both wanted a family more than anything, and that's what we had prayed for.

That summer, as we approached his 1st birthday, not really feeling up to going on a vacation, we went to visit family in GA. My aunt wanted to entertain us. We were not interested, but she would not be stopped. She was on a mission that even she didn't know about yet. Mary did not know that Elizabeth was pregnant, and yet she took that long journey, not really understanding what was about to happen. My aunt and uncle took us to a little artisan village to shop. Among the hundreds of things on display, my eyes fell upon a small magnet of Noah in the ark and the rainbow, with the words, "**God Keeps His Promises.**" As if a fog had been lifted from my eyes, I knew this was God's message to us. Our lives had been flooded, but God was with us.

I'm sure the whole concept of the Holy Spirit coming upon her, and the power of the Most High overshadowing her, was a little terrifying for Mary, yet she trusted that what the angel said to her was a message from God.

**We knew that little magnet was a message from God,** just as Gabriel had been sent with a message for Mary. It was a promise that we would never experience a flood in our lives again. That's not to say that we weren't going to have our share of difficulties, but we had hope again. We both wanted a family, but the idea of having another baby was terrifying. We were at peace because, as the angel said, "nothing is impossible with God."

**Takeaway:** As you journey through this Advent season, I pray that you see little things that you didn't even know you were looking for, and that they may become big things in God's hands.

**Prayer:**

Dear Heavenly Father, as we recall the story of the announcement to Mary, of how your Son's birth would even be possible, I pray that we are reminded of the little things, like a magnet, that can be a message that God is with us always. Amen.



The world is not yet as we hope. There is pain, brokenness, hunger, violence, and all too often it feels like those who use power for evil cannot be brought low.

**Scripture:** Luke 1:46-55

And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowly state of his servant. Surely from now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name; indeed, his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty. He has come to the aid of his child Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

**Reflection:** When I sit in my office during the week, I can almost always hear a song in the hallway. Our Soapstone preschool students gather there, waiting for their bathroom visits, and they often wait by singing. There are songs about the weather, songs that they've been practicing in music class, songs about what people are wearing that day, songs about bathroom etiquette, songs about lining up and heading to their next adventure in the building. Sometimes the teachers just make up a song (these are my favorite ones), and the children will join in, because there's something about singing that helps with our waiting. Whether we are waiting for the bathroom, or waiting for the appointment, waiting for the pain to go away, waiting for God to show up and do what God promises to do, singing can carry us through the in-between time, and can lead us in the direction we hope to go.

This was true for Mary, the mother of Jesus. An angel appears and invites Mary to join God in bringing a savior into the world. As soon as Mary says yes, she makes her way to see her relative, Elizabeth, and when she arrives, Mary bursts into song. She sings, "my soul magnifies the Lord," which is why this song is known as Mary's Magnificat – it's a song of celebration for who God is and what God is doing. And you may notice that Mary's verbs in this song are all past tense. "He has scattered the proud...he has brought down the powerful...he has filled the hungry with good things..." Mary doesn't sing about what God will do, she sings about what God has already done, which is curious. Was Mary delusional? At the time, the powerful were very much in power, the proud had not been scattered, hungry people still stretched out their hands for food. Was Mary blind to the current reality? Surely not. Perhaps instead, Mary was naming the reality that through the incarnation, through Jesus being born among us, God's healing work was already in motion. Perhaps Mary's song was a way to join God in bringing about the not-yet into existence. Perhaps Mary was singing her way through the in-between time, the waiting time, trusting that God was at work, even if the work wasn't yet complete.

And this is our invitation as well. The world is not yet as we hope. There is pain, brokenness, hunger, violence, and all too often it feels like those who use power for evil cannot be brought low. As we wait for a better day, we sing. We sing on Sunday mornings. We sing in our cars, at our desks. We sing over our babies, and while we serve food to the hungry. We sing when we believe the words, and we especially sing on the days when we don't believe them. We sing about the world we hope to inhabit. We sing about a God who won't stop until the healing work is complete, and all of our souls magnify the Lord.

**Takeaway:** Sing and magnify the Lord!

**Prayer:**

Ever-faithful God, you are already making all things right. While we wait, help us to sing. Help us to sing when we trust, and when we don't. Help us to sing about a world of beauty and then help us to create it. We pray this in the name of Jesus, who is being born among us. Amen.



## 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, and even a drive-through nativity!

**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 6, 4:30 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 7, 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 14, Soapstone's Cantata Choir and Orchestra will present "Hope has Dawned, Noel A Cantata for Christmas".

**Christmas Caroling** — Rev. George Freeman invites everyone to join him in singing Christmas songs Sunday, December 21 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 15 and 16. 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 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 17, 6:30 pm, Room 200.

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

