

Daily Readings for Advent

2015



Park Lake Presbyterian Church

**309 E. Colonial Dr.,
Orlando, Florida 32801**

**407/841-6550
www.plpc.org**

Sunday, November 29, First Sunday of Advent

9:00 a.m. Sunday School
10:30 a.m. Worship Service
5:30 p.m. Advent Worship (Sanctuary)

Wednesday, December 2

6:00 p.m. P.L.O.W. - Zebra House

Friday, December 4

5-9:00 p.m. FAVO Christmas Event

Saturday, December 5

9:00 a.m. Hanging of the Greens (sanctuary)

Sunday, December 6, Second Sunday of Advent

9:00 a.m. Sunday School
10:30 a.m. Worship Service
11:45 a.m. Lunch and Gingerbread House/Nativity Build (Habitat for Humanity Benefit)
5:30 p.m. Advent Worship

Saturday, December 12

6:00pm Disciples Class Christmas Party (Walk and Nancy Jones' home)

Sunday, December 13, Third Sunday of Advent

9:00 a.m. Sunday School
10:30 a.m. Worship Service
5:30 p.m. Advent Worship (Sanctuary)

Tuesday, December 15

11:30 a.m. Church Staff Christmas lunch (Dubsdread)

Wednesday, December 16

6:00 p.m. P.L.O.W. - Christmas Program

Friday, December 18

6:30 p.m. Koinonia Class Christmas Party (Jim and Sandy Bogner's home)

Saturday, December 19

9:00am Nativity Practice in sanctuary

Sunday, December 20, Fourth Sunday of Advent

9:00 a.m. Sunday School
10:30 a.m. Worship Service; Poinsettia Sunday, Nativity Pageant
6:30 p.m. Cantata (Sanctuary)

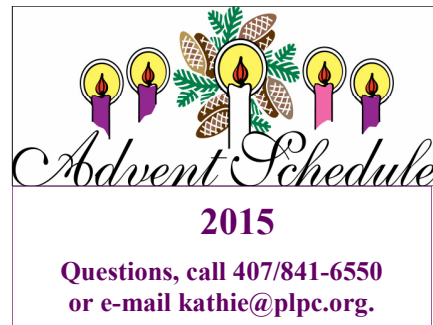
Wednesday, December 23

6:00 p.m. Pizza (Struble Hall) and Caroling

Thursday, December 24, Christmas Eve

5:30 p.m. Worship - Carols and Candles
11:00 p.m. Worship - Carols, Candles and Communion

Friday, December 25, Christmas Day *Have a blessed Christmas!*



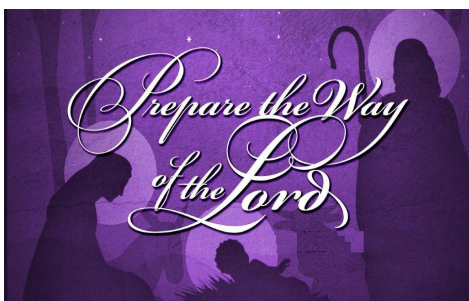
Introduction...

Prepare the Way of the Lord

Advent is a time of preparation, four weeks modeled after Lent, a season of seven weeks before Easter. Advent means ‘coming’ referring to the coming of the Christ. How appropriate that we consider the ways in which we are preparing for the coming of Christ into our own lives.

We’ve been preparing for this time since early fall. Each year, in September, members and friends of Park Lake Presbyterian Church volunteer to write reflections and stories to be used for daily devotions as we approach Christmas. The reflections might be based on the day’s scripture text, which comes from the assigned lectionary readings. Each writer was asked to consider this year’s theme: Prepare the Way of the Lord.

This devotional guide is an invitation for you to take a quiet moment each day in December to slow down, read God’s word, listen to the story of a fellow traveler in this life’s journey, and hear the voice of God’s Spirit to you today.



We pray that you will be blessed and encouraged as you prepare the way of the Lord.

In Him,

Helen DeBevoise

HOPE

1st Sunday of Advent - November 29
Scripture Reading for today:

Bob Larr
Malachi 3:1-6

As a child I always looked forward to the Christmas season. Everyone seemed happier and festive. I looked forward to listening to Christmas carols, Christmas television programs like *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, and Christmas cookies. My parents had a tradition of not putting the Christmas tree up until the night before Christmas. And of course Christmas day when we got to open up the gifts we got. My only preparation for Christmas was being good, as I always heard that Santa knows when you have been bad or good.



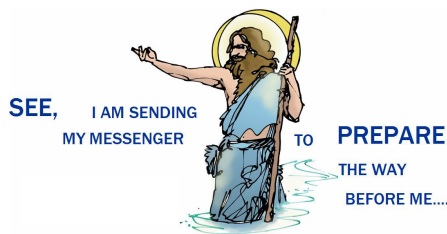
When my wife and I started having children, my Christmas preparation took a much different approach. I looked for the perfect gifts for my kids, or at least perfect for that time. I watched *A Charlie Brown Christmas* with them, sang Christmas carols with them, and we all put up the Christmas tree together after Thanksgiving. Realizing that something more significant was missing, we also started to get ourselves involved with a church and in particular around Christmastime having the kids participate in the living Nativity scene the church displayed during the Advent season.

Now getting into my later years I have decided to prepare for Christmas in a much different way. While I look forward to the giving of gifts to the ones I love, I started viewing Christmas as a rebirth of my faith. I contemplate on how I can be a better Christian. I take as lead the birth of Christ and all of the things he taught. Love thy neighbor. Do not speak ill of others. Welcome all. Commit yourself to helping those in need. As I do this, I recognize the gift I have received on that day when he was born and a far greater gift than I could ever receive. The gift of love and eternal life.

Prayer: O Holy Father, in this Advent season please help me in my rebirth in my faith. Lead me when I stray from your teachings. Allow me to grow in your love and be a worthy disciple. Amen.

November 30
Scripture Reading for today:

Dan DeBevoise
Malachi 4:4-6



4 Remember the teaching of my servant Moses, the statutes and ordinances that I commanded him at Horeb for all Israel. 5 Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. 6 He will turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents, so that I will not come and strike the land with a curse.

We are trying to get ready for the great day – Christmas day. Well maybe its more like getting ready for all the getting ready that we think we have to get ready for Christmas day. Well maybe we aren't even getting ready – actually preparing – we are just doing all the things we do at this time of year.

When the Hebrews thought about God's coming they thought in terms of the "day of the Lord." Prophets like Malachi envisioned that "great and terrible day" as a day of judgment on people's complacent faith in God and a time when God's ways would be the way all people lived. There will be a day when God will get done what God wants done.

Malachi believed God would send Elijah again to help the people get ready for God's coming on the great day. One main thing Elijah would do is turn people's hearts to each other.

I know, for me, in the midst of all the getting ready for Christmas, it's very easy to forget how much my heart needs to be readied. I know that there is a lot I do that is simply a way of avoiding turning my heart to the Lord and to people around me. But ready or not, God will get done what God wants done. So I wait, and watch, and listen for one little turn of my heart as a sign of God's coming.

And I pray, "Come, Lord Jesus. Come quickly."

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F9QeTmRCpW4>

December 1
Scripture Reading for today:

Anne Vercheski
Jeremiah 29:10-14

I really like this year's Advent theme, "Prepare the way for the Lord". I should prepare, plan.

You see, I like to plan. I make to-do lists for the day. I plan dinner menus for the week. I plan VBS months in advance.

When plans change, though, I no longer get as troubled as I used to. Perhaps God wants that new plan, so I am learning to trust Him more.

Jeremiah's letter from God to the Israelites in Babylon told them to plan life there in exile. In essence, I think God says, "Bloom where I have planted you." "I have a plan for you, seek me, and you will find me." So preparing the way for the Lord may actually mean that I am not to get in God's way and to trust His plan.

At a commencement address at Stanford, Steve Jobs once said, "You can't connect the dots looking forward; you can only connect them looking backward. So you have to trust that the dots will somehow connect in your future. You have to trust in something – your gut, destiny, life, karma, whatever. This approach has never let me down, and it has made all the difference in my life." I am trusting God to connect the dots.

Prayer:

Dear Lord, thank you for loving me. Please help me to prepare for You by trusting in You. Help me to bloom where You have planted me. Help me to see the cracks in life as places in the concrete to not avoid but to bloom through. In Jesus' name, Amen.

For surely
I KNOW THE
plans
I have for
YOU,
says (the)
Lord...
TO GIVE YOU A
future
WITH
Hope.
Jeremiah 29:11, NRSV

December 2
Scripture Reading for today:

Sandy Bogner
Isaiah 2:1-4

It I look forward to “the holidays” all year. My Dad did too - he would send a note every year in the middle of July telling us how many days were left until Christmas! It’s very heartwarming to celebrate the birth of our Savior. Jesus’ birth was the fulfillment of prophecy. God had promised that He would send a Savior, even at the very beginning, to Adam and Eve (Gen. 3:15), and many times through Israel’s history, especially in Isaiah. But in our scripture today, Isaiah is talking about Jesus’ second coming, when he will reign over the nations and bring peace.

God promises that some day - maybe not in our day - there will be peace. No more young men and women dying, no more huge national debt spent on weapons. That is God’s promise - and it is our only hope. Isaiah says that God will teach us what he wants us to do, and we will walk in the paths he has chosen.

It can be very tempting to feel hopeless about the world situation or even our own situations. But God promises everlasting peace to those who walk in the light of His Word and our Savior. As Hebrews 12:28 reminds us “Let us be thankful, then, because we receive a kingdom that cannot be shaken.”



Let us celebrate the birth of our Savior, who brought peace between man and God, and look forward to the time, which will surely come, when He returns to bring peace to the earth.

Prayer:

Lord God Almighty, please help us to do what you want us to do, and walk in the paths you have chosen as we celebrate the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ and wait in hope and confidence for His return. Amen.

December 3
Scripture Reading for today:

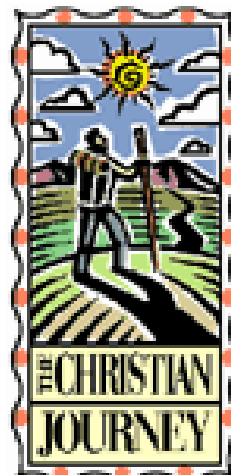
Erin Cook
Isaiah 7:10-17

IMMANUEL – GOD IS WITH US

Ask where you can Serve.
Be Patient as you Grow.
Sow Seeds and Reshape.
Walk and Tell.
Rejoice in the Following.
Adore and Comfort.
Be Restful in your Exhaustion.
Listen and Be Still.
See with your Heart.
Find Faith in your Prayer.
Be Ready and Come.

I often think about who has built the trails we hike on or who decided to take on the mountain before them and make a path over to discover what is on the other side. Who had enough curiosity and courage to face the dangers of the task of taking on the forest and boulders? And I think, that had to be hard. I am grateful for those that have created the trails for me to try, given me hope that it is a possibility and made it a little safer for me and those that follow. As we look to the Christ child, we are in awe at what we know he will face and what he will do for us, the trails he will create for us to follow.

Prayer: *Father, thank you for the trailblazers, for the fighters and those that do the work we can't or have the courage to do. Help us to give what we have, with open hearts and without worry. Thank you for staying with us as we ask and test you. Thank you for your Son and may we follow him along the path to you. Amen.*



December 4
Scripture Reading for today:

Bill Warlick
Isaiah 9:1-7

THE PEOPLE WHO HAVE WALKED IN DARKNESS HAVE SEEN A GREAT LIGHT; THOSE WHO HAVE LIVED IN GREAT DARKNESS-ON THEM HAS THE LIGHT SHINED. ISAIAH 9:2

When Nancy and I attended the New Wilmington Mission Conference this past summer, we heard for the first time Chris Rice's song, "Go Light Your World." The words challenged us to "Light your candle, and run to the darkness... for Jesus to make us a beacon in darkest times... take your candle, go light your world."



Jesus fulfilled the promise of Isaiah. As John 1:4,5 tells us, "in Him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it." Paul tells the Corinthians, "For it is God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' who has shone in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of

Jesus Christ." II Corinthians 4:6

As we try to follow His light, we are asking our children and grandchildren (all teenagers) to give what they would spend on our "Christmas" presents to the Home of Hope in Harare, Zimbabwe. Our "Christmas" gifts to them will be the same. We'll still have stockings with fun things, but the main thought will be giving to others.

Prayer:

Jesus, you are the light of the world. As we walk through this Advent season towards the celebration of your birth, may you light the dark places along this journey. As we walk, make us "lights" to those who need a gift of love and peace in their lives. In Jesus, Amen.

December 5
Scripture Reading for today:

Will Park
Isaiah 11:1-9

Prepare the Way of the Lord

There are Christmases that come and go, and there are others that stay with us for a lifetime. As a seven-year-old, I was swept up in the wonderful storybook nature of Jesus' birth: the star, the manger, the three kings, and the shepherds. I also loved the decorations, the songs, the tree, the food, and our family time.

During WWII, my oldest brother, Charlie, was serving in the navy. We knew he was stationed on a Minesweeper docked at the Charleston Naval Base, and was not able to come home for the holiday. It would be the first Christmas we were not all together. My parents also worried that at any time his ship might be ordered into the conflict.

A frosty Christmas Eve. Mom and Dad had just finished the preparations, the scent of our cedar tree filling the living room. It was time to go to bed. Suddenly, the doorbell chimed. My mother asked me to see who it was.

I cracked the door, and an icy blast of air swung it open full, and there stood a very tall, very cold sailor in his blue uniform and white cap. My oldest brother grinned down at me.

It didn't seem real. "Charlie!" I screamed, and everyone rushed to the door. He had managed to get a two day pass, and had hitchhiked home.

It was a very special Christmas.

Prayer:

We are thankful for the special times, Lord, and for all the blessings we enjoy. Let us prepare the way in our hearts for your coming, and let your goodness work through us to make this a better world.



HOME for the
HOLIDAYS

PEACE

2nd Sunday of Advent - December 6
Scripture Reading for today:

Gayle Schmidt
Micah 5:2-5

There are some rules, unwritten, about Christmas in our family --

- 1) NO buying for yourself after November 1 unless it is an emergency;
- 2) NO playing holiday or Christmas music until after Thanksgiving;
- 3) NO watching holiday or Christmas movies until after Thanksgiving; and
- 4) WAIT until after Thanksgiving to buy or put up the tree and decorations.

Why these rules? Because we get very frustrated with the rush of all holidays by both the media and business and we now have time to focus on the most important day of all, Christmas.

And isn't that what the theme of devotionals, to focus on preparing the way. Since knowing this theme there has been the little "ear worm" following me around, the anthem from Godspell – "Prepare ye the way of the Lord, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, Prepare ye the way of the Lord." There, now you have it too.

Advent is such a special time. Each morning I will look forward to reading thoughts from members of my church family. They touch me and remind me to pray for you that day. We spend so much of our time during December thinking of material gifts, but Advent reminds us to focus on the love, joy, peace and hope.



Prayer:

Dear Lord, as we go through the very busy days preparing for our celebrations, shopping, cooking, and other busyness let us stop for quiet moments. During that time, let us hear that song reminding us to Prepare Ye the Way of the Lord. Amen.

December 7
Scripture Reading for today:

Marian Price
Zechariah 8:1-8

Faithful Connections

Of all the things I do to prepare for Christmas, sending mail to distant friends is the most time-consuming and demanding. With Tom's assistance, I choose a card or stationery, write a letter in English and another in German, add a photo, duplicate the letters, address over a hundred envelopes, write a personal note on each letter, and seal and stamp them all.

This Advent project is immensely satisfying because it reminds me of these people and what they mean to me, and it lets them know we haven't forgotten our connection even though we may have been too busy to get in touch during the year. I think God approves and blesses this method of being faithful to so many old friends in so many places.



In Zechariah's time, the people of Israel have been through an ordeal of exile and humiliation, during which time they must have felt unloved by God. Zechariah brings them a vision of a restored connection: "Thus says the Lord: I will return to Zion and will dwell in the midst of Jerusalem. Jerusalem shall be called the faithful city." In Zechariah's vision, older folks with canes are swapping stories and children are playing in the streets without fear. In the Faithful City, God and God's people are faithful to each other.

Prayer:

Faithful God, Emmanuel, we're glad that you dwell in the midst of our family, church, and world. Help us do our part to keep a strong and faithful connection to you and to the people you've given us. Amen.

December 8

Scripture Reading for today:

Helen DeBevoise

Matthew 9:35-10:15

When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, 'The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.' Matthew 9:35-38



John's gospel explains this same passage by saying, "The fields are white unto harvest..." Before we moved to Orlando, we lived for ten years in Virginia. The winters always brought snow. One gray morning pre-Christmas we opened the front door to a blanket of white all around our home and neighborhood. Driveways and yards were no longer visible. Fence posts and cars were buried as well. The streets were impassable. Nothing moved. It was a mixture of beauty and confusion. The snow was magic, but how could we possibly get anything done that day?

In this passage, Jesus has been healing the sick and curing diseases. Now Jesus stands looking out at the crowds of people. There is **So. Much. Need.** Imagine a doctor on the mission field taking care of person after person, finally getting a moment's break and looking up to see that the line of people is as far as her eye can see. Sigh. There is **So. Much. Need.** The need of God's people can be daunting. How can I possibly make a difference?

May I offer a positive perspective? While we call it need, Jesus calls it a harvest. The fields are full of fruit. Fruit is life, opportunity, food, people who are life-giving and life sustaining. The harvest of the field is what God is all about and God will provide a way to bring in the harvest. We need only to ask.

Whatever the work, our job is to prepare our hearts for what God brings to our door.

Prayer:

Dear Lord, when the demands of life seem more than we can manage, remind us to bring them all to you. Prepare our hearts to receive Your wisdom and your challenge to serve faithfully. In Christ. Amen.

December 9
Scripture Reading for today:

Alice Schmidt
Haggai 2:1-9

Haggai? Haggai! What about Luke 2? I want to get to the goal --- Jesus' birth. I have to admit during Advent worship services I groan when I see the scripture is Isaiah but then always admit that our pastor's sermon is inspiring and does prepare my heart for the Christmas story. But Haggai?

Haggai tells about the building of the temple in Jerusalem after the return from exile in 520 BCE. The Jews first built their homes and are then called to build a temple to worship in. The new temple looks as nothing in comparison to the first temple built by Solomon but Haggai says it will be splendid. We today know the Messiah, Jesus Christ, would be dedicated there, would learn and would worship there.



However, I have a problem with considering this scripture and this temple only as a 'preparation'. That could imply that the present is not important. The Jews who returned will have the joy of building this together, they will have the comfort of its being a place for their worship of the Lord and a place for their children and grandchildren's worship.

'Preparation' is more than a future thing; it is a present day activity. As we live each day, in our work and play, with pleasure in buying or making the Christmas gifts, or with heartache as we remember a loved one, or struggle with our own illness, even with flossing our teeth or tying our child's shoe or stretching an aching back, each of these is preparation for the next hour or day and for December 25, but it is also a today activity.

God cares for us in our big things and in our little ones. So in addition to Luke 2, I commend to you this day Psalm 118:24 "This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.", Haggai 2:4 "Yet now take courage says the Lord, take courage, take courage all you people of the land, says the Lord", and all of Psalm 150.

Prayer: Lord, please help us take courage and then share that courage with all the people of your land.

December 10
Scripture Reading for today:

Gene Simmons
Psalm 139

God's Perfect Knowledge of Mankind

*[For the Chief Musician,
a Psalm of David, 139]*

*O, Lord, You have searched me and known me.
You know my sitting down and my rising up;
You understand my thought afar off,
You comprehend my path and my lying down,
And are acquainted with all my ways.
For there is not a word on my tongue,
But behold, O Lord, you know it altogether.*



These words give assurance that God is with us in our daily life. It is a special time of year to be reminded of this “blessed assurance” to be most important as we approach this annual celebration of Christ’s birth.

In these modern times we live with many worldly distractions to this holy event. We have to personally not be swayed or influenced away from the true meaning of this nativity happening.

Laying aside these distractions of modern life celebrations we can choose a plan of arrival to Bethlehem to discover again true meaning by His Birth and for our lives today.

Be assured, as in Psalm 139, that God goes with us on this journey again this year....

Prayer:

Lord , go with us to Bethlehem this year and renew a right spirit within us for this great Gift at our side... Amen.

December 11
Scripture Reading for today:

David Foley
2 Corinthians 5:5-21

Be Reconciled

In my late twenties I was living alone in a small duplex a block east of Ferncreek Elementary and exploring Job in earnest. Next door lived a single mother, her young and only daughter blinded at birth by an “act of God.” They were a peaceful pair.

We didn’t interact much and neither of us lived in that duplex long; there’s little more I can say about them. I remember them now, and the “act of God” that marked their lives, only because today – seeking insight into 2 Corinthians 5:11-21 – I turned to the very large and heavy concordance my mother gave me that Christmas I was their neighbor on Oregon St.

Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance is still for me a wonderful net for catching up every instance of any troublesome word I find in the scriptures. And today’s reading at 2 Corinthians 5:11-21, provides at least one that requires some meditation – “reconcile.”



Per *Strong’s*, “reconcile” appears in the Bible far less than “blind;” Mom’s Christmas gift adds irony to Paul’s epistle.

God has reconciled me to himself by not counting my debts against me and by trusting I will do likewise – 2 Corinthians 5:19.

Do likewise? Does Christ command that – like Israel (Genesis 32:28), like Job – I must wrestle with and reconcile God – the “acts” and the “image” – to myself?

Prayer:

Who am I to count any “act” or “image” of God against the Lord who resurrects and shapes me daily from dust? All are reconciled.

December 12
Scripture Reading for today:

Jody Mask
Mark 1:1-8

I recently participated in a Discerning Missional Leadership Assessment process associated with the 1001 Worshiping Communities movement in the PC(USA). In other words, I and a few other potential church planters gathered to figure out whether we have gifts to start a church/worshiping community from scratch. Following Frederick Buechner's advice that



“the place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet,” I hope to base a community of believers and potential believers in outdoor settings. My aim is to re-establish a connection between the “original sanctuary” of creation and our worship of God.

Others who were in the DML assessment have particular contexts in mind that they feel called to serve. Still others were simply responding to the Spirit's nudge to explore the 1001 movement and see if they might be called to this work as well.

There's one thing our group of budding leaders and the shepherds that guided us have in common: we seek to prepare the way of the Lord. Like any wilderness trailblazer can testify, this preparation is chock full of surprises--snakes, spider webs, mosquitoes, etc. But the One who is more powerful than any surprise -- and the One who baptizes with the Holy Spirit--is coming. Preparing the way for the Beginning of the good news is a privilege, no matter how we are called to do it.

Prayer: Faithful God, you know that new beginnings can be scary things for your people to face. Even when the path is familiar, we often stumble or wander when we try to prepare your way. Remind us this Advent season of the magnitude of the gift to all humanity that you have given us the privilege to prepare for--your son and our savior, Jesus Christ. Thank you for the good news we find in him. Amen.

LOVE

3rd Sunday of Advent - December 13
Scripture Reading for today:

Linda Simmons
Revelation 7:1-4, 9-17

I resist “Christmas creep” as long as possible, staying with Thanksgiving till the last second. But once the first Sunday of Advent arrives, let the preparations begin! Which for me means music.

Let all mortal flesh keep silence... Low tones emerge from silence, and with fear and trembling stand. The organ chords build to a resounding Alleluia, Lord Most High!

Musical traditions carry us through Advent as we prepare our house and ourselves for Christmas. There’s ‘Matt’s Christmas CD’ (from Matt Cook) with the crazy-low-voiced guy singing “Jingle Bells.” There’s the Roche’s New York-accented “Wualkin in a Wintah Wundehland!” There’s “Oi to the World” for driving home with our fresh-cut evergreen from Santa’s Christmas Tree Forest in Eustis. Unwrapping treasures for the tree, I hum my favorite carol from childhood, “Born in the night, Mary’s child, a long way from your home...”

These beloved songs remind me of wonderful memories with my family, especially my Dad who is now gone and our children who are now grown. I know I am reminiscing as much as spiritually preparing. And I know that deeper than these memories is the Good News of Christmas – God is with us. Christ came and comes and will come again. *Alleluia, Alleluia, Lord Most High.* This is the only song that endures.



As I listen, hum, and sing aloud this Advent, I pray for deeper reaffirmation that what really matters is our God, who transcends all the welcomes and farewells of our lives, and is the only One who lasts forever.

*The Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd,
and he will guide them to springs of the water of life,
and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes. (Rev. 7:17).*

Prayer: *Count us among the multitude, O Savior, who put our trust in you. Guide us to the springs of the water of life. In Christ, Amen*

December 14

Scripture Reading for today:

Then the seventh angel blew his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, saying "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign forever and ever."

Linda Castle

Revelation 11:15-18

The Seventh Trumpet

How do we prepare for Christmas? The years are flying by and Christmas comes before we can blink. Advent is that time to pause, reflect and pray about what Christmas will bring.

Amid the hubbub, we Christians take time to celebrate Christ's birth. Recently, a young woman in our church was preparing and waiting to give birth to her baby boy. Our church family was there to support her in her journey to motherhood. Everyone was anxious for the big day and relieved when James arrived surrounded by love.



I think Mary's experience was much different. She and Joseph were on their own traveling to Bethlehem without the support of loved ones. What must have been going through her mind and heart as she tried to understand her role given by God. Today we debate a woman's choice. Mary knew this was God's choice. How would she nurture and raise this baby boy who would someday save the world? She could not imagine, but she was prepared.

Today's scripture is not about the Christmas story. It is about that day when The Lord will return, not as a small baby but as our King in all his glory. Trumpets will sound for all to hear. We must be ready for that day when Christ shall come to reign for ever and ever, Lord of Lords and King of Kings.

Prayer:

Dear Heavenly Father, our hearts are full of joy and anticipation as we prepare to celebrate the birth of our Lord and Savior. May the spirit of that Christmas long ago dwell among us as we prepare for the return of our Lord and King. Amen.

December 15
Scripture Reading for today:

Leesa Bainbridge
Revelation 21:1-6

Renewal. What a positive assurance.

The new heaven and the new earth this passage promises will bring peace and healing. God will walk among us. No more tears, just joy.

We look forward to that. We live for that.

In the meantime, the Christmas season offers the same spirit of renewal and promise. It offers a chance to celebrate, be joyful, plan for a new year, and move closer to God.

I'm reminded, though, that truly embracing renewal requires focus, deliberation and being conscious of what needs refreshing in our lives.

Distractions -- and I love most of them -- abound during the holidays. That's why I'm so grateful for Park Lake during the season, when you can take a break from running around and indulge in self-reflection; revel in the services, music and fellowship; and, indeed, embrace the promise that Christ's birth brings.

I wish that for all of us.



Prayer:

Dear Lord, help us to take the much-needed time to reflect during this season on how we can renew and refresh our faith, our outlooks and our attitudes. Guide us as we embrace the promises of Christmas and let them live with us all year long. In His name, Amen.

December 16

Scripture Reading for today:

Ellie, Jane, Rachel Callahan

John 1:1-18

The LIGHT



**Shines in the
darkness
& the darkness
did not
overcome it**

John 1:5

John's gospel tells us that John came as a witness to testify to the light, the true light which was coming into the world. John 1:8-9. Our family's preparations to celebrate the light coming into the world include sending out a Christmas card. In advance of the season we re-affirm all of the reasons why we send out cards. It is a way to connect with friends and family, and may be the only communication to distant friends for the entire year. The card also is an opportunity to send a picture of the family to mark the children's growth and to help maintain these connections for the children. The card affirms that we are, in fact, preparing for Jesus' arrival — a testimony to the light.

Actually sending the cards, surprisingly, is very difficult in most years. Selecting the family photograph. Adding a little text to the photo (how does that work?). Printing the photo. Finding the address list (where could it be?). Addressing the cards, selecting/buying postage stamps. Writing a little note. After the cards finally go out, we resolve to start early the next year, maybe January!

We continue sending cards every year as a part of our preparation for Christmas to proclaim the light coming to the world. The card tells our family and friends that we love them and that we love Jesus. The Christmas card is a chance to send Jesus' love into the world.

Prayer:

Thank you, light of the world! Be in all of our preparations for welcoming the Christ child. Amen.

December 17
Scripture Reading for today:

Carol Bookhardt
Matthew 1:18-25

When I read the Advent devotional theme “Prepare the way of the Lord”, I immediately thought of the song from the 1970’s musical *Godspell*. The soundtrack from *Godspell* is played often in Mike’s car as he was in the musical at church with his youth group. He played John the Baptist. His solo was “Prepare ye the way of the Lord.” It is played loudly as we sing along with much enthusiasm!

Just as the Christmas season starts out quietly, John the Baptist sings “Prepare ye the way of the Lord”. The excitement builds, eventually the rest of the cast joins in, all sing the same verse louder, more joyous, dancing until the end when all are cheering.

Our Christmas season usually starts out slowly and quietly, as we listen to Christmas choral music on Thanksgiving night. In December we get busier, excited about Christmas, looking forward to seeing family and friends. We don’t dance or cheer loudly like the cast of *Godspell*, but we experience the joy of the preparations.

It is exciting preparing for the birth of a new baby, our own babies, or someone we know. Our own Delaney was born on December 24. What was it like for Mary and Joseph to prepare for baby Jesus? Were they preparing for his birth slowly, quietly or loudly singing and cheering for the new baby? Was it more exciting because they knew he is God’s son? During the sometimes quiet, always busy Advent season, I will be thinking of how I am preparing to celebrate God’s gift to us, the precious baby Jesus.



Prayer: Dear Lord, We thank you for sending us the Christ child. In all of the busyness of this season, help us to focus on you. Guide us as we “prepare the way of the Lord” with joyful anticipation! Amen.

December 18
Scripture Reading for today:

Kimo Hyatt
Luke 3:1-17

John the
Baptist
Prepares
the Way



As we prepare for the Advent Season, Luke's account of John the Baptist preparing the way for Christ provides us with our own example to do the same by preparing our hearts and lives. John's message has three themes, but the one I will address is social justice or how we should share with one another.

Our office is located near a day labor provider. Often these individuals come into our office asking for money. Many of them appear unkempt and rough and our staff often feels unsafe when they show up. Our usual response is to direct them to agencies in the area that can help them.

One day a rather rough looking individual who had a speech impediment, was hard of hearing, and spoke loudly walked in. I could tell our receptionist was uneasy by her response to him, so I came out of my office.

Like others, he asked for my help and I told him I wouldn't give him any money, but I would pay him to wash my car. He agreed and I got him the necessary supplies. At the end of the afternoon, I had a clean car and the individual had been compensated for his work. Every Wednesday for approximately three years, my car has been washed and waxed. There are those in my office who question my sanity for allowing this person near our office, but I believe that this has been an opportunity for me to help someone less fortunate and to acknowledge this is my duty as a Christian.

Prayer:

Lord, as we prepare ourselves for this Advent Season, we pray for your guidance so we may be unbiased and sensitive to the needs of others. Amen.

December 19

John Franklin

Scripture Reading for today:

Luke 1:5-25

Luke 2:7 The Message (MSG) While they were there, the time came for her to give birth. She gave birth to a son, her firstborn. She wrapped him in a blanket and laid him in a manger, because there was no room in the hostel.

As some of you know my parents died when I was very young. Christmas as a child always felt awkward. I was often times moved from one family to another. They all meant well, but I never really felt that I fit into another families Christmas. Once on my own, at age twenty-one, I pretty much ignored Christmas for a few years. I worked in retail. For anyone who has done retail, you know that by the end of the season you are glad for it to be over. I remember spending a few Christmas Eves alone in a bar singing Christmas carols with other strangers like myself. This was the low point in my celebration of Christmas.

At some point in my late twenties I began to create my own ways of doing Christmas. In my early thirties, as I began to reconnect with family members, it became important to create the Perfect Christmas; the one you see on TV and in magazines. By this time Allison and I had reconnected and joined forces. We began buying presents and making plans for new decorations and celebrations right after one Christmas ended. We had dinners and parties that seemed to get bigger and bigger every year. Getting ready for Christmas was fun, exciting, and a big adventure.



It was not until her death five years ago, that getting ready for Christmas became a much calmer, more spiritual affair for me. I have gotten rid of most of the elaborate decorations and, in the last few years, spent a lot more time focusing on Advent. I enjoy our Advent booklet very much. I love the things we do at church; beginning with the youth thanksgiving dinner to the children's programs and the beautiful choir music, culminating with the Christmas Eve service and candlelight, as we move into the celebration of the birth of Christ.

Prayer:

Father as we prepare for this Christmas help us to focus on the love all round us here in this church. To look around for those who seem to be left out and make them a special part of our celebration. Help us to carry the love for everyone in our hearts throughout the coming year.

JOY

4th Sunday of Advent - December 20
Scripture Reading for today:

Victoria Vargas
Luke 1:26-38

For the past four years God has come to me through the Youth Conference at Montreat. He came to me the most this past year as I was a part of the Jeremiah Project. The Jeremiah Project is a worship team that is made up of youth attending the conference. Every day we would get up on stage and perform skits during Keynote and conduct worship in the evening. On Tuesday morning I was able to tell my story along with two other girls.



As I was telling my story it was amazing to see that I was not alone. After Keynote many people came up to me and said how I wasn't alone and that they have or had the same things happening to them. God spoke to me through every person I came into contact with that day and for the rest of the week.

Ever since that morning I have been a different person. Being a part of the Jeremiah Project has made me realize that I can do so much more through God than I thought I could.

God comes through to people in many different ways and speaks to people in different ways also. You never know when or where he'll speak to you but he's always with you right by your side guiding you through life. He is a glorious and almighty God who loves us unconditionally no matter what. Without him I don't know where I would be today.

Prayer:

Dear God, right when I least expect, you show up in my life. At my lowest you have come in the hand offering to pick me up; at my loneliest, you came to walk with me. O God, thank you for reminding me through Jesus that You are never far away. Amen.

December 21

Scripture Reading for today:

Nancy Jones

Luke 1:39-45

*For as soon as I heard the sound of you greeting,
the child in my womb leaped for joy.*

Luke 1:44

There seems to be a little baby boom in my extended family. Recently three of my nieces have been pregnant. One niece gave birth to Spencer Marie their fifth daughter. Another niece gave birth to Hudson their second son this week. A third niece is due in February. What fun for these three cousins and sister in laws to have this time of waiting and expecting together. What will the lives of these families be like in a year, 10 years, 15 years? Who is to know? We can only wonder. This is a season to wonder, expect, hope.

I don't remember the first time I felt the babies in my womb (after all, I was feeling so many unusual things), but I shall never forget the look on Walk's face the first time he felt it. He had put his head down to rest on my belly. The babies gave a good kick. Walk's face looked up at me in amazement and wonder. I suppose it became very real to him at this time. This is really going to happen.

Elizabeth and Mary are related. They now have another shared experience of being pregnant at the same time. Their babies are going to change the world. John will become the Baptizer and Jesus will save us through his life and death. I would imagine that they still had so much wondering as they went through this, but they believed that this was a fulfillment of the LORD.



Prayer:

LORD, be with us as we wonder. AMEN.

December 22
Scripture Reading for today:

Rosalyn Russell
Luke 1:46-56

THE MAGNIFICAT



Mary is visiting her cousin Elizabeth. Elizabeth is pregnant with John the Baptist. Both women have been visited by an angel.

What a comfort that must have been to each other. After all it isn't everyday that people get visited by angels.

Mary has grown up hearing that someday a savior was going to come to save them from their enemies. Now she knows that she is the one to give birth to this savior. She rejoices.

As Mary rejoices in the "I am the most fortunate woman on the earth", she remembers how God has been preparing the way for this event through the years gone by. Remembering how God saved the Israelites from the Egyptians. And remembering what God had promised Abraham.

Let us look back on our lives. What has God prepared for us? How are we to prepare to help God to enter those around us?

Prayer:

Help us to prepare our hearts so we can celebrate Christ's birth in us and others in 2015.

Amen

December 23
Scripture Reading for today:

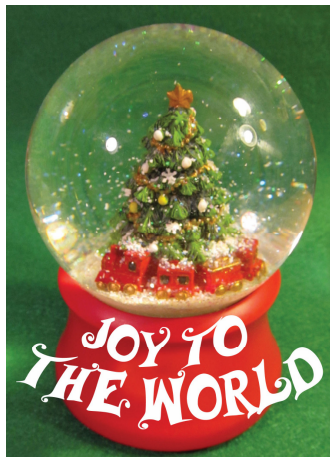
Winnie Nofsinger
Luke 1:57-66

While I have to admit I don't remember reading today's passage before. Maybe I'd "forgotten" it because it brought back memories of well-meaning but annoying questions as to what we were going to name our babies. Remember -- this was in the days before the sex could be determined before delivery. That means having to fend off even more "suggestions!"

I'm proud of Elizabeth for standing her ground. She knew that her son was special and would become intimately involved with his cousin Jesus and his ministry.

The Bible tells us nothing of Jesus' boyhood but I'd like to imagine that he and John spent many happy hours together, much like the times I had with my cousins and that my children have with theirs.

One of our most beloved carols says it all this and every Advent season:
"Joy to the World!"



Prayer:

*Lord, the events of Advent and Christmas bring up so many memories for us: waiting for what seems like an endless period for Christmas to arrive; spending time with family and dear friends; bursting out into joyous song at times that even surprise ourselves. As I prepare this year, teach me to embrace each day, each step, as a gift to prepare for your glorious presence in my own life. In the gift of your Son I pray,
Amen.*

December 24, Christmas Eve
Scripture Reading for today:

John Bowers
Luke 1:67-80



Christmas Eve

Prepare the way of the Lord. Prepare means to make something ready for use or consideration. I think the definition should also include making something ready for sharing. As Christians, we make someONE, namely Christ Jesus, ready for sharing. Christ's love is way too big for our hearts, so we share His love by showing kindness, compassion, love, forgiveness, patience, gratitude; the list goes on.

I grew up in Jacksonville Beach at the Palms Presbyterian Church. During every Advent season, as Christmas approached, I noticed more and more people attending worship services on Sunday. Then by New Years Day, boom, bunches of them were gone. I couldn't help but wonder how so many people could attend church during the most beautiful and meaningful season of the year, and be moved so little by the magnitude of the birth of Christ that they didn't care to come back before Easter. I would think, "this means so little to you?"

But I would also think, you know, we who attend worship every week continue to have our hearts filled with Christ's love, and those hearts become so full that we have no choice but to share it. We want to share kindness, compassion, forgiveness, etc., not to "score points" with God, but because God first shared them with us through the life of Christ. Christmas can be an emotional time of the year. Happy emotions and difficult ones. It can remind us how fast the years slip by. Yet it can also remind us how full our hearts are with the love of God, and how important it is to share that love, not only during Advent, but every day of the year. **Prepare to share!**

As I type this, I'm saying this prayer:

God, fill my heart this Advent season, and prepare me so that I may better share your love every day of my life. Amen.

December 25 , Christmas Day
Scripture Reading for today:

Susan Frith
Luke 2:1-20

It's Beginning to Smell a Lot Like Christmas

“It’s like a little Christmas tree in a bottle!” So exclaims my 10-year-old as she squirts hand sanitizer into her palms and our car fills with the overpowering aroma of “Balsam Pine.” Never mind that it’s two weeks before Thanksgiving. Sarah’s already got her mind on December 25, her hands on the sales coupons, and her nose in all the Yuletide scented products on display at Bath & Body Works. I have received from her, so far, a handwritten Christmas wish list, followed by an updated, typed and illustrated edition.

Meanwhile, I am feeling a bit ... fussy. It’s not that I dislike the smell of Christmas trees, but I feel unprepared in the face of all this jolly. Once again Advent has snuck up on me, disrupting my routine and reminding me I’m not as organized and in control as I think I would like to be.

As if it’s all about me.

In Luke we’re told how Mary and Joseph came to the Bethlehem to be registered, not having a plan except that God would lead them. In the humble, last-choice lodging of a manger, Jesus was born. The shepherds were simply minding their sheep when they got the good news from the angels, and yet they “went with haste” to find the child. Doesn’t sound like a lot of planning there either. Preparation seems to be more about showing up to glorify God than organizing or perfecting anything.



Maybe I should have another sniff.

Prayer:

God of All We Know and Don't Know, prepare our hearts to be present for the gift of your Son. Rather than stress about the preparations we make during Advent, help us to find joy in the small parts we each play in a much bigger story.

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DATED MATERIAL

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