



*Advent 2019*

A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse;  
from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.



## Introduction

Welcome to the season of Advent!

*A green Shoot will sprout from Jesse's stump,  
from his roots a budding Branch.—Isaiah 11:1*

This year, we encourage you to build a Jesse Tree. We have small magnetic ones available in Asbury and the AG, or you can create your own symbols each day and build your own tree.

A Jesse Tree is a tradition that dates back to the Middle Ages as a way for people to tell story of God's promise of blessing from the beginning to the birth of Christ in a visually creative way.

The unfolding of that promise was told through the lives of a single family, so when we follow the family tree, we see God at work over time.

Jesse was King David's father and David's royal line lost power during the Exile. The passage from Isaiah above was God's promise to restore life to that lineage – it just didn't happen the way people expected.

God's promise to bring new life to something that was dead, specifically the promise that was made to Abraham that seemed to have died.

As we move through the story, there are common themes of new life born from barren women and uncommon people chosen to represent God in the world.

The tree holds together the people through whom the story is told with symbols to represent each one.



**Sunday, December 1**

**Read Genesis 1:1**

I am not particularly creative when it comes to art, so I greatly admire and appreciate those who are. As a child and even a teenager in school, I was required to take art, also a class we called “shop,” and later on “industrial arts.” In each class we had projects to complete that required taking raw materials – clay, paper, copper, iron, plastic, wood, and more – and “creating” something new, according to a design and instructions we were given. Lacking an innate attention to detail, some of my creations did not turn out quite as intended, although most did. Most were at least “good;” and a few were “very good.” With each completed work, regardless, I felt a sense of pride, satisfaction, and accomplishment.

By faith, we affirm that you and I are part of God’s good creation, through what we term “human agency.” Our growing knowledge of DNA reveals our intricate design; and, I believe, the presence of a Designer: God.

Thus, I yearn to fulfill the purpose for which I believe I was designed. I place my trust in the One behind the design, who came to reveal the reason for creation in the first place: love. Love that seeks relationship, love that gives meaning to life, love that precedes our coming into this world and endures beyond the grave. Because of Christ coming into the world, I dare to place my hope in the power and ultimate triumph of God’s love. For me; for you; for all.

Picture a globe of the earth. If you happen to have one, find it and hold it in your hands. Then, find the words to the song, “He’s Got the Whole World In His Hands” and read or sing them; or, the hymn, “How Great Thou Art”. Imagine the love that God has for all God has created, including you.

### **PRAYER**

Father in Heaven, we belong to You because you made us and our world. Thank you for the beauty and wonder we see all around. Thank you for sending Jesus to be light for the world and for our lives. Help me to walk in the light of your love today. Amen.

*Rev. Jim Wishmyer*

## Monday, December 2

Read Genesis 2:7-9, 16-17

As children, our mom frequently had to tell us, “Don’t touch!” And, as can be imagined, my brothers and I typically took those words as a challenge to try and do otherwise. Oh, we weren’t terribly misbehaved (except perhaps our older brother...), we simply had this penchant for mischief. Later, when my wife and I had daughters, I discovered that this penchant was not peculiar just to boys.



So, is curiosity a sin? No. Disobedience is. We didn’t understand why we were not to touch something – until it slipped out our fingers and broke on the floor. “Oops! I’m sorry! I didn’t mean that!” Too late.

God, the Creator, has placed limits or laws, for us to follow. Theologians and non-theologians have long wondered why God placed two trees in the garden and then told the first human “Don’t touch!” with respect to one of the two. Whatever the reason, in the retelling of this story, we are each reminded of our temptation to do otherwise, even before we read the story further.

In what ways do you wonder the “Why?” of some principle, rule, instruction, or law? Where do you struggle with temptation?

### **PRAYER**

Gracious and generous God, thank you for the goodness of your creation that you have given us to enjoy. Thank you for the guidelines, instructions, and commands you have given us to live by. Help me to trust that you know what’s best, and you want what’s best, for me and for our world. Amen.

*Rev. Jim Wishmyer*

## Tuesday, December 3

Read Genesis 3:1-6



What an unlikely conversation! A talking serpent carrying on a dialogue with a human. How did this conversation start? And, if the man was present the whole time, why did he not speak up? Did other animals have the capacity of speech?

Where was God when this conversation was taking place? Lots of questions. What questions do you have about what is happening here?

We ask some questions in order to better understand. We also ask questions because we are trying to make a point to convince others. Some questions we ask in order to raise doubt or uncertainty. And, we sometimes ask questions in order to justify ourselves. The serpent asks a question in order to raise doubt. The first bite the woman took was not into the fruit but taking the “bait” presented by the serpent’s question.

Eventually, the woman and the man eat the fruit of the tree in disobedience to what God had said. It all began with a question that introduced doubt. The doubt centered on the trustworthiness of God: “Did God *really* say...?” “It is not true...” Focusing on the love God has for us can help us discern and respond to the temptation that this type of doubt can bring.

Reflect on the words to the song, “Jesus Loves Me”, and the carol, “Love Came Down at Christmas”.

### **PRAYER**

All-wise God, thank you for giving us minds to reason and think for ourselves. Thank you for the free will you give us to choose between right and wrong. Help us to discern between the doubt that would lead us astray, versus the doubt that leads to better understanding. In all things, help us to trust in you. Keep us from sin, we pray, in Jesus’ name.

*Rev. Jim Wishmyer*

## Wednesday, December 4

Read Genesis 6:5– 9:17

There's an expression, "between the devil and the deep blue sea," meaning you're in a dilemma. In Genesis, we meet Noah, who's put – literally – between God and a sea that got deeper and deeper in unrelenting rain, until even the mountaintops were submerged. Can you imagine waking every day to that deluge, knowing that every creature that "moved on the earth" was dead or dying? But Noah and his family were safe.



Why were they? The obvious answer is they were in the ark...the ark that everyone learns about as soon as they learn anything at all about the Bible. Bobbing along in a floating zoo, safe if a little smelly after many weeks, waiting for the rain to stop. But the answer that has more meaning and application for us is that Noah got the opportunity to survive because he "was a righteous man...and walked with God."

He worshipped God not because he hoped to be spared destruction. He didn't even know the flood was coming until God told him to build a boat longer than a football field. He worshipped because he knew the right place for him, and for God, in their relationship. The Lord said, "I can work with this," and spared just enough human and animal life to repopulate the earth for a do-over. So Noah never was in a dilemma at all. Noah was always under God's care and protection.

There is something else that tethers the Noah story to the Advent season: God's severe judgment pivots to redemption. He proves his enduring love by promising what only he can deliver...if we will remain in right relationship with him as Noah was; if we keep the covenant. God promised Noah never again to destroy all life on earth. Many centuries later, God sent his only son Jesus,

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who promised that “everyone who has faith in me will live, even if they die.”

**MEDITATION FOR THE DAY**

Have you ever been at a distance from a loved one, then looked at a bright moon and taken comfort knowing the other person could see the moon at the same time? God sealed his covenant with Noah by promising to remember his covenant, every time he saw a rainbow – a rainbow like we also can see, whenever the sun comes out after a rain.

*Bill Henry*



**Thursday, December 5**

Read Genesis 15



On a clear night in the Near East, some eight thousand stars are visible. Centuries ago, Abraham – or Abram, as he was known then -- looked up at the night sky as God told him he would have offspring as numerous as the stars. Wait. What?! There must have been a mighty battle between faith and reason in Abram’s mind at that moment. He was old, and so was his wife Sarah. They were childless. And God was promising...was this a joke? In fact, Sarah did laugh at the idea.

But faith won out, and “Abram believed the Lord.” Not only would he have descendants as numerous as the stars, but his descendants would inherit the land Abram stood on, plus the land then occupied by enemy tribes. It would not be easy, though. The people would be enslaved for 400 years. Abram wouldn’t even see the promise fulfilled. How easy it would have been for Abram to say to himself, “There has to be a better way. Let me get an army together, and take this land now, before I get any older.”

But Abram wasn’t wired that way. He trusted the Lord’s schedule. At the Lord’s direction, he sacrificed five animals and left the carcasses on the ground. That night, a smoking brazier – or firepot – passed through the encampment...a symbol of God’s presence, and the seal on a covenant between God -- whose promises never fail -- and a man whose faith never faltered.

### **MEDITATION FOR THE DAY**

As we worship each day in Advent, let’s remember that each of us who believes God’s promises, and celebrates the birth of our Savior Jesus Christ, is like one of the stars God showed Abram that night long ago.

*Bill Henry*



**Friday, December 6**

**Read Genesis 22:1-18**

Abraham got up early, for the trip with his son, Isaac. Maybe the early start was motivated by Abraham's desire to respond as quickly as possible to God's demand. Maybe it was just to get the detestable, heartbreaking task over with.

Covenants are great when God is promising that you'll have offspring as numerous as the stars, and your people will occupy the whole region someday. The hard part – the big test -- comes when God says to do something that just makes you want to run and hide. Kill my son, like a sacrificial animal? God, ask me ANYTHING else! But Abraham, with his unsuspecting son, put one foot in front of the other, toward Moriah, as God had ordered.

We know how it ended. Abraham had the knife in his hand, when the angel of the Lord commanded him to stop. He'd proven his faith; passed the test; validated the covenant. We regard this Genesis story as the epitome of faith in action, as well as the prefiguration of God's willingness to send his only son as a sacrifice for our sins. Paul called Abraham "the father of all who believe" (Romans 4:11), and the example of how we must carry out our faith as Christ believers and followers.

### **MEDITATION FOR THE DAY**

At what point do my actions as a disciple progress from convenient to inconvenient to real sacrifice? What can I do, with my time and talent and resources, to sacrifice things I want for the things that make me a better follower of Christ?

*Bonus meditation:* How about Isaac's own faith?! He was already an adolescent, if not a teenager, by the time his father "bound him and laid him on the altar." He could have struggled free and run, but he chose to obey his father's will.

*Bill Henry*

**Saturday, December 7**

Read Genesis 28



Jacob. Son of Isaac and Rebekah, younger brother of Esau. Scheming little trickster and tricky little schemer. How ethically challenged do you have to be to deceive your dad (with an assist from mom!) into giving you what rightfully belongs to your brother? (About as ethically challenged as Jacob's uncle and future father-in-law Laban was, but that's another story.) But God has a plan for all of us, back then and right now, no matter whether we're closer to Abraham or to Jacob on the "righteousness" spectrum.

Fearing that Esau would kill him for the wrong he'd done, Jacob headed for the hills, and the safety of Laban's family. On the way, he had a dream, of angels ascending and descending on a ladder, or stairway, between earth and heaven. And God was speaking to him, offering a covenant to him, just as he had offered to Noah and to Abraham...innumerable descendants, occupying the land, and the promise that "all peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring." And God added, "I will watch over you, wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land."

Jacob wasn't all in, at first. He was skeptical enough to say, "OK, IF you keep me safe and let me get back home, you will be my God and I'll give you back a tenth of all you give me." Flawed as he was, he wasn't ready to believe that God's promises never fail. Yet, here we are in the Leesburg United Methodist Church congregation, beneficiaries and living proof of covenant power, as we celebrate the promise of eternal life made possible through the gift of Jesus Christ to the world.

**MEDITATION FOR THE DAY:** It's comforting to know that God works through flawed people like Jacob and us, isn't it? Sin can be forgiven if we repent. Busyness, distraction and impatience can be set aside for rest, reflection, and waiting for the right time. Futile reliance on our own wits and energy can be traded in for prayer, and trust in God. Selfishness can be repurposed for sharing. Bright, shiny, entertaining and false gods can be discarded for the real thing. Advent is a great time for those transitions.

*Bill Henry*



## Sunday, December 8

Read Genesis 37, 45:3-15

Joseph, son of Jacob, was a dreamer. “Hey, guess what?” he told his brothers. “I dreamed your sheaves of grain bowed down to mine!” No wonder they resented him. Joseph, with his dreams and his fancy coat. That resentment boiled over when they took the opportunity to sell Joseph to some traders bound for Egypt, for a bag of coins -- 20 shekels. There was no reason to think they would ever see him again. Good riddance, dreamer.

But this story, like so many in the Old Testament and New Testament alike, has a last-to-first, beaten-down-but-raised-up theme. God had a plan for Joseph – not only to become the second most powerful man in Egypt after the Pharaoh, but also to perpetuate the nation of Israel. To continue the fulfillment of the promise God made to Abraham.

Joseph did see his brothers again, and his father who thought Joseph was dead. Can you imagine the guilt his brothers felt when Joseph (after messing with them a little), revealed who he really was? Imagine their terror, when they realized he could pay them back as severely as he wanted, for their cruelty to him! He could let them starve in the raging famine, or put them to death violently.

But Joseph’s response was, “Do not be distressed!” (What did the angel say to the shepherds in Bethlehem?) Joseph said, “God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance.” Again, a foreshadowing of God’s sending Christ into the world later, for another great deliverance from sin and death – the event we celebrate in this season of Advent. Joseph wanted to be reconciled with his family, and protect them. God wants that for us.

**Meditation for the day:** Joseph had absolute power, and used it for good. What do we do with our own measure of power?

*Bill Henry*

## Monday, December 9

Read Exodus 20:1-20



The Ten Commandments: setting the expectations for the relationship.

God brought the people out of slavery in Egypt into a transition period. The people had forgotten about the God of their ancestors and had been exposed gods that were created by man.

As this new relationship was developing, God needed to lay the groundwork of what it was going to look like.

Step one: amazing signs and wonders to prove his omnipotence.

Step two: establish the rules.

All relationships have rules, even if they are unspoken. Rules provide structure and boundaries and they lay out the expectations.

“I will be your God and you will be my people.”

During the Bronze Age, gods were expected to lay waste to enemies, provide food (rain for crops & good hunts), and protect the people from pestilence. This is what it meant to “be your God,” and this God had proved worthy of the job.

But what does it mean to “be my people”?

Jesus would later sum it up nicely: love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind and strength and love your neighbor as yourself. That was probably too vague at the beginning of the relationship, so God explained what that looks like.

What does it look like for you today to love God will all of your being and to love your neighbor as yourself?

*Angela Becek*



**Tuesday, December 10**

**Read 1 Samuel 3:1-10**

Once in my life, I have heard what I know to be the voice of the Lord. Only once that I can recall. I had been appointed to serve a congregation, and had only been there about two months. Without going into great detail, the pastoral appointment had come as somewhat a surprise since I had not yet met with my District Superintendent to discuss options. I received the telephone call out of the blue asking me to consider the assignment. Needless to say, the assignment came with its own set of unique pastoral challenges.

The deeply personal affirmation God had for me included the words, “You are right where you need to be...”

The clear and personal affirmation that God has for each of us during Advent comes in the timeless message of the manger. In the gift of a child, we have reason to hope and strength to follow the star of God’s love, forgiveness, mercy and grace.

Find a hymnal, or look at [hymnary.org](http://hymnary.org) to find “Wonderful Words of Life”. Read or sing the message of this hymn.

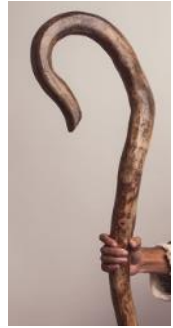
### **PRAYER**

Loving God, you created us for relationship; you have called us to service. Help us to hear your words of affirmation and assurance, guidance and commission, that in our activities this day we may demonstrate your love. Amen.

*Rev. Jim Wishmyer*

**Wednesday, December 11**

Read 1 Samuel 16:1-13



God rarely chooses the expected one. In our world today, we expect our leaders to be powerful, well-known, wealthy, educated, popular, accomplished. All attributes that seemingly qualify someone for a position of leadership. That's the human way, it is not God's way. God chooses His leaders based upon what is on the inside, the heart, of a person, not the outside appearance.

He chose David, Jesse's youngest son, the least of his family. David was not powerful or accomplished. Instead he was a shepherd, and he knew how to care for his sheep. When anointed as king, "the Spirit of the Lord came powerfully upon David" and with God's guidance he used his experience with the sheep to become a shepherd of his people to lead them into what God wanted His people to be. He became the greatest of Israel's kings.

Through the line of this great King David, God came Himself as the Messiah. Another unlikely king, He came in the form of a tiny, fragile baby. This baby came to redeem the world and bring us salvation. God, through Jesus, became the ultimate Good Shepherd and sacrificed Himself to save His sheep. What a farfetched, crazy idea! God' surprise factor was working overtime in this situation and the world had a really hard time believing in the truth.

This story reminds us that God has plans for each of us, and those plans might be really unexpected. We may not be called to be leaders or people of great importance to and in the world, but God sees what is in our hearts and will call us to serve Him based on what he sees. God knows exactly how He can use each of us to serve in His kingdom on earth.

Advent is a good time to ask "What does God see when He looks into my heart?" Keep your heart ready to be called to the unexpected in His service.

*Polly Downey*



**Thursday, December 12**

**Read 1 Samuel 16:13-23**

One of the things the church is good at doing is teaching each of us that we have gifts and talents given to us from the Lord. Often with that teaching we are reminded that we are to use the unique gifts and talents we aren't to squander them away. However, too often the church has made the mistake of teaching us that these gifts and talents are used exclusively to bring God glory inside the life of the church. I don't think this in an intentional church teaching but growing up I always had the impression that any talent I had should be maximized and used at church. While it is very important to use our gifts and talents in the life of church I believe it's more important that we don't check our gifts and talents at the door as we walk back out into the world on Sunday.

David used his gift of music to soothe King Saul in his time of affliction. He brought King Saul peace in a time where he was not capable of summoning peace for himself. David shows us how his talent and gift is used and can bring God glory but isn't used a part from the world. In this season of Advent we wait with hope for the Messiah, for Emmanuel, God with us. In our waiting we also prepare to welcome Christ. As you wait I hope you will ponder these questions: What are the talents God has given me? How can I use them to bring God glory and honor in my every day life? What will I do to accomplish that in this season and beyond?

### **PRAYER**

Holy God, you knit each of us together in our mother's womb. You have bestowed upon us unique talents and gifts that we can use to serve you and make you know in the world so that all may know you, the God of grace and peace. In this Advent season help me to see all the ways you desire me to use my unique talents. Thank you for the example of King David. Amen.

*Rev. Heather Wray*



**Friday, December 13**

Read 1 Kings 3:3-28



What is your most memorable gift for Christmas? Some of my most memorable are actually gifts given – to my wife, my children, and even to those I did not know. But in terms of gifts received, my most memorable as a child was the gift of a castle set, complete with opposing armies, when I was 9 years old. I recall the hours of enjoyment I spent with that set. So, what is your most memorable Christmas gift?

For Solomon, the greatest gift to which he aspired was “an understanding heart to judge God’s people to discern between good and evil” (1 Kings 3:9).

Understanding. Discernment. Good judgment. Perhaps we can begin with “an understanding heart” this Advent. As the Apostle Paul notes, “be quick to listen...”. Are we willing to take the time to understand others?

The classic hymn by Isaac Watts, “Immortal, Invisible” affirms the wisdom and glory of God. Use the text of this hymn as your focus of prayer throughout the day, as you affirm God’s wisdom and attributes.

### **PRAYER**

Immortal, invisible, God, only, wise; in light inaccessible hid from eyes. Most blessed, most glorious, the Ancient of Days, almighty, victorious, thy great name we praise!

*Rev. Jim Wishmyer*



**Saturday, December 14**

**Read Matthew 1:16-25**

In *Because of Bethlehem*, Max Lucado writes: “I have a sin nature. So do you (Merry Christmas!). Under the right circumstances you will do the wrong thing. You won’t want to. You’ll try not to, but you will. Why? Because you have a sin nature.” Ouch. He goes on to write, “The heart of the human problem is the problem of the human heart.” Yes, we easily point the finger at our politicians and news commentators who seem to be under a spell of meanness. But then our own words and actions come back to us. We too quickly judge the intentions of others while giving ourselves a pass. We too quickly dismiss the thoughts, words, and opinions of others while we push our own. Yes, as Lucado, Charles Wesley, and many others have observed, each of us entered the world with a bent toward sinning. Christ entered the world to correct it.

The angel announces that Mary’s child will “save his people from their sins” (v. 21). Jesus did not come to empathize, to counsel, to listen, to advise, to coach, or even mentor. He came to save. You. Me. All people. From our sins. You and I do not simply need advice or the latest “how to” book, however helpful. We need a savior. Because of the manger we have one.

Do you know the Christmas Carol, “Away in a Manger”? Read or sing the words. Take time to focus and reflect on the final line of the 3<sup>rd</sup> stanza: “and fit us for heaven to live with Thee there”.

### **PRAYER**

Jesus, Savior and Friend, Lord and Teacher, work in my life to shape me and “fit” me for your kingdom, for heaven. Help me to know you, love you, and serve you in all I do. Amen.

*Rev. Jim Wishmyer*

## Sunday, December 15

Read Matthew 1:18-25; Luke 1:26-38

I have always felt a bit of connection with Mary and her story of pregnancy. I, too, was surprised at being pregnant with my firstborn. Unplanned pregnancy is a very strange situation for a woman to find herself and she must deal with all sorts of emotions. On the one hand, excitement over the prospect of having a baby. On the other hand, fear at becoming a mother and not knowing what to do and also losing control of the timing of life plans. I was surprised, confused, happy, afraid, excited and worried all at the same time. I imagine that Mary experienced all those emotions too.



Her situation was much direr than mine, though. I was 25, an acceptable age to have a child. She was a teenager, hardly more than a child herself. I was married and my pregnancy was acceptable in my society. Mary was not married, and in fact, was engaged to a man who was not her baby's father. This could have made her an outcast in her society. My husband was excited about the coming birth. Mary's fiancé was upset and was going to secretly break the engagement.

Despite the similarities and differences in our situations, both Mary and I accepted on faith that it was God's plan for these two boys to be born. Our lives were going to change dramatically with the coming of motherhood, but with the responsibilities also came the blessings. God sent an angel to Mary to assure her that this was His plan and He would not fail her. I did not experience the presence of an angel, but I did come to feel peace at the prospect of having a baby and changing my life plans.

God is always in the details of our lives. Mary had a much bigger leap of faith to make than I did, with much greater impact on the world. But even in our smaller leaps of faith, God will work in a big way to support us through whatever our circumstances

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might be as long as we accept His plan.

Advent is a good time to consider whether we are ready to accept God's plans for our lives.

*Polly Downey*

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## **Monday, December 16**

Read Mark 1:1-8

Did you ever notice that in this story the people head back out into the wilderness to be baptized by John? For the Jewish people the wilderness was a time of wandering but it was a time book ended by deliverance. John the Baptist is also wearing camel hair and his look was one that would have been associated with prophets. These people heading back into the desert to be baptized by a prophetic man were ready for another deliverance. A deliverance that was coming in Jesus Christ.

By engaging in the act of baptism these people were cleansing themselves of their sins to make them right before God. The text reminds us that John's purpose is to help them to prepare a way for the Lord, clear a straight path for him, and get ready to receive him. John continues by saying that the one who will be coming to deliver us is more powerful than him, a prophet, and will gift us more than just water, we will be given God's literal Spirit.

Advent is a time of preparation. I hear the words of the Old Testament ring in my ears during Advent "Prepare the way of the

Lord, make his paths straight.” How are we preparing a way for the Lord in our lives? Have we made a straight path to God in our lives? Or have we placed road blocks and boulders in the road that both we and God will have to traverse to get to each other? Advent allows us to ask and reflect in our preparing for the Christ child, how prepared am I to receive God? We have a great deliverer waiting for us, let us spend this time preparing the way so that he can come into our lives and hearts and transform us with the power of the Holy Spirit.

### **PRAYER**

God of deliverance you are holy and blessed is your Son Jesus Christ. John the Baptist, a prophet for you Lord, proclaimed the deliverance that would come through this your only Son. Through Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection you gave birth to us your church, you delivered each of us from slavery to sin and death, and made with us a new covenant by water and the spirit. In our baptism we are marked as yours. Forgive us for blocking the path to you. Grant us wisdom to see the ways in which we can prepare better to receive you in our daily lives. Amen.

*Rev. Heather Wray*





**Tuesday, December 17**

**Read Proverbs 9:10**

Christmas is just around the corner!

Christmas Eve is a week away. The pressure is on, as always, for many of us. Travel plans, shopping lists, menus to prepare, visits to finalize, so much to do! Go ahead, make up your “to-do” list, or update it. Check off the tasks completed. Think about those yet to do. In the midst of it all, press the pause button on your worry and the rewind on your anxiety. Clear your thoughts for just a moment. Take a deep breath in; now, slowly exhale.

At the risk of this becoming just another “to-do”, try making a “to-be” list. Just for you – and perhaps to share with someone close for prayer support - write down a few phrases that describe the person you hope to be during this season. For a moment, forget about those around you and those you will encounter. Simply focus on you. Who and what is Jesus calling you to be? A person of peace. A harbinger of hope. A demonstration of 1 Corinthians 13 love. A breath of fresh air for those around you. One who prioritizes people over projects; doing right over being right. An encourager who spots the signs of what is right and good over the critic who searches for the speck.

How can you “be” the person on your “to-be” list? It begins with “the fear of the Lord”. In other words, with a genuine respect and reverence for God, who equips us to “be” the person we were created to be. Reverence and respect means we come to God on God’s terms, not our own. Reverence and respect results in our being reshaped to “be” the person God wants us to be. “Just as I am, without one plea, but that Thy blood was shed for me, and that Thou bidst me come to Thee, O Lamb of God (Jesus) I come. I come.”

Recall the words and tune of “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel,” and time permitting, look up the stanzas for “Just As I Am” and read or sing them through.

### **PRAYER**

Lord, Jesus, my Savior and King, “mold me and make me, after Thy will, while I am waiting, yielded, and still.” This day and every day, I pray. Amen.

*Rev. Jim Wishmyer*

**Wednesday, December 18**

Read Exodus 3:2, 20:1-2



In high school there was an adult leader in our youth group who we called Yoda. He was wise and eccentric but always present to us and loved sharing ministry with high school students. One Sunday in Sunday school he was teaching us about the “I AM” statements and how these statements taught us about who God was for us as God’s followers.

I remember him asking us to complete the statements using our understanding of who God was to us. He gave the example of I Am the One who paints the Clouds. As you can imagine that sent us into a series of snickers and eye rolls but I think some of the youth did participate in completing the statements.

I may have thought his lesson was funny then but now it is one of my favorite things to do, name the ways I know and understand God from the scriptures, from the Christian tradition across time, and from my own lived experience with God. In doing this work I am naming the nature of God. God is redeemer, sustainer, creator, deliverer, and so much more.

In the face of life’s many challenges it can be a powerful reminder to state God’s nature, to know we worship I AM. Today, I invite you to ponder what about God’s nature do you know to be true? Where have you found that to be true in your own life? Where do you see that part of God’s nature in Scripture?

### **PRAYER**

Creator God, it is such a privilege to worship you. Thank you for all the way you reveal yourself to us throughout our lives, the lives of others, and the Holy Scriptures. I pray God that today I might be more attentive to your presence all around me. Amen.

*Rev. Heather Wray*



**Thursday, December 19**

**Read Isaiah 11:1-3**

When we bought our house ten years ago, we became the proud owners of a fig tree. To tell the truth, we didn't even know it was a fig tree until a friend excitedly pointed it out to us and started eating figs right off the tree (didn't she know fruit comes from the grocery store?).

For several years the tree produced beautiful figs.

A few years ago, we had one of those springs where the warming temperatures were interrupted by a couple of violent cold snaps. That year our fig tree died, or so we thought. We cut it down to the stump and assumed that would be the end of things. To our surprise the tree started to grow, and we've seen signs of new growth every year since then.

Each year we trim what's not budding in the hopes that what remains will eventually bear fruit. We have not yet seen the fruit, but the tree is now nearly as big as it was when we bought the house. We remain hopeful.

Jesus traces his lineage from David (son of Jesse), the first in a long line of kings of Israel and Judah. In the fourteen generations between the exile to Babylon and his birth, the tree had been a stump. Now the stump would flower.

*Chris Becek*



**Friday, December 20**

Read Isaiah 22:22



As toddlers, our daughters would sometimes lock themselves in various rooms of the house. Most of our doorknobs have push button locks, which are very easy to pop open from the outside of the room by using a paperclip. A couple of doorknobs have rotating locks, which require a precision screwdriver to unlock.

One day our youngest managed to lock herself and our puppy in her bedroom. Unable to find the precision screwdriver (and unable to explain to her how to free herself), I had to disassemble the doorknob while she cried and the puppy barked. I'm sure it only took one or two minutes, but it seemed like an eternity. Our daughter was rescued and there were no messes on the new carpet. That doorknob was changed to one with no lock very quickly!

Jesus shuts the door to death and opens the door to life for all who choose to follow him. No one can do otherwise.

*Chris Becek*



**Saturday, December 21**

Read Isaiah 9:1

We were married in December 2009 and went on our honeymoon to St. Thomas the week after Christmas. No one would be surprised to learn that it had been the most eventful year of my life. Over the course of the year, I had met the ones who would become my wife and my stepdaughter, endured three months of day/night shift work, sold my townhouse in Sterling, bought our house in Leesburg, and changed churches.

On New Year's Day 2010, I took a photograph of the sun rising over the ocean. I would like to believe that I spent time that morning reflecting on the year that was, and on the excitement and adventures that the new year would bring. More likely, I was checking flight schedules and worrying that our taxi to the airport would fail to pick us up on time.

Jesus' birth signals the dawn of a new chapter in the relationship between God and humanity. One in which "there will be no end." (v7)

*Chris Becek*

## Sunday, December 22

Read Psalm 2:7-8



In the book of Joshua, in the Old Testament, chapter 5, Joshua encountered the “captain of the host of the Lord” (Josh. 5.12-ff).

Joshua asked, “Are you for us, or for our adversaries?” (v.13). The angel responds, and I paraphrase, “I have not come to take sides but to take charge” (v.14).

We like to think *we* are in charge of our lives. *We* are the masters of our fate; the captains of our souls (“Invictus”). We are not. Fate yields to no one. Disease, discord, disappointment, and death come eventually to each and every one of us. As much as we would like to believe, we are not masters or captains. So the question comes, who is? Therein lies the gift of choice. Will we yield before the King of kings and Lord of lords? Or will we cling to the illusion that we are individually in charge? To yield to Christ is not to abdicate all responsibility, for each of us is truly responsible for our own choices. Rather, it is to acknowledge that we cannot face the storms and vicissitudes of life in our own strength. There is no weakness, shame, or embarrassment in recognizing our limits – and yielding to the one who created us for life, love, and eternity.

Advent signifies the coming of one who did not come to take sides but to take charge. Will you yield your heart, your life, your destiny, to his love, mercy, and rule?

Read, sing, and reflect on throughout the day, the beloved Christmas Carol, “O Little Town of Bethlehem”.

### **PRAYER**

Renew and revive us, Jesus, this day, that we may draw near to you for strength, for wisdom, for life, for love to better serve and witness for you. Amen

*Rev. Jim Wishmyer*



**Monday, December 23**

Read Isaiah 7:4

God with us, Emmanuel, God involved, God close by, God present.

How could we not be comforted by knowing that we have a God who is closer to us than our next breath? In this season it is easy for us to feel lonely. Perhaps we think of holiday seasons that have gone by filled with loved ones who are no longer with us. Maybe, we see others pictures and merriment and wonder why we can't have that too. Or maybe we have strained relationships with family members or friends so the holidays are filled with potential conflict. Perhaps the short days and long nights affect us and make it harder for us to enjoy the season. Whatever the reason this can be a lonely season for some of us. I cannot take the loneliness away but I hope the reminder that God with you is a comforting one.

Emmanuel is present in all our lives always offering love, grace, mercy, understanding, and transformation to each of us. In the Scripture it says: "Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign," the sign Israel was looking for was God with them, God was protecting them. In your coming day look for the signs that God has put before you to show that you aren't alone? What signs will God put in your day to show that God is Immanuel God with us? One of the greatest ways that we know God is with us is when we partake in the Holy Sacrament of Communion which is why the chalice and the bread are the symbols for today. Jesus is present with us as the table is prepared and the meal is served. We, as Methodists, truly believe that Jesus is with us in the sanctuary sharing this meal of grace. As you come to receive at the table know that Jesus is there, welcoming you, sustaining you, and promising to be with you every day.

### **PRAYER**

Emmanuel, thank you for being present with us. Thank you for being close, for caring deeply for us, and for giving us the opportunity to be in relationship with you. We ask that we might be open to seeing you with us throughout the day. Amen.

*Rev. Heather Wray*

**Tuesday, December 24**

Read John 1:1-14

The message paraphrase of verse 14 reads, “The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood.”



Just picture Jesus in *our* neighborhood! What in the world would that be like? We all have our ideas, but I imagine that he would not conform to any of our expectations. Just as he did not conform to the expectations of those who lived in the first century. Jesus cannot and will not be put in the box of our own presuppositions. Darn! As a pastor for over 35 years, I want Jesus to perform as expected. Instead he invites me to conform to his will and calling, that I might be transformed into his likeness.

We claim to welcome the light of the world, but when that light shines into *our* dark places; when that light illuminates *our* sin and brokenness; what then? Far more comforting to point to others' dark places and sin and brokenness, than our own. But that's not how the Light works.

It's Christmas Eve. Will we be ready for the light to shine in/on us?

The contemporary song, “Here I Am to Worship,” is a wonderfully contemplative song that focuses on the light of the world coming into our darkness.

### **PRAYER**

Thank you, Jesus, for stepping into the darkness of our world to shine the light of God's love. In revealing our brokenness and sin, you also remind us of your healing and forgiveness. Draw us nearer to your light and enable us to bear the light of your love to others. Amen.

*Rev. Jim Wishmyer*

**Wednesday, December 25**

Read Luke 2:1-20



Have you ever been out on Christmas morning? It is eerie how quiet and still our world becomes for a few hours that morning. You may see a few people headed to worship or on their way to serve others but for a time it is quiet and still. I imagine that is very similar to what it was like when Jesus, the Son of God, entered our world.

Jesus' birth, while miraculous in conception, was a fairly quiet entry into the world he was coming to save. While the announcement to the shepherds in the field was quite awe filled it was still only an announcement to a select few. Here was the birth of the one who has come to save the world and yet only a few knew of his arrival. My favorite line in this selection of scriptures is this one: "But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart." What were the words she pondered and treasured? The ones that the Angels told the Shepherds about her son.

As you go into this day to celebrate the miracle that is Emmanuel, God with us, I hope you too will ponder and treasure these words: "**To you** born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the messiah, the Lord."<sup>1</sup> To you, to me, for all the world a child was born for us, to save us from our sin, to reconcile us to a God who loves us. Go into the day sharing the Good News of Emmanuel. Merry Christmas!

### **PRAYER**

"Eternal God, by the birth of Jesus Christ you gave yourself to the world. Grant that, being born in our hearts he may save us from all our sins and restore within us the image of likeness of our Creator, to whom be everlasting praise and glory, world without end. Amen."<sup>2</sup>

*Rev. Heather Wray*

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<sup>1</sup>Emphasis added

<sup>2</sup>UMH 231





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