



# CHRISTIAN CHURCH IN OHIO

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A covenant network of congregations in mission:  
We are the Body of Christ gifted and called in covenant together as Disciples of Christ  
to be centers of transformation on the new mission frontier of our own communities



2018 Advent Devotional

# First Day of Advent Sunday, December 2nd Advent Lighting

Please read Jeremiah 33:14-16

Advent is a time of expectation, and this is symbolized not only by the four-week period of preparation, but also by the lighting of an Advent candle on each Sunday of the season. The flame of each new candle reminds the worshiper that something is happening, but something more is still to come. The Advent season will not be complete until all four candles are lighted, with the central Christ candle also burning brightly on Christmas Eve.

The tradition of the Advent wreath is traced back to an old Scandinavian custom that celebrated the coming of light after a season of darkness. In that day candles were placed on the edge of a horizontal wheel. As the wheel was spun around, the lighted candles would blend into a continuous circle of light. Today we use a circle of evergreen to remind us of the continuous power of God, which knows no beginning nor ending.

There is also symbolism in the colors of the candles in the Advent wreath. The three purple, or white, candles symbolize the coming of Christ from the royal line of David. He is coming as the King of Kings as well as the Prince of Peace. The pink candle is lighted on the third Sunday of the Advent season. This candle symbolizes joy; its use goes back to the Latin church which asked the worshipers to fast during this period of time.

A progression is noted in the lighting of the candles of the Advent wreath. The first symbolizes expectation and hope. The second reminds us that we are involved in a season of preparation for peace in the coming of Christ. The third candle is proclamation, as we proclaim that Christ brought joy to the world when he appeared. The revelation of God's love for all humankind is portrayed by the lighting of the fourth candle. The culmination of the season comes on Christmas Eve, or Christmas Day, as the Christ candle is lighted.

Let us join now in this season of expectation and hope.

Prayer:

O God, in the weeks to come, our attention to this blessed and holy event, the birth of your Son, will be continually distracted. help us to distinguish between the secular and the sacred, and to remember the true meaning of our joy and excitement. Help us to refocus our minds and hearts on your loving and most precious gift to us, your Son, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Amen

**Rev. Thaddaeus Allen**

Regional Minister and President

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## Monday, December 3rd

### Hope

In this first week of advent, we celebrate hope. The hope that our Savior, Jesus Christ, will be born. It is the hope that David wrote about in Psalm 23: 1 The Lord is my shepherd; there is nothing I lack. 2 He lets me lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside quiet waters. 3 He renews my life; He leads me along the right paths for His name's sake. 4 Even when I go through the darkest valley, I fear no danger, for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff—they comfort me. 5 You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. 6 Only goodness and faithful love will pursue me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord as long as I live.

This is one of my favorite Psalm because it ties in one of my favorite themes: that our Lord, Jesus Christ, gives us our hope and will guide us to where we need to go. And I know that it is very hard to see that hope that Jesus brings to us when we look out onto this world: a world where people are losing their homes as the fire continues to burn; a world where families are being torn apart at our nation's border; and a world where some of our leaders use their power to bring hate upon God's people. It is hard to feel that Jesus is guiding us down the right path when we feel sorrow for the pain that is put upon ourselves, our family, and our world. And as we go through this time as a Region: where some may find it hard to see the hope for our future; we all need to remember that Jesus is the good shepherd. He is the shepherd who King David proclaims that will give us no fear as we walk through the darkest valleys in our lives. He is our Lord who will calm the storms in our world and will find rest for our souls. For he is coming! Jesus, our Savior is coming once again! And as we stay faithful, Jesus, our shepherd, will continue to give us hope as he guides us through this time of questioning and restructuring.

#### *Will you please pray with me:*

God, we thank you for this week: a week where we are given hope that your Son will come once again and be our Good Shepherd. A shepherd who will lead us along the right paths and guide us through the darkest valleys in our lives. Though we may feel pain and sorrow alongside those who are hurting in this world, let us find comfort in your Son, Jesus Christ. Allow the hope to open our minds for the future of our Region, our communities, and our world as we continue to shape it your loving image. For it is in your Son's name that we pray, Amen.

**Tomas Hernandez**

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## Tuesday, December 4th

Please read Luke 1:26-45

Reflexively, my mind turned toward Christmas. I thought of the freshly snow-blanketed landscape I'd left behind in the early morning darkness a few hours earlier. I thought of the light displays popping up on neighbors' houses which occasionally broke through the darkness and of those unboxed in my own home, waiting for me to carve out a few hours (after this trip!) to get them hung. My mood lifted and I smiled in spite of the tiredness I felt from the earlier-than-usual start to my day. I thought of Christmas carols – and then I realized I was hearing Christmas carols. Walking through the airport, I soon encountered the source of inspiration: a player piano sat in a corner of the terminal lobby, sharing “We Wish You a Merry Christmas” to anyone who would receive its joyful greeting.

The piano was ideally located just inside the security check-point, contrasting the anxious hurry up—wait that seems to come mandatory with air travel. Having some time, I grabbed a breakfast sandwich from a nearby restaurant, found a seat nearby, and I just sat. Ok, I tried to catch up on some email, but the airport wi-fi wasn't having it. So I sat, and ate, and people watched, humming along, at times, with whatever gift the piano presented. “Deck the Halls” came next, followed by “I Saw Mommy Kissing Santa Claus.” Soon it was, “I'll be Home for Christmas,” “O Little Town of Bethlehem,” and “Let it Snow.” And then the piano offered “Ave Maria.”

*Ave Maria, gratia plena, Dominus tecum.  
Benedicta tu in mulieribus,  
et benedicta fructus ventris tui, Iesus.*

*Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee.  
Blessed art thou among women,  
and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.*

Setting beautifully to music the Hail Mary (the prayer, not the football play), its opening lines join together the annunciation of the angel, Gabriel, to Mary (Luke 1:28) with Elizabeth's greeting to Mary upon her visit a few verses later (1:42). Both of these women – one young, the other “in her old age” – received remarkable news from an extraordinary messenger in the midst of what we believe were otherwise ordinary lives. Set apart perhaps only by their faithfulness, neither Mary nor Elizabeth sought or expected what they received, yet both accepted Gabriel's message in faith. Their lives were changed in those moments, and with them, the whole world.

This Advent season, how are you preparing for the familiar and the surprising? Will you be ready to respond with the faithfulness of Elizabeth and Mary? Are you prepared to accept a message that changes your life?

God you are full of surprises. In this Advent season, we know that the Word comes again, comes to us still. Yet in our busyness and the hurry up—wait of our lives, it is easy to forget until Christmas day is upon us. May we make the time to slow down, to just sit, even, and to open ourselves to the blessings and the surprises of this season. Whether your word comes to us as bold proclamation or subtle musical messaging, may our ears be open to receive it. May our hearts be open to accept it. May our mouths be open to share it. And may our lives be opened to proclaim, in faithful word and deed, the good news of Jesus' birth, reflecting the light which shines in the darkness for all the world.

**Rev. Josh Baird**

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## Wednesday, December 5th Is There Any Room?

Please read Luke 2: 1-7

Caesar Augustus sent out a decree that all the world be registered by census. To this very day, they are done every ten years in the USA.

Although, Joseph knew Mary was about to give birth and her time was near, they made the trek to Bethlehem in Judea. Mary was in much pain I am sure as she rode a donkey into town. She needed somewhere to lay her head and prepare herself. Joseph went to the Innkeeper and asked him; "Is there any room?" The Innkeeper advised Joseph that there was no room, due to the census.

Joseph found that while they journeyed to be counted amongst the community and its members, that the same community had no room for them. You, a peer, or family member may have had a similar experience at some point. After a period of two thousand and eighteen years we have to ask ourselves; Is there any room?

Even on our Christian journeys, as we approach the significant event of Christmas; we ponder many events taking place in the world, the USA, and our local communities, and wonder; Is there any room?

When others are constantly emphasizing their heartfelt hatred, through their violence and intolerant acts upon society and its members, many of us today may find ourselves approaching the same question that Joseph asked the innkeeper. Is there any room?

When we reflect on the many miles we have traveled as brethren, to get to where we are, Christian and Non-Christian alike, we wonder if we are really being counted amongst the community, as various family members, cultures, and peoples, coming together to be registered amongst the many.

Sometimes we find that all we can do is to pray and praise. As simplistic as this may sound, we must remember what Joseph and Marie did, they took the most humble station in their pursuit of being community. And look at the "Blessing" the world received, "a Savior".

Our first thought should be to pray to God in order to remedy the situation. Then give God all the praise for working things out. Having faith enough to walk in belief and celebration of our Savior's birth, and His presence in our lives.

As Christians we know that God's has a larger plan and that two thousand eighteen years ago a Savior was born. Let us celebrate with gladness the joy of having traveled from our past locations to our modern-day Bethlehem's, awaiting the significant events of our lives to happen.

No one foresaw this event happening in a stable, nor among the animals. Why a stable? Why a manger? Why no crib for a bed? Why would God send Jesus into the world to be born of lowly means? Why would God choose to let his son not find a room at the inn?

*Continued on the next page*

*Wednesday, December 5th continued*

I believe I know the answer and it is that Jesus was birthed into this world in a most humble and lowly way.

In approaching the light of Christ's birth, we still see and experience the sores of prejudice, jealousy, hatred, envy, strife, confusion, greed, and all other kinds of evil happenings.

What is most important in our community and at this time of advent and celebrating our Savior's birth is that as we consider "Is there any Room?" Our answer should be yes, there is room at the cross for you, though millions have come, there is still room for one, there is room at the cross for you.

**Rev. Dr. Pamela Barnes-Jackson**  
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## **Thursday, December 6th**

O Little Town of Bethlehem is my favorite Christmas Carol. The melody and mystery of this song quietly bring love and light into my heart. It reflects the way Jesus came into this world beautifully. Jesus was born quietly in a manger in a stable tucked away from the noise and busyness of the Bethlehem streets. No grand announcements were made in the town square that Jesus was born. Simply angels appearing to the shepherds in the fields.

Would the angels have been heard or even noticed had they brought the message to the people bustling around in Bethlehem? Probably not. The people were preoccupied with finding housing and making sure they were counted for the census. In other words, they were concerned with matters of the world, they were not concerned with God matters.

How much different is our world today? Not much. I wonder how many people will really notice that Christ has been born. As we go through this Advent season, be like the shepherds. Notice the wonder and love that comes this season through the holy child. Then go share the good news with all those you meet. It's just like the words of O Little Town of Bethlehem claim, "Let's drown out the noise of the world with shouts of joy and love."

**Rev. Lauren Roe**  
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## Friday, December 7th

*"The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah." ~ Jeremiah 33:14*

Advent is one of my favorite seasons in the church. To me, it is a time when we acknowledge our pain-denying culture and look for God doing new things even in the suffering of life. Advent is a time when we are encouraged to take off our blinders and look at this fleeting moment. This life that is with us right now that is precious, and perhaps, it is not here tomorrow. This is advent – a time when we admit the realities of today – of violence, death, and pain – and yet also claim it to be a time pregnant with new life.

My favorite band, Mumford and Sons, encapsulate Advent well with the lyrics: "Hold on to what you believe in the light when darkness has robbed you of all your sight."

Advent is a time when we together admit darkness has ahold of us in so many ways

- When we separate people from people as though we can know who is good and who is bad.
- When we meet families with hostility who are fleeing unsafe countries to find a better life
- When we participate in a volatile and uncompassionate dialogue with others.

And yet we also claim the ways that God is working within it.

- When communities come together to feed outsiders in their midst
- When neighbors are able to break bread together and talk past the signs in their yards
- When policies are created that protect all people from violence and bloodshed.
- When we can be communities following God's dreams for the world

Prayer:

God – during this season of advent, may we open our eyes to the world in which we live that we may say yes

Yes to the outsider in our midst

Yes to the person in need

Yes to policies that promote love instead of fear

Yes to the church that needs our time, our talents, and our resources

Yes to being followers of your way through Christ

So that You can do all things new

You can fulfill your promise in ways we cannot see

You will be present to us despite all the ways we fail.

You bring light in the darkness

We say yes in this season of advent because you are here already saying yes to us

already loving us

already being patient with us.

Amen.

**Rev. Audrey Connor**

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## Saturday/Sunday, December 8th/9th

As we enter into the season of waiting we call Advent, expecting that the Christ child will be born anew into our hearts and lives, let us give thanks. He will come once again as Emmanuel, God with us. And while we are waiting we also, face the challenge of attending to the many tasks and traditions we try to fit into our crowded schedules thinking that Christmas just wouldn't be complete without them. Two of my favorite Bible characters are Simeon and Anna, who awaited Jesus' birth long ago. They were wise and patient people whose hope for the future was firmly placed in the promise of the Messiah. Luke tells Simeon's story in Chapter 2, verses 25-32. Simeon prays:

*Sovereign God, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word, for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel.*

And of Anna, Luke says in verse 38,

*At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Israel.*

Reflecting on stories from scripture can remind us of our own stories. I was reminded of two stories that speak to me about waiting and about our knowing that God is with us.

My first story comes from the year that I was 13. My mother was pregnant and we were all waiting for my brother Tim to be born. He finally arrived on December 13th.. My mother was in no condition to search for just the right gifts for a husband and children of 13,11,3,2,1, and newly born. So I was "chosen" to help my father prepare for our Christmas, while my mother brought home our family's most precious gift, a new baby brother.

And this year, before the season of Advent has even begun, I received word of the death of a friend who has been near and dear for many years. Her wisdom, faith, and welcoming spirit ushered me into her family hearth and heart, and brought untold blessings. She took my wonderings and questions and held them with me; that divine understanding might come. Last week, at the age of 101, She left this world, to transition to the next, where if there is waiting at all, it will be a whole new experience.

I close with a prayer from a New Zealand prayer book.

Welcome , welcome, Jesus Christ our infant savior,  
baby who makes every birth holy.  
May we, who like the shepherds  
have witnessed in the stable a new kind of love,  
return to our work with joy.  
May we, for whom the heavens have opened  
to proclaim that God is with us.  
we who have fed on living bread  
and drunk the wine of heaven.  
go out to be instruments of your peace, day by day.

**Marybeth Corbett**  
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## Monday, December 10th

*And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise."*

- Luke 3:10-11

At this time of Advent, we are often our most generous. We give gifts to families and friends. More importantly, we give to those from whom we expect nothing in return. It is in this spirit that I want to share some of the great work that is happening right at our very own Camp Christian. The Free Store at Camp Christian has re-opened, and provides gently used clothing and linens to disadvantaged families in Union and Delaware Counties year-round. Volunteers prepared Turkey Pot Pies and dessert pies to give to needy families for Thanksgiving. And as we prepare for Christmas, Disciples across Ohio are donating toys and personal items that will become gifts from Free Store clients to their children. All of these beautiful expressions of love are made possible by the generosity of Disciples like you, who give of their time, talent and wealth in the name of Christ. Thank you for all you do to share your blessings with others.

Prayer:

Creator God, thank you for the blessings you have so generously bestowed upon us. Help us to show that same spirit of generosity to all your children.

Wishing God's blessings upon you,

**Gladys Davis**

Treasurer, Regional Church Council

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*P.S. Please remember the Christian Church in Ohio by giving through the [Christmas Offering](#), which supports all of the great work done at Camp Christian and through our Region.*

*If you would like more information about the Free Store at Camp Christian, please contact Wendy Taylor at [wendyetaylor@icloud.com](mailto:wendyetaylor@icloud.com)*

## Tuesday, December 11th

Psalm 130:5-6

<sup>5</sup> I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I hope; <sup>6</sup> my soul waits for the Lord more than those who watch for the morning, more than those who watch for the morning.

A few years ago, I was walking through the Dollar General with my kids and we heard this really fun Christmas song. The song was “The Twelve Days of Christmas”...but with a twist. It was sung by an all men’s acapella group, had some funny lyric changes, and they finished it by incorporating Toto’s famous 80’s song, “Africa.” It was different but awesome. I wanted it for our family playlist.

In those moments I flashed back to how “back in the day” I would have sat up in my room for an afternoon with my fingers on the “record/play” button of my cassette deck waiting for the song to come on the radio. As each song would begin, I would close my eyes and listen intently to discern if this was the one. Every ounce of my being would be focused on being ready for that moment of recognition when I would quickly press the record button. The afternoon would be one of victorious celebration or bitter disappointment in having to wait for another day and time.

But on that afternoon at the Dollar General, I got out my Shazam app which immediately told me the artist’s name and song title. About 10 seconds later I had the song downloaded on my Google Play and Amazon accounts. Not quite the same experience as “back in the day.”

There’s a big desire within us that hope, peace, joy, justice, love...even God...were on demand like a streaming song service. But--as it turns out--these are not commodities to be bought, sold, and downloaded at our immediate convenience.

Instead, we have a season like Advent which calls us to heighten our senses and awareness to them. A whole season to build up within us a sense of eagerness, anticipation, and longing for Christ. We set aside to practice the spiritual discipline of waiting. To close our eyes and pray a little harder for the hurts in the world. To strain our ears to listen a little more intently for God’s voice over the din. To focus every part of our being, ready to recognize Christ when he comes in ways we wouldn’t expect or anticipate. And as we wait--as we pray, listen, and focus--we are preparing ourselves to spring to action. To join in on the ways Christ is transforming the world.

This Advent and Christmas...

Enjoy the Music...

Pray, Watch, and Listen for Hope, Peace, Joy, Justice, and Love...

And...Embrace the Waiting.

**Rev. Chad Delaney**

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## Wednesday, December 12th

*Please read Titus 3:3-8 (NRSV)*

That passage doesn't sound much like Christmas, does it?

But it's one of just a few passages outside of the traditional Gospel accounts (Matthew 2, Luke 2) which describe the birth of Jesus.

And if you've been present for the birth of a child, whether as a guest or the principal actor (God bless you all, mothers of the world), you might note that this passage of Scripture is a bit more on point than Luke or Matthew ever want to get.

I know, these are Advent devotionals. We don't like messy. That's why we like Hallmark movies, where the messes are strategically placed and resolved by the last act, often cleaned up off-camera during the commercial break.

Titus is putting at least some of the messiness right out in front. Our messiness of sin and foolishness, the malice and envy which has built up the separation between our hearts and heavenly hope.

And at least obliquely, he's making reference to something in the ancient world everyone would know about childbirth, whether female or male, old or young. Birth, in the home or out in the stables, is messy. You can gloss over this passage and make it an elaborate baptismal allusion, but I hear the voice of a husband and father who knew something about water breaking and the labor process. I hear a pastor speaking to an audience of as many if not more women than men, and about the events of a birth that call for lots of water and washing along the way.

Also, Titus is speaking to people who had a personal, visceral sense of what it meant to know that when a child is born, when the perilous period of labor and delivery is over, and that child is safely in the mother's arms, you know something has been accomplished. "The saying is sure." The birth means an heir is with us, a child is part of the family, the lineage continues. A successful birth means certain facts are now present, and others have changed.

Titus says "when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us," and that's every just-after-the-birth picture we've seen, whether of Mary and Jesus, or any Mother and Child photo posted on social media. You look at your phone or computer or on the sheet folded into the letter, and gaze on those two, and you don't focus on the work and pain and water and blood it took to get there, even though you know it was all part of the story. You rest in that goodness and loving kindness, and trust that it will carry the parents and family and all of us into a more loving place.

When Jesus was born into the messiness of this world, he didn't take a short cut to avoid it, he came right into the middle of our lives so that the loving kindness would mean all the more when we found it, knew it, accepted it as meant for us. Through a baby, love beyond anything that baby can know at that moment comes to all who share in the occasion. Through Jesus being born into this world, we are all washed with a Spirit of rebirth and renewal that's beyond anything we can imagine, but we can feel simply by looking upon a Mother and Child, at peace.

Loving God of us all, Maker of heaven and earth, Creator and sustainer of life to life eternal, show us with a Mother's love what can be born into this world; may your Spirit enliven every task we take on, cleaning up messes, renewing the weary, and granting to your beloved, peace. Amen!

**Rev. Jeff Gill**

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**Thursday, December 13th**

*Please read Exodus 2:1-9*

In Disciples Christian Church in Cleveland Heights we are using Desmond Tutu's Children of God Storybook Bible as a guide for worship this year. The story from Exodus 2 of the beginning of the life of Moses came up in November. It is a remarkable story, not because it tells of the birth of Moses, but of the "Sheroes" who saved the life of this infant. The midwives of Israel refused to kill Hebrew baby boys at the command of King Pharaoh. The mother of Moses hid this baby that was under threat of execution. The sister of Moses (later named Miriam), watched the baby and dared to offer assistance. The princess, daughter of Pharaoh, was not fooled. She knew this was a Hebrew baby boy, and still saved him, even adopted him! Each of these was a shero!

Were it not for these women, God's plan to save the Hebrew people would have fallen apart! These nameless women, with their acts of civil disobedience, saved the life of a baby boy and changed the course of history.

I am struck by the parallels between the story of Moses as an infant, and the story of the coming of Jesus. Both were born to dirt poor parents. Both were under threat of execution by a powerful ruler. Both were brought into this world and protected by shero women. Both grew up to change the course of history. Both moved humanity forward in understanding the mysterious God of Sarah and Abraham, the Creator and Redeemer God of all people and all time.

But none of it would have happened if God had not had partners among us human beings, willing to risk their lives, to follow the call of God, willing to be sheroes or heroes, in acts of civil disobedience.

Can we take these partners of God as examples today? Can you identify one way that God might be calling you to be a partner with God in changing the course of history yet again, in 2018?

**Rev. Roger McKinney**

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## Friday, December 14th

When it comes to the month of December, a lot of people think about what gifts they are going to buy people. Also others think about Santa Claus and the story of Rudolph. But really the month of December should be about Advent, which leads us up to Jesus' birth. Advent comes from the latin word adventus which means, "coming" or preparing for something. In the Christian viewpoint, Mary and Joseph were waiting for Jesus' coming into the world, in which we celebrate his birth on the 25th of December which is Christmas. An angel appeared to Mary and told her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name 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 father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; and of his kingdom there will be no end." Luke 1: 30-32

The angel was explaining to Mary that she will conceive God's only Son, and He will be called the kings of kings and lords of lords. The question a lot of people ask is how does this scripture relate to us? It relates to us by explaining that God's Son is going to be the way to our salvation, in which later on down the road he pays the price for our sins by dying on that old rugged cross.

So what can we do now as Christians during Advent to lead up to Jesus' birth? We can start rejoicing and spreading the Good News to the world about Jesus' birth. We can be like the 3 Kings in the Bible who followed the star to get to Bethlem to bring Jesus gold, frankincense, and myrrh. In all as Christians we should be preparing our hearts and minds for Jesus' birth and thanking God for sending his Son down to earth for Him to teach us and prepare us for the Kingdom of Heaven.

In conclusion, December is not just about buying gifts, the story of Rudolf, nor about Santa Claus. But if we all just remember that the real reason for the season is that Jesus Christ came down here to dwell amongst man to save a lost sinner like me and you. God gave us His gift now it's up to us to give our hearts and souls to Him.

### *Prayer:*

All wise and heavenly Father, thank you for sending your Son down to earth to save us. Please work within us Christians to bring lost souls to you during this Advent month while we prepare for Your birth. Remind us Jesus each and every day that you are the kings of kings and lords of lords, the alpha and the omega, the beginning and the end. Lord we love you and we thank you. In Jesus' name, Amen.

**Frances Smith**

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## Saturday/Sunday, December 15th/16th

### Divine Anticipation

Well before Thanksgiving, and even before Halloween, a local store had filled their display with Christmas decor. Every year, there seems to be a headlong rush into Christmas that plows right through Advent. This seems to be an all too familiar pattern. Why wait for Christmas when we can have it right now? After all we live in a world obsessed with instant gratification. But something is lost in a jump straight to Christmas.

There is a wisdom in the pattern of the Christian year. The secular calendar begins in January with much hope for the new year, wrapped in new resolutions. The start of something is usually marked by a burst of action, but the Christian year begins with Advent. This beginning is marked by waiting, not action. There is no burst of energy, but rather a quiet simmer of anticipation. The differences in the attitudes facing these new “years” shows a fundamental difference in value. As Christians we are being taught the worth of anticipation.

Some of the most fruitful seasons of life can be seasons of anticipation. The period of time between a woman realizing she is pregnant and the delivery of her child can be a season of deep connection between the mother and her unborn child. If this period were skipped, many precious moments would be missed. There would be no relish of the first quickening of the child within the belly, no baby shower in which loved ones join to celebrate the coming child. But greater than this, without a season of anticipation, there would be no time for preparation. Much preparation is needed for a child. Drawers must be child-proofed, cribs must be procured, diapers must be stockpiled.

Lamentations 3:25-26 While seasons of anticipation can feel like “wasted time” in our fast-paced culture, they serve an important function. Waiting can produce a depth of emotion that is otherwise inaccessible. Waiting also allows for the important work of preparation. I challenge you to take this Advent to delve deeper into your experience of God, gaining a more intimate experience of the Holy yet to come

#### Scripture

Lamentations 3:25-26

*The Lord is good to those who wait for him,  
to the soul that seeks him.*

*It is good that one should wait quietly  
for the salvation of the Lord.*

#### Prayer

Holy Creator,

Help me to journey with Mary as she feels the savior growing within her womb. Bless me with feelings of the Holy Spirit quickening within me, preparing my heart to receive the coming Christ-child. Teach me to keep holy time, unrushed by the demands of the holiday season. Teach me to relish the anticipation of the Divine.

*Spend a few moments in quiet communion with God.*

Amen.

#### Faith Solon

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## Monday, December 17th “The Power of Preparation”

*Please read Mark 1.1-8.*

What is the Advent blessing that God has for us? News! It won't come through Macy's but through Mary. It won't be encased in flashy gift wrap but in swaddling clothes. The gift was born in a manger, and now wants to be born in us.

John suggests the blessing we need is the Christ Child. However, we've got to get ready for him. We must participate in our own blessing.

To do this, we need more than cities and nations with clean houses; we need cities and nations occupied and run by people with clean hearts. I am drawn to the words that Gospel songwriter Margaret J. Douroux penned, “Give me a clean heart, so I may serve thee. Lord fix my heart so that I may be used by thee. For I'm not worthy of all these blessings. Give me a clean heart, a clean heart, and I'll follow thee.”

If we who occupy seats in sacred and secular sectors want Advent blessings, some assembly will be required! We must set up our blessings by repenting, revealing a visible redirection of our lives away from sin's path – that route that boasts we can live apart from God. Reverse! Reverse! Turn around!

For those who place the spotlight on preachers, John said, “Don't look at this preacher for I'm not the one! I'm in the wilderness, wearing a non-designer camel hair suit with a leather belt, so clearly, I am not a fashion model.”

“I'm not eating lobster but locusts! I'm not dining on wild turkey but wild honey. My modesty signals that this preaching thing is not about me; it's about the Lord. I'm just a spokesperson for the savior; when you get right down to it, I'm not even worthy of untying his shoes.”

I baptized you with water, but he'll baptize you with the Holy Spirit. My water cleanses your body; his Spirit cleanses your soul!

This is the time of year when some of the best food ever will be cooked, served and eaten. In fact, I plan to cook and serve greens to my family. However, some of my friends make fun of me, saying I am not a greens purist.

Their complaint? I buy pre-cut, pre-washed, greens sold in bags. I simply boil water, add seasonings, put in smoked turkey, and then pour in my pre-cut, pre-washed kale or collard greens and let them cook. That's it!

*Continued on the next page*

My friends claim I'm taking the easy route, as they personally pick, cut and wash their greens while reminding me that serious greens eaters won't eat just anybody's greens because greens must be prepared properly.

In other words, greens have got to be correctly washed. If the washing is not thorough, you will end up with sandpaper-like greens that are challenging to eat as they are, well, rocky!

Propper preparation involves holding each leaf under running water and unfold each layer so the hidden grime can be exposed and washed away. Only when the grime has been washed away can you safely cook, serve, and enjoy your greens.

If we want to be blessed, if we want to be serious, practicing Christians, we must repent. Repenting is not an event; it's a life-long process. Like that water on the greens, we've got to allow the Holy Spirit to unfold our lives, to pull back each layer until our sinfulness, brokenness and estrangement are exposed and cleansed.

We've must say, "Lord, expose and cleanse my apathy and silence! Expose and cleanse my fear and indifference! Expose and cleanse my selfishness and privilege! Expose and cleanse the hurt I carry and the hurt I inflict! Lord, I don't want to be a sandpaper saint; I want to be a smooth saint."

Then, we, along with people from every city and county, across our nation and every nation, may emerge from the dark tunnels of despair, and the unsteady hills of hopelessness, and sing with expectancy and urgency, O come, o come, Emmanuel. Ransom captive Israel. Ransom addicted Ohio. Ransom fragmented and uncivil America. We are mourning in lonely exile here, until the Son of God appear. Rejoice, rejoice, for Emmanuel shall come to thee, O, Israel; O, America; O, world. Amen.

Prayer:

Gracious God, as we await the birth of the Christ child, give us courage to avoid the allure of party, nationalism, and privilege, so that we may be transformed by his presence.

Amen

**Dr. Jack Sullivan, Jr.**

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**Tuesday, December 18th**

**Hebrews 13:2 (NIV)**

2 Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it.

Awaiting the arrival...

It is the beginning of the holiday season and in my world, the beginning of preparing for guests. A number of years back, I realized a dear friend of mine, Shannon, possessed one of the most honorable and cherished spiritual gifts in my opinion...the gift of hospitality. There was never a time I would not feel welcome in her home and I am guessing never a stranger who felt like a stranger. Her door always seemed open and she had a knack for preparing just enough food, even if there was a surprise guest. Her heart, to me, seemed like a "welcome" mat. Her home, the platform to extend her welcome.

As we prepare for the Advent season, my prayer is that our hearts can be surrounded in hospitality and a "welcome" mat laid out for Jesus. In order for our season to be filled with Christ, we must extend the invitation of welcome and set a place for him in the midst of the holiday hustle. My prayer is that I remember that it is Jesus who I need to welcome before anyone else. I pray my heart is a hospitable place and ready to host the miracle of the season.

Loving and Gracious God,

Please help me to clear my heart and head this season to have a place of welcome to receive Jesus. Help me to prepare my heart before my home and be a light of hospitality in your world this season.

Amen

**Wendy Taylor**

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## Wednesday, December 19th

*Please read Isaiah 40:9*

You who bring good tidings to Zion, go up to a high mountain. You who bring good tidings to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with a shout, lift it up, do not be afraid; say to the towns of Judah, "Here is your God!" Behold, the Sovereign Lord comes.....

Since being retired I have had plenty of time to reflect. One of things I had trouble resolving over my forty-one years was dealing with interruptions. You know, like being engrossed with my plans, my agenda, my program, my sermon, my space, and then, suddenly, Bam! The phone rings. A person drops by. A crisis occurs. A problem happens. A plan changes. I then had to deal with it. To be honest, my work was constantly interrupted. Now I know why. Thinking back, it was the interruptions that defined as well as gave meaning to my work.

That, I think, is the great conversation being shared by many of us in the church today. As a region, as congregations, as clergy, and lay folk all dealing with the incredible disruptions affecting us during these transitional times. We have become uneasy, unsure, frustrated, confused, and even angry with all that has transpired within recent years. We long for tranquility again. But have we considered that many of the unexpected events and occurrences are not just disrupting interruptions of our projects and plans, but may very well be the ways in which God is molding our hearts and minds for the advent of his return?

All too often, our great temptation is to just simply slide by, doing as little as possible, not breaking out of our comfort zones, being safe within the confines of our own group, and being complacent in regards to our true mission and purpose. But whenever our plans are interrupted by poor weather, inner turmoil, relational discord, betrayal of heart, a change in leadership, a revision of policy, a loss of presence, or a fading dream, we are quickly tempted to give in to our baser natures and either become paralyzed by preservation or embittered by resentment. But when we look to the Lord and allow our faith to speak to us, we can develop the patience required to help make our expectations grow. Then what is seen as fate can be converted into vocation, hurt into a call for deeper understanding, loss into a motivation for renewal, and grief into a nativity of joy. Isaiah's words should ease our anxiety and give us hope.

Prayer: Loving and Everpresent God, during this Advent time help me to see my interruptions from a different perspective. Mold and shape my heart in preparation for the new day you are about to reveal. Amen.

**Rev. Mike Valentine**

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## Thursday, December 20th

### Malachi 3:1 (NIV)

*"See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come," says the LORD Almighty.*

Back when I was a kid, I had a favorite Christmas Carol, and I couldn't wait to hear it played on the radio stations. From Thanksgiving through Christmas I would scan the dial searching for it. In 1958 when it was first aired it reached #1 on the Billboard Music Chart. That was the last time a Christmas song would do that. Maybe it was one of your favorites as well, because it's still a classic today. I still hear it played from time to time during the holiday season.

Have you figured out the name to the song yet?

So, what was this chart topping song from 60 years ago? It was "The Chipmunk Song (Christmas Don't Be Late)" by Alvin and the Chipmunks. Okay, I'll admit that it pales in comparison to the true Christmas Carol classics like "Silent Night", "What Child Is This", or "O Holy Night". Yet, it far out ranks "Grandma Got Run Over By A Reindeer."

Actually, it was the theme and words that hit home for me back then. Do you recall the words?

It's a simple tune with simple and short lyrics:

Christmas, Christmas time is near  
Time for toys and time for cheer  
We've been good, but we can't last  
Hurry Christmas, hurry fast

Want a plane that loops the loop  
Me, I want a hula hoop  
We can hardly stand the wait  
Please Christmas, don't be late.

It's a song that speaks of an eager childlike anticipation about the arrival of Christmas. "Hurry Christmas, hurry fast!" "We can hardly stand to wait, please Christmas don't be late."

When was the last time you felt like that about the coming Christmas Season? When was the last time your anticipation outweighed your anxiety and frustration for a time of years that demands so much of your time and energy. The shopping for gifts, the decorating of home, the cooking and baking, sending Christmas cards, the parties, and the traveling, all rolled up in a few short weeks.

When was the last time you longed for the Messiah to come into your life? The Old Testament shares repeatedly about the people of God longing and waiting for such a time. We sing about it during Advent with such hymns as "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel, that mourns in lonely exile here, until the Son of God appear." or "Come, O Long-expected Jesus, born to set your people free... dear desire of many a nation, joy of many a longing heart."

*Continued on the next page*

*Thursday, December 20th continued*

While some people say that, they can't wait for Christmas to be over. What about you? What are you anticipating during this Holy Season of Advent and Christmas? Will you be caught up in the commercialism and busyness, or maybe this is the year that you strive to focus on the real purpose of these sacred days of preparation, receiving and celebrating the coming of Christ in the world, and into our lives.

May you be open to the leading of God's Spirit in reading the scriptures and other resources like this Advent Devotional. May you be aware of those less fortunate than yourself and seek out those who may be alone or just lonely.

If we truly share the Spirit of Christmas, then it won't be late, it will be just in time.

Prayer:

Most Gracious God, in our anxiousness slow us down, in our anticipation open us up, in our hope of experiencing your presence in this Advent Season let your Spirit enfold us in your love and grace. In the name of Christ Child we pray.

Amen.

**Rev. Ralph S. Wearstler**

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## **Friday, December 21st**

"The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us." John 1:14

"Troublesome Terminology"

It comes around every single year at this time. Well, yes, Christmas, but what I'm referring to is the regular litany about how the culture has so diminished the true meaning of Christmas. To that I simply ask, "Is anyone really surprised?"

That grouching came again in a CNN story by reporter Jeanne Moos, wherein she flipped through the advertisements in the New York Times. She noted that every ad, except one, promoted its event as a 'Holiday' sale. She noted the word, 'Christmas' was completely missing, kidnapped by a least common denominator culture that doesn't want to offend anyone. Retailers especially want to make sure shoppers of all religious persuasions know their money is welcome and happily accepted. And so, 'holiday' works best in the overlap of religious seasons: Ramadan, Chanukah, Christmas and Kwanza. Of course, this also includes not offending those of 'no particular religious stripe' who want to spend like it grows on trees.

Each Advent, I hear several conversations and read a few articles wherein Christians are upset (again!) and complain loudly about the loss of the language of Christmas in the culture.

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Perhaps what we need is an historical and etymological (the study of words) checkup to help us realize that what the advertisers in-particular and the culture as a whole promote as safe terminology to protect market share and minimize offense is still, curiously, the language of the church!

Case in point: two of our favorite terms to dislike and dismiss are the afore mentioned 'Holiday' and the ever unpopular 'X-mas'.

Try saying the first term slowly, h-o-l-i-d-a-y. Did you hear it? The word 'holiday' is simply a morphing of the church's term for observing special days on the Christian calendar: Holidays, that is, Holy Days.

The second term of contention requires a brief journey into past. I was told as a child that 'X-mas,' was a sacrilegious way of referring to Christmas or worse, was an effort to cross-out Christ. I've heard plenty of well-intentioned Christians bemoan the phrase and I've sat through a few sermons deriding the thoughtless use of the term with the suggestion that we boycott merchants that use the 'X' word in their Christmas advertising. But they simply hadn't checked the sources. 'X-mas' is a medieval Christian abbreviation for the holy day celebrated as Christ's birthday. The first letter in the Greek word, Christos, is the 'chi' pronounced, 'kie' (as in 'pie'). The Greek character looked like the Latin 'X' and thus the holy day celebration known as the 'Christ Mass' became 'Christmas' and was often indicated by the church as 'X-mas.' It is Christian tradition and an authentic way of referencing what we celebrate during this season.

Perhaps in the future, rather than bemoan the good old days when everyone (?) respected the traditions, we should look for the proverbial silver lining when we see what looks like a dark cloud. Even in a culture that thinks it has risen above or grown beyond its religious impulses, there still remain seeds of faith that need only a little watering by the people of faith to grow to fuller expressions.

Me, I'm not overly concerned about how Wal-Mart, Macy's or Tractor Supply minimize the faith to maximize the profits. It's what I expect from them. What I am concerned about is whether the Christians among us will share their experience and understanding of the God who clothed himself with flesh and became a human being—Emmanuel—God with us. This is the work of the people of God and the Word that should escape our lips during the X-mas Holiday.

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## Saturday/Sunday, December 22nd/23rd

*A star shall come out of Jacob,  
and a scepter shall rise out of Israel..*

~ Numbers 24:17 (NRSV)

Christmas is, practically speaking, a birthday celebration.

Did Jesus celebrate his birthday? The truth is that we don't know. Josephus, a Jewish author of just a few decades after Jesus' time, said that people in Israel did not observe the date of their birth, but he goes on to explain that they don't want to encourage an occasion for heavy drinking, implying that maybe people were doing just that. But birthdays seem in the literature to be more of an Egyptian or outlander thing.

In Galilee or even Judea around the greater Jerusalem metropolitan area, you would say what your age was by how many Passovers you'd seen. "Oh, I've been around for about sixty-five Passovers, not that I made the trip to Jerusalem every time."

But the date of your birth was probably not known. Not in the sense that we are used to thinking about it. Maybe the time of year, the season, the month, but our obsession with the "day of" wasn't the concern of the ancients.

Tradition holds that Luke, in compiling his account of the life of Jesus, traveled around the Mediterranean interviewing eyewitnesses; this is partly supported by the two places where his gospel specifically says of Mary that she "treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart."

Would Mary have known the exact day? A mother today would be certain, but in a time and place without calendars or almanacs or watches, possibly not. It wasn't that long ago on the Appalachian frontier that people were fairly uncertain about their year of birth, let alone the day.

What is certain is that God's intentions entered the world in a decisive way through the life of someone we know as Jesus. There is no ambiguity about this; once there was a Jesus, and then there was, and he has been changing lives and impacting the world ever since. So the Western world dates time itself to this certain moment, even if precisely unknown: Before Christ, and then numbering "Anno Domini," years of Our Lord.

We don't have to be certain of the day on the calendar to know that the calendar changed, the world changed, and we have been changed because a star rose up, and a royal presence entered the world from heavenly realms.

O Lord most high, you came down low, and entered this world to save us, and to share with us your peace, and your power. Let us celebrate the coming of your Son into the world with joy, and also with a commitment to sharing; to share Jesus with those around us, and to share the love brought into our lives from you with everyone who needs to know that sort of heavenly love in our broken and hurting world. Amen!

**Rev Jeff Gill**

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## Monday, December 24th Christmas Eve

O God, you are never revealed so completely as in the face of the child of Bethlehem. Hear us as we give you thanks for those who today reveal your love in our world in his spirit.

We pray for those who give you hands by doing their best toward their brothers and sisters; for those who give you a mouth by speaking words of justice and peace for the broken and oppressed; for those who give your poverty the look of hope for your reign, revealing you simply by being your children, reflecting your beauty as did your only Son Jesus.

We hold up in prayer the lonely and hurting, the hungry and homeless, the sick and dispossessed, knowing that your heart has always been nearest those who are poor in spirit and least likely to be thought of as people touched by the hand of divinity.

As we remember how you came to live among us in the flesh, and as we celebrate that moment long ago which lives forever in the hearts of those who believe, and as we long for your fullness in our lives that we too might enflesh the goodness and love of Christ in our day, we ask that you would bless us, your church, to be food for the hungry and hope for those who are lost and alone—a living testament of Christ's faithfulness to you. May all who drink of your one spirit receive new life to give to those in our world who are thirsty for meaning and belonging.

Pour out your Spirit upon us, your people. Continue in our lives the mystery of Christmas. Let your Son become flesh in us, so that we may reveal you to our world all the days of our lives. Holy child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray. Cast out our sin and enter in. Be born in us today.

**Rev. Thaddaeus Allen**

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## Tuesday, December 25th Christmas Day

Please Read Luke 1: 46b – 55

In a sense, because of the cycle of the Julian calendar, the opening two lines of Wendell Berry's 6th poem in the 1987 Sabbath poems collection, "Remembering that it happened once, we cannot turn away the thought..." were fulfilled this year.

Yesterday, my day began and ended in worship, remembering that God came into this world in the form of a baby, named Jesus by his mother.

Berry describes the birth with these words, "...the Child bedded in straw, the mother kneeling over Him, the husband standing in belief he scarcely can believe, in light that lights them from no source we see..."

Like those earliest visitors to the stall where Mary gave birth, I could not turn away.

The mother of Jesus, upon learning she would give birth to God's son, responds with incredibly beautiful words, what the Church has named, "Mary's Song." In her song, Mary describes what Jesus' birth will mean: through his strength, he scatters the proud in the thoughts of their hearts; he has brought down the powerful from their seats of power, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry, and sent the rich away empty; and he has helped his people remember his mercy.

Mary's Song describes her understanding of what Jesus' birth means to the world. Berry uses these words to describe the moment of Jesus' birth, as one might have experienced it, standing at the open stall door, "...We stand with one hand on the door, looking into another world, that is our world, the pale daylight coming just as before...our white frozen breath hanging in front of us; and we are here as we have never been before, sighted as not before, our place Holy, although we knew it not."

"Remembering that it happened once, we cannot turn away the thought..."

May your remembering this Christmas Day enable you to experience more hope than despair; more peace than fear; more joy than sorrow; more love than hate; more light than darkness.

Blessings to all this Christmas Day.

Rev. John M. Richardson  
Retired Interim Regional Minister

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*We hope and pray that this year's Advent Devotionals have been a blessing to you. We extend a heartfelt thanks to all who contributed. And we wish each of you the Merriest of Christmas' and the Happiest of New Years. God Bless.*