



CLARITY

A 2021 ADVENT DEVOTIONAL

written by members of Marion Center congregations

About this collection...

In 2014, several congregations of the Marion Center Area Ministerium created a collection of devotions for the season of Advent to share voices and perspectives as we all prepare for the coming of Christ. The collection was so well received over the past few years that we wanted to come together again to make available a new collection of voices from our brothers and sisters in Christ across the Marion Center area, all helping us to turn our focus onto the coming of Christ, both as we celebrate Christmas, and as we look ahead to the coming of Jesus in victory and the new creation.

The passages in these devotions are quite likely ones you are already hearing on Sunday mornings throughout the season of Advent. They are taken from what is known as the Revised Common Lectionary, a pattern for selecting Scripture readings through the church year in a cycle of three years. So you will see in these pages a variety of kinds of biblical books—prophets and psalms, epistles and stories. And hopefully they will fit with the Good News being shared on Sunday mornings across our community as well.

We pray that this season and these devotions are a blessing for your own faith and your own faith journey. And we give thanks to all who have offered their voices to this collection. This year we are excited to have members from seven congregations contributing.

Devotions for this booklet have come from voices in these congregations:

Creekside United Methodist Church

Clymer Presbyterian Church

Harmony United Presbyterian Church

Marion Center First United Methodist Church

New Life Lutheran Church

Plumville Presbyterian Church

Presbyterian Church of Marion

Rev. Jackie Greene

The Gift of Clarity

An Advent Invitation for 2021

By late November, the tree-lined hills here are mostly bare. Autumn's flare of color fades as the orange, yellow, and fiery red leaves fall to the ground and the chill sets in. Most folks I know hate to see it happen, especially knowing that the end of autumn pulls us into the grip of winter around here.

But I have come to cherish this season of mostly empty branches and these days before heavy January snow, when the oaks and maples look like dark skeletons. It's in these days you can most easily spot the evergreens. The pine, the fir, the spruce—the trees that don't lose their leaves in the winter, but which keep their deep, dark green all year long. They are there in the woods, all throughout the year, of course. But in these weeks, you can see them more clearly, without the flashy colors blocking them from view. And when I find myself on a winding road in December, I am reminded once again that those evergreens have been there all along. I just don't always recognize them.

The season of Advent gives us the same unexpected gift of clarity. While the stores keep trying to dazzle us with Christmas merchandise on display and play the same seasonal songs on an endless loop, the gift of these four weeks is the gift of clarity. Advent offers us a clearing away of distractions to see the One who has been with us all along... and yet whose coming in Christ is ever new. And like the sparse, surprising beauty of spotting an evergreen tree where you hadn't noticed it before, Advent offers us the chance to see that the God we are waiting for is also the God who waits with us. The God we find in the manger is the God who keeps watch with us on the journey to Bethlehem. Sometimes we just need the gift of clarity to see it: the God we see in Jesus is with us already, too, with enduring love that is evergreen.

In these pages, you'll find voices from congregations across our communities, each inviting you to see clearly the God whose coming we look for at Christmas... who is also already God-with-us here and now. Let their voices help you keep your eyes, and your heart, open.

Pastor Steve Bond
New Life Lutheran Church

Day 1 - November 28

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."

Jeremiah 33:14-16

God's promises are always true and as we reflect on Jeremiah 33:14-16 it reminds us once again that God fulfilled His promise by sending his Son, Jesus Christ. Just think of the waiting that had already occurred for the fulfillment of this promise.

Advent begins a time of preparation and waiting in anticipation of Christmas celebration. WE work at decorating, shopping, baking and many other things that seem to take our attention at this time of the year. Do we fill the Advent season with necessary activities and those pleasing to God or something else? At this holy time of the year, let us turn away from all the things that pull us away from what God would have us do and remember to put Christ at the center of our Advent activities. Just a few short weeks of the Advent season are nothing as we anticipate once again celebrating the birth of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and wait for His return.

Sandy Murphy
Creekside/Tanoma UMC

Day 2 - November 29

How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy that we feel before our God because of you? Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you face to face and restore whatever is lacking in your faith.

Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus direct our way to you. And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you. And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.

1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

Paul is writing to the Thessalonians after hearing from Timothy who has visited them, that they were still standing strong in their faith in spite of persecution. They had previously worshipped idols so had no previous experience with the one true live God. Paul was concerned about them needing encouragement and love. That is what we all need-encouragement and love. Where do we find that? By worshipping with other believers. I wonder if someone like Paul can encourage us today, would we really listen? Do we really listen to our minister when they try to encourage us today? We should follow the Thessalonians' example and stay strong in our faith and love, no matter what all the clatter coming from the world today. We need to show others encouragement and love as well. Let us this Christmas season show the love of Christ to everyone, just like the Thessalonians.

Marilyn Kinter
Plumville Presbyterian Church

Day 3 - November 30

“There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in a cloud’ with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

Luke 21:25-28

We, like Jesus’ followers want to know when the end times will be. It has been a question really from the beginning of time. When we see what is going on in the world we still want to know “is this now the end times”.

Take comfort in knowing that if we are Christians we are His. We will be with him for eternity. I remember years ago my Dad telling me of a dream that he had the night before. He said that he was out in the field and heard a loud noise of trumpets blaring. He looked up and saw horses pulling a chariot of fire. The chariot was gaining on him and he began to run as the chariot drew closer he said “I stopped. I knew who it was and I knew I had nothing to fear.” Now when I think of the end times I remember that dream of Dad’s and of the words of our Savior “your redemption is drawing near.”

Praise be to God.

Jim Ray
Harmony United Presbyterian Church

Day 4 - December 1

Then he told them a parable: "Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

Luke 21:29-33

Jesus is teaching in Herod's Temple in Jerusalem and as was often His custom, He used a parable. This parable is of a fig tree and when they sprout leaves and produce buds. Jesus tells His audience that when they see this, they will know that summer is near, and they should be planting their crops to have food for the next year. There were no grocery stores at this time in history so successful crops were very important to the people's survival. The sprouting leaves and buds were a sign of things to come.

Jesus then tells them that when they see the signs which He has described earlier in this chapter, they will know that the kingdom of God is near. Jesus also says that this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. It seems that Jesus is not talking about the current generation that he is addressing but rather He is using the word generation to mean an 'age or larger period of time'. He is pointing to a future.

The last verse in this passage states that Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. Jesus is saying that his words are universal and apply to all whether it be past, present, or future.

To me, this means that Jesus is telling us to be aware of what is happening around us, look for the signs, and prepare for the second coming of Christ. We are living between the first coming of Christ and the second, so the best preparation is to read, study, know the Bible and do your best to follow the teachings of Jesus.

Tom Shadle
Marion Center First United Methodist Church

Day 5 - December 2

“Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day catch you unexpectedly, like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.”

Luke 21:34-36

Pray for Strength.

Right now we live in a scary, strange world. At times, we don't know who or what to trust. What we need is the power and the strength to endure whatever comes our way. In this passage, Jesus was talking about the end times, when life on earth will be difficult to live. He tells us to pray that you might be strong enough. In doing this we are proclaiming this, “Lord, I'm pretty weak and scared. But you, Lord, have the strength, the power and the plan. Grant to me the spirit and the strength to endure whatever comes my way.” Christmas reminds us that God is intimately involved in our world. He has not abandoned us and is committed to us. We can approach the coming days by keeping Jesus first in our lives. Whatever you go through, keep your eyes on Jesus. And if you can, be some of the strength that others need as they move through this season!

Lorrie Gallo
Presbyterian Church of Marion

Day 6 - December 3

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.

Malachi 3:1

It's hard to live in limbo, isn't it?

That state of being in-between, of waiting for things to happen, of wishing for news while you sit uncomfortably, you know that feeling, don't you? In hospital waiting rooms (or in the days of COVID, hospital parking lots), waiting by a phone, or nervously checking your inbox for a long-awaited reply. It's hard not knowing when—or if—news is coming. And then, when the doctor finally comes out to give you an update, or when the envelope you were hoping for finally comes in the mail, there's relief just to get a message.

So much of our lives unfold in that tension—waiting for a word to come. The prophet Malachi announced that the wait would not be forever. God knows we don't do well living in limbo for too long, and God promised to send a messenger preparing for the coming of Messiah, to relieve our anxious waiting. Even now in our times of limbo, God knows our needs. God keeps speaking the news we need even in the in-between times, sustaining us until the One for whom we are waiting at last appears.

Stephen Bond
New Life Lutheran

Day 7 - December 4

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 fullers' soap; 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.

Malachi 3:2-4

We have to start at the truth....AGAPE. God's love: cuddling, hugging, singing, I love you; you love me Jesus loves me" the Bible the book.

Showing and demonstrating and being an example. This is molding and making. As they get older the hearing increases. We can explain the right and the wrong; the good and the bad; good friends and bad ones; living good - living bad.

Think back, didn't Mary need to teach Baby Jesus some stuff: don't touch the fire, stay here with Mom and Dad. I know Jesus was God's son, but what one, two, three-year-old knows it all?

That is why we have ADVENT-ANTICIPATION. It takes how many months, days, years to get here and grow to be an adult?

How old was Jesus when he gave his parents a scare? Halfway back to Nazareth after they had paid taxes. They could not find Jesus and had to return to Jerusalem, and they found him in the Temple. Things were beginning.

Laurene Vodopivec
Creekside/Tanoma UMC

Day 8 - December 5

I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.

Philippians 1:3-6

I have been blessed throughout my life to have multiple opportunities to work with folks from other churches. Whether it was an area youth group, VBS planning, Presbytery committees, Advent devotionals or any other joint mission, I have always enjoyed the opportunity to work with people from other churches and other denominations. We all worship the same Lord and working together gives us all the opportunity to learn from each other and grow as Christians. When a church focuses inward, they lose out on this chance to learn new ideas or sometimes confirm that what you are doing is good. I would challenge you if you haven't worked on faith related activities with people outside your own congregation to try it. We are all part of the Kingdom of God – not the church of here or there, but Christ's Kingdom, and for those I have been privileged to work with, I thank my God every time I remember you.

Sandy Gandolfi
Plumville Presbyterian

Day 9 - December 6

It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God's grace with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus.

And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.

Philippians 1:7-11

In this passage, the apostle Paul is thanking the Philippian church for supporting his ministry, even when he was wrongly imprisoned and persecuted. I am reminded of this type of faith and devotion in my own life during times where it was difficult to remember that God is always faithful despite our own personal circumstances. When I have endured and experienced these challenging times, I often try to find God in the small places - a sunrise, a tree, the smile of a student, and in my own profession, beautiful music to experience. It gives me comfort to know God is there, and if God can exist in the small places, I have no doubt that he is in the grand places as well.

Jason Worzbyt
Penn Run/Clymer Presbyterian Churches

Day 10 - December 7

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'"

Luke 3:1-6

The time had come for Jesus to begin His earthly ministry. Few people knew He was God's son. Almost no one in Nazareth, Jesus's hometown, suspected that the Messiah walked among them daily. The town's residents thought Him ordinary. Jesus was just the obedient son of Mary and Joseph, a carpenter like his dad. No doubt Jesus crafted quality products-chairs, tables, and such. But nobody raced to His dad's shop to buy the latest "Jesus Thing" creation. No, Jesus appeared to be as unremarkable as anyone who called Nazareth "home."

BUT, Zachariah knew. So did Elizabeth, Joseph, the shepherds, the wise men, and even the wicked king, Herod. They all knew Jesus was "the One" - Son of God, King of Kings, The Light, the Word, the Savior of a world. And John, son of Zachariah, knew. Filled with the word of God, this wilderness-dwelling hermit heralded Jesus's arrival loud and clear. "Listen to me... I am the one who, in a mighty voice, tells you to prepare for the coming of the Lord. Throw off your sins, cleanse your hearts, and make yourselves ready. To 'see the salvation of God.'"

During this Advent season, as you prepare for the celebration of Christ's birth, listen for the mighty voice within you whispering, "Prepare for the coming of the Lord." Then do so...

Jane Smith
Marion Center First UMC

Day 11 - December 8

Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke this prophecy: "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them. He has raised up a mighty savior for us in the house of his servant David, as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.

Luke 1:67-71

The Holy Spirit empowered Zechariah to speak words of wisdom, confirming the words of the holy prophets of long ago. The Lord has come to his people, the power of salvation is coming from the house of David to redeem his people from their enemies and from the hands of those who hate them; 'He has raised up a horn of salvation for us', the horn symbolizing the "power", the power of the Lord has been raised up, he is coming as promised. The world was about to be changed forever, life as everyone knew it would be no more, the one to come before him has been born. Salvation is on its way! Praise be to the Lord, for he has come to his people to redeem them, for He is the power and the glory forever. Amen.

Donna Kanouff
Presbyterian Church of Marion

Day 12 - December 9

Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham, to grant us that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

Luke 1:72-75

This has been a difficult two years. Some enemies seem to be invisible. Many of our loved ones have contracted the COVID-19 virus, a microscopic “bug.” Some have even succumbed from the virus.

Others may be suffering under the weight of more visible enemies – the loss of a loved one to other disorders. Some may be experiencing the loss of a job, the loss of independence, or other loss. Some may experience Seasonal Affective Disorder due to the extended periods of darkness this time of year.

But I heard it said in a church service this morning: “You might experience difficult times, but you still have the joy of the Lord.” Regardless of the size or reach of our enemies, visible or invisible, God *does* rescue us and brings “joy in the morning.” That, we can count on.

Thanks be to God!

Shelby Lemmon
New Life Lutheran

Day 13 - December 10

And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.

Luke 1:76-79

Get Found, Kid!!

Robert Fulghum once reflected on the childhood game of Hide and Seek as he was observing the activity unfolding with neighborhood children outside his window. An enterprising young lad was expertly hidden away amongst the fallen leaves not likely to be found for a very long time. Fulghum recalled from his childhood when many times someone was hidden so well that other children would give up and trot to their comforting homes for snacks, leaving their friend still hidden and waiting to be found...for hours, alone... only to emerge later- mad, disappointed, left out. He wanted to tell that enterprising kid to get found.

As Christians, we need to make sure not to hide so well that we can't be found - our hearts, our pains, our struggles, our hopes, our triumphs, our love for Jesus Christ. We need to play out in the open, create a path for others to gather and to join together. You know, like the game of Sardines. Unlike hiding away, in Sardines you seek to gather, to find the hidden, to squeeze together giggling, laughing, sharing.

Kristen Mabon
Creekside/Tanoma UMC

Day 14 - December 11

Surely God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid, for the LORD GOD is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation. With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.

And you will say in that day: Give thanks to the LORD, call on his name; make known his deeds among the nations; proclaim that his name is exalted. Sing praises to the LORD, for he has done gloriously; let this be known in all the earth. Shout aloud and sing for joy, O royal Zion, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.

Isaiah 12:2-6

This passage starts off, "...God is my salvation..." God is my salvation, and yours. His salvation is for all who will trust in Him and not be afraid. These times we are in have brought this thought to the forefront of my mind. It would be very easy to let fear, and uncertainty take over so instead I work on putting my trust in the Lord and giving Him my fear and not hanging on to it.

With the events of the past couple of years, it seems to me that my own strength has been lacking. I have realized that on my own, I will succumb to the fear and anxiety of what is going on around me. I am not in control, but "the Lord is my strength" and by leaning on Him I have found that life is not as hopeless as it first appears. I have learned to look for a positive in a tough situation, no matter how small it is. With God's strength and mercy, we can find the light in the darkness. That light or that little positive in the entire negative should be our focus.

As I have matured in faith over the years, my understanding of advent has evolved. I used to see it as purely the weeks leading up to the celebration of the birth of Jesus. As with all of us, I have started to view things from a different angle. The advent season should, maybe, be more of a lifestyle than a time of year. We should be looking forward to the return of our savior and the fulfillment of God's promises. Let us focus our thoughts this advent season on drawing from the waters of salvation and spending all of eternity in singing joyful praises and proclaiming the Glory of God to all of creation.

Jospeh Buente
Plumville Presbyterian Church

Day 15 - December 12

Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem! The LORD has taken away the judgments against you, he has turned away your enemies. The king of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst; you shall fear disaster no more.

Zephaniah 3:14-15

What a wonderful rush of exuberant gladness there is in these words! The invocation in one verse, the promise in another verse, all help the impression. The very words seem to dance with joy. Zion is called to rejoice in God because God rejoices in her. She is to shout for joy and sing because God's joy too has a voice, and breaks out into singing. For every joy in a person's heart, there is a wave of gladness in God's. These verses appear to show the abundant peace, comfort and prosperity of the church, in the happy times yet to come. He will save, he will be Jesus; he will answer the name, for he will save his people from their sins. Surely our hearts should honor the Lord, and rejoice in him where we hear such words of condescension and grace.

How do you celebrate your blessing from God?

Jonna Swansboro
Clymer Presbyterian Church

Day 16 - December 13

On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem: 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. I will remove disaster from you, so that you will not bear reproach for it. I will deal with all your oppressors at that time. And I will save the lame and gather the outcast, and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth. At that time I will bring you home, at the time when I gather you; for I will make you renowned and praised among all the peoples of the earth, when I restore your fortunes before your eyes, says the LORD.

Zephaniah 3:16-20

There are times in each life when heartaches and unpleasant events tend to break our hearts. How difficult it can become when we realize that plans and desires can't be resolved quickly and in your own time. To accept that God's timing is the answer, but impatience is not a virtue, and it can be frustrating. It so often is a hard lesson to learn, that God in his wisdom will send new people and new places to fulfill those things that seem so important in the past.

God sent his Son to take those heartaches and give peace and new exciting opportunities to fill the emptiness that seemed to fill our hearts. We need to be grateful for God's peace and love and realize that it was always there just waiting for realization. His love and compassion are waiting to fill a broken heart.

Marie Stumpf
Marion Center First UMC

Day 17 - December 14

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near.

Philippians 4:4-5

Paul's words to the Philippians are meant for each and every one of us every day. Christ came to save us and then sent his Holy Spirit to be with us until Christ comes again.

I have been on this Earth almost 85 years and more than ever I need to be aware that "The Lord is near." Like you who are reading these words, I can enumerate the many times the presence of His Spirit has held me up and comforted me on my journey through this life. However, for the last two years, I have needed every day to seek his presence as I have been guided through the golden years of aging.

Because of God's blessings and enlightenment through medical research, I have benefited by the restoration of sight without distortion in my left eye, the result of regular injections in my eye by a retina specialist for aging macular degeneration.

During that same time period, after months of my appeals to several doctors and many tests that gave no answers for increasing deafness and lack of balance, an MRI revealed a benign tumor between my left inner ear and my brainstem that was pressing on my acoustic nerve and my balance nerve. Prayer had been my only hope. God's pointing the way to stemming the growth of the tumor through radiation was the road I had to follow. The healing process is on-going. Daily improvement is much appreciated. I am rejoicing.

Philippians 4:6-7 provide these comforting words: **"Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."** NIV

Nancy Stiver Laird
Presbyterian Church of Marion

Day 18 - December 15

Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Philippians 4:6-7

It was summer, 1957. “What was I thinking?” was uppermost in my mind, while vast fields of green beans whizzed past the carpools of college kids packed into the procession of cars heading to Coudersport in Potter County, PA. The next two weeks would be spent renovating an abandoned country church to welcome migrant workers who had come to pick beans for the truck farmers in the area. We were also providing Bible School activities for the children while their parents were working.



Caught up in the enthusiasm of the group of students meeting at the Penn State University Christian Association, I had signed up for the summer project. It was a challenge I had accepted, and now was feeling intimidated by the venture, but buoyed up by prayers to the One who gave me strength.



Our days were filled with repairing and painting the church, telling Bible stories and making crafts outside with the children, and on weekends attending church and Sunday School in large tents. Evenings we gathered around a campfire and listened to the workers and their families sing their songs of faith, including a rousing rendition of “I’ve Got Shoes,” by the children.



My worries about reaching our goals faded into accomplishment, as camaraderie with the other students and the many people at the camp brought us all closer together. We ended with a celebration service in the newly renovated church, where I was able to play the piano for the joyous singing. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, filled the church to overflowing.

Yvonne Learn
New Life Lutheran

Day 19 - December 16

John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" He said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages."

Luke 3:7-8a, 10-14

John the Baptist was a force to be reckoned with. He lived in the wilderness and ate locusts and honey. His clothes were made from camel's hair. The way he lived has always amazed me. He had no problem telling people like it was. He was not afraid to offend anyone. He was bold with his faith.

John's message to the people of his day rings true today. Advent is a time of preparing the way for Jesus. We can prepare our hearts by turning to God and act on what Jesus says, share. John told the people to be thankful for what they had and to give. As we prepare our hearts for the coming of Jesus, think of unusual ways to give. An anonymous card with a gift can be sent to someone you know is struggling. We can offer to babysit for a single mother, so she can have a break. We can go to visit a shut in and spend some time. The Holidays can be a lonely time for those who have lost loved ones. Pray and ask God to show you someone who needs a helping hand, and He will show you the way!

Pastor Lois Jackson, Creekside/Tanoma UMC

Day 20 - December 17

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. *Luke 3:15-16*

We all like getting compliments, don't we? Maybe we did a good job on a project for the boss, or made a good golf shot, or have the nicest flower beds in the neighborhood. When someone heaps praise on us, it makes us feel good that our hard work has been noticed.

But we shouldn't let the praise go to our heads.

When the Israelites, who had been waiting for the promised Messiah for centuries, heard reports of, or saw with their own eyes, the spectacle of John the Baptist, they couldn't be blamed for wondering if John were the Messiah.

Like Jesus, his birth was announced by angels, and the story of his conception parallels that of Isaac to Abraham and Sarah centuries earlier

The son of a priest, John's expected role would have been to follow in his father's footsteps

His formative years were spent in the desert, living as simply as possible while preparing himself for the task God had assigned him

And John the Baptist had early success. People came out to the area of the Jordan in droves to hear his words of repentance, and to be baptized by him

John had the words the people wanted to hear, the first prophetic words in hundreds of years

But he had heard the call, and knew he was set apart for a unique place in human history: to announce the coming of the Messiah

John had the adoration of the crowds, John had his own group of disciples, and many of the people thought, and hoped, that perhaps John was the long-awaited Messiah

But John deflects the praise directed at him. He knows he's a minor player in the big picture. And he relishes and thrives in that role

He brushes off the idea of he himself being the chosen One. Oh no, John says, there's another one coming, and He is much more powerful than I am. He will do things I can't conceive of

Following the example of John may keep us from getting a big head, for thinking too highly of ourselves, for forgetting the work that God has laid out for us

Perhaps John should be the model we emulate when accepting praise Praise the Lord!

Randy Stear, Plumville Presbyterian

Day 21 - December 18

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.

Micah 5:2-5a

In Micah the prophet shares God's word to Bethlehem "out of one of the little clans shall come forth one who is to rule Israel.

What this means is our Savior Jesus is coming to save us all.

God used a lonely woman named Mary to bring forth our Savior. She traveled from her home town to Bethlehem to give birth in a stable.

Our Lord will stand tall and greatness will reach the ends of the Earth..

As we prepare to celebrate the birth of our Lord and Savior spend some time this week considering what "little things" you might give, what simple gifts you might present, what humble service you might offer to God. And there by magnify the Lord.

Humility reveals glory. Glory to God on the highest!

Brenda Freeman
Clymer Presbyterian Church

Day 22 - December 19

Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock! You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh. Stir up your might, and come to save us! Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved.

Psalm 80:1-3

As we enter into Advent 2021 we find ourselves stressed almost to the max. So much to accomplish, shortages, prices going up, our minds and schedules racing. The words penned by the Psalmist here describe a stressed people as well. People that have been taken captive, their temple destroyed, lives in upheaval-stressed to the max. These people cry out in desperation/longing to God. They have ceased to follow God's laws, had become idolaters and were far removed as the people of God. As they call out to their "shepherd/God," they ask for forgiveness and help to turn around (turn back) to see God's shining light held out to them.

This reminded me of a story I had read about when happens ewe rejects a lamb. The ewe will never take the lamb back. The lamb becomes despondent and without the shepherd intervening the lamb will die. But if the shepherd gathers the lamb and takes it into his care (often into his home), and nurtures the lamb, it will grow strong and later be returned to the flock. When the shepherd calls the sheep, which sheep is usually first to respond and come? The one that the shepherd has nurtured. Isn't that what we are celebrating this Advent season... God sending Jesus to earth to nurture/save us from our sins. And as we celebrate and worship Jesus in this season, we are also encouraged to look forward to his second coming. A time when we will get to experience seeing God "make His face to shine upon us." His expectant, God believing people/flock.

Glenda Mears
Marion Center First UMC

Day 23 - December 20

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

Luke 1:39-45

Luke 1: 39. "At that time..." What time? Mary had just received angel Gabriel's astounding message that she had been chosen to be the mother of the Son of God!

What was her first response? *"Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea,"* a dangerous 75 mile walk from Nazareth.

Why was she going in such a hurry? She wanted to talk with her relative, Elizabeth, who Gabriel had just reported was miraculously 6 months pregnant. Two women who by all human standards should not be having a child: One, a young unmarried virgin of about age 13 who was told she was to become a mother of a son **conceived by the Holy Spirit**. Who would believe that?

Second, a barren married woman, well past child bearing years, who was to bear the forerunner of the long anticipated Messiah. Remember, the last recorded Word from God was in the book of Malachi which took place 400 years ago, and now Gabriel appears to two women! Can you imagine how excited Mary was to be able to talk with Elizabeth who was also carrying a "miracle child?" Elizabeth and Zechariah had been unsuccessfully praying for a child for many years, but Mary, a virgin, who would believe her story? She needed confirmation and encouragement.

What happened when the two women met? *"The baby in Elizabeth's womb leaped for joy!"* Both children were to be key players in God's plan of salvation. This Christmas season, our hearts, too, should "leap with joy" as we encounter the Son of God and await the second coming of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Day 24 - December 21

And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

Luke 1:46-48

Before the passage for today, Mary went to visit Elizabeth. When Elizabeth saw Mary, she was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed praises to Mary. Mary responds with a song of praise, these verses being the beginning of it. In this song, Mary praises the Lord for blessing her. In the duration of these specific verses, she is thankful and excited about how blessed she is. Oftentimes, our world finds it hard to be thankful for what we have. We've all gotten caught up in the negatives and the evil in the world. Remember to be thankful for what you have and to look upward to Jesus!

Other verses to reflect on:

-Psalm 9:1-2

-James 1:16-17

-Deuteronomy 7:13

Becca Martin
New Life Lutheran

Day 25 - December 22

For the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. 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 thoughts 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.

Luke 1:49-53

A Little Push

Have you ever been in a low state? A relationship ended? Having to declare bankruptcy? A point in your life where things look grim, and hope is fading? You might find yourself feeling like you are all alone in this world. Possibly on the bottom looking at starting over from scratch.

But then you get a phone call from a family member or a visit from a friend. People come to you in your hour of need to pull you up. You get set back on your feet and helped out of your troubles.

The Lord reached out in your time of need with the strength you needed. He touched your friends and family. He fed you when you were hungry and in need of good in your life. It's as though the Lord himself has reached out and given you a push.

Dan Mabon
Creekside/Tanoma UMC

Day 26 - December 23

He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”

Luke 1:54-55

The text picks up towards the end of what we know as Mary's song. Mary is so young but she has found favor in the eyes of God and he sends his angel Gabriel to her to announce that she will give birth to a son and she is to name him, Jesus. The angel explains that the will be great and will be called the son of the Most High. That God will give him the throne of his father David. And he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever: his kingdom will never end - vs 31-33

Mary agrees to this, despite all that it will mean for her. She goes to see Elizabeth who is also pregnant with a boy who will grow to be John the Baptist. The Holy Spirit clues Elizabeth in as to what's going to happen with Mary and her baby boy. In response, Mary sings a song of praise to the Lord.

As part of her praise, our verses tell us that God has been faithful to his promise to Abraham that he would be merciful to his people forever – see Genesis 22:16-18. The birth of Christ is the fulfillment of that promise made centuries earlier! And Mary gets it! She understands that the baby boy has some great and incredible things ahead of him.

Mary believed all that she had been told by Gabriel. But, in his grace, God made sure that she had some human or earthly encouragement and support as she prepared for the birth and faced the challenges to come.

We can believe God will keep his promises to us as we find them in his Word. He has kept his word for a very long time and he will keep his promises to us. The birth of his Son is proof of his faithfulness. Jesus Christ came to save us-all of us who believe in him.

The words to the familiar hymn written by Charles Wesley may say it best. *Come, Thou long expected Jesus, Born to set Thy people free. Form our fears and sins release us; Let us find our rest in Thee. Israel's Strength and Consolation, Hope of all the earth Thou art; Dear Desire of every nation Joy of every longing heart.*

Rev Colleen McFarland, Pastor
Plumville & Atwood Presbyterian Churches

Day 27 - December 24

And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

Luke 2:7

Hearing this part of the Christmas story for years and years of my life, I have always envisioned an innkeeper standing at the door, all full of himself with hordes of people laughing, eating, and singing in the background. Then, with a very demeaning posture, tells Joseph the he and Mary have to stay in the stable.

Living through (and still living through) Covid from a health care point of view, I have a whole new appreciation for the term – ***no room for them at the inn***. I have had to rethink the innkeeper's point of view. How heart wrenching and painful it may have been, to see them in need and not have any way to help, but to offer a spot in the barn. Then, when the innkeeper turns around, the inn is full – no one is jovial, no one is having the grand ole time, no one is singing, and he laments for all of them, too.

In this Christmas season, as we navigate through so many things that we have never had to think about before, we are reminded that things may not be as they appear. But what we know that Jesus was to be the constant, what we know to be true, what we know to be everlasting, is that our Savior came to us in a manger because there was no room in the inn.

Darla DeCarlo
New Life Lutheran

Day 28- December 25

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him no one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.... And the word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth."

John 1:1-5, 14

Life is precious and is ours by the Word of God. He is the beginning and the end -- the alpha and omega. Even the end is a blessing as we as followers of Jesus stand in the victory that He came and died for us to have. We know the end and He has won. There is no life without God merely just existence. Let us open our hearts to the one that created us and wants only the best for us and to prosper us. The love of a father goes beyond measure and our Heavenly Father has exhibited that time and time again.

A father neither is an anchor to hold us back nor a sail to take us there, but a guiding light whose love shows us the way. God is love and light.

God's word is powerful like a double edge sword. We have His word at our disposal in any moment of our life through the Holy Bible and the Holy Spirit. We can know the plans He has for us and know how to live it out. We receive the power to do so through the Holy Spirit. When God created, he made something from nothing. Because we are created beings, we have no basis for pride. Remember that you exist only because God made you, and you have special gifts only because God gave them to you. With God you are something valuable and unique; apart from God you are nothing, and if you try to live without him, you will be abandoning the purpose for which you were made.

When we follow Jesus, the true Light, we can avoid walking blindly and falling into sin. He lights the path ahead of us so we can see how to live. He removes the darkness of sin from our lives.

In what ways have you allowed the light of Christ to shine into your life? Let Christ guide your life and you will never stumble in the darkness.

On this Christmas day, let us worship God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit and welcome them into our lives in a fresh new way!

Jackie Greene
The Gap Ministry



O Come Let Us Adore Him!