



2020 Advent Devotional  
First Presbyterian Church, Hartsville

## Intro

Every year as we haul the boxes down from the attic to decorate for Christmas, I am reminded of the memories and stories each box holds. There is the box with the angel that sits atop the tree. It is the same angel my brother and I took turns crowning our childhood trees with and now my children do the same. There are the silver bells that represent each year in my children's lives. There are the homemade ornaments (by far my favorite) that we dust off each year and hang proudly on the front of the tree. We pull out the nativity set that is worn due to constant play. You can tell the places where I have repeatedly re-glued the sheep's head back on. The last box always contains our wooden advent wreath. It is slightly different than most advent wreaths because it has a candle for each day. It is simple and rustic and stained from years of wax and it is the heartbeat of our Christmas season. Each night we gather around the table and light another candle, and our dim room gets brighter each night as we approach the birth of Christ.

Church, this year we have gathered stories from you. Like each box my family opens, each page in this devotional represents a memory, a scripture, a story that draws us closer to Christ. As we walk towards the manger, in need of the bright light Christ brings, may we do so as a church family, gathered around these pages in our individual homes. Let us do so united in Christ's spirit and in expectant hope of what God will do in and through us this season.

I am grateful for each submission and I pray that these words bless you and keep you this advent season. Let us journey.

Ashley

Week 1 – Hope – Monday, November 30  
Isaiah 40:3-5

<sup>3</sup> A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. <sup>4</sup> Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. <sup>5</sup> Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken."

The prophet Isaiah spoke these words around 740 BC, but how is it relevant to us today, and what does it mean to prepare the way of the Lord? How do we make a highway in the desert?

Long ago, whenever monarchs began a journey or expedition, they sent forerunners before them to prepare the way. To do this, it was necessary to provide supplies, make bridges, or find shallow places over the streams, to level hills, and construct causeways over valleys or fill them. The forerunners were sent to mark and improve the route.

Much of humanity stands in the wilderness, uncertain of where to turn or to walk. To prepare the way of the Lord is to live our lives so that people can see Christ in us. It is providing food, clothes, and shelter and comforting those that are sick, alone, and afraid. It is living lives of justice, truth, and love. It is a journey led by faith that shares God's light and life. We are chosen, beloved, redeemed, and called to share God's peace, freedom, justice, truth, salvation, and grace with everyone.

During this Advent season, may we be more vibrant in our faithfulness, more courageous in our justice, and more truthful in our righteousness. May we be like the ancient forerunners and carry out the good work that God has prepared us to do, and become a voice crying out in the wilderness in a world who needs a Savior. Prepare the way!

Ronda McElveen

Tuesday, December 1  
Deuteronomy 18:18-19

*“18 I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their own people; I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them everything that I command. 19 Anyone who does not heed the words that the prophet shall speak in my name, I myself will hold accountable.”*

The Old Testament prophets gave hope of a coming Messiah. Through Him, we have hope for eternal life.

During Advent, we anticipate and celebrate the birth of Jesus. Children anxiously await Christmas morning, and all the excitement it will bring. As Christians, we can be excited and look forward to our future.

We often listen to Christian radio, and one of our favorite groups is Mercy Me. We find hope in the lyrics of their song, “Best News Ever”:

*What if I were the one to tell you  
That the fight's already been won*

...

*What if I were the one to tell you  
That the work's already been done  
It's not good news*

*It's the best news ever*

Heaven is our hope for the future. In the meantime, trust that God has all things under control.

Heather and Haydon Norwood

Wednesday, December 2

Psalm 89:3-4

*<sup>3</sup> You said, "I have made a covenant with my chosen one, I have sworn to my servant David: <sup>4</sup> "I will establish your descendants forever, and build your throne for all generations." (Selah)*

I have made a covenant with my chosen, I have sworn to David my servant. Thy seed will I establish forever and build up thy throne to all generations.

As I write this, Covid is still all around us. Every day seems to bring news of someone we know testing positive for it. We wear masks, wash our hands and social distance. Christmas is only a few weeks away. We talk with our family and friends about plans for celebrating the season. We wonder and worry about how to safely celebrate or whether we should gather at all. Decisions, decisions, decisions....how do we make them?

With Christmas approaching amid these strange times, let us stop and remember that a baby born in Bethlehem is THE reason we celebrate. Even if our celebrations are different this year, we have much to celebrate in Jesus' birth. Nothing can rob us of the joy in knowing that a Savior was born for you and for me. God's covenant to us is that He will never leave us or forsake us, that He is King of Kings and Lord of Lords, and we are his beloved children forever and ever. Let us rejoice knowing that He is our hope and joy and reason for celebrating this season and all seasons. This good news should relieve our minds of stress and anxiety and fill our hearts, overflowing with love, joy, and peace. This is my prayer for my First Presbyterian family and for your families this Advent Season.

Prayer: Thank you God for the assurance of your love and care in all days and in all things. We rejoice, give thanks, and celebrate our abundant blessings from you, most of all the gift of your Son to each of us. Calm our fears with your tender care and help us to love unconditionally as you love us. In your Son's name, I pray, Amen.

Mary Lathan Steele

Thursday, December 3  
Isaiah 11:1-2

*<sup>1</sup> A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. <sup>2</sup> The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.*

This passage is a clear presentation of the coming of Lord Jesus. A shoot will come up from the stump of Jessie.

A single shoot – a man who will be filled with the Holy Spirit of God and who will do great work in the land of our Lord referred to as the “Son of David” or “the stump of Jessie” seen as the ancestry as a Spirit filled ministry.

Life Application: In profoundly awesome humility Jesus comes as one of us in order to make us one with Him.

Prayer:

“Gracious Father, I thank you for these amazing words from the ancient books. How accurately they picture One who has come to mean more than all else to me. I thank you for the confirmation of the Spirit to my heart that those words can be fulfilled in me as well.”

Susie Guerry

Friday, December 4  
Isaiah 40:9-11

*<sup>9</sup> Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, "Here is your God!"*

*<sup>10</sup> See, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. <sup>11</sup> He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.*

Coming from a not-so-quiet family, we loved the first verse of this passage. One of the children's bibles worded it as "Shout the message loudly. Shout it out loud. Don't be afraid". We should take this to heart. When we think about welcoming Jesus and telling others about His arrival, we should not be afraid to shout it from the rooftops. Or as Miriam said, "We should yell it at the top of our lungs that Jesus is coming".

The next two verses are striking with what seemingly opposite pictures they paint of the Lord. He is powerful, mighty, and strong. He wins battles over his enemies. But at the same time, he treats us with gentleness and compassion. He gently leads us and gathers us in his arms. Mary Sullivan pointed out how amazing it is to think that someone so strong could be so kind at the same time, but that is Jesus. What a wonderful message of good news to shout at the top of our lungs.

Lindsay Powell

Saturday, December 5  
Isaiah 9:6

*6 For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*

If life has been weighing heavily on your shoulders this year, you are not alone. We meet this Advent season with heavy hearts during a global pandemic, civil unrest, and a historically contentious election season. We are plagued by voices telling us what we should do, when and where we should go (and not go), who we should vote for, and It's easy to be confused as to who's in charge. My favorite Facebook post from election day was, "No matter who is President, Jesus is still King." That simple statement was such a relief! We are not alone; Jesus is in charge!

The issues we face aren't new to mankind. Centuries before Jesus was born, this prophesy was given to Isaiah to comfort the people of Judah during a time of fear and powerlessness. God promised to send a son who is Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, **The Prince of Peace**. He promised the government shall be upon his shoulder. They were not alone. God was with them just as he is with us now. In Jesus, we know that no matter what challenges we face, in Him we can overcome anything. We can face our problems head on knowing he is with us.

I still remember the first time I truly felt close to God. Overwhelmed by my schoolwork, I was praying in my dorm when I felt Him with me. I'd always been told to "give it to God in prayer" but I didn't know how. That night, my prayer wasn't fancy, it was honest and pleading and The Prince of Peace gave me the peace I needed. that night changed me forever.

Jesus gives us a peace that the world cannot offer. This Advent season as we celebrate His birth, let's give him our faith and love, and also our worries. We don't need to carry them alone. For unto us a child is born!

Graham Segars



Week 2 – Faith – Sunday, December 6  
Micah 5:2

*<sup>2</sup> 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.*

Micah wrote this passage at a time when the Assyrians threatened to move westward and overtake his home in Judah. Micah foretells the coming of a savior from the small town of Bethlehem Ephrathah, similar to his own small village, Moresheth.

At this time of unrest, a savior will come from humble beginnings. At times, don't we all see ourselves as small, and unimportant. But then we remember the birth of Jesus, in a small town in Southern Judea. This young child born in a manger among animals is enough to save us all.

So, aren't we all also good enough? We can each use our strengths, our gifts, and our humility to better the world around us.

Let us reflect today how we might better the world for someone around us.

Josh Witten & Jennifer Taylor

Monday, December 7  
Isaiah 9:2

*<sup>2</sup> The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness— on them light has shined.*

The following is a hymn. It is number 79 in our hymn book. It is a hymn whose tune came first. The text was written in 2001 by Mary Louise Bringle who heard it and it led to Isaiah 58:11-12 She paraphrased the refrain and then wrote the stanzas.

**“Light Dawns on a Weary World”** is perfect for us this year 2020.

1. LIGHT dawns on a weary world when eyes begin to see all people's dignity. Light dawns on the weary world; the promised day of judgement comes.

2. LOVE grows in a weary world when hungry hearts find bread and children's dreams are fed. Love grows in a weary world: the promised feast of plenty comes.

*Refrain*

The trees shall clap their hands, the dry lands, gush with springs  
The hills and mountains shall break forth with singing!  
We shall go out in joy, and be led in peace,  
As all the world in wonder echoes shalom.

3. HOPE blooms in a weary world when creatures, once forlorn, find wilderness reborn Hope blooms in a weary world: the promised green of Eden comes.

CLAP YOUR HANDS!

Paula Davis

Tuesday, December 8

Mark 1:1-3

<sup>1</sup> *The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.*

<sup>2</sup> *As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; <sup>3</sup> the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight," "*

There is no doubt that this year has been a challenge. As we enter this Advent season there is much to reflect on. When we look back at the path that this year has had led us on, in what ways has God been Faithful to you? Have we helped to make a path for him in the world around us despite the unusual circumstances this year has brought?

Reflect on this past year & the way that God has been Faithful to you. Make a list of the ways that Gods goodness has been shown amidst the challenges that have been faced. How has your Faith grown? How can we prepare ourselves and others to receive & see Gods Faithfulness - in all things? Although the path of 2020 has not been a straight one, think of all the ways God has been by our side, helping us to move forward & blessing us along the way.

As we prepare for Christmas Day & to celebrate the birth of our Savior, reflect on Gods Faithfulness to us - share that good news with those around you, pray for his goodness & grace to light our path and the world around us. Stay the path, God will light the way ~ the end will be worth the journey ~ for his faithfulness endures forever

Dear Lord - Thank you for making our paths straight. Your mercy and grace are such gifts. Help us to truly pause and see all the gifts that you have given to us. As we continue through this Advent season Lord, prepare our hearts for the celebration of our Saviors birth. Help us to lead others on the path to you & to come to know your faithfulness.

Thank you, Lord, for a new day, new mercies, and unending grace. May your love surround us and guide our path today & always.

In your most holy & precious name

~ AMEN

Ginny Munson

Wednesday, December 9  
Luke 1:30-33

*30 The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. 31 And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. 32 He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. 33 He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."*

When you wake up in the morning, do you think of your loved ones who are no longer with you? Do you long to see them? Is the feeling like when you were a child at Summer camp, and you were homesick for your family? When you visit the cemetery, are you reminded of people who have lost spouses, sons, daughters, brothers, sisters, Mothers and Fathers? Thank God for giving them to you to love. Thank God for the memories that sustain you daily.

Death is inevitable, but so is being reunited with your loved ones, if you believe that Jesus died to save you from your sins. What a glorious day that will be when we see Jesus!

"And they said, Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved, and thy house." Acts 16:31.

Jean Beasley

Thursday, December 10

Matthew 1:21-23

*<sup>21</sup> She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." <sup>22</sup> All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: <sup>23</sup> "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us."*

This is so cool to me because it says that Christ will save us from our sins. God came and sent his son to save me from me. He sent his son to save me and us from our mistakes, misjudgments, and even our outright rebellion. We need saving.

As a child, in my immaturity I often believed that my parents, particularly my Dad was always wrong and that I knew much better than he did. I ignored the fact that he was older, wiser, and often had experienced exactly what I was going through at the time. Listening and heeding my parent's advice would have made life so much easier. Just as my parents knew then so God knows now. Still as that child we often won't listen. This is one of the main reasons we celebrate Christmas. Christ came to earth so that when we don't listen, it won't be the end for us. He gave us a way to get back on track... to come back, no matter how many strikes we have against us. He offers us his love and trust even if we have abused it thousands of times. He wants us to learn, and he will help us succeed even when... especially when... we can't figure out how on our own. We need his help, and he is there to give it to us. He lived, died, and lives again in order to give it to us. I like the end too. God with us. That's what his name means, and that's what he offers us... his constant attention, love, and assistance. He offers us a way to become better than any role model we have ever known or seen. He \*is\* hope... and love, and anything you could ever want in a Father.

Tim Smoak

Friday, December 11  
Luke 1:41-42

*41 When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit 42 and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.*

We know that Elizabeth and Mary shared a kinship as cousins. They also had a common bond of being expectant mothers. John the Baptist, in verse 41, even in vitro demonstrates his role as the prophetic one who foretold the arrival of the Christ child. Elizabeth gives voice and words to the significance of his leap while in her womb.

Such is the role of advent: Individually and collectively we are physically and spiritually preparing for the celebration of the Christ child.

Rachel, our first-born daughter, was an infant at Christmas in 1977. As young parents, we were approached by organizers of the nativity scene to serve as Joseph, Mary, and the child in our church's Christmas program. One of our fondest memories as first-time parents was to clothe our Rachel in a swaddling wrap thus recreating that first Christmas.

Many Christmases have come and gone since that time. However, we reflect on our modest contribution to celebrating the birth of Christ. 2020 is the year, of all times, that our focus should be on the coming of Christ and how this one event overshadows all others. Thoughts of Covid 19 along with political disharmony should be cast aside as we remember the infant's leap and the coming of Christ Jesus.

David and Gay Blackmon

## Week 3 – Joy - Saturday, December 12- Luke 2:4-7

*4 Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. 5 He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. 6 While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. 7 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.*

*Joy for the birth of a child. Joy for the birth of all children. Joy for the birth of Child Jesus.*

There are many joys in our world if we look for them. There are joys of happy times with family and friends. There are joys in hearing good news. There are joys in receiving improved report cards and job evaluations. There are joys in knowing how we have been loved. There are joys we share when we learn that others have done well, whether accomplishing much, loving faithfully, forgiving abundantly, or sharing generously. These are wonderful joys of human life.

There is also great joy in human life when a child is born; that occurred for us as parents the first time in October of 1999 when Cate was born. The sheer palpability of joy was unparalleled at that time, as tears of happiness were effusive. Then in May of 2002, this level of joy was revisited for us when John was born.

Tiny lives entrusted to our care, gifts of God to imperfect people. Great Joy manifesting not only at these life-beginnings but also in the newly born possibilities.

With Mary and Joseph, we pair the joy of their baby's birth with another event of infinite joy that in the fullness of time, the Savior of the world became flesh and began dwelling here on earth. In Luke 2:4-7, we find this beautifully singular moment where the simple "birth-joy" of humanity intertwines with God's salvation story.

But, smelling that manger cradle with its musty straw and seeing the inn filled to capacity, and perhaps scoffing at the possible insensitivity of an innkeeper, one could easily doubt that the veritable completion of God's incarnation could occur amid such imperfections. And that's just the point of God's Good News! We accept with great Joy that Jesus comes to us best, not through any perfectness in our lives, but through all the imperfections throughout our world. Jesus comes to us as a child, a fellow human, and then his divinity dawns in our consciousness such that the joys of salvation also become ours. No matter what we have done or what we have left to do, the Joy of knowing Jesus' love and His Lordship is ours. What Joy!

**Joy to the World! The Lord is Come! Let Earth receive her King!**

*Gracious God, we thank You for the joy-filled gifts of birth and good news. Prepare our hearts this Advent to celebrate with great Joy Your birth here on this imperfect earth and the abiding news of Your Perfect Love to all, in Christ Jesus. Amen.*

~ Susan and Kyle Henderson

Sunday, December 13  
Luke 2:8-12

*<sup>8</sup>In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. <sup>9</sup>Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. <sup>10</sup>But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people:*

*<sup>11</sup>to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. <sup>12</sup>This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger."*

When I celebrated my last birthday ending in zero, I made a promise to myself to try harder to find JOY more frequently in my life. I made it a personal goal, like a fitness goal, to find joy in everyday things and events. For that reason, I was thrilled to find that my passage of reflection included so much joy; indeed the “good news of great joy for all the people.” Verses 8-12 of the book of Luke tell the shepherds not only to find joy in the birth of the Savior, but also to not be afraid as the “glory of the Lord shines around them.” Christ is born in the City of David, bringing God’s promises of the Old Testament to fruition with a “child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” After the shepherds visit the newborn Savior in Bethlehem, they return to their fields and continue to find joy praising and glorifying God.

These verses in Luke are some of the most joyful and hope-filled verses in the Bible. The birth of a child is not an unusual occurrence; however, the birth of the Christ child, which had been prophesied throughout the Old Testament, is an event bringing joy to both heaven and Earth. While we don’t live during the time Christ physically lived on Earth, we can find joy maintaining our relationship with Him and our brothers and sisters in Him.

I find joy in the smiles and enthusiasm of elementary students whom I teach. I am joyful when my students master their letters or read new books that were previously too difficult for them. I also find joy in time with family and friends. Now that my husband and I are “empty nesters,” I am joyful when my children come home and are sleeping under my roof. I am extremely joyful that I have an amazing friend group who is a source of support in times of celebration and sadness.

May we seek AND see JOY this Advent and throughout our lives as we remember the gift of our Savior to all people.

Rita R. Daniel



Monday, December 14

Luke 2:13-14

*<sup>13</sup> And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, <sup>14</sup> "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"*

A tradition in many families is decorating the Christmas tree together with Dad lifting the smallest child up to adorn the angel upon the top exclaiming, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men." (Luke 2:14 KJV)

This reminds me of a tradition Jimmy and I started twenty years ago. We were stationed at Patrick Air Force Base in Cocoa Beach, Florida enjoying the Space Coast and all it had to offer. We were living in base housing in December of 2000 and had just purchased a beautiful Fraser fir that had been shipped from a tree farm in North Carolina. We both had inherited some childhood ornaments, but we wanted to add something special for our many Christmas trees to come.

While visiting a local Hallmark store, we found it-- a photo ornament that read, "Our 1st Christmas Together". I knew which picture of us was going in it-- our sun kissed faces from our honeymoon cruise that left port from Cape Canaveral. For years it was my favorite ornament... until 2004 and those two person ornaments turned into a family of three, then four then five.

Our youngest son Deke loves looking at the ornaments in chronological order and seeing how our family has changed through the years. A special tradition that began twenty years ago has even more meaning today.

Katie Liddle

Tuesday, December 15  
Luke 2:15

*15 When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us."*

Luke's narrative of the birth of Christ has long been one of my favorite Bible stories, perhaps because of an experience I had as a child. I participated in a school Christmas pageant as a shepherd and had to memorize and recite a large section of Luke (from 2:8 through 2:20). If I recall, I was around 8 or 9 at the time, quite shy and introverted, and very scared that I would "mess it up." But I didn't, and my parents were very proud of me. I don't think I realized at the time exactly why they were, or even what "Advent" was all about.

It was some years later that I began to appreciate the significance and beauty of the story, and I have read and reread the entire chapter many, many times. The anticipation, excitement and joy expressed in Luke 2 is awe-inspiring. Here is our God letting us know that he will humble himself to share his ONLY Son with us, to be a symbol of love, and peace, and hope for the ENTIRE world. How special is THAT?!

Many of you know that I "dabble" in poetry. For a long time, several ideas about Christmas floated around in my mind, and I finally wrote them down a couple of years ago. It wasn't until after I did so that I realized the "promises" I refer to are the four themes of traditional Advent. Here is what I wrote:

Christmas Promises

The promise of Christmas is **HOPE**  
When you've reached the end of your rope.  
When nothing is left, and you can't go on,  
Your Savior awaits you with each new dawn.

The promise of Christmas is **PEACE**.  
God's love for us will never cease.  
The ultimate sacrifice made for mankind.  
An unpayable debt, a contract unsigned.

The promise of Christmas is **JOY**  
For the birth of that baby boy,  
Who saved us all from the pain of sin  
When we allow His spirit in.

The promise of Christmas is **LOVE**.  
That wondrous gift from above  
Who came into our world to demonstrate  
That love and compassion conquer hate.

God keeps His promises, hears our call.  
He sent Christ to this world to save us all  
His Christmas gift was His best to give.  
He died for us, that we might live.

Ken Hughes

Wednesday, December 16  
Luke 2:16-20

*<sup>16</sup> against all the ships of Tarshish, and against all the beautiful craft. <sup>17</sup> The haughtiness of people shall be humbled, and the pride of everyone shall be brought low; and the Lord alone will be exalted on that day. <sup>18</sup> The idols shall utterly pass away. <sup>19</sup> Enter the caves of the rocks and the holes of the ground, from the terror of the Lord, and from the glory of his majesty, when he rises to terrify the earth.*

*<sup>20</sup> On that day people will throw away to the moles and to the bats their idols of silver and their idols of gold, which they made for themselves to worship,*

This passage tells the story of the responses of the first people to ever know about Jesus' birth. And we find two very different kinds of responses. On the one hand, the shepherds are rejoicing! For them, Jesus' birth is nothing but good news- the long-awaited Messiah is finally here! He will save his people, proclaim release to the captives, restore sight to the blind, let the oppressed go free. This is cause for celebration!

But then we also have Mary, who, while the shepherds are rejoicing, is "treasuring all these words and pondering them in her heart." Now, you might have known when asking a seminary student to write a devotion that you might just get a little Greek lesson! This verse is rich with meaning that we miss in English. The word "pondering" is important here—in Greek, its meaning is more like "confront," or "reconcile several matters together." With that in mind, we can understand why Mary's response is much quieter than the shepherds. This is her, "Oh gosh" moment. She's taking in the words of the shepherds about her son, remembering the words of the Angel Gabriel, remembering all the prophecies about the Messiah and the hopes of her people, and she is reconciling them to this tiny life in her arms that she's now charged with raising. This moment is holy. It is the moment that will change the world, the entire course of history. And Mary is standing at the center of it, feeling the weight of that responsibility.

I hope this Christmas brings you both kinds of responses. I hope you will celebrate as you remember the joy of Jesus' arrival and hope for his return. And I hope you will also remember the weight of the role we are each called to play in continuing his work to change the world.

I hope you will get your "Oh Gosh" moment—a moment to step away and take in the holiness of this season. - Caitlyn Hathaway

Thursday, December 17  
John 1:14

*<sup>14</sup> 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.*

We've all experienced the thrill and joy of birth in our families. With the birth of Jesus, God fulfilled his promise to mankind. Can you imagine the tremendous joy and glory felt by those who came to Jesus' birthplace and fully realized that this little baby was indeed the Son of God? Our earthly lives are fleeting. Regardless of what each day may bring, we can find joy in living and daily peace and rest in the truth of God's promise of a beautiful eternity with Him through Jesus Christ. Especially during this time of Advent, may we seek to live daily in God's presence and feel the joy of knowing Him and the fullness of His grace.

Lou and Vicki Norment

## Week 4 – Love – Friday, December 18

### Isaiah 52:7

*7 How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, "Your God reigns."*

Growing up, one of my favorite "Church songs" was "Go Tell it on the Mountain" with its memorable chorus of "Go, tell it on the mountain, Over the hills and everywhere; Go, tell it on the mountain, That Jesus Christ is born!" Those words, to music, are what I think of when I read this verse – and that makes me warm and fuzzy. The knowledge and news that the birth of one child, God's child, was an event that should have been shouted from everywhere is truly, in my opinion, the only great event in all history that deserved such joyous announcement.

We all tell news, good and bad, and, in a small, wonderful town like Hartsville, it can travel like wildfire ... and it does. I remember returning home the night of my husband's sudden passing to a house already full of friends – several from our First Presbyterian family. I was out of it I am sure, but I still remember those loving, caring, ready to be there for us faces. That was not a night of good tidings or joyous news to publish and yet the news was told and, as a result, it brought a form of peace to my night because we were reminded that we are not alone. I know it let Rob up in Heaven know that his girls would be taken care of – much like the arrival of God's son was to be for all on Earth, whether they believed or not, to be reminded that they were taken care of.

Mostly, I believe that the news shared from the mountain, and hills and everywhere of the birth of Jesus Christ was to remind us all that we are loved, so very loved, by our God – who gives so much more than we even realize. Through our shared news, now over a year old, my family has constantly been reminded that we too are not only loved by God but in so many other wonderful ways as well. The greatest gift is always love ... #JustLove

Valerie Gardner

Saturday, December 19

Matthew 2:1-2

*<sup>1</sup> In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, <sup>2</sup> asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage."*

“*We saw his star*” said the Maji. They found baby Jesus, the person who God sent to spread love to the world. They were led there by a star. How do you show your love to others?

The 1960’s singing group created a song titled “Shining Star”. The first few lyrics are:

*When you wish upon a star,  
Your dreams will take you far.  
But, when you wish upon a dream  
Life ain’t what it seems  
What’d you see on a night so clear  
In the sky so very dear  
You’re a shing star  
No matter who you are  
Shine bright to see  
What you could truly be*

That shining star that the Maji saw brought Jesus to the world to teach us LOVE. Note the circular Advent wreath in the Sanctuary, which signifies eternity and unending LOVE, and the 4<sup>th</sup> purple colored candle on the wreath, stands for repentance and LOVE.

**How much love could you bring to someone if you let  
your star shine, just as Jesus did?**

Larry and Eloise Renck

Sunday, December 20  
Matthew 2:10-11

*<sup>10</sup> When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. <sup>11</sup> On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.*

The Wisemen had a star to follow to get to Jesus, but sometimes in our lives we don't have that obvious sign and it takes longer than expected. We will have many journeys throughout our lives with obvious signs and some without anything. We will sometimes have fast results and some very slow. This is the time we should be patiently waiting, especially this year, for the outcome. Every year we wait with excitement and nervousness of the birth of Jesus, even though we know it's going to happen. The Wisemen's journey was not fast, but they kept the faith and followed the star through it all! There may not be a whole lot of certainty through this year, but we should always know that God is certain in our lives as long as we continue to look for him!

Prayer: God help us to open our hearts and minds and know that you are with us Always!

FPC Church Member

Monday, December 21

Galatians 4:4-5

*4 But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, 5 in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children.*

In this passage, Paul lays out an essential fact of Jewish life in the first century. Jews in this time were ruled by a complex, difficult, and harsh system of Law that covered all aspects of life. This Law existed because men needed guides to help them, but even men can corrupt seemingly good laws. Jesus, born “under” the law, comes to the Jews to free them from it, and creates the analogy of “sonship” to describe this liberated state. The impersonal nature of the law is changed to the personal status of “Sonship” and the Jews, and all believers by extension, are offered a way out of the harshness of the Law by Christ. Christ still offers us today a goodness and freedom beyond rules, beyond any system, beyond anything other than faith in Him, both the strongest bond and the most liberating call possible.

Prayer: “Dear Lord, thank you for offering us more than just rules, but offering us yourself. Please help us live life faithfully to the life you have offered us, and love others as you loved us, like a Son. In your name we pray, Amen.”

Matthew Lee



Tuesday, December 22  
John 13:34

*“34 I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.”*

At Christmas, we tend to believe that a physical gift can express the love that we have for one another. God also used a physical gift to express his love towards us when he sent a small child named Jesus.

Although the gift that God sent us is one that cannot be competed with, we have the same goal that God did when He sent Jesus.

“How can I show these people that I love them?”

God knew that Jesus would be sacrificed. He knew that the world would hurt his only son, and yet he still sent him. Why?

Because He loves us!

Friends, love is sacrifice. God knew this and wants us to know this as well. This Christmas, gift yourself and others with the gift of love. This may mean forgiveness, prayer, laying down your pride, or stepping outside of your comfort zone. Whatever it is for you, I pray that you can choose the gift of love and realize the magnitude of ways in which it changes the lives of those surrounding us.

May your Christmas be full of love and happiness!

Paige McElveen

Wednesday, December 23  
Ephesians 2:8-9

*Ephesians 2: 8-9. For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God-not because of works, lest any man should boast.*

Grace is a gift from God, freely given. There is nothing we can do to earn this on our own. God loves us unconditionally. Grace is clearly expressed in scripture and embodied in the life of Jesus. As I contemplate the coming celebration of the arrival of Jesus, and God's promise, I was thinking about some things we can do every day to respond to God's goodness and grace.

We can live each day with an "attitude of gratitude": saying thank you for our lives, and for God's unconditional love. We can reflect God's love to others. We can attempt to live out the words found in Micah 6:8: *...to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.* We can follow the examples set by Jesus, knowing that even when we come up short, God will be there to forgive us.

Grace gives us power to live joyously, knowing that we are each loved unconditionally by the creator of the universe. Praise be to God.

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Bob Kearns

Thursday, December 24  
John 3:16

*“<sup>16</sup> For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”*

As children most of us memorized John 3:16. “For God so loved the world that God gave God’ son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” What a powerful statement of God’s sacrificial love and the promise of life eternal. However, we often stop at the end of that verse. And yet, if we read a little further, we see that God sent Jesus not to condemn the world but to save it. To bring the light of God back into the world through the Christ child. Matthew 1:23b tells us that Jesus’ very name, Emmanuel, means God with us. Christ came not to simply save us, but to be with us and in doing so redeem the world.

Church, over the past few weeks we have journeyed to the manger. On this journey, we have read one another’s stories. We have met Mary and Joseph, the angels, and the shepherds. Like them we are a little worn, dust covered, and ready for the hope this season brings. We are craving that holy night and the miraculous indwelling of God. We long for the truth that God has come to be with us now and forever. And we affirm our belief that salvation arrived in the Christ child and continues to arrive even now in the presence of God in our world.

As we celebrate the birth of our Savior, may we live into the promise Christ brings. The promise of peace, of hope, of love. May we seek to live our lives in a way that reveals God’s saving love to the world.

Friends, I give God praise for you. I thank God for the light you shine, and I look forward to continuing to walk towards God and humanity in the coming year.

Merry Christmas, Church. Christ has come.

Ashley Cheek

***2020 Advent and Christmas Schedule***

**Sunday, November 29 – First Sunday in Advent**

Worship Service 10 AM  
Advent Wreath workshop 4:30 PM

**Friday, December 4**

12 PM Virtual First Friday Concert with Penny Rogers, Ronda McElveen,  
Tim Smoak

**Sunday, December 6 – Second Sunday of Advent**

Worship Communion Service and Installation of  
Rev Ashley Cheek 10 AM  
Live Nativity Drive Thru 6:00-7:00 PM

**Sunday, December 13 – Third Sunday of Advent**

Festival of Lessons and Carols 10 AM

**Sunday, December 20 – Fourth Sunday of Advent**

Worship Service 10 AM  
Caroling 4 PM

**Thursday, December 24 – Christmas Eve**

Candlelight Service 5 PM  
Church Office Closes at Noon

**Friday, December 25 – Christmas Day**

Merry Christmas  
Church Office Closed for Christmas

**Sunday, December 27 – First Sunday of Christmas**

Worship Service 10 AM Virtual

**Thursday, December 31**

Church Office Closes at Noon

**Friday, January 1**

Church Office Closed for New Year's Day