



The
Advent 2018
Devotional

God's Invitation to Prepare



FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF LAKE FOREST



Grace and Peace to you this Advent!

Our theme for the season this year is “God’s Invitation to Prepare.” Advent comes from the Latin word that means “coming,” and during this time we are preparing for what is to come—for us as individuals, for our families, for our church, and for our world.

This devotional is a gift to help you accept God’s invitation to prepare. It is written by different church leaders, whom God has clearly gifted with grace and wisdom. As you read each day’s devotion, you’ll get insight into how Jesus is at work in the lives of these leaders—those you know and those you may not yet know. Our prayer is that you’ll grow closer to Christ as you move from the first Sunday of Advent (December 2) through each day until Christmas itself.

Each day’s entry is based on one of the scriptures for that day from the Daily Lectionary, which is a schedule used by Protestant churches all over the world to help us participate more fully in each of the seasons of the church year. Each writer’s devotion reflects on how that scripture connects with their lives and today’s world, and then concludes with a brief prayer.

You can find these devotions here in this booklet, of course, but also on the church’s website (www.firstchurchlf.org), facebook page (search for firstchurchlf and then “like” us), and twitter (@firstchurchlf). You can help spread the message of God’s invitation to prepare by sharing the devotions on social media. You can also receive each day’s devotion on email by contacting Alisa Steady at asteady@firstchurchlf.org.

God bless you this Advent, and through you, bless others!



Bill Ingersoll



Kristie Finley



Chip Hardwick



Sean Kelly



Sarah Seccombe

Matthew 25:1-13

Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. But at midnight there was a shout, 'Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.' Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.' But the wise replied, 'No! there will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves.' And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, 'Lord, lord, open to us.' But he replied, 'Truly I tell you, I do not know you.' Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.

Get ready for school. Get ready for work. Get ready for the rebound. Get ready for prom. Get ready for a medical procedure. Get ready for dinner. Get ready for a test. Get ready for a move. Get ready for college. Get ready for winter. Get ready for church. Get ready to become a parent. Get ready for a new pastor.

We hear it so often in lives. "I've got to (go and) get ready." The stance is one of doing, of personal preparedness for an event we know is coming. It conveys the fact that without action, we're not ready to experience, or manage, or fully enjoy, that which we know lies ahead.

Remember a time when you weren't fully ready? Pause for a moment to reflect on what that felt like. For me, being caught in a state of unreadiness usually results in my resolve to be "more ready next time".

The five wise bridesmaids in this passage clearly had gotten ready for the bridegroom. They anticipated what was ahead and were ready with oil for their "lamps", which many believe were torches wrapped with fabric soaked with oil to keep them burning. The wise bridesmaids were ready to light the darkness of night, ready to be part of celebration and banquet. There wasn't a "next time" for the unwise bridesmaids. No one could have known the bridegroom would finally show up at midnight. There was no tolerance for "Hold on, bridegroom! I'll be right back with my lamp. Then the celebration can begin." The unwise bridesmaids didn't prepare, and consequently were excluded from the celebration.

Now pause to remember a time when you were truly ready. What a difference! It allows us to make the subtle, yet important, transition from "getting ready" to "being ready". The wise bridesmaids' preparation made it possible to wait, watch, and ultimately enjoy and participate in the joyous celebration.

Prayer: Lord, we anticipate your coming at Christmas, just as we anticipate the blessings ahead for our church. May we be ready for the season ahead. Amen.

Psalm 40

*I waited patiently for the Lord;
he inclined to me and heard my cry.
He drew me up from the desolate pit,
out of the miry bog,
and set my feet upon a rock,
making my steps secure.
He put a new song in my mouth,
a song of praise to our God.
Many will see and fear,
and put their trust in the Lord.
Happy are those who make
the Lord their trust,
who do not turn to the proud,
to those who go astray after false gods.
You have multiplied, O Lord my God,
your wondrous deeds and your thoughts
toward us;
none can compare with you.
Were I to proclaim and tell of them,
they would be more than can be counted.
Sacrifice and offering you do not desire,
but you have given me an open ear.
Burnt offering and sin offering
you have not required.
Then I said, "Here I am;
in the scroll of the book it is written of me.
I delight to do your will, O my God;
your law is within my heart."
I have told the glad news of deliverance
in the great congregation;
see, I have not restrained my lips,
as you know, O Lord.*

*I have not hidden your saving help within my heart,
I have spoken of your faithfulness and your salvation;
I have not concealed your steadfast love and your faithfulness
from the great congregation.
Do not, O Lord, withhold
your mercy from me;
let your steadfast love and your faithfulness
keep me safe forever.
For evils have encompassed me
without number;
my iniquities have overtaken me,
until I cannot see;
they are more than the hairs of my head,
and my heart fails me.
Be pleased, O Lord, to deliver me;
O Lord, make haste to help me.
Let all those be put to shame and confusion
who seek to snatch away my life;
let those be turned back and brought to dishonor
who desire my hurt.
Let those be appalled because of their shame
who say to me, "Aha, Aha!"
But may all who seek you
rejoice and be glad in you;
may those who love your salvation
say continually, "Great is the Lord!"
As for me, I am poor and needy,
but the Lord takes thought for me.
You are my help and my deliverer;
do not delay, O my God.*

Where are you today? What song are you singing?

Clearly, the psalmist has been in and out of a pit. In fact, it seems the author jumps out of and back into a pit all within the same psalm! Some days are like that for me, too. I sing praises to the Lord for the good things He gives. These songs spring happily to

my lips and then troubles overtake me and I find myself singing **BASE** again. **BASE** reminds me to:

BELIEVE that I am praying to the Lord God Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, sovereign and omnipotent over all. It is to God that I

ASK for what I need, and then

SEEK the Lord's direction because I

EXPECT an answer. This is the trickiest part, for AN answer (God's) is not always MY answer. Expecting an answer helps me to be aware of it when it comes and yield to God's reply.

How has the Lord answered your prayers? The psalmist reassures us that God hears our prayers and will answer them. Perhaps you want to track your requests this advent season and see how God responds. They are powerful examples of God's presence that we can share with others.

Above all, we are reminded that God wants our hearts, souls and minds before any earthly treasures or sacrifices. As we bring ourselves into alignment with God's direction and plans, other aspects of our lives follow. God bless you today!

Prayer: Gracious and giving God, remind me that you know better than I do how to answer my prayers. Give me patience and hope while I wait. In Christ's name, Amen.

Tuesday, December 4

Marcy Kerr

Psalm 146

I would like to reflect on Morning Psalm 146.

This psalm was one of the final five psalms that sings praise to the Lord. It starts out:

Praise the LORD!

Praise the LORD, O my soul!

I will praise the LORD as long as I live;

I will sing praises to my God all my life long.

It calls us to praise the Lord, to trust, to put our confidence in the Lord. It strives to restore our hope. This psalm focuses on the positive. It declares the power and loving care of God.

*Do not put your trust in princes,
in mortals, in whom there is no help.
When their breath departs, they return to the earth;
on that very day their plans perish.*

Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob,

*whose hope is in the LORD their God,
who made heaven and earth,
the sea, and all that is in them;
who keeps faith forever;
who executes justice for the oppressed;
who gives food to the hungry.*

Advent is the perfect time to reflect on all that God has given us. He believed in us enough to send his son to teach and redeem us. Advent is a time to prepare our hearts, still our minds and sing praise to our LORD, to sing of his love and compassion, to sing of the miracle of the birth of Jesus and prepare for all he will accomplish.

*The LORD sets the prisoners free;
The LORD opens the eyes of the blind.
The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down;
The LORD loves the righteous.
The LORD watches over the strangers;
He upholds the orphan and the widow,
but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.*

In our home growing up, Advent was a time of preparation. Decorating, baking, sending greetings to old friends but it was also a time for helping others, donating mittens, visiting and bringing cheer to shut-ins, caroling in the neighborhood, spreading love and hope of the season.

Psalm 146 ends as it begins, singing praise to the LORD:

*The LORD will reign forever,
Your God, O Zion, for all generations.
Praise the LORD!*

Prayer: In this season of hope and wonder we thank you LORD for all you do for us. Help us to do your will and remember your love each day. In your name we pray, Amen.

Wednesday, December 5

Martha Zeeman

Isaiah 2:1-4

The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.

*In days to come
the mountain of the Lord's house
shall be established as the highest of the
mountains,
and shall be raised above the hills;
all the nations shall stream to it.
Many peoples shall come and say,
"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the
Lord,
to the house of the God of Jacob;*

*that he may teach us his ways
and that we may walk in his paths."
For out of Zion shall go forth instruction,
and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.
He shall judge between the nations,
and shall arbitrate for many peoples;
they shall beat their swords into plowshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more.*

In the days to come we will prepare for the birth of our Savior. Many of us will be shopping for the perfect gift and decorating our homes for gatherings. It is easy to get “caught up in the season” with activities and forget what this season is really about. While Christmas is still several days away, let us remember that Jesus can reign in our lives, in our minds and in our hearts right now. We don’t have to wait for Christmas to celebrate the blessings of Jesus’ righteousness in our lives. We can shout from our own mountain tops by living the example of Jesus every day of this season and beyond. We can openly share our faith and our joy by simply living every day with kindness, integrity, mercy and grace.

God’s ways are to be learned in his church, in communion with his people, and in the ways of duty which he requires us to walk in, the ways of grace in which he walks towards us. It is God who teaches his people, by his word and Spirit. It is worth while to take pains to go up to his holy mountain to be taught his ways, and those who are willing to take that pain shall never find its labor in vain.

The people will go up to the mountain of the Lord for the purpose of learning God’s ways and walking in God’s paths. Walking in God’s paths involves a choice. If we choose to walk on God’s paths, it means choosing not to walk on competing paths. Choosing God involves accepting certain restrictions, but it is a life-giving choice. Jesus says, “Enter in by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and many are those who enter in by it. How narrow is the gate, and restricted is the way that leads to life! Few are those who find it” (Matthew 7:13-14).

Prayer: Heavenly Father, during this season of Advent, help us to choose to follow your path. Help us to remember that this is a season of preparation for your joyous birth. Help us to show others that all are welcome in your house and that it is a house of joy. We anxiously await your coming and the coming of our new pastor to help us find ways to shout from our mountain top so that those who need to hear it will know they are welcome. Amen.

1 Thessalonians 3:9-13 New International Version (NIV)

How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have in the presence of our God because of you? Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith.

Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus clear the way for us to come to you. May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you. May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones.

Sarah helped me make a very obvious “real life” connection to today’s Scripture through the book by Dr. Seuss, *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*. I took my kids, along with 4 friends to see the new Grinch movie. You know the story - grumpy Grinch, steals Christmas, only to find out Christmas is not about stuff, but about the love found with the season. In the car on the way home, my heart grew three sizes as they talked about what happened without all the Christmas”stuff” that the people ALL still had Christmas. They talked about their favorite Christmas traditions (though they did not use the word “tradition”) and I heard more about “being with” than “having” things at Christmas. I just listened, and really did not rush to get home. I loved hearing about the excitement to travel to see family, what each calls grandma & grandpa, and how excited they are for Christmas Break. They talked about what they will DO over the break, and the friends and family that they will be with during break. There was not ONE mention of Santa or presents. I knew better than to bring it up, and I continue to hold the conversation in my heart.

The scripture reminds me to enjoy the wait, expectation, and to remember to keep the STORY of Christmas in my conversations with my children. I will do my best to celebrate the JOYFUL moments, and try to keep the rush at bay. We will continue to take time to LISTEN to God as he helps us prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus on December 25.

Prayer: Dear God, We are getting ready to celebrate the birth of your son, Jesus. We will look for joy in the weeks to come, and do our best to focus on our time spent with family & friends and not our wish lists. Amen.

1 Thessalonians 4:1-2, 9-12 New International Version (NIV)

As for other matters, brothers and sisters, we instructed you how to live in order to please God, as in fact you are living. Now we ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more. For you know what instructions we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus...

Now about your love for one another we do not need to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love each other. And in fact, you do love all of God's family throughout Macedonia. Yet we urge you, brothers and sisters, to do so more and more, and to make it your ambition to lead a quiet life: You should mind your own business and work with your hands, just as we told you, so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody.

Living to please God...what does this mean to us?

I know I *think* I'm living a God pleasing life by donating time, talent, and cash to charitable organizations and living a moral life. Jesus asks us to clothe the naked and feed the hungry and our Church home does a great job of doing this! But this passage asks us to do MORE. "*Now we ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more.*" How then would this look?

If you read on in the passage they outline Gods teaching about loving one another. Again, they *urge* us to do this "more and more." Here is where I gravitate to during this Advent season; to love one another **more**.

Our world is turning us more and more inward and insular. Looking someone in the eye has become a challenge move or an uncomfortable stare. Saying "hello" is usually met with a quizzical glance and suspicious instinct. What if we dare to be kind? Dare to meet another's eyes and engage with them in a human way? Would God encourage us in this kindness movement? I say he would! "More and more" we need to love our neighbor and reach out to our fellow humans. THIS can be our charge during this Advent season: **Kindness**.

There was a viral movement after the Parkland, Florida school shootings for kids to *walk out* of classes for a time to protest gun violence. This resulted into an idea to "walk up not out". This different movement was intended to encourage us all to walk up to someone who was sitting alone, to **walk up** to someone who was angry and ask them if you could help, to reach out with friendliness, compassion and kindness.

Kindness. A simple charge during this season as we await the birth of our Lord.

We can certainly walk up and do this "more and more" to live our life to please Him.

Prayer: Dear Lord, we know that your love is more than enough for us. Please guide us in learning to love each other more and more to your delight. In Jesus's name we pray, Amen.

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died. For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have died. For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage one another with these words.

Have you ever attempted to complete a task you felt completely unprepared for? Ever drive to a new place, unsure of the 'exact' course you should travel? Have you started a project, knowing full-well of your end goal, but not completely certain of the intermediary steps to get there?

I feel this way in the kitchen. I always have grand visions of how the meal I am preparing will look once it is served on the dinner plate, but have very little confidence on how to actually accomplish the feat! This is why I never attempt a recipe that isn't accompanied by a picture! I need the assurance, every step of the way, that things look right and are progressing as they should. Due to my lack of experience preparing meals with multi-step instructions, and that don't involve a microwave, I often get rattled if I do not have clear guidance on the way I am to proceed.

In today's scripture verse, Paul is writing to the church in Thessalonica whose members are dealing with similar feelings of uneasiness about their lack of experience with what they are encountering. Believers in Thessalonica have experienced multiple deaths to beloved community members and, simply put, they are unsure of what happens to believers after they die. Paul encourages them though, to have hope!

As we prepare our hearts for the celebration of Christ's birth this Christmas, may we all be reminded to have hope! There is more to the story, God is still at work! No matter the trials, no matter the questions, no matter the doubts, Christ offers hope and purpose to all. And may we all be reminded that one day, one glorious day, "*we will be with the Lord forever*".

Prayer: Lord, as we prepare throughout Advent to celebrate Jesus' coming this Christmas, please keep us centered on the hope only you can provide. Draw us closer to you as we strive to be lights in the darkness, shining for your glory. In Jesus name, Amen.

Psalm 25

*To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul.
O my God, in you I trust;
do not let me be put to shame;
do not let my enemies exult over me.
Do not let those who wait for you be put to
shame;
let them be ashamed who are wantonly
treacherous.*

*Make me to know your ways, O Lord;
teach me your paths.
Lead me in your truth, and teach me,
for you are the God of my salvation;
for you I wait all day long.*

*Be mindful of your mercy, O Lord, and of
your steadfast love,
for they have been from of old.
Do not remember the sins of my youth or my
transgressions;
according to your steadfast love remember me,
for your goodness' sake, O Lord!*

*Good and upright is the Lord;
therefore he instructs sinners in the way.
He leads the humble in what is right,
and teaches the humble his way.
All the paths of the Lord are steadfast love
and faithfulness,
for those who keep his covenant and his
decrees.*

*For your name's sake, O Lord,
pardon my guilt, for it is great.
Who are they that fear the Lord?
He will teach them the way that they should
choose.*

*They will abide in prosperity,
and their children shall possess the land.
The friendship of the Lord is for those who
fear him,
and he makes his covenant known to them.
My eyes are ever toward the Lord,
for he will pluck my feet out of the net.*

*Turn to me and be gracious to me,
for I am lonely and afflicted.
Relieve the troubles of my heart,
and bring me out of my distress.
Consider my affliction and my trouble,
and forgive all my sins.*

*Consider how many are my foes,
and with what violent hatred they hate me.
O guard my life, and deliver me;
do not let me be put to shame, for I take
refuge in you
May integrity and uprightness preserve me,
for I wait for you.*

*Redeem Israel, O God,
out of all its troubles.*

As I reflect on Psalm 25, it opens my eyes to where God has been in my life. In the past, hanging on to fear and feeling alone, I tried to fight through challenges blindly. Looking back, I now know God was by my side. Psalm 25:20 reads: “O guard my life, and deliver me; do not let me be put to shame, for I take refuge in you”. I feel there are times where we all feel God has left us.... ”How could this happen?” we ask. “Do not let those who wait for you be put to shame; let them be ashamed who are wantonly treacherous” (Psalm 25:3).

Often, in prayer, we ask for forgiveness and give thanks. Look around, we are surrounded by people who love us, beautiful trees and water, the sounds of nature warming our ears! As I fought through a difficult career transition, my family stayed strong, healthy and committed to each other. God was with us then, He is with us now and He will always be with us; with us All!

Finding First Presbyterian Church, I heard the message we are forgiven and loved always! Psalm 25:10 says “All the paths of the Lord are steadfast love and faithfulness, for those who keep his covenant and his decrees”. Following the Lord is refreshing and life giving; it strengthens our mind, body and soul. As I reflect on events of my past, God lifted my burdens in so many ways, even during times where I feel I may not have deserved it. Psalm 25:7 reads “Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions; according to your steadfast love remember me, for your goodness’ sake, O Lord!” Absolutely amazing! Halleluiah! Halleluiah! “Turn to me and be gracious to me, for I am lonely and afflicted. Relieve the troubles of my heart, and bring me out of my distress” (Psalm 25:16,17). God understands us all, He knows our situation.

I think of the lessons I have learned in my blessed life and I have so much to be thankful for. My scars are reminders of battles fought, and won, by the grace of God! Psalm 25:5 says “Lead me in your truth, and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation”. If I didn’t face challenging times, I believe I wouldn’t find God the way I have. Psalm 25:13-15 says “They will abide in prosperity, and their children shall possess the land. The friendship of the Lord is for those who fear him, and he makes his covenant known to them. My eyes are ever toward the Lord, for he will pluck my feet out of the net”. Thanks be to God!

Thank you, O Lord, for always loving and forgiving us. This is the best Christmas gift we could ever be given--a gift we see in the manger and the cross. In Christ’s name. Amen.

Isaiah 5: 8-17

*Ah, you who join house to house,
who add field to field,
until there is room for no one but you,
and you are left to live alone
in the midst of the land!*

*The Lord of hosts has sworn in my hearing:
Surely many houses shall be desolate,
large and beautiful houses, without
inhabitant.*

*For ten acres of vineyard shall yield but one bath,
and a homer of seed shall yield a mere ephah.*

*Ah, you who rise early in the morning
in pursuit of strong drink,
who linger in the evening
to be inflamed by wine,
whose feasts consist of lyre and harp,
tambourine and flute and wine,
but who do not regard the deeds of the Lord,*

or see the work of his hands!

*Therefore my people go into exile without
knowledge;
their nobles are dying of hunger,
and their multitude is parched with thirst.*

*Therefore Sheol has enlarged its appetite
and opened its mouth beyond measure;
the nobility of Jerusalem and her multitude go
down,
her throng and all who exult in her.
People are bowed down, everyone is brought low,
and the eyes of the haughty are humbled.
But the Lord of hosts is exalted by justice,
and the Holy God shows himself holy by
righteousness.*

*Then the lambs shall graze as in their pasture,
fatlings and kids shall feed among the ruins.*

Isaiah's woes speak to an ancient Israel that had lapsed in their commitments to seek God and to do God's will as revealed in His law. They lived very often hypocritical to God's law – following some of it, following it sometimes. They were no longer the light to the world that God had intended. Their lives bore fruit (wealth, power, status, excessive enjoyment), but not the type that God could use. So God would lift "the hedge" that protected His "vineyard" and let the nations of the ancient world destroy it. All can be brought down, humbled, and made equal by tragedy, destruction, and death.

When the ancient Israelites moved away from God's law, they no longer had the fixed rules for knowing good from evil, sweet from bitter, lightness from darkness. They followed their own "wisdom", not subjugated to God's absolute and true wisdom revealed to them in the law. Therefore, they had no knowledge (Isaiah 5:13). In Jesus Christ, the world was again blessed by being given God's law, this time made new and more accessible through Jesus' life, teachings and parables. Through study of God's law and through study of the life of Jesus Christ, we find the knowledge to live meaningful lives, directed by God's will.

In today's increasingly secular world, we are again at risk of "having no knowledge." We have stopped seeking God. Church and synagogue attendance is in decline. We follow some of God's law; we follow it sometimes. We continue to pursue worldly rewards, and we let our lives bear the wrong fruits. We take up politics and secular social movements that can make subjective and misunderstood what is good from evil, lightness from darkness, sweet from bitter. We put our faith in technology and policy to solve the world's problems, when we should see that these things are only tools in such efforts. Our faith should be in God only, and our desire should be to understand and do His will.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, we pray that we use the knowledge that you have provided us, first through Your law and then through the life and teachings of Jesus Christ, as a framework within which to develop ourselves - our intellect, opinions, and pursuits. In this way we may hope for a righteous life, seeking You, obeying Your will, and bearing the right fruit. Amen.

Tuesday, December 11

Roberta Miller

1 Thessalonians 5 12-28

But we appeal to you, brothers and sisters, to respect those who labor among you, and have charge of you in the Lord and admonish you; esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves. And we urge you, beloved, to admonish the idlers, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them. See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all. Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise the words of prophets, but test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil.

May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this.

Beloved, pray for us.

Greet all the brothers and sisters with a holy kiss. I solemnly command you by the Lord that this letter be read to all of them.

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

On those days when I am gloomy, or heaven forbid, feeling less than perfect, I see this passage and feel even more imperfect...Don't tell me to be patient, and kind, and selfless. Just make it better!! And right now!! I'm tired of waiting and waiting. I'm a pretty good person, and love God, so why do I need to keep waiting?

Until then I see "pray without ceasing," and dig down into its meaning. Aha! This phrase really can mean **rejoice and give thanks** always. Now that's getting close to

something I can relate to. Thank goodness it doesn't really mean to give up all of your other activities and spend lots more time on your knees. It really focuses on what I could call the attitude of the heart, the attitude of the soul. Give thanks as you lead your life, and you will begin to see chances to demonstrate your genuine love for God by helping those around you, and by calming your unfocused mind down. Ask for ways to rejoice, and they will be given to you. Not every minute, but certainly more than not.

I have seen so many signs of the Holy Spirit in my life, at times both good and not so good, that I am absolutely sure that I am loved and watched over. My problems and errors are the doing of myself or of those around me. Jesus does love me and constantly watches over me, rejoicing when I am rejoicing and holding me to keep me from falling too far when I am not.

I work on being stronger, as this passage advises, and see myself gradually abstaining from more and more evil. Hallelujah!

Prayer: Heavenly Father, please know that I am so grateful for your love and infinite patience with me...I see improvements and weaknesses, and hope to make you even happier with me through my small and steady improvements. Amen.

Wednesday, December 12

Patty Kreischer

2 Thessalonians 1: 1-12

Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

We must always give thanks to God for you, brothers and sisters, as is right, because your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of every one of you for one another is increasing. Therefore we ourselves boast of you among the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith during all your persecutions and the afflictions that you are enduring.

This is evidence of the righteous judgment of God, and is intended to make you worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are also suffering. For it is indeed just of God to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to give relief to the afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. These will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, separated from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, when he comes to be glorified by his saints and to be marveled at on that day among all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed. To this end we always pray for you, asking that our God will make you worthy of his call and will fulfill by his power every good resolve and work of faith, so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

This is my favorite time of year; this season of anticipation and preparation for the Christ Child, coming to us. Joy!

I have grown from as a child, delighted by the magic of the season, to an adult of faith, holding in my heart, memories of all the wonderful Advent seasons of the past here at 1st Church. The warmth and glow of the sanctuary and the advent calendar predominantly, displayed each Sunday during the advent season. The wonderfully decorated sanctuary and the sounds of the choirs praise! The Body of Christ preparing for the Joy to come.

So I did struggle a bit with this scripture, only to say I was looking for the Joy of anticipation in this Advent scripture. This scripture was about trial and tribulation?! Where's the Joy?

But wait... I went prayerfully deeper, and was able to see how this scripture relates to preparing our hearts in this Season of waiting.

This letter from Paul the Apostle was written to the church in Thessalonica in approximately A.D. 51 or 52. This was a second letter, thought by some, written only months after the first. They were a group of struggling and persecuted new Christians and like us all, needed assurance. I understood that the Thessalonians were waiting for Christ's return, misunderstanding that it was imminent. They were hoping it would save them, NOW, from their immediate tribulations and trials. They wanted a quick solution. Jesus is coming! Soon! we give up?!

Patient loving Paul, reminds them with words of prayer, counsel and encouragement, to focus on the patient endurance that comes from knowing Christ and to stand firm for Christ's sustaining truth. To prepare, be watchful and anticipate His coming again, while being like Him among each other. God is just and His justice will prevail against the enemies of His people. He encourages them to build each other up in the Body of Christ and that in God's perfect timing, Christ will come again.

As we lift our hearts and minds in preparation for this advent time we too are to be encouraged in this preparation time. Encouraged in our lives as Christ followers. That we know Who we can rely on in times of trials in our own lives.

And we have this opportunity for encouragement also through our prayer partnership church in Fairouzeh, Syria; for Pastor Jacoub, his wife Grace and daughter Celine, as they are enduring so much tribulation around them. Just as Paul did for the Thessalonians, we pray for God's protection for them, and encouragement and peace for many other places and people in the world suffering persecution and trials.

We are blessed to be encouragers for all those in our community; through each of our trials and challenges. Remaining prayerful in guiding and supporting each other through change and renewal, in the church community. Asking for the Holy Spirit's guidance daily, especially for those tasked with searching for our new pastor.

Grateful that we can celebrate together again, the coming of Christ into our world

Prayer: Gracious and All Powerful God, thank you for the gift of Your Son that we joyfully prepare for in this Advent season. Amen.

Thursday, December 13

Rita Fossell

Psalm 126

*When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion,
we were like those who dream.
Then our mouth was filled with laughter,
and our tongue with shouts of joy;
then it was said among the nations,
"The Lord has done great things for them."
The Lord has done great things for us,
and we rejoiced.*

*Restore our fortunes, O Lord,
like the watercourses in the Negeb.
May those who sow in tears
reap with shouts of joy.
Those who go out weeping,
bearing the seed for sowing,
shall come home with shouts of joy,
carrying their sheaves.*

As I searched the Lectionary Scriptures for Advent, Ps. 126 spoke to me of the recovering and healing of our church. "When the Lord restored Zion" indicates to me that Zion had gone through a difficult time and seen significant separation of the community. But a time came for "laughter and shouts of joy," for indeed "the Lord has done great things for us and we rejoiced." We have, and may still, weep for what happened, but through it all God, with the great and abundant Love that God has for all of God's people, certainly including us, stuck with us as we, with sometimes wobbly and uncertain understanding, have tried to carry on and claim that Love-beyond-our-understanding. All this was affirmed and confirmed as God-in-Jesus Christ came to show us compassion, love, and forgiveness and in that revealing that if He, as human being, can do it so can we. Thanks be to God.

Prayer: God of Love even beyond our understanding, thank you for loving us even through unlovable times so that we can come back to serving your world with shouts of joy and laughter. Amen.

Psalm 148

*Praise the Lord!
Praise the Lord from the heavens;
 praise him in the heights!
Praise him, all his angels;
 praise him, all his host!
Praise him, sun and moon;
 praise him, all you shining stars!
Praise him, you highest heavens,
 and you waters above the heavens!
Let them praise the name of the Lord,
 for he commanded and they were created.
He established them forever and ever;
 he fixed their bounds, which cannot be
passed.
Praise the Lord from the earth,
 you sea monsters and all deeps,
fire and hail, snow and frost,
 stormy wind fulfilling his command!
Mountains and all hills,
 fruit trees and all cedars!
Wild animals and all cattle,
 creeping things and flying birds!
Kings of the earth and all peoples,
 princes and all rulers of the earth!
Young men and women alike,
 old and young together!
Let them praise the name of the Lord,
 for his name alone is exalted;
 his glory is above earth and heaven.
He has raised up a horn for his people,
 praise for all his faithful,
 for the people of Israel who are close to him.
Praise the Lord!*

Psalm 16

*Protect me, O God, for in you I take refuge.
I say to the Lord, "You are my Lord;
 I have no good apart from you."
As for the holy ones in the land, they are the
noble,
 in whom is all my delight.
Those who choose another god multiply their
sorrows;
 their drink offerings of blood I will not
pour out
 or take their names upon my lips.
The Lord is my chosen portion and my cup;
 you hold my lot.
The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant
places;
 I have a goodly heritage.
I bless the Lord who gives me counsel;
 in the night also my heart instructs me.
I keep the Lord always before me;
 because he is at my right hand, I shall not
be moved.
Therefore my heart is glad, and my soul
rejoices;
 my body also rests secure.
For you do not give me up to Sheol,
 or let your faithful one see the Pit.
You show me the path of life.
 In your presence there is fullness of joy;
 in your right hand are pleasures
forevermore.*

Often during the Advent season I regularly reflect on past seasons and the joy I have felt in preparing for Jesus' coming. A most endearing memory for me was being a Madrigal Singer at my high school in Peoria. The group was comprised of the best 16 singers among the Concert Choir – and we all knew the honor of being in this ensemble. We practiced from September forward, preparing for our marquee event, dressed in medieval wear for the Madrigal Dinner, held in early December.

Where Madrigals was a most powerful experience for me, however, was outside the dinner event itself. After our evening practices during the Fall Semester, our group of high schoolers would end up at Denny's, and ultimately break into song for all the patrons in the restaurant to hear.

“Good health to all present of every degree, be noble or peasant right welcome is he. Wassail, wassail, my masters be merry...”

Our Madrigal group also visited schools and nursing homes. This was extremely rewarding, bringing the joy of Christmas to people through song. We had the opportunity to sing on a local radio station, which spread the joy even further.

“Break forth, oh beauteous heavenly light, and usher in the morning. Ye shepherds, shrink not with affright, and hear the angels warning...”

Today, over 30 years later, the Advent Season is marked with songs from my youth that continue to run through my head and spirit, and I usually sing out loud

“A heavenly vision appeared in the sky, vast numbers of angels the shepherds did spy. For this is the birthday of Jesus our King, who brought us salvation, His praises we sing”

I often sing while outside, looking at the night sky, and reflecting on the wonder of the season and the great gift of Jesus Christ. The crisp air and isolating darkness that surrounds me paradoxically focuses me on the warmth and strength of my relationship with Jesus, the gratitude I have for Him, and the desire to more greatly serve Him. While in that moment, I may be physically alone, I feel God's presence with me and my commitment to Jesus ever stronger.

“Sleep, my child, and peace attend thee, all through the night. Guardian angels, God will send thee, all through the night. Soft the drowsy hours are creeping, hill and dale in slumber sleeping. I my loving watch am keeping, all through the night.”

Prayer: O God of poetry and song, thank you for all of the carols and hymns and Madrigals that remind us that you are truly Emmanuel: God-with-us. In Christ's name, Amen.

2 Thessalonians 3:6-18

Now we command you, beloved, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, to keep away from believers who are living in idleness and not according to the tradition that they received from us. For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us; we were not idle when we were with you, and we did not eat anyone's bread without paying for it; but with toil and labor we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you. This was not because we do not have that right, but in order to give you an example to imitate. For even when we were with you, we gave you this command: Anyone unwilling to work should not eat. For we hear that some of you are living in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any work. Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living. Brothers and sisters, do not be weary in doing what is right.

Take note of those who do not obey what we say in this letter; have nothing to do with them, so that they may be ashamed. Do not regard them as enemies, but warn them as believers.

Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times in all ways. The Lord be with all of you. I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. This is the mark in every letter of mine; it is the way I write. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with all of you.

As we all reflect during this advent season, one of the last things that comes to mind during the hectic holiday season is “idleness.” Shopping, planning, travel and all other holiday “obligations” are front and center. The above scripture lesson are the closing passages in Paul’s letter to the Thessalonian church. In prior passages, Paul warned the church about such matters as lack of morals, persecution, and misunderstanding of Christ’s coming, all very heavy, important matters. I am fascinated that Paul closed with what he perceived was the greatest threat, idleness.

Idleness to Paul is not doing one’s fair share to support themselves and help the poor in the Christian community. He also calls out those who are busybodies and disruptive. Paul is very direct commanding; all are expected to “*settle down and earn the food they eat*”.

As I reflect personally, idleness of my faith is a constant challenge. I struggle with self-interest and profit and lose focus on being Christ centered. The irony is the advent season, with all its “obligations,” is *more* disruptive to following the teachings of the Lord Jesus Christ. First Presbyterian Church of Lake Forest and this faith community however, challenges me not to be idle. Thankfully, to God, the opportunities to serve and “earn what we eat” are bountiful in our faith community. I cannot “command” you as an apostle for sure, but I encourage you like Paul to fight idleness, settle down this Advent season and rejoice in the birth of our Lord and Savior.

Prayer: Dear God, as Paul writes, we pray you grant give peace at all times and in every way you be with all of us. Amen.

Hebrews 12:18-29

You have not come to something that can be touched, a blazing fire, and darkness, and gloom, and a tempest, and the sound of a trumpet, and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that not another word be spoken to them. (For they could not endure the order that was given, "If even an animal touches the mountain, it shall be stoned to death.") Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, "I tremble with fear.") But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

See that you do not refuse the one who is speaking; for if they did not escape when they refused the one who warned them on earth, how much less will we escape if we reject the one who warns from heaven! At that time his voice shook the earth; but now he has promised, "Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heaven." This phrase, "Yet once more," indicates the removal of what is shaken—that is, created things—so that what cannot be shaken may remain. Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us give thanks, by which we offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe; for indeed our God is a consuming fire.

We have arrived at a choice. A choice between something that cannot be touched, which is faith, and something that can - the often harsh reality of fear.

It is illustrated in the passage, the mountain of fear and the mountain of joy.

Here we are exhorted to make sure we do not refuse he who speaks. This Christmas season, I open my ears, my eyes and my heart – to that which cannot be shaken – the Kingdom of Heaven. To hear his voice in this season where the reality of noise and distraction is very real and very loud, I try to remember that God shook not only the earth but the heavens by giving his son to us.

This is our reminder. To remove what can be shaken, that is, created things, so that we can hear the thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, see the new covenant that Jesus brings, and touch the righteous made perfect.

Faith is difficult. We are surrounded by our created things. And in such a busy season, even more so. These things are easy to see, touch, hear, taste and smell, if not overwhelmingly so. And sometimes we have to have all our created things be shaken away by God to see what remains, to hear what really matters, to touch, and be touched by, what is truly unshakable.

I hope I come to this Advent season ready to receive his Kingdom. I hope that I open my ears so I don't inadvertently refuse the one who speaks. I pray that I embrace true faith, the belief not to leap from A to B, but to let go of my conception of A and B altogether, to remove my self-centeredness in order to offer God acceptable worship, reverence and awe.

Prayer: O God, there is a mountain of Joy. We humbly ask you to help us see it clearly, not off in the distance, but here where we stand. Amen.

2 Peter 1:1-11

Simon Peter, a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ,

To those who have received a faith as precious as ours through the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ:

May grace and peace be yours in abundance in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord.

His divine power has given us everything needed for life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Thus he has given us, through these things, his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of lust, and may become participants of the divine nature. For this very reason, you must make every effort to support your faith with goodness, and goodness with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with endurance, and endurance with godliness, and godliness with mutual affection, and mutual affection with love. For if these things are yours and are increasing among you, they keep you from being ineffective and unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For anyone who lacks these things is short-sighted and blind, and is forgetful of the cleansing of past sins. Therefore, brothers and sisters, be all the more eager to confirm your call and election, for if you do this, you will never stumble. For in this way, entry into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ will be richly provided for you.

I chose December 17 because I was confirmed on December 17, 1972. As I write this I am remembering my spiritual guides as a boy, my father William Francis Luce, Jr, and my priest the Reverend Canon Perry Cox.

During the season of Advent we are preparing; Advent means “coming” in Latin. Of course we are preparing for Jesus’s birth on Christmas. But we are strictly also preparing for the second coming of Jesus.

The Bible passage associated with Dec 17th is 2nd Peter 1:1-11. Second Peter is a letter written to strengthen Christians who were being persecuted and killed for their faith. They were worried that Jesus had not returned. Scholars believe that it was written about one hundred years after the crucifixion. The letter urged Christians to trust in the promises of GOD and to live good lives no matter what happens. We have a connection to these early Christians. As we wait for Jesus, we have to remember that Jesus can come at any time and we too must prepare.

The author writes, “...you must make every effort to support your faith with goodness, and goodness with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with

endurance, and endurance with godliness, and godliness with mutual affection, and mutual affection with love.” This is how we support our faith and support each other. It is what the Study Group did, taking stock of First Pres with self-reflection and discernment about what we are called to do in the future. It is also what the PNC is doing, seeking, discerning, opening their hearts to chose a pastor who will lead us, who will prepare us for Jesus Christ.

I try to find my way to the Lord like a child. I start by looking at what others do and have done. Two whom I have followed, as an adult now, are my mother-in-law Audrey Vanderaa, and Phil Haltom. Unfortunately both of my guides have passed. Audrey was a long time member of First Pres who loved Rummage and the Mission work done by our congregation. To whom much has been given, much is expected. It’s not a commandment, but it is a noble calling. Phil Haltom was a kindred spirit, a thoughtful student of the Way. We do not have to be perfect, GOD forgives us thanks to the sacrifice of his dear son Jesus Christ. We just need to redirect our hearts and energies, keep them open, and not be judgmental of others as well as ourselves!

Phil Haltom invited me to join Session. And when asked which committee I wanted to join, I thought of Audrey. I am the Moderator of the Mission Committee.

Prayer: During Advent, O God, we are praying for peace and openness— peace and reconciliation from the divisiveness in our country, and openness to hear the Holy Spirit’s guidance. Help us and our loved ones to be happy, healthy and to prepare together. Amen.

Psalm 33

*Rejoice in the Lord, O you righteous.
Praise befits the upright.
Praise the Lord with the lyre;
make melody to him with the harp of ten
strings.
Sing to him a new song;
play skillfully on the strings, with loud
shouts.*

*For the word of the Lord is upright,
and all his work is done in faithfulness.
He loves righteousness and justice;
the earth is full of the steadfast love of
the Lord.*

*By the word of the Lord the heavens were made,
and all their host by the breath of his mouth.*

*He gathered the waters of the sea as in a
bottle;
he put the deeps in storehouses.*

*Let all the earth fear the Lord;
let all the inhabitants of the world stand in
awe of him.
For he spoke, and it came to be;
he commanded, and it stood firm.*

*The Lord brings the counsel of the nations to
nothing;*

The Psalmist says: “Sing to (the Lord) a new song.” As an alto in one choir or another for at least 60 years, I think I have acquired some expertise about what it takes to “sing a new song.”

For sure, you need a director who is familiar with new choral literature (not just the old nuggets) as well as sensitive regarding the choir’s abilities and the audience’s preferences. In this church that director would be Tom Tropp. Tom spends a good deal of time working with the pastors to match music to their scripture text so that the anthem will reinforce the sermon’s message.

*he frustrates the plans of the peoples.
The counsel of the Lord stands forever,
the thoughts of his heart to all generations.
Happy is the nation whose God is the Lord,
the people whom he has chosen as his
heritage.*

*The Lord looks down from heaven;
he sees all humankind.
From where he sits enthroned he watches
all the inhabitants of the earth—
he who fashions the hearts of them all,
and observes all their deeds.
A king is not saved by his great army;
a warrior is not delivered by his great
strength.
The war horse is a vain hope for victory,
and by its great might it cannot save.*

*Truly the eye of the Lord is on those who fear him,
on those who hope in his steadfast love,
to deliver their soul from death,
and to keep them alive in famine.*

*Our soul waits for the Lord;
he is our help and shield.
Our heart is glad in him,
because we trust in his holy name.
Let your steadfast love, O Lord, be upon us,
even as we hope in you.*

Typically, this research takes place at least seven weeks before the performance date so the choir has plenty of time to rehearse the new music. Barry Wenger needs time to practice the piece as well. Decisions need to be made: Should we sing it with the organ or the piano? Do we need other accompaniment—a ten-stringed lyre? a harp? a string quartet? the bell choir? All this forethought happens before anyone ever sings a line!

Next, the choir finally launches into learning the music, examining both the meaning of the words and the construction of the musical parts. We spend 20-30 minutes of each rehearsal on the piece for six weeks so the spirit and meaning of the piece are clear enough to reach the congregation—and even reach the choir itself. We are, after all, there to worship too.

As we rehearse and work in our choir community to perform the music proficiently (not every choir member is a skilled musician) and beautifully, we learn to love the music—the new song. We are inspired by it and want to share it with each one of you. In rehearsal, Tom eventually swoons over some beautiful chords and calls it one of his favorite pieces. As we learn about the composer and why and when each piece was written, we, too, begin to love the piece and sing “joyfully to the Lord” and “play skillfully and shout for joy.” There’s a lot of joy in singing in the choir!

As a church, we, too, need to start researching, rehearsing, and preparing our “new song” for this Advent season so we have something worthy and joyful to offer when the moment arrives.

Prayer: Dear Lord, As we anticipate and prepare for the birth of the baby Jesus and as we await news of who You have called to service in our congregation, help us to remember that “the plans of the Lord stand firm forever.” Not our plans, but Yours. Give us the will to polish and practice our new song and be ready with love, joy, and hope. “May your unfailing love rest upon us, O Lord, even as we put our hope in you.” Amen.

1 John 4:7-16

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.

By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world. God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. So we have known and believe the love that God has for us.

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.

What is faith, but Love, for God so loved us he gave us his only son. Love shows us the way to God.

Some may not see it. Some may not feel it. But Love is there, everywhere, a boundless Love for you, and everyone. As we walk through life, we live and see often what we choose to see, we act as we choose to act. Finding and reaffirming faith for all of us is found simply in the witnessing of God's own sacrifice for us, Love. Our acts of love and kindness are pure examples of the gift Jesus brought to us with his life and how he saved ours. No matter our travels or our difficulties he is always there and Love is there. It is never but a thought, glance or moment away from us. God reaches out to us through Jesus to share God's Love. In Love we find our way and are brought closer to God. All becomes possible through God's Love and sacrifice.

To live as Jesus taught us is a path that is fraught with challenges and tests everyday. The one tool that always works is Love: our faith in God's Love for us, and the gift God gave us, our power to Love others. For this simple tool becomes a mighty weapon that we all can wield. Love takes us from our darkest thoughts and deepest worries and gives us life, purpose and direction. The more we accept God's Love, as we know it in Jesus Christ, the clearer our sight of purpose becomes.

Prayer: Bless us, Lord, on this glorious day of life. Let us have the sight to see the Love you have bestowed on each of us and the beautiful life you have given us. Let us find your strength when we need it; let us find your hope when we need it; let us live with the Love of Christ, your greatest gift, everyday. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Luke 1: 5-25

In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.

Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. But the angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.” Zechariah said to the angel, “How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years.” The angel replied, “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur.”

Meanwhile the people were waiting for Zechariah, and wondered at his delay in the sanctuary. When he did come out, he could not speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the sanctuary. He kept motioning to them and remained unable to speak. When his time of service was ended, he went to his home.

After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she remained in seclusion. She said, “This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people.”

This passage is that of an angel’s visit. But not the visit you’re thinking of. Several months prior to Gabriel visiting Mary to prepare her for the unexpected, Gabriel first visited Zechariah, husband of Elizabeth. Even though “they had no children because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years”, Gabriel was sent to Zechariah

with a special message. Elizabeth would bear a child named John who will be “great in the sight of the Lord...filled with the Holy Spirit.” John will become John the Baptist, one who, with the spirit and power of Elijah, will “turn the hearts of parents to children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

Every Monday and Tuesday morning I get to lead Faith Building time with the children of First Presbyterian Preschool. We sing songs, hear a story from the Bible, ask questions and wonder together, share our joys and concerns and pray together. The first few months with our youngest classes (two and a half to three year olds) can be quite challenging as their attention span is very short – but that’s okay. We sing our songs and say our prayers because our time together is about preparing them - preparing them to want to continue learning, wondering, accepting and sharing God’s love.

John showed us what it means to prepare the way for the Messiah and to celebrate Jesus at every opportunity, and so each week we joyfully sing songs with lyrics including “*Jesus loves me this I know,*” and “*we can learn of God above, read of Jesus and his love*” to prepare and excite our youngest as they begin their faith journeys.

Prayer: Gracious God, guide us as we prepare for the coming Savior. Keep our hearts turned to God and to one another this season as we all turn our eyes to the one who is to come. Amen.

Friday, December 21

Barbara Schulz

Luke 1:26-38

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

So many saints have gone before us to show us The Way ... saints from within our families, our church, our day-to-day lives. Some are brothers and sisters we have met in Scripture. Today we turn to a young woman, in the Book of Luke, whose life appeared to be very well ordered two thousand years ago. Her name was Mary and she was engaged to be married to a respected man ... her life was on a known and highly desired track.

Then came Gabriel. His presence was surprising, to say the least. His message was startling. His news flew in the face of what Mary knew to be true. She protested, but Gabriel was adamant, reassuring her that, “Nothing is impossible for God”. She listened and after taking, what I can only imagine, was a very deep breath, said “Yes” to God’s calling on her life.

Mary trusted that God knew who He was calling.

Can we imagine how perplexing it was to this young woman, from an un-noteworthy town, without lofty social status or life experience, to be called by God to such life-changing work?

Are we often perplexed, as well? Do we hear the quiet calls on our lives and think, “Is God really calling me? Do I have the experience, the knowledge, the wisdom, or the connections to be the right disciple here? Would I be treading on ground where I am not welcome? Do I bring enough to the table to serve in this way? Would I know what to say and do if I reached out in this crisis? Who do I think I am?”

We pause, pray, and listen to Gabriel, as Mary did. We come to see that “Who do I think I am?”, is not the question. The question is, “What is it God is calling me to do?”

Our laundry list of limitations and weaknesses and insufficiencies may be extensive. Were we on our own, they could be insurmountable. But we are not alone. We are in partnership with the One for whom nothing is impossible. There is nothing you or I lack that God will not provide. God knows who He is calling. God is calling us.

Prayer: Lord, with each call to life-giving discipleship, may we answer as Mary did, trusting that You know who you are calling. Amen.

Luke 1:39-45

Today's New Testament lectionary reading is from the Gospel of Luke 1:39-45 when Mary visits Elizabeth, her cousin, who is, pregnant with John the Baptist. Starting with 46-55 is Mary's song, The Magnificat. I encourage you to read.

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."

I was led to Psalm 90 for my reflection;

*Lord, you have been our dwelling place
in all generations.*

*Before the mountains were brought forth,
or ever you had formed the earth and the world,
from everlasting to everlasting you are God.*

*So teach us to count our days
that we may gain a wise heart.*

*Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love,
so that we may rejoice and be glad all our days.*

*Make us glad as many days as you have
afflicted us,*

*and as many years as we have seen evil.
Let your work be manifest to your servants,
and your glorious power to their children*

*Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us,
and prosper for us the work of our hands—
O prosper the work of our hands!*

I have chosen Psalm 90, selected verses, the wonder and responsibility of past generations, and responsibility to those generations to come. As George and I celebrate our 60th anniversary we feel ourselves standing in the middle of that reflection. We look back with appreciation and love on our parents and grandparents, as well as friends and mentors of those generations who kept the flame of faith burning, both living it and passing it on. Even through hard, sad times and events, as well as through fun and steady times they were with us. And we look ahead as our children have grown up and welcomed their own children – our grandchildren and now a great-grandchild - into this amazing, sometimes scary world that God has created and asked humans to steward. We hope and pray that our examples of faith, love, and care shown to us by

previous generations will inspire those next generations to know God's love and care, that participating in a faith community both receives and gives strength, courage, care - God's love, joy, reassurance and constant care. We count on God's help and inspiration.

Prayer: God of all generations, help us to be aware that you always are with us. Sometimes you even carry us. Let the assurance we know and feel be made clear to those whose lives we touch, that all may come to know you and your love beyond understanding. Amen.

Sunday, December 23

Marty Vander Velde

Psalm 150

Hallelujah!

Praise God in his holy house of worship,

praise him under the open skies;

Praise him for his acts of power,

praise him for his magnificent greatness;

Praise with a blast on the trumpet,

praise by strumming soft strings;

Praise him with castanets and dance,

praise him with banjo and flute;

Praise him with cymbals and a big bass drum,

praise him with fiddles and mandolin.

Let every living, breathing creature praise God!

Hallelujah!

It feels strange to read this passage at Christmas. The closer we get to Christmas, I always think of it getting quieter. Easter was always the loud celebration. Growing up in a large church,

Easter was the loud celebration with multiple choirs and full orchestra on Easter morning. But not Christmas. Christmas was quiet. We save Silent Night as the last song on Christmas Eve. To me, advent gets quieter as we get closer to Christmas.

I crave that quietness maybe this year more than ever. This year, there seems to be less peace in my life. I long for the coming of Jesus, the Prince of Peace, in these not-so-peaceful times.

The attack this fall on the Synagogue in Pittsburgh hit especially close to home for me. It occurred in the neighborhood where Pete and I met, and we have Jewish friends who live there. My sister is an ICU nurse close by, and knew the doctor who was killed in the attack.

To further my feeling of unsettledness, at a recent Association of Parents & Teachers meeting we were briefed on the drills that our children learn to keep them safe in case of

an attack on their school. My 7-year old learns what to do if they happen to be in their classroom, in the hallway, in the bathroom during an emergency.

Finally, my father's health took a turn for the worse several weeks ago, and it's difficult to be far away while he is sick. Global conflicts, divisive politics, we all need to welcome peace into our lives during uncertain times.

So, I want to finish the busyness of Christmas early this year so that I can be quiet and prepare for Jesus, for his peace to enter my heart. Maybe I can finish shopping so that Advent can truly be a time of quiet preparation this year. Perhaps it's because this year I anticipate the peace and quiet of Christmas in these turbulent times. And this year, when Christmas arrives, lets welcome the Prince of Peace with loud celebration. We need it now more than ever!

Prayer: Dear Lord, Help us to be still and quietly await the birth of Jesus. Help us to know that Jesus will bring peace into our hearts, no matter how unsettled we feel. Let us prepare quietly, but celebrate with loud celebration when he arrives!

Monday, December 24

Kristie Finley

Isaiah 35

*The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,
the desert shall rejoice and blossom;
like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly,
and rejoice with joy and singing.*

*The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it,
the majesty of Carmel and Sharon.*

*They shall see the glory of the Lord,
the majesty of our God.*

*Strengthen the weak hands,
and make firm the feeble knees.*

*Say to those who are of a fearful heart,
"Be strong, do not fear!"*

Here is your God.

*He will come with vengeance,
with terrible recompense.*

He will come and save you."

*Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;
then the lame shall leap like a deer,
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.*

*For waters shall break forth in the wilderness,
and streams in the desert;
the burning sand shall become a pool,
and the thirsty ground springs of water;
the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp,
the grass shall become reeds and rushes.*

*A highway shall be there,
and it shall be called the Holy Way;
the unclean shall not travel on it,
but it shall be for God's people;
no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray.*

*No lion shall be there,
nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it;
they shall not be found there,
but the redeemed shall walk there.*

*And the ransomed of the Lord shall return,
and come to Zion with singing;
everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;
they shall obtain joy and gladness,
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.*

The hope and knowledge that God always provides and prepares us for what we need is what speaks to me in this passage. The hope of this Advent season comes from the Old Testament prophet Isaiah speaking to those exiled in Babylon, and they are words that speak to us today. Isaiah provided glimpses of a new age for the wounded people of Israel. Jesus offers us the same. The desolation and aloneness that we can find ourselves in can make us feel like exiles. Exiled from our families, our friends, our neighbors, even God. Again, as happens every year we await the birth of a baby who was sent to accomplish the very things written about in this Isaiah passage. How can we not help but feel hope when our God can do amazing things with our feeble lives. Where “no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray.” This passage shines a light on the need for us to prepare, not only to wait, but to be active participants in God’s reconciliation. How will we prepare together for the new pastoral leadership God will call to us? How are we preparing during this time of new possibilities that God is offering?

Prayer: God of all possibilities, we prepare to meet the Baby Jesus again this year with joy and hope in our hearts, and singing on our lips, knowing that you have already prepared the way for us. We but need to follow the path your son Jesus has revealed for us, to keep his light before us. Amen.

John 1:1-14

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 not 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.

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

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.

The gospel of John sums up the grace and mystery of Christmas with this short but powerful phrase, “And the Word became flesh and lived among us...” (John 1:14)

How better can the Love which never ends become known to us, save in a life? In this way God is revealed in the fullness of divine grace and in the mystery of the divine decision to be God with and for us and all humanity.

This verse affirms that God takes the initiative with us. That is the deepest meaning of Christmas. The Word comes to us; God enters human lives and human history; God chooses to be born and to dwell among us. This shows us that we are loved into life and kept in life and even in death, by God whose love never stops seeking us and whose love never ends. In the light of such good news, all we can do is rejoice and be glad!

On this Christmas day and in this Christmas season, may the love of God, which always seeks us and which never ends, become flesh and dwell in your life, your family, our church, and our world. And may you be kept by this love in the new year to come.

Prayer: We give you thanks, Gracious God, for the babe of Bethlehem, who came for us and our salvation. Help us to reflect his love and light in our own lives, as we pray for his love and light to be shared with all. Amen.

Advent 2018 *Schedule*

Sunday, December 9

9:00 AM Christmas Pageant

11:00 AM Regular Worship

Sunday, December 16

9:00 and 11:00 AM Regular Worship

Sunday, December 23

9:00 and 11:00 AM Worship

with Messiah Musical Performance

Christmas Eve, December 24

3:00 PM Candlelight Service

5:00 PM Candlelight Service with Children's Choirs

9:00 PM Candlelight Service with Sanctuary Choir



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