



THE
Miracle
OF
Christmas



PULASKI HEIGHTS UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

ADVENT DEVOTIONALS
2023

ADVENT CALENDAR

DECEMBER 3

Hanging of the Greens | 5pm | Sanctuary

DECEMBER 9

Raney Dinner | 5pm | Dr. Jim Argue Christian Life Center

Raney Lecture with Dr. Alister McGrath | 6pm | Wesley Hall

DECEMBER 10

Dr. Alister McGrath preaching | 9 & 11 | Wesley Hall & Sanctuary

Service of Hope & Healing | 5pm | Sanctuary

Gift Collection for Wakefield Elementary | Christian Life Center

DECEMBER 17

Lessons & Carols | 9 & 11 | Sanctuary & Wesley Hall

DECEMBER 24

Advent Worship | 9am | Sanctuary | Rev. Curry

Modern Christmas Eve Candlelight | 12 & 6pm | Wesley Hall | Rev. McMurray

Classic Christmas Eve Candlelight | 2, 6, 8pm | Sanctuary | Dr. Robbins

Classic Christmas Eve Candlelight | 11pm | Sanctuary | Rev. McMurray

Family Christmas Eve | 4pm | Dr. Jim Argue Christian Life Center | Rev. Clark

DECEMBER 25 & 26

Office Closed

DECEMBER 31

Classic Worship | 9am | Sanctuary | Dr. Robbins preaching

Modern Worship | 11am | Wesley Hall | Dr. Robbins preaching

JANUARY 1

Office Closed

**MORE INFORMATION:
PHUMC.COM/CHRISTMAS**

“The central miracle asserted by Christians is the Incarnation. They say that God became Man. Every other miracle prepares for this, or exhibits this, or results from this.”

– C.S. Lewis



One doesn't have to look too far to see in our lives, and the life of the world, that we need healing. Hurt, pain, sickness, violence, grief, injustice, abuse, loneliness... The list goes on and on. Sometimes the bad can seem so overwhelming that it is as if good will never come, that we need a miracle.

This Advent, we look with hope for the ultimate miracle – the birth of the Christ child, the incarnation of God, who enters the darkness of the world to bring light and love, hope and healing, peace and joy. We hope this booklet, compiled of writings from the past and present, can be a meaningful part of the Advent journey as we seek the miracle of Christ this season at Pulaski Heights United Methodist Church.



December 3

MARK 1: 1-8
Charlie Coleman

In this scripture, Mark tells of John the Baptist, who fulfilled the Old Testament prophecy and was living, preaching, and teaching in the desert that the people should confess their sins, repent, and be baptized for the forgiveness of their sins. John the Baptist told the people of Jerusalem who came out to see him that he was “not worthy” to stoop down and untie the sandals of the one coming after him and who would baptize them with the Holy Spirit.

When I read this scripture, I know that I should focus on the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy, the message of repentance, or John the Baptist’s message that Jesus was coming and would baptize the believers with the Holy Spirit. However, my focus goes to the insecurity of John the Baptist, that he was not “worthy” for the role given to him. So often, that is what I feel. That I am not worthy, that I cannot do what is asked of me, or no one wants to hear my story or what I believe. But, God wants everyone to tell their story.

God made us all in our own unique way. He loves us all, and he wants all of us to love him. I believe he wants us to show him and to show others how much we love him by how we lead our lives on a daily basis. We can all do that, and we are all worthy.

Loving God, in times when we feel unworthy, help us to know your love, know the promise you have for all of us, no matter who we are, and help us show your love in all we do. Amen.



December 4

ISAIAH 9: 2-7

Aaron Cochran

As the days grow shorter, and the warmth we've grown accustomed to slowly recedes from the world, we are called upon anew to reflect on what C.S. Lewis referred to as the 'grand miracle.' The awe-inspiring fact that God, in his mercy, freely chose to dwell amongst us. During Advent, we tend to focus on the divinity of Jesus and for good reason. It is the divinity of our Lord that makes him worthy of our adoration. However, I would invite us to meditate on the fact that our Lord was also 'fully human'. Focusing on the humanity of Christ, my hope is that we'll better discern how to bring light to a world we so often find filled with darkness.

Today's reading from the prophet Isaiah tells us that the 'people' have found themselves in a land of 'deep darkness', a situation with which we are unfortunately all too familiar. In surveying our world, we are constantly tempted to believe that the darkness that surrounds us is unassailable. And yet, in this Advent season, we know that this darkness will not last forever. As Isaiah prophesied, the people have seen a 'great light'. A 'light', Isaiah tells us, that has come in a child. According to Isaiah, this child will cause great rejoicing amongst the people and will deliver them from the hopeless situation in which they find themselves.

As Christians, we interpret Isaiah's prophecy as a reference to the birth of Jesus. Yet, it may be less clear how Isaiah's words should impact our lives today. The answer, I would suggest, is in our role as co-bearers of God's light on earth. In Matthew 5, Jesus refers to his disciples as the "light(s) of the world." I can't help but think Jesus had Isaiah in mind when he made this statement. Once we understand and accept the momentous invitation God has given to us to illumine our dark world, we discover why the humanity of Jesus is so important. It is in Jesus's humanity that we are provided with a perfect representation of what it means to be a 'light' in our 'dark' world. As bearers of this light, we are called to be a people who "shatter the yoke... and rod of the oppressor," who help people "rejoice... as people rejoice at the harvest," and who are responsible for "establishing and upholding [God's kingdom] with justice and righteousness." It is through Jesus's example that we are able to accomplish these feats.

In Jesus's humanity, we find a savior uninterested in seeking his own glory but is constantly pouring himself out for others. One who does not draw a distinction between rich and poor but constantly welcomes the needy and the destitute. And one who does not demand that his followers have it all together but is willing to descend into our chaotic world to meet us where we are. The world can be an incredibly dark place, but if we are committed as a community to embodying the humanity of Christ, we will be able to provide light to those in our community who are walking in darkness. As we continue through this Advent season and move into the new year, I invite us to reflect on Jesus's humanity and what it can tell us about how best to bring light to our world.

Heavenly Father, as the daylight fades around us, thank you for being our light. During this season, we ask that you give us both the wisdom and fortitude to be a light to a world that is all too often shrouded in darkness. As we prepare for a new year, help us grow into the people that you would have us be. It is in Jesus's name that we pray. Amen.

December 5

ROMANS 1: 1-7

Cynthia Hampton

“To all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be his holy people: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.” - Romans 1:7

During this blessed Advent season, it is important we remember the birth of Jesus Christ and the promises it brings. It is a time to celebrate light in the midst of darkness. Christian churches observe Advent as a time of expectant waiting and preparation for the celebration of the Nativity of Jesus and the return of Jesus at the second coming.

The Apostle Paul, in his letter to the Romans, introduces us to the basic tenets of the Gospel—Jesus is the Son of God, a descendant of King David, died and was raised from the dead, and because of this, salvation is available to all.

Paul reminds us of the sinful nature of humanity and the need to make a conscious effort to develop and nurture a relationship with God. We are called to have complete faith, trust, and obedience to Christ.

As we await the birth of Jesus during this sacred season of the year, we rejoice in our relationship with God through our faith in Jesus Christ.

O God of Grace, thank you for coming to live among us, so we can grow in our relationship with you. Help us to love and serve others, and finally, grant us your peace which surpasses all understanding. Amen.



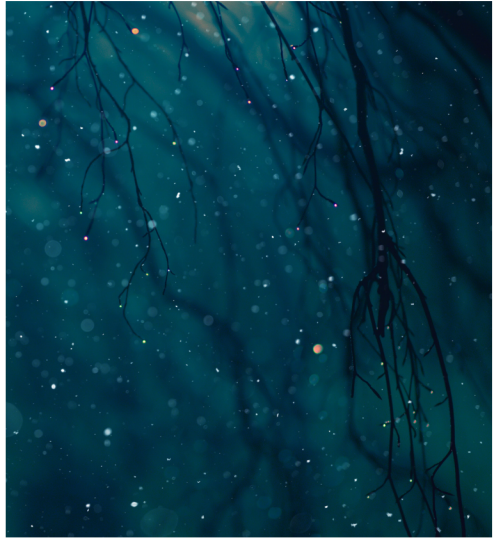
December 6

PSALM 80: 1-8

Sarah Argue & Matthew Anderson

In the bleak, dark days of winter, we wait. The trees lose their leaves, the sky turns gray, the wind bites our cheeks, and we wait.

In this season, we wait for the coming of Christ, but doesn't it seem like we are always in some season of waiting? We are waiting for the promotion, or the relationship, or the child; whatever that next step we think is necessary to make us whole, happy, and well. We create winters of our own, dwelling on our waiting, rather than our present.



But the season of Advent teaches us that waiting is often the means that God uses to carry out His plans in our lives. The Psalmist laments that God seems so distant He must be angry, "Oh Lord God of hosts, how long will you be angry with your people's prayers?" And pleads, "Restore us, O God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved." Advent reminds us that God is never so far off, that His grace is always given, and that His love is the everlasting light in the darkness.

Sometimes, the darkness seems especially oppressive this time of year. Grief is more pointed when we gather with friends and family. The weather is darker and colder. Our neighbors and community are suffering from economic hardships, hunger, and loss. So as we wait for Christmas morning this year, let us find ways to prepare our hearts that center us on the light God brings into our lives every day, even in the darkness, through Jesus Christ.

Oh Lord God of Hosts, thank you for the blessings you bring into our lives. While we wait, let us not be consumed by the darkness but be reminded of the light you gave us in Christ. Help us remember that waiting is not being abandoned and that the time spent waiting is best spent preparing. Let us prepare our hearts and minds for the coming of Christ, so that we too may be a light in the darkness for others. Glory to God in the Highest. Amen.

December 7

ISAIAH 11:1-5

Rev. Kathleen McMurray

A couple of years ago, I had to have a tree removed from my yard that was leaning unsettlingly close over my house. It was quite the ordeal. The removal of this tree that left a stump, a stump that now serves as a base for a number of flower pots (that I don't keep watered as often as I should) because the stump doesn't grow things anymore.

The prophet Isaiah says "a shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots." Jesse was the father of King David, who reigned over the kingdom of Israel before it collapsed. The monarchy (and with it seemingly God's promised presence) had been cut off. But... that's not the end of the story, says Isaiah.

What does it say about our faith to proclaim that from a stump and from roots which lie UNDER the ground - branches bearing fruit will sprout forth? It's a bit of a miracle, a radical hope, to believe that from that which has been chopped down, something new can grow.

The season of Advent is a season of a miraculous expectation - an expectation that this prophecy from Isaiah would be real. From that which seems dead or buried, something new would break forth. Advent is a season of waiting, a season of expectation, a season of radical and ridiculous hope as we look towards the Christ child coming to redeem this broken world that often feels like a stump.

It doesn't take a lot to look around and see that this world is not as God wishes it to be, and yet, we have this radical expectation that One is coming to bring righteousness and justice and peace. One that will save us from the violence and the hatred and the decay and bring new life even from that which is dead. A beautiful and miraculous vision coming from a stump.

God of new life, when things seem dark and gloomy, challenging and difficult, when it seems like we are living underground or we have been cut down, remind us of your great expectation of transformation and new life in Christ Jesus that we look towards this season, that we may have hope. Amen.



December 8

MATTHEW 7: 24-27

Trenton Teegarden



When I read these verses, I am reminded of the hand motions from the children's Sunday school song. You know, the big finale when the walls of the house built on sand come tumbling down with a big BANG! This story gives us two examples of the type of foundation upon which to build our "house", build it upon sand like the foolish person or on rock like the wise person.

As much as we want to be like the wise person, it isn't always easy. Repeatedly we find that we are building our houses on foundations that are more like sand - our own talents, intelligence, friends, our own strength, health, and our loved ones. While these are all great things, they can all be carried away effortlessly like shifting-sand, and we can be left struggling without a footing. Our foundations are also too big of a job for anyone but God.

But the good news is, God is miraculously able to be our foundation. And the bigger BANG is God wants to be the foundation of our house. This Advent, let us make a commitment to place God as the foundation of our lives as we prepare for the birth of Jesus.

*God of Advent,
Help us prepare for this season by placing our hope in you,
our foundation and our rock.
In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.*

December 9

MATTHEW 9: 35-10: 1, 6-8

Susan Robbins

"Go tell it on the mountain over the hills and everywhere!"

I have always loved this familiar Christmastime hymn, an African American spiritual dating back to at least 1865. The adaptation most often used is attributed to composer John Wesley Work, Jr. While the hymn is reminding us to rejoice and tell everyone about the birth of Jesus, the call to action makes me think of this passage of scripture as well.

Jesus is giving the disciples his authority to act with clear directions. Go. Proclaim. Cure. Cleanse. Cast Out. He also gives us, his followers, clear instructions. In order to follow Jesus, we must be people of action. He needs each of us to be his hands and feet because as he says, "the harvest is plentiful and the laborers are few."

During this season of Advent, we can tell others about the good Shepherd, we can show compassion to others as Jesus did, and we can offer a kind word to someone who may be struggling. Any of these things are small but powerful actions we can take.

We may not think we are capable of curing anyone, but we can actively work to make our world a cleaner, healthier place so that all can experience the kingdom of heaven right here on Earth.

Let's be people of action and "Go tell it on the mountains!"

Loving God, who came to earth to be with us, empower us with your spirit that we can act as you did with love, compassion, and justice, making the world a better place. Amen.



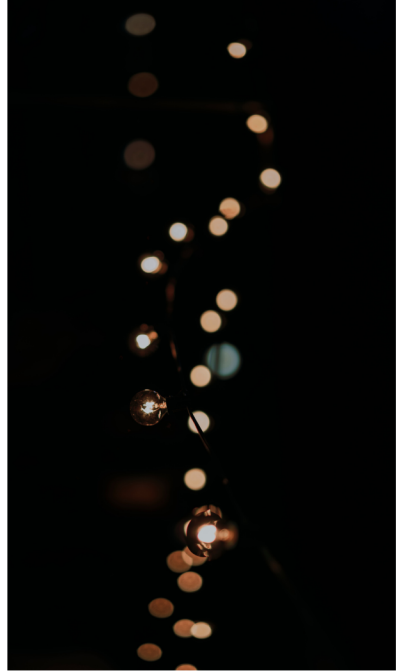
December 10

MICAH 4:1-5

Virginia Porta

I have heard phrases from this selection used in rhetoric, poetry, and debate. Never had I read this book to see the overall theme. As with many parts of the Old Testament, this is one of hundreds, if not thousands, of scriptures foretelling the Kingdom of God. It is amazing that prophets were able to predict the final reign of the Lord and tell of subsequent actions and activities. This scripture teaches us what life will be like when the Kingdom of God is restored.

I love beautiful pine garlands with bows. The heirloom ornaments illuminated by tiny, twinkling lights are a highlight of my family's celebration. Who doesn't get excited about pretty invitations to holiday gatherings? There are times when we've all been guilty of being caught in the frenzy of the Season which focuses on external measures of consumption and status and losing sight of the Miracle of Christmas. In our frantic and harried worlds, we must remember the promise of Christ's arrival, His resurrection, and His return. Micah 4:1-5 reminds us the season is not all about the beautiful decorations, family Christmas cards, or even the perfect gift waiting under the tree. Instead, it asks us to be prepared for Christ's return and his Kingdom in our hearts and minds where we will find peace and rest.



Lord, the provider of all things known and unknown, the giver of life, we pray to you. We know that we are not always thinking of and focusing on all that you have provided for us. And that we often desire more. More things, more activities, simply more. We should be thankful always for all that we have in our lives - health, family, friends, and You. You help everything make sense and give us patience and understanding when we don't understand life. We ask you today to help us focus on the Miracle of Christmas and the ultimate Kingdom of God always and not just these weeks leading toward the birth of our savior. Amen.

December 11

PHILIPPIANS 4: 4-7

Grace Rogers



Relentless joy is hard. Especially during the Christmas season, it is easy to feel the absence of things and people in our lives: a loved one who has gone to be with the Lord, a paycheck that falls short of meeting your basic needs, a friend with whom you have had a falling out. There is darkness in this season. And yet, joy is shoved down our throats as a marketing scheme to get you to buy, buy, buy.

Paul knows the darkness we experience. His letter to the church in Philippi was written when he was imprisoned in Rome, convinced that he was awaiting his execution. He knew the inclination to give in to the darkness and the anxiety that was evident all around him, and it would have been easy to give in to that impulse. Instead, Paul chooses relentless joy because he rests assured in the peace of God that goes beyond our understanding. Paul's joy rests in the miraculous Jesus who brings peace in the midst of chaos.

However, the joy Paul refers to cannot be purchased at Macy's. It is so much deeper than the fleeting happiness of capitalism that permeates the Christmas season in our society. The Greek word for rejoice is *chairō*, and its definition goes beyond a call to just be happy. Instead, it indicates a calling to be calmly happy, to be well, to thrive, to rejoice exceedingly. This joy is not cheap. It is a calling to rest assured in the grace of God, in the knowledge that no matter what, you are loved exceedingly by the God who created all of the universe and who knows every hair on your head. In that knowledge, you are invited to rejoice, even when it is hard.

God of all, in this season so often full of anxiety, grant in us your unending presence so we may be calmly happy. The stresses in our lives are plentiful. Help us to remember Your grace abounds amid our unrest. Thank you for the pockets of peace in our lives through which we come to know your love and generosity. Focus our attention on You, so we may be more attuned to Your presence in our lives. In the name of the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer who loves us beyond measure. Amen.

December 12

ISAIAH 11: 6-10

Cathy & John Engle, and Christian Lopez



I found these pictures of a bear and wolf on the internet recently. They really fascinated me. A bear and a wolf being friends? It doesn't seem possible. But when we read Isaiah 11, we read that it is possible. But it took the birth of a baby to make it possible.

The birth of Jesus changed our whole world then, and it changes our world now. His love makes everything possible. In this difficult world, we must look to Baby Jesus to find our hope in a world where the bears will befriend the wolves.

*Dear Lord,
Show us how Baby Jesus can be like the bears and wolves that eat together,
hunt together, and lie together. We can look past our differences and love
each other. Thank you for giving us Baby Jesus!
Amen.*

December 13

Micah 5:1-5

Marc Haynes, Lucy Haynes, & James McCormick

For most children, and many adults, Christmas can certainly revolve around the Christmas tree. It's magical to see a beautifully decorated tree with ornaments that range from those that come from fancy stores in felt boxes to the ones made by tiny, special hands using paint, glitter, and macaroni. The glow of the lights and the special star on top, so mesmerizing, enchanting and filled with romance of the season.

And the gifts, oh the gifts! All shapes and sizes, wrapped with love and precision, just the right paper selection and, of course, the perfect bow to top each off. As a child, I can recall being surprised and humbled by opening the biggest present from under the tree to find the smallest gift of the day. And on the contrary, opening a tiny package, expecting a small gift, then being shocked to find a HUGE surprise!

In Micah 5: 1-5, it is revealed that Jesus, the Messiah, is to be born in Bethlehem. Bethlehem- the small, unassuming town, not a place of power and might nor on the rise to be. Why would God place a HUGE gift to the world in such a small and unexpected place? This, I believe, is His lesson to all of humankind - to be humble and to know Him and not be taken or distracted by anything else.

Not only does Micah make it known where the King of Kings is to be born; he also tells how Christ will secure for us the promises of God- by using 4 key words. Stand- He won't lie down but will stand strong and tall for all of us. Shepherd- He won't abandon us nor leave us hungry or wandering about. Strength- He will provide strength for those who walk with Him. And finally, Peace- He will be our peace to all the ends of the earth.

With this let us rejoice in wonderful song and lyric. "He rules the world with truth and grace, and makes the nations prove the glories of his righteousness, and wonders of his love."



God of love, as we celebrate this Christmas, we thank you for the promise of peace and hope and your never ending presence you bring to us. Help us to remember amidst the tree and the lights and the gift-giving, your true gift that you have for us this season and all year long. Amen!

December 14

MATTHEW 15:29-37

Melanie Buchanan

Have you ever had one of those days when all you want to do is sit down? You finally make it home, and you just want to relax. I think that's where we find Jesus in this story. He's just travelled, on foot, all the way from Tyre. It took several days. He gets back to the Sea of Galilee (home, really) and walks up the side of a mountain to sit down. But he doesn't get to rest. The crowds keep asking for his help and healing. For three more days, Jesus keeps at it. Healing, helping, and amazing people.



After three days, Jesus realizes they have a problem—the people are hungry, and there's not any food around. He can't just send them away, so Jesus asks the disciples to help problem-solve. They've seen miracles. Jesus has already fed a huge crowd with just a little bit of food. And yet, when he asks the disciples to help, they are overwhelmed with the task. "There's no way we could find enough food to feed all these people! If we share what little we have, there won't be anything left for us."

Jesus came to the world to invite us to participate with him in God's work. Oftentimes though, we don't feel like we have enough to be able to help. Jesus can take what we have (even if it's just a little) and solve whatever problem we face. And remember, Jesus never sends anyone away hungry. When Jesus sends you out, you are full and ready for the journey. So be listening for Jesus to show you the problems in the world, and when he asks you to help, share your resources (even if they are small), and watch as they become more than enough.

God of abundance, help us receive your word for us this day, your invitation to be a part of what you are doing in the world. Help us be a part of the everyday miracles you work in our world through our generosity and service, so that your presence can be born in the world in new ways. Amen.

December 15

PSALM 16:11

Tori Garrett

I fell in love with the Appalachian Trail when I was about 10 years old, on a hike with my father and his Boy Scout Troop. I was captivated by the idea of taking all the necessary items for survival – food, clothing, and shelter – in a pack on my back and hiking in a continual direction for days on end. Many decades later, I found an opportunity to go back to the east coast and experience life on the AT. In preparing, I took several hikes on the Ouachita Trail with family and friends, and it is on the OT with Martha that I learned the valuable lesson, “Look for the blazes!”

What are blazes?

Most trails are marked by a 2” by 6” rectangle, painted on tree trunks, rocks, posts, and even sidewalks. The AT is marked by white blazes. One blaze per tree. Two blazes, stacked off-center, indicate a switchback, obstacle, or turn. Blue blazes mark the trail to a water source, view, or special landmark. They are spaced several hundred feet apart and are designed to guide the hiker through the wilderness, a sort of primitive GPS system. You won’t get lost, you won’t miss out on nourishing water sources, and you will be rewarded with incredible sights that are otherwise inaccessible as long as you follow the blaze.

God’s voice is my blaze. I won’t get lost, I will be nourished, and I will experience viewpoints and perspectives that are otherwise inaccessible as long as I follow God’s voice. When God really has something to tell me, especially when I’ve missed the turn or gotten off the path or need to change my view, God will show up in dreams and Sunday sermons and serendipitous moments, shouting at me to get back on the path!

Dear God, thank you for being my spiritual white blaze, guiding me back to the path you’ve created for me, keeping me headed in the right direction, and making sure I don’t miss out on the life you’ve provided. Amen



December 16

ISAIAH 40: 1-11

Rod & Rev. Gail Hocott

You may know this passage best as the opening to Part I of Handel's Messiah, the "Christmas" section. The Prophet Isaiah foretells of one who is to come. The person to whom Isaiah is referring in his passage is not Jesus, but his cousin, John the Baptist. John was not what you would call a person who inspires comfort. He lived in the wilderness, and according to Matthew 3:4 "John's clothes were made of camel's hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey."

John was critical of Pharisees and Sadducees and preached that "the kingdom of heaven is at hand" and of a "coming judgment." John proclaims baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sin and says another will come after him who will not baptize with water, but with the Holy Spirit.

Although John may not have been the most comfort-lending person pre-Jesus, there is comfort in knowing that he fulfilled the prophecies of the Old Testament. John is the messenger sent to "prepare the way" for the true Messiah who was to come.

So where is the comfort? We think the comfort in this passage comes in verse 11. Picture a little lamb not being able to keep up with the herd or his mama when the shepherd is moving the sheep to another pasture. The lamb feels alone and is not strong enough to continue. All of a sudden, big arms swoop down and pick up the scared little thing, and immediately, the lamb feels comfort in the strong and warm embrace of the shepherd who holds the lamb close to his chest. The mama is calm now because she has faith her lamb is safe and follows along at his side knowing that green pastures lie ahead.



There is always one who goes before us to "prepare the way" through life. John, in his time, was a rock star who prepared the way for Jesus, and Jesus the superstar of all time, has gone ahead to prepare the way for us. Thank be to God.

Holy God, help us in this season of anticipation to remember that, just as you sent John the Baptist to prepare the way for Jesus, Jesus lived, died, and lives again to prepare the way of grace and love for us. Amen.

December 17

JOHN 16:20-22

Anna-lee & Sam McSpadden

Dear cherished friends in Christ, as we journey through this season of Advent at PHUMC let us be drawn into the remarkable story that is the Miracle of Christmas. It's a tale that has been told for centuries, yet it never loses its power to awe and inspire. The heart of this miracle, as revealed in John 16:20-22, is the transformation of sorrow into unshakeable joy.



In these verses, Jesus speaks words of profound significance to His disciples. He acknowledges the reality of their impending grief and sorrow, much like the world's rejoicing at His birth while they were faced with uncertainty and challenges. The pain of childbirth is used as an analogy, emphasizing that, just as the pain of labor gives way to the joy of new life, their sorrow will ultimately transform into lasting joy.

The Miracle of Christmas encapsulates this very promise. Jesus, the Prince of Peace, entered the world amidst humble circumstances, and His presence brought hope and salvation. The world might not have recognized the fullness of this miracle at the time, but it unfolded in a way that transcended human understanding. In our own lives, we encounter seasons of sorrow, disappointment, and uncertainty. These moments can feel like the darkness of night with no end in sight. But just as the dawn follows the darkest hour, the Miracle of Christmas reminds us that our grief can turn into joy.

As we journey through Advent, let us embrace this message of hope. Let us remember that even in the midst of trials and tribulations, the miracle of Jesus' birth assures us that joy will come in the morning. Just as the shepherds and the Magi found unexpected joy in a humble stable, we too can find joy in unexpected places when we fix our eyes on the Savior.

This Advent, may we hold onto the promise of the Miracle of Christmas—the promise that our grief will indeed turn to joy. As we anticipate the celebration of Christ's birth, let us also anticipate the transformation of our own hearts, trusting that God can turn our sorrows into abiding joy, just as He did on that miraculous night in Bethlehem.

Heavenly Father, as we journey through this Advent season, may we fully embrace the transformative joy that Christ offers—an eternal joy that endures despite life's challenges. In moments of sorrow and pain, we turn to You. Guide us, Lord, to fully embrace the transformative power of Your love, recognizing that the joy we find in Jesus is never-ending. In His name, we pray. Amen.

December 18

PSALM 150: 6

Susan Dunn

Let everything that has breath praise the Lord. Praise the Lord!

Ah, nice deep breaths! I had taken them for granted until the coronavirus infiltrated itself among us in 2020. The very important need to wear masks to protect ourselves and our fellow man from the virus stifled those deep breaths. Ventilators had to be used to assist those ill from the virus to breathe, and tragically, there have still been over one million deaths worldwide.

Yet, our God remained with us. From the beginning, he breathed into us the breath of life. He sent his only Son into the world, in the form of a baby born in Bethlehem, that, through his ultimate death and resurrection, we might have eternal life. He sent the Holy Spirit, who guides us and watches over us even now.

So, take that precious deep breath, and give thanks and praise to God, who gives us Life and Breath!

God of our lives and the very air we breathe, as our lungs rise and fall, help us to receive and share the life and love you have so generously given us. May we never take for granted the life you have given us to experience and to share with those around us. Through the power of your Spirit we pray. Amen.



December 19

LUKE 1:5-25

Pam Hunter

For such a time as this—Called to be extraordinary

“I have some news. Are you sitting down?”

Have you ever received a phone call that began that way? It is life changing.

In today’s Bible reading, an angel appeared to Zechariah. “Do not be afraid. Your prayer has been heard.” And that was life changing.

The Lord said to Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh and say ‘Will I really have a child, now that I am old?’”

Moses said, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?”

Mary said, “How can this be since I am a virgin?”

Zechariah said, “How can I be sure of this?”

I have questions too. I question God. I question my call from God. Sometimes, I am so overwhelmed by what God asks of me that I forget. I forget all that has taken place in my life to prepare me to carry out the very work asked of me. In the book of Esther, Mordecai says, “who knows but that you have come to your position for such a time as this?”



Each of us has traveled a unique spiritual journey that has fashioned us into ordinary people who can reach out in extraordinary ways to serve God and to serve others. For such a time as this.

Miraculous God, in a life full of questions and uncertainty, help us to remember your promise that whenever life is changing you are there with us. Help us, even in the midst of our questions, to reach out in faith to serve you in ordinary ways that you make extraordinary through your power, even in such a time as this. Amen.

December 20

ISAIAH 40:25-31

Dorothy & Paul Young

For all of us, this year has brought stress and anxiety. The Israelites of this story who questioned their God and considered resorting to the worship of other gods were suffering through some stressful times too. Many had clearly lost their faith.

In this holy season, we have an opportunity to be reminded of God's great power and strength as represented by this passage. "Lift your eyes and look to the heavens: Who created all these? He who brings out the starry hosts one by one, and calls them each by name...The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth" (40:26-28). And, in today's world of modern science we know that the vastness and complexity of God's creation is much greater than Isaiah or anyone that contributed to the Bible could have ever imagined.

As we focus on the great gifts of grace and strength God has promised, it gives us hope and room to celebrate the joy of faith and the peace it can bring. God is able and ready to renew our strength. Wherever you are, whomever you encounter, please share the gift of love which is the best way to give those in stress hope. Even a simple smile in passing can make an impact. "Those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles" (40:31). The circumstances of the last few years help us appreciate the privilege of celebrating with our church family in person, participating in missions, hugging friends and family, and enjoying social occasions. We are thankful for those things. And always, we can look up and see the stars and remember the promises of our God who made the heavens and earth, and who cares for each of us. The Christmas Star guided the shepherds, and can help us remember God is near and strong even today, and does not grow weary.



God of creation, open our hearts and minds to witness your presence in creation and in the midst of our lives, especially when things seem dark. Help us to see your light that shines through to give hope and healing to a weary world. Amen.

December 21

MATTHEW 1:18-25

Vivian Huff

In these verses, we learn Joseph and Mary were beginning an arranged marriage. And Joseph noticed Mary was pregnant. So Joseph wanted to quietly divorce her to let her not be put to shame. In verse 20, it says, "But as he considered these things, behold an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream..." This means God saw Joseph worrying and sent help through a physical angel.

This is a Christmas Miracle because even before Jesus was born, he already fulfilled his promise of "saving his people from their sins".

If Joseph divorced Mary, Jesus would have never been born like we know it. The story would have been different. This also shows us that God is here with us like his name states, "Immanuel". Even though we may not have a physical angel to remind us of God's presence like Joseph did, we all have times when we know God is with us. Think about one specific time that God has been there for you. How did it make you feel? What difference did it make that God was with you in that moment?

Remember that God always hears us and knows us. We see that from the very beginning. No matter what.

Dear God, thank you for being with us when we go through tough times. Thank you for helping us when we have big problems or questions or think that we are alone. Help us this Christmas to remember those times you are with us and celebrate the miracle of your coming. Amen.



December 22

LUKE 1:26-38

Michelle & Brad Moore, Tucker & Landon

The story of Mary has always amazed me. As a teenage girl, I remember being fascinated at her faith and willingness to answer God's call knowing that the consequences could be catastrophic. As I got older and became a mother myself, I have revisited Mary's willingness to say "yes" despite not knowing what the future would bring. Bringing new life into this world is an incredible, joyous experience indeed. But that joy also brings incredible responsibility, fear, and constant worry. Mary's story in these verses shows us what it looks like when we have faith in God even though we don't know what the future holds.

Similar to Mary, Elizabeth has her own story of faith. She held on to the hope of bearing a child for so long. She suffered due to her inability to conceive, but when God tells her what has been impossible will now be, her answer is one of faith, not skepticism. Elizabeth shows us that hope is never futile with God.

So, which woman do you relate to in this season of your life? Are you courageously standing in your faith despite so many unknowns in the future like Mary? Or are you holding on to the hope your faith gives you even as you know the circumstances surrounding you make that hope seem useless like Elizabeth?

God of us all, help us to see your presence in our stories. Whether we find ourselves joyous or grieving, fearful or celebratory, help us know that our stories are yours because we are yours. And as we claim these stories for ourselves, help us to know our part in your story, that as your children we can carry on the gift of love you have to share with the world.

Amen.



December 23

LUKE 1: 39-56

Mark Saviers



There are many alternatives for our response when we hear shocking or distressing news: fear, anxiety, and worry are among the likely reactions. It's human nature because we perceive that we have been thrown a "curve ball" in life that doesn't fit into our own plans for the future.

Today's scripture reading gives us an example of two other alternatives for response to shocking news - hope and trust. The Virgin Mary has just been told by the angel Gabriel that she would bear the Christ child, the Son of the Most High. Her natural response to this news would be something like, "I am just a teenager, and this will mess up my whole life!" Or perhaps, "How can a poor, unwed person like me provide for this child when I am a social outcast?"

But no! Mary chose other reactions, as is evidenced in her beautiful song in verses 46 - 55. Here she praised the Lord for her shocking news. She exhibits humility in submission to God's plan. Mary's personal plight is totally subjugated to her trust in the Lord's overall plan for Israel and for the world, from generation to generation. She expresses hope and trust for the future. Mary's faith is a major part of the Christmas miracle.

As Christians in this world, each day, we are called to live one foot in today and one foot in eternity. The half of us that lives in eternity dwells in hope and trust in our Lord.

Dear Lord, thank you for the Christmas miracle. Thank you for Mary's example of hope and trust. Help us to remember today, and every day, that you have a plan that is far superior to our plans. We give our plans, and our lives, to you this day. In the name of Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen

December 24

LUKE 2: 1-20

Dr. John Robbins

In our culture, the birth of a child is big business. Gender-reveal parties, baby showers, and birth announcements are commonplace, even expected. Contrast that with how the King of kings was born into the world. There was scandal surrounding the birth of Jesus. A young, unwed woman was soon to deliver a child. Mary and Joseph found themselves in a small, out-of-the-way town with nowhere to stay but a cattle stall. There was no pomp and circumstance. No public declaration. No sanitary conditions. And that's how God chose to come into the world. How utterly simple!

What is even more unusual is that dignitaries weren't invited to celebrate the birth of Jesus, but lowly shepherds were. In addition, the only witnesses, outside of Joseph and Mary, to the birth of the Savior of the world were most likely sheep and cows.

The One who would say, "The humble shall be exalted," came among us in the humblest of conditions. His mother had no experience in rearing a child, and his earthly father was a poor laborer. Even the birth announcement came from the mouths of dirty and uneducated shepherds. A simple but profound declaration. This child was God wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.

God chose simplicity over extravagance as the way to become one of us.

Christmas is really about a miracle of simplicity, though we have made it a time of stress and busyness. I hope this year you will look for the Christ child in the simple moments because that's how he chose to come to us from the very beginning.

Holy God, in the midst of the chaos of the world, help us to stop and remember the true meaning of this day, your coming to us in such a simple and profound way as a child through the miracle of birth. Help us to witness you in the simple moments this Christmas and know the presence of Jesus Christ our Lord with us. Amen.



December 25

ROMANS 1:1-17

WHAT I WANT FOR CHRISTMAS IS FAITH

*From How Do You Spell Christmas?
Lessons from the "L-E-O-N" Candles*
By the late Rev. Vic Nixon

Following the rather corny Nixon family tradition, every Christmas, the filled "L-E-O-N" candleholders, along with other holiday decorations, were unpacked, and the filled candleholders have been placed in the large front window where N-O-E-L can be seen by passersby and folks who come to visit.

When he was younger, my pesky kid nephew used to sneakily re-arrange the letters almost every season to read "L-E-O-N", which would thrill him to no end for getting away with it for the time being. Fortunately, I'm pleased to report he subsequently got religion, went to seminary, learned how to spell Christmas correctly, and now is a United Methodist pastor - an indication that miracles never cease!

Maybe my Texas nephew learned that old switcheroo letters trick from that former Texas football Coach Beavers. His wife once reported that he would also reverse the letters in the Christmas carol, "The First Noel," and sing "Le-on, Le-on" She said, "For years, our children didn't know it was wrong. Our oldest grandchild thought there was a shepherd or somebody in the stable named Leon."

As far as I am concerned, the major problem is that many folks just don't know how to spell Christmas. They seem to not get the meaning of Christmas. They try to change the meaning of Christmas for their own purposes. That's why I want faith for Christmas this year. Without faith, Christmas is not really Christmas - and I want to get it right.

The word faith appears seven times in the epistle reading for today's lesson from Romans in which St. Paul affirms the birth of the Messiah and stresses the significance of faith for those who proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ to the world. "Through faith," Paul says, we perceive that God is just, and, furthermore, that "the just shall live by faith."

I enjoy singing "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer" and "White Christmas" as well as reciting the delightful "Twas the Night Before Christmas" poem. And shopping the malls and strip centers for gifts for family and friends gives me a certain satisfaction. But they are not truly Christmas for me because they aren't centering Christmas around faith.

Christmas is the Christian belief that the baby born in Bethlehem long ago to peasant parents, Joseph and Mary, was the Messiah, the Christ, whom God sent to save us. Angels sang about his birth to poor shepherds in the field. Magi from the East followed his star to the manger and presented him with exotic gifts. Christmas is about celebrating God's gift to the world, to you and me – He is the reason for the season. He's why I want faith for Christmas this year.

Also, faith describes a present reality, namely a relationship with Christ. Faith says that Jesus loves you and me and wants a relationship with us in the present. Faith says that my life will be dramatically different when I have a personal relationship with Jesus. I won't have to worry about whether I'm loved and have value as a person because I'm assured that God loves and cares for me, even when I'm not perfect and mess up. Plus, I don't have to measure up to the worldly standards – as a creation of God, I have inherent value, just like other children of God. And when I follow Jesus, a new life and a new future with endless possibilities are possible.

Another reason I want faith for Christmas this year is that faith believes in the promises of Christmas, promises of peace on earth and goodwill among all people. Faith says that Jesus comes into our world in the midst of war, uneasy relationships, and fear. Christmas tells us that there is a force greater than fear. That force is faith, faith in Christ, and the promises he came to fulfill in the hearts and lives of people like you and me the world over.

Christmas invites us to become part of that benevolent faith force for peace and justice that can transform our personal nations, and international relationships. The world will always have its Herods, hatreds, and injustices. But because you and I believe in God's promises in Christ, we are willing to work together for the common good of all humanity with faith; for where there is faith, there is hope. Our world needs such a faith this Christmas...

I took [the candles] to the living room and placed them in the window so that they spelled NOEL. We looked the front door and prepared to leave. As we walked by the window, I noticed that the filled candleholders didn't spell the same thing when viewed from the outside as they did when viewed from the inside. On the inside, they spelled NOEL. On the outside... well, you know. Maybe, by God's grace and little faith, one day, I'll get it right because those on the outside need to know how to spell Christmas too. Thanks be to God.



Thank you for being a
part of this journey!
Merry Christmas &
Happy New Year!



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