

**Embracing  
The Christ**  
THIS CHRISTMAS

**ADVENT, CHRISTMAS AND EPIPHANY**

*with First Presbyterian Church, Franklin*

**DEVOTIONAL GUIDE 2025-2026**

# ADVENT, CHRISTMAS AND EPIPHANY

*First Presbyterian Church, Franklin*



# Embracing The Christ

THIS CHRISTMAS

## EACH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Lord's Day Worship 10:15 AM

### NOVEMBER 30-FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

*Matthew 24:36-44: Keep Watch*  
Advent Workshop: 9 AM

### DECEMBER 7-SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

*Matthew 3:1-12: A Message From The Edge*  
Youth Live Nativity and Chili Cook-off: 5 PM

### DECEMBER 14-THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Service of Lessons & Carols

### DECEMBER 21-FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

*Matthew 1:18-25: Keep Calm and Carry On*  
Service of Light: 5:30 PM

### CHRISTMAS EVE SERVICES

4 PM AND 6 PM

A Candlelight Service of Word and Sacrament  
Nursery available at 4 PM only  
*Luke 2:1-14: Surprise, It Is Christmas!*

### DECEMBER 28-FIRST SUNDAY AFTER CHRISTMAS

*Proverbs 26:22-23 and 1 John 4:16-18:*  
*I Resolve to Gossip More*

### JANUARY 4-SECOND SUNDAY AFTER CHRISTMAS EPIPHANY

*John 1:1-10: Testify to the Light*

## Matthew's Call For Us To "Embrace the Christ in Christmas"

**Prayer Prompt:** *O Lord, please slow us down. Teach us to wait with holy patience and to see your hand in the long story of grace. Amen.*

**Invitation to Advent's Journey:** I suppose if you listen closely this time of year, you can hear it—the sigh of a season worn thin. The department stores went up with garlands before the leaves were down. The Christmas carols came early without any thought to Advent, hollow and hurried. Somewhere between Black Friday and the endless stream of delivery trucks, we lost the hush. We lost the waiting. We lost the Christ in Christmas.

Where do we find him – the Christ? We only need to look in scripture to see the old stories calling us, and this year, we turn to Matthew, who would understand. Unlike his colleague Luke, Matthew's story doesn't start with angels singing over fields or shepherds running through the night. No, Matthew begins with a long list of names—Abraham, Isaac, Jacob—all the way down to Joseph. It's as if he's saying: Slow down. This story didn't begin yesterday. God has been working toward this moment for generations. This birth, this child, it's the culmination of a promise that has been ripening for centuries.

And maybe that's why Advent matters so much. It calls us back to the slow work of God. While the world rushes ahead to wrap up the year with wrapping paper and peppermint, the church lights one candle, focuses on one scripture story, offers up one prayer, and then waits. Advent teaches us to slow down and breathe again, to remember that salvation is not a slogan but a story—one that began in the very heart of God and took flesh in a manger.

"Embracing the Christ in Christmas" isn't about putting a slogan on a bumper sticker. It's about rediscovering the humility of the Holy One who came not in splendor but in a straw-filled manger. It's about noticing the Christ who shows up in the quiet, the overlooked, the in-between places—like a carpenter's shop in Nazareth, or a refugee family on the run to Egypt.

Because Matthew's Gospel begins not with "Merry Christmas," but with Emmanuel— "God with us." That is the heart of Advent. That is the Christ we embrace. God is indeed with us, and who was once lost is now found.

Welcome to the story of Jesus, and may you come to know him in this Advent Season.

Shalom,

Eddie Bellis, Interim Pastor



Embracing  
The Christ  
THIS CHRISTMAS

*Artwork by Mike Moyers*

**First Sunday of Advent - November 30, 2025**  
**Eddie Bellis: Embracing the Courage of Hope**  
*(If you have an Advent wreath, gather around it and light the first candle.)*

**Hymn:** [“My Hope Is Built On Nothing Less”](#)

**Matthew 24:36-44 – Reflection:** In Advent’s message, we pause and reflect on Christ’s return. Advent, which means "coming," calls us to anticipate the arrival of Christ, not just as a historical event but as a present reality in our lives today. In our story, Jesus reminds us of the importance of being ready for His coming, emphasizing that we do not know the day or the hour.

We light Advent's first candle, which serves as a symbol of hope. The candle represents optimism in the face of uncertainty and readiness for future developments. This hope is not a passive wish but a vibrant expectation that invites us to engage with our faith actively and meaningfully.



Matthew's message speaks to us in a world that often distracts us with its noise and chaos. Our everyday tasks, routines, and responsibilities can overwhelm us, and we may forget that Christ's presence is just as real in our daily lives as it was on that holy night in Bethlehem.

This Advent, may we nurture Christ's hope in our lives by setting aside time for quiet reflection, engaging more deeply in prayer, or reaching out to those in need. Take time to reflect on the ways we can embody Christ’s love in our homes and communities. Let us be like watchful servants eagerly waiting for His return while actively living out our faith through hope.

In our Advent journey, let us remember that preparation demands our attention. Let us look inward and reflect on how God's work of hope in our lives and those around us is essential. Let us embrace the Christ who offers hope at Christmas; it is not merely about celebrating presents and parties but about recognizing Him in our waiting and yearning. So, as we embark on these four weeks of anticipation, may we seek ways to embrace His presence, allowing it to transform our hearts and open our eyes.

May this Advent ignite a spark of hope within us, reminding us that we are not just waiting for the past to be replayed but are opening our hearts to the newness and joy that Christ will bring into our lives.

**Our Prayer to Embrace Christ:** *O God of hope, in a world that often feels weighed down by despair, we seek the embrace of Christ, who shows us the way of hope. We thank you for the examples of hope bearers who show us their courage and love. They remind us that we are never alone. May we strive to lift the burdens of one another. As we embrace this Christ of hope, let us be vessels of his light, illuminating the path for others. We offer this prayer in the name of the Bethlehem baby. Amen.*

[Spotify Advent/Christmas Hymn Playlist: fpcfranklin.org/advent](https://fpcfranklin.org/advent)

**We suggest listening to this playlist as you read and meditate on each daily devotion.**

**First Week of Advent:** *O Come, O Come, Emmanuel; Come Thou Redeemer Of The Earth; Come Thou Fount; Wait for the Lord; O Come All Ye Faithful; O Come Divine Messiah; In The Bleak Midwinter*

**Monday, December 1, 2025**  
**Barbara Heerman: Watching**

**Matthew 24:36-44:** What do you look forward to as Christmas approaches? Bright stars in the sky? Snowflakes? Christmas music? Decorations and lights on houses? A favorite TV special like “The Grinch Who Stole Christmas?” Lessons and Carols? The Live Nativity?

The scripture reading in Matthew cautions us to be watchful as we do not know when The Son of Man will come. WHAT? Isn’t it ALWAYS on Christmas? Our Presbyterian tradition celebrates the birth of Christ and puts less emphasis on the Second Coming when Christ will gather His followers to live with God in Heaven. Yet we all know that we want to be included as one of Jesus faithful disciples.

Our eyes may be more focused on the dates and times on our calendars than on the wonder and awe of the season. In Matthew 24, the sinfulness of life before Noah's Ark is compared to the sinfulness of modern life. If we don't focus on the teachings of Jesus and "love our neighbor as ourselves," we might not be seen as a faithful disciple. We must focus on the life that Christ wanted us to live. In Chapter 25 of Matthew, Jesus tells us to care for the naked, the hungry, the thirsty, the sick, the poor—if we reject them, we reject Him. As individuals, we need to be watchful for the people excluded because of illness, loneliness, or poverty. Jesus wants us to model our life on His, and he helped many people who were alone, sick, and poor. We don't know when the "Son of Man" will come again. Therefore, we need to spend our lives trying to live as Jesus taught us.

**Reflection:** What specific groups of people might your family watch for during Advent and the rest of the year? How can you help them?

**Prayer:** *Dear Jesus, please help us to be more watchful during Advent and throughout the year. Help us see the people to whom we need to show your love, so they can celebrate Christmas in a spirit of love. Amen.*

## Tuesday, December 2, 2025

### *Carolyn Smith: Lighter and Brighter*

**Isaiah 2:1-5:** Isaiah is a historical reminder of unsettled conflict with renewed promises. "Come, descendants of Jacob, let us walk in the light of the Lord." During the expected invasion, the prophet is planting a different course of response and reaction.

As we wait for the first holiday lights to greet us, traditional expectations are in every imaginable direction. May we look high, low, around the corner to hear, see, and believe the light shines in the darkness to guide us toward Christ.

This Christmas season is a special reminder of walking with Christ's promises and provisions. As we walk into each day, may we wake in gratitude for these ageless lessons. May we carry the light of Christ extending hope. May we remember to trust God's plans on steep challenging paths. When tensions or fear occur, transform our thoughts, words, and actions to your guiding light.

**Reflection:** Each time we see any holiday lights, we take a breath of life and exhale hope.

**Prayer:** *Dear Lord and Savior, may you light our path to bring tidings of hope to those in darkness. May our light shine brighter with you. Amen.*

## Wednesday, December 3, 2025

### *Rich Crim: Peace As We Wait*

**Isaiah 2:1-5:** In this Advent season, as we wait patiently for the coming of the Lord, let us do so with peace in our hearts. The text from Isaiah tells us that the Lord's temple will be above everything else, and when that happens, there will be peace between peoples and nations. We are reminded that Jesus did not come to lead Israel over other nations or to give the Israelites power over others. Jesus came to be the Savior for all people. He came to bring peace to everyone, not to raise some people over others.

When I am with friends and family during the advent season, at parties and get togethers, it is easy to feel at peace. But at other times, at work, while doing chores, or when running errands, it can be easy to lose that feeling of peace. When we feel that sense of peace slipping away, let us remember Jesus and his temple sitting above all else. To me, this means that when we place Jesus above everything else and live our lives according to his will, we can find the peace we are missing. As we refocus our thoughts on Jesus, may that feeling of peace return to us.

**Reflection:** When I am missing the feeling of peace in my life, where is my focus? How can I return Jesus to his proper place above everything else?

**Prayer:** *Dear God, help me to put Jesus in his proper place above everything else, so that I may feel his peace in my life. Amen.*

**Thursday, December 4, 2025**  
*Monique Jennings: A Call to Action*

**Romans 13:11-14:** I am writing this in the early morning while it is still dark outside, with a strong desire for more darkness and more quiet time before the day breaks and the busyness of life takes over. I love this dark, quiet time of day where I can sip my coffee in peace and, most days, ground myself with prayer and some sort of daily devotion (huge fan of “Jesus Calling” by Sarah Young for a brief, yet impactful daily message). I find that by doing this, I have the best chance of navigating my day with perspective on what really matters, calm and grounded in a grateful and loving heart.

Well, that is ‘most days’ – and did you catch ‘best chance’? I’ve had a challenging year, professionally and personally, and too often the sound of alarm sends my mind straight to my to-do list, which usually means straight to my computer to finalize a PowerPoint deck or knock out some seemingly urgent personal/mom administrative tasks. And when I’m stressed, fatigued, and distant from God, I know impatience, resentment, a resistance to forgive and distractions ‘of the flesh’ are not far behind. Those are my ‘deeds of darkness’ that frequent my silence confession on Sunday mornings. And while I know our God forgives us constantly, I appreciate the challenge of this scripture to live a Christ-centered life with urgency. This scripture also reminded me of our Sunday School discussion on the parable of the fig tree in Luke, which balances God’s grace and patience for us with a similar warning of our judgement day to come. I have a choice to make each morning before the daylight breaks: which call to action will I answer?

**Reflection:** God wants us to be part of what He is doing in this world, and He is encouraging us to respond to this call in our everyday lives. What are three simple things you can do this month to answer His call?

**Prayer:** *Dear God, I want to live a life that honors you. Today and every day, please help me to reset my focus on you, and to turn away from distractions that leave me spiritually empty. Fill me with your Holy Spirit so that each day I answer your call to extend love, kindness and goodwill in our world. Amen.*

**Friday, December 5, 2025**  
*Ryan Fox and Elliot Crim (Covenant Partner and Confirmand): Come and See*

**Isaiah 2:1-5:** If you have been a Confirmand or a Covenant Partner at First Presbyterian, Franklin, you know that we read the Gospel of Luke as part of the Confirmation experience. In our early meetings, Elliott and I read the first two chapters of Luke together. I couldn’t help but connect the first verses of Chapter 2 to Linus’s retelling of the birth of Jesus in A Charlie Brown Christmas. Either way you hear the story—either from Luke or from Linus—you know of Jesus’s humble beginnings among the animals and away from the people. You know of that special group of people, the magi from the east, who travel a long distance to see the newborn Messiah.

Notice how this story feels very different from what we read in Isaiah. The earthly return of the Lord is a literal mountain top experience, as we read in verse 2. Isaiah says we will find God in the highest of mountaintops. But what happens with the coming of the Messiah? Luke’s gospel tells us he arrives in a lowly manger. No wonder so many people were confused! A Messiah who comes to end fighting and bring prosperity to all, as mentioned in verse 4, first comes to us a baby. Rarely does a baby have the power, or ability, to complete such amazing feats!

There is one commonality we can see in the two second chapters: people, whether invited in Isaiah or mentioned in Luke, come and see the Lord. As we make our way in this hopeful time of Advent, let us prepare ourselves for the coming of the king, whether the king comes on the highest of mountaintops or lowliest of mangers.

**Reflection:** Where are we looking for the newborn king, the highest of mountaintops or the lowest of mangers? How would we prepare differently for Advent if we changed our answer?

**Prayer:** *Gracious God, you are indeed powerful and mighty. It would be exciting if you would come down in a powerful position to bring justice and prosperity quickly. However, in this Advent season, give us the patience to wait. To wait for a coming mercy. To wait for a hopeful future. We ask for the patience of waiting in the name of the soon-to-be newborn king, Jesus, our Savior. Amen.*

## Second Weekend of Advent - Saturday, December 6 - Sunday, December 7, 2025

*Eddie Bellis: Embracing a Path for Peace*

*(If you have an Advent wreath, gather around it and light two candles.)*

**Hymn:** "Prepare the Way" by Jacques Berthier © 1984

**Matthew 3:1–12:** You could hear him before you could see him. Out there in the wilderness, shouting over the wind, the river running behind him is John, son of Elizabeth and Zechariah. Not the kind of fellow you'd invite to light the Advent wreath. Camel hair. Locusts. Wild honey. He didn't look like a preacher from the temple or a priest from Jerusalem. He looked like the desert itself had found a voice. And what a voice it was: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near!"



Now, repentance isn't the sort of word we put on Christmas cards. It doesn't sparkle or jingle. It doesn't sell well in December. However, John was never particularly skilled at marketing. He was too busy telling the truth. Before Christ could come, the clutter had to be cleared. Not just the clutter of our schedules or shopping lists, but the clutter of our hearts: pride, bitterness, and grudges. The places we've made that are too crowded for God to enter.

John stands by the river like a holy bulldozer, saying, "Make room." And people did. They came by the hundreds, stepping into the cold water, confessing their sins, turning their faces toward a new beginning. Even the religious folks came out to watch — the Pharisees, the Sadducees — and John turned to them and said, "Don't think your pedigree will save you. God can raise children from these stones."

Advent, you see, isn't just about looking back at Bethlehem. It's about looking ahead — clearing a path for Christ to walk again through the wilderness of our lives. Every year, we say we want to "keep Christ in Christmas." But John reminds us: before we can keep Him, we must make room for Him.

So, as you light the second candle — the candle of peace — listen for that wild, gracious voice crying in the wilderness of your own heart. Make straight the path. Let go of what you don't need because Someone is coming — not to decorate your life, but to transform it. And if you listen closely enough, you might hear the sound of water running and grace beginning again.

**Our Prayer to Embrace Christ:** *Creator God, John the Baptist calls us to prepare the way for your coming. We thank you for this call to embrace a path of peace, a path that often requires us to reflect upon our own hearts and our relationships with one another. We confess we stray from this path, choosing bitterness over forgiveness, and conflict over reconciliation. Grant us the courage to turn from the wilderness of our own making, where pride, greed, and division dwell, and guide us toward the rich soil of humility, compassion, and understanding. Prepare us for your presence in our lives, and may we also work tirelessly to embody your message of peace within our communities. Let our actions reflect your love, sowing seeds of kindness and mercy wherever we go. In the name of the Bethlehem baby, we pray. Amen.*

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*Second Week of Advent: In Dulci Jubilo; Ecce Novum; Peace Child; Ubi Caritas; Angels We Have Heard on High; Coventry Carol; We Three King*



## Monday, December 8, 2025

*Sam Belcher, Director of Youth Ministries: Christmas is for Everyone*

**Romans 15:4-13:** Every year on Christmas Day, after starting the celebrations with my dad's side of the family in Nashville, my parents, sisters, and I quickly pack up the car and head to Jackson, TN, where my mom's side of the family is based. This holiday drive is always a bit eerie, as the interstates are as empty as they'll ever be. And yet, if you're watching, you'll see small signs of life. Truckers, still dutifully hauling wares across the country. A handful of restaurants, mostly chains, still open to catch that holiday rush. Gas station attendants, helping travelers like ourselves move along our way. People for whom, perhaps, Christmas is not the joyful celebration and day off that it is for many of us. They may not get to experience the merriment of the holiday for a variety of reasons: needing to work for the money to make ends meet, estrangement from family, or simply a dislike or separate belief system from the holiday. To some, the good news of Christmas is not good news.

Paul's words to the church in Romans 15 bring to mind these individuals, as he talks about how the glory of Christ and the good news of the gospel has come for both the Jew and the Gentile. Imagine the first century outsider, looking into the early church. They saw Jewish believers celebrating that their Jewish messiah had come to save them. As Gentiles, was this even good news? Or was it like watching others celebrate Christmas with family, while you're left alone to wait tables and make ends meet? Paul makes sure in his letter to convey the radical truth: Jesus lived, died, and resurrected for everyone. His love knows no boundaries of race or class, and he invites all to join in the joyful celebration.

**Reflection:** As we go throughout this Advent season, let us keep a special eye out for those who might feel like outsiders. For whom might Christmas not be good news? For whom might the Christian gospel not sound like good news? Let us emulate Paul in our words and deeds and make sure that everyone knows that they have a seat at the table.

**Prayer:** *Welcoming God, we thank you that you do not divide us by race, creed, language, background, or any other human category, and you chose to send Jesus for the salvation of all. In a holiday season that can tend to keep us focused on ourselves and our own circles of people, draw our eyes out to the margins. Let us recognize Christ in every person, and may our words and deeds invite them all to experience his love and care. Amen.*

## Tuesday, December 9, 2025

*Sadie Lahey and Leanne Hoeffler (Confirmand and Covenant Partner): The King of Hope*

**Psalms 72:1-7:** This passage describes the ideal king: one who exemplifies God's justice and righteousness. This, of course, reminds us of Jesus.

The whole hope of Advent is found in the promise that God sent Jesus, the perfect King, to stand up for the oppressed and the needy. He came not just to rule, but to bring true peace and righteousness for all of God's people.

As we've explored in our Confirmation class and in our time together, sharing God's love isn't just a lesson—it's how we live out the hope Jesus brought to the world. Our church provides practical ways to live out this love, from serving the community through the FISH program and connecting at Sunday Night Summit to participating in youth mission trips. But sharing God's love isn't just about big events. We also do it in the ordinary moments of the day: with a genuine smile, by offering kindness to someone who isn't kind to us, and by taking the time to truly listen to a friend in need.

Jesus brought peace to a broken world long ago, and He still upholds this promise today and forevermore. By serving others, we join Him in that work.

**Reflection:** Where can you intentionally stand up for someone or serve a need this week to share the hope of Christ the King?

**Prayer:** *Heavenly Father, we pray for the strength and wisdom to see the needs around you and to live our faith just as Jesus taught us. Amen.*



**Wednesday, December 10, 2025**

*Kelly Kan: Finding Hope*

**Romans 15:4-13:** The Christmas season has a profoundly reiterated theme surrounding the idea of hope. The wise men and shepherds hoped for the Savior's birth, Mary and Joseph hoped for the Lord's fulfillment, and children all over the world now hope for Santa's ever-exciting presence and gifts he leaves behind. In my own personal life, I hope for a number of things, Christmas-related and non-Christmas-related. I hope for the food during Christmas dinner to turn out well, I hope to get the biggest tree my family can feasibly fit through our front door, I hope to get good grades on my mid-term exams, I hope it snows, causing the such great unfortunate sadness of missing two to three days worth of school.

We as a people are made to be a hopeful kind. God gave us such a gift to hope, to aspire for a better world, but it is vulnerable to hope; the more we hope, the more we can be disappointed. Hope does not promise a win. It does not promise planned perfection or things to turn out exactly as we might have wanted. For those who bear the scars from the hurt of this world, hope can be too risky, too unrealistic. For the families who hope to make ends meet, or for the children who hope to receive at least one wave, one smile at school, their hope is not always met. We strive to become a hopeful culture. One that believes hope isn't flimsy, but how can that be when such suffering is in the world, when such non-hope aspiring actions and events transpire every minute?

The times of our world often make hope seem impossible, but cynicism can not change the world; only hope can. During the suffering of the world, hope challenges us to declare that we can do better and empowers us to make it so. It does not promise flawless outcomes, but it does promise progression. It promises change, no matter how small it may seem to us. The wise men hoped for Jesus; they didn't know, they weren't sure, but they hoped, and in that hope alone they took the journey to find their newborn king. In Romans 5:4-13, it expresses, "For everything that was written was written to teach us, so that the encouragement provided by Scripture might give us hope". God gave us such a wondrous ability to hope, and it is a radiant reflection of God's plan for the world, plans for renewal and restoration, even in the face of despair.

Every day, we are given the chance to choose hope, even when it disrupts our understanding and expectations (perhaps especially then). So I encourage you to use your hope to work wonders in God's world. Remember those who are living without or with little hope. I encourage you to pray for those who have seen their hope lit, only to be blown out by the world's unforgiving winds. I ask you to pray for those who are hopeless, who have suffered far too much, who have been forgotten, or let down. Reflect on how you can embody hope during uncertain times and how you to share your hope with others, and spread the hope that Jesus spread. Through this Christmas season, and all the seasons to come.

**Reflection:** Is it harder to hope in peaceful times or in difficult times? Were there difficult times where you chose cynicism over hope? How can we as individuals, as a church, and as a community use our hope, instead of our cynicism, to seek and empower a better world?

**Prayer:** *Lord, may you, in this Christmas season, teach us what it truly means to hope with your plan in mind. May you empower us to spread our hope to your people, who have been left hopeless by our broken world. May we not forget about those who are suffering from a lack of hope, and may we keep them in our prayers during this season and seasons to come. Give us comfort in knowing you will not fail us or forsake us, and allow us to celebrate in the hope you give this Christmas. Bring us joy and celebration for the birth of Jesus and the hope he brings to your people. Amen.*



## Thursday, December 11, 2025

*Chuck Cairatti: Great Leaders*

**Psalm 72:1-7 & 18-19:** Give the king your justice, O God, and your righteousness to a king's son. May he judge your people with righteousness, and your poor with justice. May the mountains yield prosperity for the people, and the hills, in righteousness. May he defend the cause of the poor of the people, give deliverance to the needy, and crush the oppressor. May he live while the sun endures, and as long as the moon shines, throughout all generations. May he be like rain that falls on the mown grass, like the showers that water the earth. In his days may righteousness flourish and peace abound, until the moon is no more. Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, who alone does wonderful things. Blessed be his glorious name for ever; may his glory fill the whole earth. Amen and Amen.

Walter Brueggemann and William H. Bellinger Jr. in *Psalms* (New Cambridge Bible Commentary) state "It is clear that the king is a pivot point for theology and for the connection between theological claim and socioeconomic policy." Solomon is critiquing the kingship of Israel. While many would say this passage speaks to our current political situation, I want to explore a different perspective.

Do we act like kings? How often do we make decisions that impact the lives of others? How do we use the resources entrusted to our care? How do we care for, guide, and teach each other? How do we establish a vision for our future? These are all expectations of a leader!

I find leadership an interesting behavior. Many say great leaders are born. I think all leaders are taught, coached, mentored, and built upon the experience gained from practice. We can learn by studying great leaders. I learn more by watching the leaders close to me and asking questions.

**Reflection:** Jesus calls us to lead by loving God and loving our neighbors. Jesus doesn't expect all of us to be "great" leaders. There are many situations around us that can be improved by some good leadership. Open your eyes and heart, choose a need and get started!

**Prayer:** *Dear Lord, help me see the leadership opportunities that you present to us. Give me the strength to accept the challenge to change the world around me. Guide me to lead with compassion and love. Amen.*

## Friday, December 12, 2025

*Susan Freeman Burns: Stumps and Shoots*

**Isaiah 11:1-10:** One of my favorite places is Yellowstone National Park. I first visited the park as a small child on a family vacation. It made an indelible impression on me, and I have returned many times since. One of the most memorable – and dreaded return trips to Yellowstone was in the 1990s a few years after a devastating fire burned more than 700,000 thousand acres. Both my husband and I were concerned about what we would find when we visited. While evidence of the fire was still abundant, there were hopeful signs – most notably, all the green shoots coming from beneath dead stumps and burned-out logs on forest floors. The roots were still there, and park was beginning to renew itself. Each time we visited, we were amazed at how quickly the park was recovering. There were still vestiges of the fire, but, with each visit, streams ran clearer, wildlife grew more abundant, and mountainsides once covered with burned evergreens showed new signs of life.

Advent calls us to look ahead and consider what might be – to look for the green shoots when all we can see are the stumps. Isaiah's branch from the root in the stump of Jesse did eventually come to life - in the manger. Throughout his ministry, Jesus worked to heal creation and bring about the peaceable kingdom Isaiah so eloquently describes. That work continues in us today. In this season of Advent, may we be on the lookout for signs of God's renewal and re-creation in this damaged world, and work diligently to bring about God's kingdom.

**Reflection:** Look and listen for signs of God's renewal each day. As you end your day, take a few minutes to think about what you discovered. Give thanks and ask God to help you be a part of his ongoing work in the world.

**Prayer:** *Living God, give us eyes to see the new growth you are creating all around us, and the determination to work each day to bring about your kingdom. Amen.*

## Third Weekend of Advent - Saturday, December 13 - Sunday, December 14, 2025

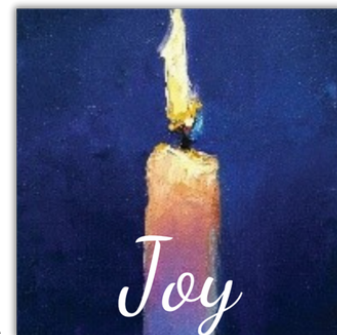
*Eddie Bellis: Embracing the Joy That Waits In the Dark*

*(If you have an Advent wreath, gather around it and light three candles.)*

**Hymn:** [“It Came Upon The Midnight Clear” by The Mormon Choir](#)

**Matthew 11:2–11:** It’s strange. John, the fiery prophet who thundered in the wilderness, who baptized the Son of God, who called out kings and crowds alike now sits in a cell, asking questions. The voice that once thundered in the Jordan valley is now reduced to a whisper behind stone walls: “Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?”

Usually, we imagine Advent with the smells of baked cookies, twinkling trees with decorations, and the laughter of friends. We do not think of bars and shadows. But sometimes joy begins in the dark. John’s message prepared the way and pointed to the Lamb of God, but now he is in prison. Where is the kingdom coming soon? Rome still ruled. Herod still schemed. The poor were still poor. And John? Where is he? He is in prison and still waiting.



So, he sent messengers to Jesus, and Jesus sent back no rebuke, no sermon, no lightning bolt — just evidence: “Go tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.” No fireworks. No spectacle. Just quiet mercy at work in the corners of the world. That’s how joy often arrives. Joy enters not as a shout, but as a whisper that grows.

Maybe that’s the hardest kind of faith to embrace and rejoice. Not because everything is alright, but because God is still at work making it so. To sing not because the night is gone, but because dawn is on the way. Our faith isn’t certainty but trusting God enough to keep walking even when we don’t see the end of the road. That’s John’s gift to us this Sunday — a faith that holds on, even behind bars, and a joy that refuses to die.

So, let us light the third candle, which is our candle of joy.

As you light this candle, recall that John reminds us that joy is not the absence of sorrow. Absolutely not! Christ’s joy is the light amid the shadows of waiting and the glowing lamps in the dark. And sometimes, when the waiting feels long and the darkness deep, may we be the oil that keeps a light burning.

**Prayer to Embrace Christ:** *Gracious God, in this moment, we come before you, echoing the questions that danced in the heart of John the Baptist. From the depths of our own uncertainties, we ask: Are you the one? Are you the one who brings joy amidst sorrow, hope amidst despair? As we ponder your presence, help us to embrace not just the Christ of our expectations, but the Christ of joy—who walks with us through our doubts and fears. O Lord, we ask that you open our eyes to see your miracles in the laughter of children and in the kindness of strangers. Let us find your joy in the joys of our everyday lives. Help us to proclaim the good news of your love with boldness. Let our lives be a testament to the joy that shines through even the darkest of days. In your name, we pray, the one who is both the question and the answer, the one who brings joy to all corners of our lives. Amen.*

[Spotify Advent/Christmas Hymn Playlist: fpcfranklin.org/advent](https://fpcfranklin.org/advent)

**We suggest listening to this playlist as you read and meditate on each daily devotion.**

**Third Week of Advent:** *We Toast the Days; O Magnum Mysterium; The Little Drummer Boy; Come Light Our Hearts; The Wexford Carol; Pie Jesu; God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen*

**ADVENT, CHRISTMAS AND EPIPHANY**

## Monday, December 15, 2025

*Michael P. Snoddy: Patience – Encouragement - Love*

**James 5 :7-10:** The season of Advent is one of waiting. We decorate the house, we break out the good china for its yearly bath, and we make holiday plans with those we hold dear. We also...wait.

The above passage in James was written as a sort of guide to members of an early church, as an example of both patience and love. He writes, in essence, the following: “Be patient...as the farmer waits...be patient... encourage one another, and don’t forget to love.” While written long ago, its message remains clear for a church in the 21st century, one that finds itself in an instant Starbucks culture of “now-ness.”

Growing up in Texas in a farming and ranching community, my mind is filled with earthy memories of both good and bad weather (particularly the tornadoes and hail); crops that “made” and those that did not; as well as the need to occasionally sell a portion of the herd because of challenging times. Friends, neighbors, and relatives who had such experiences knew how to be patient and also drank from a deep, deep well of strength and courage. James’ farming examples are poignant and clear and hit close to my boyhood home. During especially challenging days (or following an emotional disappointment), my late father used to say, “Tomorrow will be a better day.” He understood from experience that life can, and will, offer challenge and found avenues of encouragement (like these six words). I still remember them today and draw strength from his example.

In addition to patience and encouragement, James reminds us of the importance of living in healthy community by not “grumbling against one another.” It seems he knew humanity well and felt that we might be missing the “larger picture” of faith if we did not practice patience, encouragement, AND love.

**Reflection:** In what ways might I become more patient and loving?

**Prayer:** *Lord Jesus, we thank you that you came to live among us and to show us the way of love. Help me to offer it to the whole world in your name. Amen.*

## Tuesday, December 16, 2025

*Jean Acklin: FOREVER-Mary's Song of Praise*

**Luke 1:46-55:** As I read and reread Mary's Song of Praise, it touches my heart, my mind and my soul. It reminds me of everything that Advent should renew within me. It reminds me of everything that came before, of what is in the present and what is to be in the future.

God chose for an infant to be born to Mary. He chose for his people to discover this miracle baby, to watch in awe as this child reached his full growth and to listen as this child spoke to his people as an adult. Luke 1:37 tells us "For nothing shall be impossible with God." God intended for us to witness the human development into his beloved son.

This is what Advent should be for all of us common human beings here on God's earth. It is, of course, a time to celebrate our families and to watch as our children grow. It is more than the joy of Christmas preparations. We gleefully share holiday decorations and shop for treasures to gift to our loved ones. We plan for family gatherings and reunions with those close to our hearts. These plans are very important to everyone. We should treasure our family traditions.

Mary's Song of Praise is more than the celebration of Jesus' birth. It is a reminder of all of God's love from generation to generation. When you read her Song of Praise it is about God's mercy, his promise, his strength, his power, and his help for those who believe in him and his son.

This Advent season should be a reminder to us all that it is important to celebrate Jesus' birthday and what it means to our personal relationship to God. The renewal of belief in the relationship of God to his human people will usher each of us into the new year with his love.

**Reflection:** Where is your personal and family's relationship with God this Advent season? Are you prepared to renew your love of God's purpose for us through the birth of his son?

**Prayer:** *Heavenly Father, we pray that this season of Advent will renew us all in your purpose of the birth of Jesus, his life and lessons and your words to us through him. We praise and honor Mary and your gift of Jesus to us. Amen.*

**Wednesday, December 17, 2025**  
*Ann Crim: Anticipation, Waiting, and a New Way to See*

**James 5 :7-10:** Life is fast paced. We scroll and swipe and are primed for instant answers. It can be frustrating to wait for a website to load, a text response or a package in the mail. It's easy to complain. . . we say things like, 'why is this taking so long?' or 'may I open a Christmas present early? I can't wait any longer!'

Question: How can we be patient as we wait?

Perhaps waiting looks like pausing before we speak or taking a deep breath when someone cuts us off in traffic. Instead of complaining, we could consider a more thoughtful response.

Let's look at an example of patience. Imagine an optical illusion – one picture that has two images within one another. (You've seen the lady/vase drawing?) One person sees one image, while a second person sees another. Only seeing one image and not the other can be frustrating. Instead of saying, "I can't see it, I can't see it!", regroup and wait. Wait. . . relax your eyes, give yourself a moment, and then you can see. The second image may not pop out immediately, but if we strengthen our resolve, and wait, then we see. Similarly, as we anticipate the coming of Jesus, we must stay steadfast and believe that there is an amazing gift coming.

**Reflection:** God has given us comfort and direction during this waiting period. Verse 10 tells us to use the prophets as "an example of patient resolve and steadfastness" (Common English Bible). Let us be like those prophets who were speaking of God.

**Prayer:** *Dear God, as we anticipate the coming of our Lord, help us to be patient. Help us catch ourselves as we start to complain and instead, try to take another viewpoint. Strengthen and quiet our minds. Help us feel a sense of resolve as we wait, for we know that you give us all that we need. Amen.*

**Thursday, December 18, 2025**  
*Jennifer Heath: Growth*

**James 5: 7-10:** A few times every year, I make the 5-hour trek to visit my mom in northeast Arkansas, an area that is mostly Mississippi delta farmland. As I make my way along I-40, the rolling hills and curvy roads stretch and settle and gradually give way to farms. Cotton fields and wheat fields peek out among the trees from Jackson to Memphis, but when I cross the bridge into Arkansas, the farmland opens up and expands into something altogether different with fields in every direction, as far as the eye can see.

I love to see the changes in the farmland over the course of the year. Tractors stirring up dust in the spring during planting season, the huge irrigation systems bringing rain in the summer, the rich green of the rice fields swaying right before the harvest. And the quiet, restful calm of the empty, barren fields in winter, patiently waiting for the seeds that will be sown the next year.

James 5:7-10 tells us that we must be patient like the farmer who carefully tends his fields and waits for his crop to grow and flourish. The farmer has faith in the sun and the rain, but he also knows the work he must do to bring about the growth and the harvest.

**Reflection:** Sometimes in the spring and the summer, I notice fields that are still empty and barren, even though the season is in full swing. Every few years, farmers must let the fields rest and rebuild their supply of nutrients in the soil so the following year that field can produce a healthy crop. Like the farmer, we must recognize when we are depleted and allow ourselves to rest. Life includes both joy and sorrow; we all experience seasons of healing and seasons of growth. We must be patient at all times, trusting the Lord to provide and guide our steps and trusting ourselves to recognize and embrace our current season.

**Prayer:** *Lord, grant us your mercy in our times of healing and your joyful spirit in our times of growth. May we be patient and trust in you, knowing that you tend to us always. Amen.*



**Friday, December 19, 2025**  
*Nancy Faye: Questions*

**Matthew 11:2-11:** John has questions?? He finds himself in a dark hole after he has faithfully proclaimed the coming of the Messiah! His entire life was purposed by God for this: prophesying "Prepare the Way of the Lord." Now, he needs reassurance. John needs a SIGN! With boldness, he sends two disciples to find Jesus and ask Him "are You the One, or are we to wait for another?"

Jesus uses this opportunity to encourage John. He could have chastised him for doubting, instead Jesus uses scripture of the old prophets who preceded John. These words ring familiar, written on their hearts since childhood "Remember, the blind receive sight, the deaf hear, the lame walk, the leper is cleansed, the poor are fed, and the dead are raised up."

Then Jesus turns to the crowd following Him and continues: "I tell you there is no greater among men than John. For it was foretold "Behold I send my messenger to prepare the way before Thee."

**Reflection:** The message is true today. Preparation is essential to receive Him. This is the time, and if we are ready, we shall know Him when He comes.

**Prayer:** *Dear Lord Jesus, help us to use this season of Advent to prepare our hearts; hear the words of those who have gone before, and be reassured of His coming. Amen.*



## Fourth Weekend of Advent - Saturday, December 20 - Sunday, December 21, 2025

*Eddie Bellis: Embracing Christ's Love*

*(If you have an Advent wreath, gather around it and light four candles.)*

**Hymn:** ["O Little Town of Bethlehem" by King's College Choir, Cambridge](#)

**Matthew 1:18-25:** Joseph didn't have many lines in the Christmas story. In fact, he doesn't say a word. He listens. He dreams. He obeys. And in that quiet obedience, love is born into the world.

When Matthew tells the story, he begins not with shepherds or mangers, but with a dilemma—a man caught between what is right and what is kind. Joseph learns that Mary, his fiancée, is pregnant. The law gives him options. His heart gives him pause. He chooses mercy.



Our faith, like Joseph's faith, is not just believing the unbelievable—it's doing the unreasonable. It's stepping into a story that doesn't make sense, trusting that God is at work behind the scenes. Joseph doesn't understand everything, but he knows enough to stay. And that's love. Perhaps our faith is bolstered as Matthew's gospel begins with a genealogy full of surprises—outsiders, scandal, and grace. Maybe Matthew wants us to know from the start that God's story has always been written in crooked lines, that love has always made its home among the unlikely. Joseph becomes the next name in that long line of grace.

When the angel says, "Do not be afraid," it's not just for Joseph. The angel speaks to us and for us. Don't be afraid to love when it's hard. Don't be scared to stay when others walk away. Don't be frightened to trust that what is conceived in the chaos of our world might still be from the Holy Spirit. In the birth of the Bethlehem baby, we see that God's love doesn't wait until the circumstances are right. Love shows up in the middle of confusion, in the ache of uncertainty, in the dark hours before dawn. Joseph shows us that love is not a feeling—it's faith with skin on.

With our lighting the fourth candle of love, the story of Joseph invites us to make room for Christ in the quiet corners of our hearts. We are asked to believe that God is still at work, still speaking in dreams, still weaving redemption through ordinary people who choose mercy over judgment, faith over fear, and love over law. And when we do, the promise of Emmanuel—God with us—becomes not just a story we hear, but a life we live.

**Our Prayer to Embrace Christ:** *O Lord, we light this candle, and we remember Christ's love for this broken world that you made and called good. May his love for others fill us, and may we share your love with others. May your love transform our hearts and guide our actions, so that we may become vessels of your peace in a world that desperately needs it. Amen.*

[Spotify Advent/Christmas Hymn Playlist: fpcfranklin.org/advent](https://fpcfranklin.org/advent)

**We suggest listening to this playlist as you read and meditate on each daily devotion.**  
**Fourth Week of Advent:** *Kyrie; Gabriel's Message; Ave Maria; Cradle Hymn; Cro na Nollag; Mary, Did You Know?; O Radiant Dawn*

### Monday, December 22, 2025

*Terrence R. Love: The Gift for All*

**Romans 5:18; Luke 2:14:** Advent always begins with a small light — one candle flickering against the darkness. That little flame reminds us that God's promises are still alive, even when our world feels uncertain. It also reminds us of something even bigger: the light of Christ shines for everyone.

Paul writes in Romans that while one man's sin brought brokenness to all humanity, one man's righteousness — Jesus Christ's — brings life for all. That's the heart of the Gospel. The birth of Christ wasn't just good news for a few; it was the start of redemption for the whole world. The manger in Bethlehem was never meant to hold a private Savior. God declared that no one is beyond reach.

When the angels appeared to the shepherds, they said, “I bring you good news of great joy for all the people.” That word *all* still rings true today. God’s light is for the entire world, and that includes you, me, and everyone we might be tempted to overlook.

Hope is what we light first in Advent. It’s not blind optimism; it’s trust in who God is. Hope doesn’t deny the darkness — it just refuses to let the darkness have the last word.

Paul reminds us that Christ’s grace is stronger than any failure, any distance, any despair. God’s mercy doesn’t stop at the edges of our imagination. It runs deeper and wider than we can comprehend. The gift of Christ brings life for all — not just for those who seem “good enough,” but for everyone. That truth humbles me. It also gives me peace. Because if God’s love truly reaches everyone, then none of us is ever too far gone. Advent invites us to rest in that — to remember that God’s story is still unfolding, and His grace is big enough to gather us all in.

When the angels sang of “peace on earth, goodwill toward men,” they weren’t offering a holiday slogan. They were announcing a new reality — that through Christ, God’s heart of goodwill extends to everyone. Goodwill isn’t just about being nice. It’s about seeing the world through God’s eyes. It’s recognizing that all people we meet — whether they share our faith, views, or values — are deeply loved by God. It’s choosing compassion in a world that often chooses division. When we live with goodwill, we participate in God’s ongoing work of reconciliation. We become part of the same story that began in Bethlehem — a story where shepherds, strangers, and sinners all find a place at the table. That’s the radical message of Advent: God’s love is not exclusive; it’s all-inclusive.

Romans 5:18 gives us a breathtaking glimpse of God’s plan — that through Christ, life will come for all. We can’t fully explain how God will work that out, but we can trust that the One who came to save will not stop until His love has reached every heart.

Heaven, I believe, will be fuller than we imagine. The God who left heaven to dwell among us won’t rest until all creation is made whole. Advent reminds us that God is not finished yet. The story that began in a manger is still being written — in our lives, our relationships, and our world. So we wait with hope. We live with goodwill. And we trust that one day, all will be gathered in the light of Christ’s love — every tongue, every tribe, every heart finally home.

**Reflection:** This Advent, how can we live as people who believe in that promise — that God’s love is truly for all? How can we treat others as people for whom Christ came? How can our hope burn bright enough to help others see the way? May our goodwill reflect the peace that comes from knowing we are all part of God’s great redemption story.

**Prayer:** *Loving God, You came to bring light and life to all the world. Help us to wait with hope and to live with goodwill toward all people. Teach us to see others the way You see them — as Your beloved children. And let our lives reflect the peace and joy of Your Son, in whose name we pray, Amen.*

## Tuesday, December 23, 2025

**Laura Marzano: Ignorant! Immoral! Unlawful! Unforgivable!**

**Matthew 1:1-7:** When I read scripture that describes events in Jesus’ life, I imagine what the possible conversations sounded like. Joseph’s betrothed turned up pregnant. “Ignorant! Immoral! Unlawful! Unforgivable!”

What conversations did Joseph have with family, friends, in-laws, or clergy? “Of course, I should divorce her, but publicly or privately? To stone or have mercy? Should I consider Mary’s feelings even though she’s the wrongdoer? And what about her family—even though they should’ve kept her in check? What does the law require?”

Any mercy could have implicated Joseph as the culprit, which would then bring shame on him and his family. “Didn’t we/his family/his teachers raise him better than that?” “Son, I know you guys were friends, but do NOT hang out with that Joseph anymore.”



The judgment, the whispers...of course, we can hardly blame anyone for not considering that God was the cause of this debacle. Who could've guessed THAT? When we decide who and what is right and wrong these days, we have access to ALL the possibilities and facts, so that we can make a proper judgment, don't we...Don't we? Of course not. Is there ever any way to really know the whole story when we condemn others? "Why did they do such a thing? Of COURSE they should throw the book at them! They shouldn't have made that choice in the first place! They knew it was unethical, immoral, illegal, unforgiven..." Hmm. Did I just do that?

**Reflection:** When do you find yourself judging others?

**Prayer:** *Lord Jesus, help me to remember that it is impossible for me to know all the facts, that I cannot walk in another's shoes, that I cannot worry about what others think when I support or refuse to pass judgment on another person's life choices. Help me to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with You, considering only what You would have me do, just as Joseph was instructed to do. I was hoping you could help me to distinguish between good and evil and live accordingly. Amen.*

## Christmas Eve - Wednesday, December 24

*Eddie Bellis: Embracing the Christ*

*(If you have an Advent wreath, gather around it and light the Christ candle.)*

**Hymn:** ["It Came Upon the Midnight Clear" by Mormon Tabernacle Choir](#)

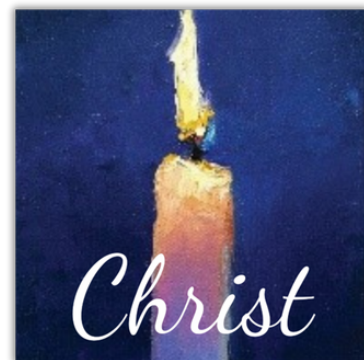
**Luke 2:1-14:** Our story for today does not begin "Once upon a time." It begins "In those days." God doesn't come to some imaginary world where things are clean, calm, and polite. God comes to our world—this one—where travel is hard, rooms are not to be had, and power often overshadows grace. It's here, precisely here, that the Word becomes flesh.

And if we're honest, we too live in "those days." Days crowded with noise and need, schedules and shopping lists, arguments and anxieties. We try to keep Christ in Christmas, but more often than not, it's Christ who keeps us in Christmas, holding us steady, turning our gaze toward the manger, whispering through the music and lights, "I am here." It is a wonder that God would choose such a setting for salvation. A barn filled with smells of hay and sweat and sheep, the rough hands of a carpenter, and the weary sighs of a young mother. But maybe that's the point. The gospel begins not where everything is holy, but where everything needs to be made holy.

And then—oh then—the angels. A whole choir of them breaking the night wide open. Not at the palace, but in the fields. Not to the priests, but to the shepherds. "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace." The announcement of peace comes first to those who could least afford it—those who worked through the night, those on the margins. That's the rhythm of grace. Heaven is bending low so that the lowly might be lifted.

To embrace the Christ in Christmas is not to hold onto a holiday, but to be held by a Savior. It's hard to believe that in every ordinary place, God is doing something extraordinary. It's to hear the angel's song not as background music but as a calling: "Go and see." So, go! Leave the busyness, the brightness, the bustle. So go to Bethlehem. It may be no farther than your own kitchen table, your neighbor's doorstep, or a hospital room at midnight. There, you will find Him—wrapped not only in swaddling clothes but in love that will not let you go.

**Our Prayer to Embrace Christ:** *Holy God, you come to us not in the grand halls of power, but in the quiet corners where hope trembles and faith is born. You slip into our world wrapped in vulnerability, and we nearly miss you—busy as we are counting, buying, doing. Yet, You wait for us, in the stillness, in the manger of our own hearts. You wait for us to stop long enough to hear the rustle of angel wings, the murmur of shepherds, the sigh of a world that has just been loved again. So come, Lord Jesus. Come into our crowded lives and weary spirits. Come where joy is thin and peace feels far away. Come with your quiet power and steadfast love. For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Savior is given, and we will not be the same again. Amen.*



## Christmas Day - Thursday, December 25

*Eddie Bellis: Embrace the Bethlehem Baby*

*(If you have an Advent wreath, gather around it and light the Christ candle.)*

**Hymn:** [“Where Shepherds Lately Knelt” by Atlanta Master Chorale](#)

**Luke 2:1-14:** It was just another night on the hills outside Bethlehem, cold and quiet. The kind of silence and calm that presses against your ears. I had my cloak pulled tight, my staff leaned across my knees, as I watched the sheep breathe clouds of mist into the dark. Nothing ever happens out here, not to people like us. We’re the ones who smell like the fields with our hands rough and our speech plain. We keep our distance from the holy places because, truth be told, we don’t belong there.

And then, suddenly, the sky split open. I don’t have words for it—light everywhere, spilling down the hills, flooding the stones and the sheep and my own shaking hands. I thought the world was ending. But then came a voice—so full of joy it made my heart ache: “Do not be afraid; for see, I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people...”

Does “all the people” mean me? Does that mean “Even us?” Yes, that means especially us. We didn’t wait to be told twice. We ran, stumbling over rocks and roots, hearts pounding faster than our feet. When we found the place, it wasn’t what I expected. No throne, no guards, no gold. What did we see? We witnessed just a tired young couple and a baby lying in a feed trough. But when Mary looked up at us, smiling through her weariness, something inside me cracked open.

There was no choir now, no light from heaven, just the soft sound of a newborn breathing. And I knew—without anyone having to tell me—that this child was the one. God had come close enough to touch. We left that place in a different state than when we arrived. The sky seemed brighter, the air warmer, the sheep more precious somehow. We couldn’t keep it to ourselves—we had to tell someone. Anyone. Everyone. The world had changed. We changed, too.

To embrace the Christ in Christmas is to see through the shepherd’s eyes and find holiness in the most ordinary of places. To see with Shepherd eyes is to witness to our God who still shows up in the fields of our lives: in the night shift at the hospital, in the quiet kitchen after the family has gone home, in the lonely or forgotten corners of our hearts. The good news of Christmas isn’t that God came once a long time ago. It’s that God keeps coming. Our God is still coming, and God comes again. God comes to the lowly, the weary, the left out, and the overlooked.

So, pause for a moment today. You belong here. Step outside and feel the cold air against your skin. Look up and see the same stars that shone over Bethlehem shine on you. And if you listen closely enough, you might hear the echo of wings and a familiar refrain: “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors.” Embrace Christ this Christmas Day.

**A Christmas Day Prayer:** *O Holy One, on this day, we remember that you broke into this world in the form of an infant. In his coming, we are stunned that he did not arrive in thunder or triumph, but he became a small cry of a newborn child. Teach us to recognize your nearness in the rough places of our lives, and to see your glory in the faces of the forgotten. Let our hearts, like those shepherds long ago, be quick to seek, quick to wonder, and quick to tell the world that you are here. Amen.*



Embracing  
The Christ  
THIS CHRISTMAS

**Friday, December 26, 2025**  
*David Bell: A Messenger*

**Isaiah 7:10-16:** ... “Therefore, the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, a young woman shall conceive and bear a son and shall call his name Emmanuel.”

I confess I have difficulty with parts of the Old Testament, including the Old Testament God, which, I presume, does not make me unique. The Old Testament starts out beautifully with the creation story, better than the best efforts of any physicists and cosmologists. But in the Garden of Eden, a wheel drops off when the serpent shows up; henceforth, the good message is interlaced with mayhem. There is moral and personal evil, including disobedience to God, murder and violence, lust and sexual immorality, greed and deceit, injustice and oppression. Idolatry is everywhere, the golden calf being Israel’s first major act of apostasy, followed by child sacrifice, witchcraft, and divination. Kings and priests enrich themselves by exploiting the innocent, the poor, widows, and orphans. Sounds like today’s world; perhaps that is the point.

God offers opportunities for redemption, but apparently His patience is not unlimited, and his judgment can be harsh. Flooding the world, destroying Sodom and Gomorrah, the plagues of Egypt, the generation of Israelites that died in the desert, Jericho’s destruction, Babylon’s destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, and countless divine fires, the earth swallowed up, and child deaths. That is a serious disciplinarian.

But wait, there is more to the story, and it comes to us first in the Old Testament. Apparently, God concluded we were not figuring things out, so he sent a new messenger with a novel message.

I expect all Christians to love the above Isaiah verse. Although it is the one most often recited, it is not the only Old Testament passage that foreshadows or hints at Jesus.

In Genesis, “The scepter will not depart from Judah ... until he to whom it belongs shall come.” Similarly, in Numbers, “A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel.” In 2 Samuel, God’s covenant with David, “I will raise up your offspring after you ... and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.” In the Psalms, we read, “They pierce my hands and my feet ... they divide my clothes among them,” and “They put gall in my food and gave me vinegar for my thirst.” Even more specific in Micah, “From Bethlehem ... will come one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from the old,” and from Malachi, “I will send my messenger ... then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come.”

**Reflection:** Jesus is the antidote for the problems I have with the Old Testament. He is also the antidote for the challenges we have in life. This is a beautiful time of the year, a time when we can recommit to living the message. The question is, will we carry the message to others marching in this great, historic parade, or will we just sit in the viewing stands?

**Prayer:** *Eternal God, we are grateful for sending us the Bethlehem baby and for the wisdom found in your Word. Help us reflect on the stories of the Old Testament, recognizing both the struggles and the redemptive threads that weave throughout. Inspire us to carry Jesus’ message of love, hope, and redemption into the world around us. Let us not be mere spectators, but active participants in sharing your truth with those we encounter. May Your love shine through us, drawing others to the beauty of Your grace. In Your holy name, we pray. Amen.*



## First Weekend After Christmas - Saturday, December 27 - Sunday, December 28, 2025

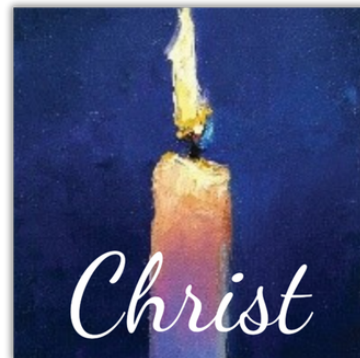
*Eddie Bellis: Embracing the Love That Travels Far*

*(If you have an Advent wreath, gather around it and light the Christ candle.)*

**Hymn:** ["O Come, All Ye Faithful" at Westminster Abbey](#)

**Matthew 2:13-23:** What do we do after Christmas is over? After the angels finish their song and the shepherds return home, and the magi pack up their gifts and depart by another route, the story takes a darker turn. Matthew tells us that an angel again visits Joseph in a dream. Our angel's voice is not a shout, but that quiet voice of God that speaks when the world is still enough to listen: "Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt."

The surprise is in the response. All we read is that Joseph gets up and goes. We expect speeches, hesitation, and bargaining. Yet, we encounter just obedience. And what is obedience but faith in motion?



And so, the Christ child, not yet speaking a word, begins to live out the story of God's people. Israel, which means struggle with God, is witnessed in the story of a refugee family, the story of deliverance, the story of one who enters our broken geography and redeems it from within the pain of a government slaughter of innocent babies.

In this part of the Christmas story, we begin to see what "Embracing the Christ in Christmas" really means. We embrace the tender image of a baby in a manger, as well as the trembling child on the run. Immanuel is our God who enters the world's danger in the family chased from their home, and our God does not look away. To embrace this Christ is to welcome God's vulnerability, to hold close the divine compassion that knows what it is to be displaced, hunted, and homeless.

Matthew will not let us romanticize Christmas. He reminds us that Herod's cruelty is still alive in every generation. We witness systems that crush the weak, in leaders who wield fear as a weapon, and in every heart that prefers power to peace. Yet even here, the light does not go out. Joseph's quiet faithfulness and Mary's steadfast courage are the sparks that darkness cannot extinguish despite Herod's evil plan.

So, embracing the Christ in Christmas means more than celebrating a birth; it means taking the side of the vulnerable. It means trusting the God who chooses the hard road of love over the easy throne of power. Even in exile, God is already at work preparing a way home. Our child will grow, and at the right time, the exiled family will return home. When he does, he will carry with him the story of every refugee, every displaced soul, every heart longing for home. That is the Christ we embrace. He is our companion for our journey.

**Embrace the Christ:** *God of refuge and redemption, in Christ you entered our danger and shared our exile. Embrace us with your presence in our dark and fearful places and enable us to trust your guiding light when the road is uncertain. In the name of the Bethlehem baby, we pray. Amen.*

[Spotify Advent/Christmas Hymn Playlist: fpcfFranklin.org/advent](https://open.spotify.com/playlist/fpcfFranklin.org/advent)

**We suggest listening to this playlist as you read and meditate on each daily devotion.**

**First Week of Christmas:** *Carol of the Bells; The Lamb; The First Noel; Greensleeves; I Wonder as I Wander; Hark, The Herald Angels Sing; Amazing Grace*

**ADVENT, CHRISTMAS AND EPIPHANY**

## Monday, December 29, 2025

*Al Purvis: Fully Human*

**Hebrews 2:10-16:** Four days ago, we celebrated the birth of Jesus. From the fall of the first man and woman to the sin of disobedience, the Creator God sought to bring all humankind back into a right relationship with him. The culmination of that plan was to take on human flesh and blood and live among humanity. That meant being born of a woman, suffer as humans suffer, and even undergo physical death. The man, Jesus, was fully human in every respect, yet he was also fully divine. I'm sure his mother, Mary, went through the same labor pains in birthing him that she did in birthing her other children and that our mothers go through to birth us. I am also sure that baby Jesus cried when he was hungry and when he was uncomfortable with a soiled diaper, just as we did in our infancy. Crying is the only way infants have of expressing their needs. It had to be so, otherwise Jesus would not have been fully human.

The writer of Hebrews tells us that Jesus underwent the same sufferings and stresses we do in life, and for that reason, he is not ashamed to call us brothers and sisters. Yes, Jesus shared with us flesh and blood, yet he was obedient to the Creator God even to death on a cross. The Creator God raised Jesus from physical death to eternal life. Just as Jesus could not escape physical death, neither can we. Our hope is that the same Creator God who raised Jesus to eternal life will also raise us to eternal life.

**Reflection:** How do you know that you are being obedient to God instead of just being obedient to your own selfish needs?

**Prayer:** *Creator God, recreate us in the image of the man, Jesus. Help us to be more obedient to your will for our lives and less to our own selfish wants and needs. Amen.*

## Tuesday, December 30, 2025

*Jaclyn Wetzel: Our Perfect Brother*

**Hebrews 2:10-18:** We are all children of God - this is a powerful statement to remind ourselves when struggling to understand differing perspectives or hurtful behavior toward us. I find it provides spiritual clarity that each and every person is linked to our Holy Father. This opens our hearts to more compassion toward our siblings as we realize we are connected, and we each fall short.

Jesus refers to us as his brothers and sisters, yet it is a relational description that is hard to accept. How can the Messiah - King of Kings, Holy Lamb of God - be my brother? As the scripture says in verse 11, "For the one who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one Father. For this reason Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters." We are so honored to have such a brother who knows of our shortcomings (when he is without fault!) and still accepts us into his family.

It was our Holy brother, Lord Jesus who suffered through many tests yet always chose obedience to the Father and compassion for his siblings. Versus 18 "Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested." Jesus understands our struggles - the "flesh and blood" reality of being human... our self-righteousness, our tendencies toward not truly forgiving... but he also understands our ongoing effort to choose the Light and overcome the pull of the devil. Rejoice in our brother Jesus' atonement for our sins and his teachings that illuminate the Holy Spirit in our hearts! Thanks be to God!

**Reflection:** Be honest with yourself and identify top barriers (worldly possessions, mental, physical) that are preventing you from being present and treating each of God's children like our Holy brother. Create a plan and follow through on addressing top barriers - your spiritual joy will be contagious.

**Prayer:** *Lord, we pray you give us fresh eyes to truly see all our brothers and sisters around us just like our perfect brother Jesus did. Help us to give selflessly and love endlessly. Thank you for the deep joy your Spirit gives. Please guide us on the barriers we must resolve to draw closer to Jesus' leadership example. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.*

### Wednesday, December 31, 2025

*Jim Bryant: The Christ of Christmas – Our only Mediator*

**Hebrews 2:10-18:** On the night that Jesus was betrayed, he told Peter that he would disavow Jesus publicly three times that evening. But Jesus said that he had prayed for Peter that his faith may not fail; and when he turns back, Peter will strengthen his brothers.

Hebrews reminds us that Jesus Christ bore the wrath of God that we deserved. He is now our merciful high priest in service to God to make atonement for the sins of the people. As Jesus was fully human, he not only knows what our suffering is like; he also has been tempted in all ways like us. Despite our sins, Jesus is not ashamed to call us his brothers and sisters. And as he prayed for Peter that night, he continues to intercede for us to forgive our sins and to strengthen our faith.

I constantly stumble in my Christian life. Jesus' prayer for Peter reminds me how much Jesus cares for those whom he has saved. I take great comfort in knowing that I can turn to Jesus for forgiveness and understanding.

**Reflection:** In Christ we have a merciful high priest because he has been made like us; and because he himself has suffered as has been tempted. Reflect on the mystery of Jesus being fully human and fully divine, and on what they means to you.

**Prayer:** *Gracious God, let us never hesitate to turn to you for forgiveness and to strengthen our faith in you. Amen.*

### Thursday, January 1, 2026

*Marlene Cole: Listening for God*

**Matthew 2:13-23:** The passage poignantly recounts how extremely difficult life was for Joseph, Mary, and Jesus soon after Jesus was born. We can only imagine Joseph's fear when God sent a message to him that King Herod planned to kill his young son and instructed Joseph to move Jesus and Mary from Bethlehem to Egypt. Some scholars estimate this journey to be over 400 miles, which could have taken over a month to complete – not an easy trip. But, Matthew describes Joseph immediately following God's instructions.

King Herod wanted to be sure that he destroyed Jesus, so he did the unthinkable and ordered all the male children in Bethlehem and surrounding areas, age two and younger, to be killed. This breaks my heart when I read it and certainly speaks to the evil of man and the uncertainty of life during this time. Joseph had to be terrified for his family's future, but he was obedient, and he trusted God.

When Herod died, God sent a message to Joseph again, and instructed him to move his family from Egypt to Israel. This was another long and difficult journey, and they would be leaving the safety of Egypt to live in an area now ruled by Herod's son. But, Joseph listened for God's message and trusted God's plan.

It may be hard to truly understand the terrible circumstances and fear that Joseph faced, but Matthew describes Joseph following the path God outlined for him without hesitation and without question. In contrast, I've never faced adversity even close to the events in these verses. I have been very blessed, but I often mistakenly feel that I have the best plan for my life. These verses in Matthew remind me that I need to do a much better job of listening for God's messages and following the important instructions that are provided for me in the Bible.

**Reflection:** As we start this New Year, can we think of new ways to ensure we are listening for God's guidance and His plans for our lives. Are we missing any messages or opportunities to take action in serving Him?

**Prayer:** *Dear Lord, please help me to listen as You speak to me and to trust Your plan for my life. Lead me to follow Your word and to take actions to serve You. Help me to initiate these opportunities instead of waiting for them and to welcome commitments to do Your work. Amen.*

Embracing  
The Christ  
THIS CHRISTMAS

**Friday, January 2, 2026**  
***Kathy Garst: Entire Creation Praises God***

**Psalm 148:** During the Christmas season, Psalm 148 encourages us to pause during our Holiday activities and listen to the constant praise offered by Creation. We see how the story of Christmas highlights this universal praise through angels singing, the shepherds and wise men worshipping, and the presence of the animals in the stable.

Sometimes we are so busy preparing for the Holiday season that we forget or do not make time to slow down and recognize the things around us praising God, like a bright sunrise or sunset, a pretty winter sky, a change in temperature, bright stars shining in the sky on a clear night, or a beautiful snowfall. Even our Christmas trees, winter greenery, and flowers remind me how Creation praises God.

Looking back at my childhood, I am reminded that some of the most beautiful things of Creation's praise were right before me, our aromatic Fraser Fir Christmas trees, decorated with many, many bright lights, shimmering with tinsel icicles, and every ornament my sister, brother and I made since we were about three years old (which were wrapped more carefully than the heirloom ornaments passed down from generations), the smell of sugar cookies baking, and the wonderful meal we shared every Christmas afternoon with family and friends. By seeing the beauty in nature and remembering that Creation operates according to God's will, we can perceive and feel the praise that surrounds us.

**Reflection:** What gifts await if you take time this week to slow down, spend time with family, and consciously observe together Creation while praising God?

**Prayer:** *Heavenly Father, as all of Creation praises you, we ask that you open our hearts and minds during this season to understand the message of Psalm 148 and its connection with the Christmas season. We pray that we can join with all of Creation in praising you and remember that the hope of Christ's coming is for all of Creation. Amen.*



## Second Weekend After Christmas - Saturday, January 3 - Sunday, January 4, 2026

*Eddie Bellis: Embracing the Light that is Stronger Than Darkness*  
*(If you have an Advent wreath, gather around it and light the Christ candle.)*

**Hymn:** ["Shine Jesus Shine" at Graham Kendrick](#)

**John 1:1-10:** In the beginning—before shepherds and angels, before mangers and stars—there was the Word. John begins his Gospel not in Bethlehem, but before the dawn of time itself. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” It’s as if John stands at the edge of eternity and points to a light that has never gone out. Before creation sang, before human hearts could even break, the Word was already humming beneath it all—the melody of God’s love.



It is striking that John does not begin his Gospel with a story we can picture. He does not start with a baby, a journey, or a manger scene, but his story embraces the mystery with poetry and light. Perhaps that’s because the truth of Christmas is not confined to a single scene or night. It stretches backward into eternity and forward into every darkened corner of our lives.

“The light shines in the darkness,” John says, “and the darkness did not overcome it.” Notice he doesn’t say that there is no darkness. Advent, if we are honest, is full of it. The days are shorter, and the world can seem colder. This harsh break from the heat of summer and cooler fall days reminds us that the ongoing violence, division, and loss this world contains is all too real. But John insists that the light still shines. Not once shone, but shines—present tense, ongoing. This light is not fragile or fickle; it is stubborn and steadfast.

In every generation, God sends light into the shadows. The edges of flickering lights remind us that God’s word sometimes comes in unlikely places. The Word refuses to stay distant or abstract.

Today, as we complete our journey through Advent, we might listen for and embrace that Word spoken not just from pulpits or pages, but also whispered in our waiting, in our weariness, in our wonder. The true miracle of this season is not that we find our way to the light, but that the light, undaunted, finds its way to us.

**Our Prayer to Embrace Christ:** *Eternal Word, Light of the World, speak again into our shadows. Let your truth shine in our confusion, your hope in our fear, your love in our coldest nights. May we see your glory, full of grace and truth, and welcome you anew. Amen.*

[Spotify Advent/Christmas Hymn Playlist: fpcfranklin.org/advent](https://fpcfranklin.org/advent)

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**Second Week of Christmas:** *O Little Town of Bethlehem; O Holy Night; Silent Night; Joy To The World; Christmas Canon*

Embracing  
 The Christ  
 THIS CHRISTMAS



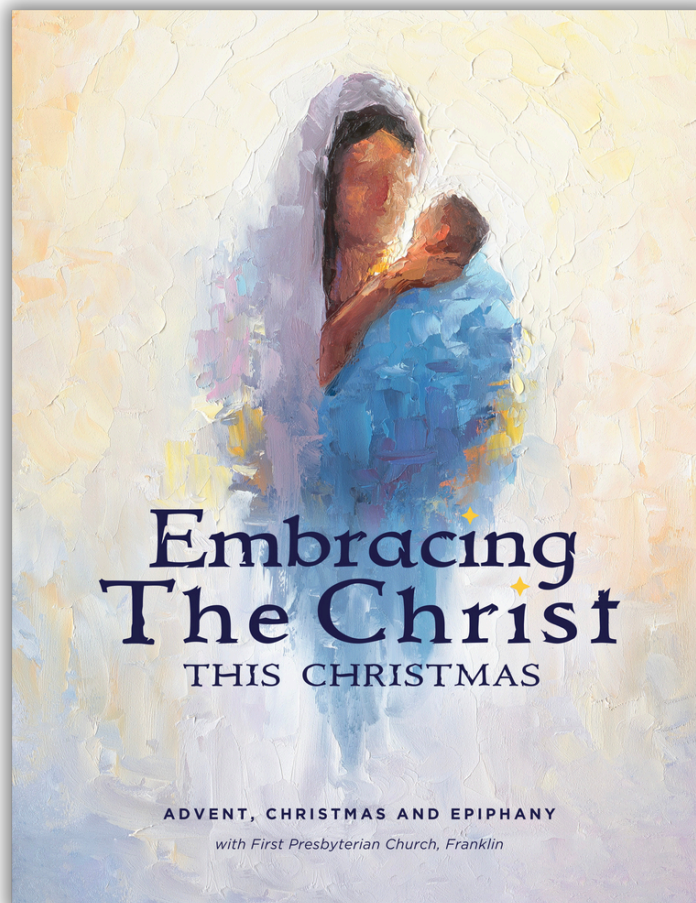
**Monday, January 5, 2026**  
*Anne Osborne: Coming Home*

**Ephesians 1:3-14:** In high school, I had the privilege of applying for college across the country and in my hometown and state. However, I was not interested in staying in the town or state where I grew up. I could not wait to spread my wings and explore the world. I knew there was more to see and do. I had the blessing of my parents to apply where I wanted, and they said they would find a way to make it happen. After being admitted to several schools, including those in my home state, I chose to attend a college hundreds of miles away in the Midwest. I was thrilled to “get away” from home and make my own mark on the world outside my family unit and high school friends and peers. I was blessed to have a supportive family who had the means to send me to my college of choice and knew I would always be welcome home. I also knew that God through Jesus Christ would always be my spiritual home no matter the physical location.

In Ephesians, Paul reminds us that God has blessed us in Christ “with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, just as He chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love.” We have also in Christ “obtained an inheritance, destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will,” and “believing in him, have been marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit toward redemption as God’s own people.” In essence, by proclaiming Christ as Lord and Savior we come home to God time and again whether we fly away from home to explore the world or remain in our hometown. We are never far from His home.

**Reflection:** What does it mean to be chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love? How does that statement impact your daily walk with Christ?

**Prayer:** *Gracious God, help us to remember that we are holy and blameless in your loving arms. May we welcome all who find their way home to you through Jesus Christ and share your constant embrace in joyful praise. Amen.*



## Epiphany of the Lord - Tuesday, January 6, 2026

*Anne Keener: Star Words*

Epiphany is the day that marks the end of the twelve days of Christmas. It is a day when we remember that God, through the light of a star, led people who lived at the edge of the known world to the child. It is a powerful witness that the grace known in Christ is not for some but for all. It is a witness that God's love knows no bounds. The primary symbol for the day is a star representing the light in the night sky that guided the magi. This light brings fear to the Herod's of the world, but to those looking for hope it is the light of a new day just ahead on the horizon.

To celebrate Epiphany, we invite each of you to receive a star word and ponder what significance the word might have in your life or how God might be speaking to you through this simple message. This star word is a gift that will travel with you throughout the year. All are invited to receive an Epiphany star gift by [clicking here](#). (If you are reading a printed copy, see today's church email or email Anne Keener for the link.)

Epiphany is the celebration of God's presence breaking through to shine as a light in the darkness. May we receive the gift of Epiphany and let it guide us to bear Christ's light in the world throughout the year. We invite you to offer this Litany as an individual or as a family.

### Litany for Epiphany of the Lord

Arise, shine; for your light has come!  
The glory of the Lord has risen upon you.

**Jesus Christ is the light of the world.**

Nations will come to his light,  
and rulers will seek his radiance.

**Jesus Christ is the light of the world.**

He will judge the people with righteousness  
and defend the cause of the poor.

**Jesus Christ is the light of the world.**

The mystery of the ages is revealed;  
the eternal plan of God is known to all.

**Jesus Christ is the light of the world.**

Let us kneel down before him to give him honor, glory, and praise.

**Jesus Christ is the light of the world.**

Let us offer him all the treasures of our hearts and our lives.

**Jesus Christ is the light of the world.**

After a brief silence for silent reflection:

**Prayer:** *God of endless light, you sent a star— rising from darkness, guiding seekers and sages, overwhelming us with joy. Let the splendor of your dawning light grow in us and in all the world until the whole creation shines with your glory; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.*

