SONGS
IN THE WAITING



Advent voices
of hope, peace,
joy and love

GRACE COVENANT
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Advent Devotions
2026

The Season of Advent

November 29, 2026 through January 6, 2027

SONGS IN THE WAITING



This Advent, we're listening for the voices
that rise up in the middle of waiting.

Through the Gospel of Luke,
we'll meet Zechariah, Elizabeth, Mary, John,
and the angels, ordinary people living
between a promise and its fulfillment.

Each week, one voice and one candle will
help us hear familiar scripture with fresh eyes:
hope that trusts before it sees,
peace that dwells in uncertainty,
joy that leaps at God's nearness,
and love that prepares the way.

On Christmas Eve, the waiting gives way to song
as the promise becomes flesh and
we hear the news again:
God is here.

A special thank-you to Nelson Townsend for coordinating this year's Advent devotion writers and bringing these daily reflections together.

The devotions will be delivered by email each day throughout Advent from the church office. Please contact the church office if you would like to be added to or removed from the email distribution list.

A PDF file of this booklet can be downloaded at gcpc.org/advent.

Sunday, 11/29/26

by Debbie Campbell

Luke 1:67-79

Zechariah, a righteous man and priest, and his wife Elizabeth were both known for their holiness and doing the work of God. However, they did not have any children, and in the Jewish culture at that time, it was considered a sign of not having God's blessing.

The angel Gabriel appeared to Zechariah and told him that they would have a son, whom they would name John who would prepare the way for the Messiah. Zechariah reacted in total disbelief at the message of this unexpected child given Elizabeth's and his old age. Because of his disbelief, Gabriel said that Zechariah would be unable to speak again until the birth of their son. When the child was born, Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit, and his first words are the prophecy found in Luke 1:68-79.

Zechariah prophesied the coming of the Savior, and he predicted that his son, John (the Baptist) would prepare the Messiah's way. These words of hope have become known as the Song of Zechariah often called Benedictus (meaning Blessed) after the first words in the Latin translation of this passage.

We are invited to reflect on the prophecy of hope as we light the first candle of Advent.

To do while we wait:

- Make a simple display of 4 candles to light each Sunday of Advent.
- Listen to one of the recordings of Zechariah's Song
    - Zechariah's Song (in English) by Aqueduct Project
      https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xcRqgkg1XQw
    - Zechariah's Song (in English) by Viral Light Music
      https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=up8pwf_7B4Y
    - Benedictus (in Latin) by Vancouver Youth Choir
      https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HN5RWQ5TTEA
    - Benedictus (instrumental) by 2Cellos
      https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f_RjllPuqyc
- Think about how we can share hope with others.

Notes:

Monday, 11/30/26

by Harold Frye

Genesis 15:1-6

Genesis 15:5 Then the Lord took Abram outside and said, "Look at the sky and see if you can count the stars. That's how many descendants you will have."

In 1685, Heinrich Frey left his small village in what would later become Switzerland. He was 22 years old. Heinrich traveled west, first to Alsace, then to France. He was forced to travel at night to avoid capture by troops of Louie XIV who persecuted non-Catholics. Reaching London, he indentured himself to a family to purchase funds for travel to America and, eventually, to Philadelphia. Upon marriage to Anna Levering, a German woman, they settled in Germantown, still a part of the larger city. Today, hundreds of people who trace their ancestry to Heinrich are a part of the Heinrich Frey Family Association.

From one man, the Lord brought forth hundreds and hundreds of descendants of Abram. Followers of the faith, they worship God.

In just my generation, my wife and I have begun a line of descendants that number ten already.

God is good!

Notes:

Tuesday, 12/1/26

by Harold Frye

Luke 1:5-25 "What the Lord has done for me will keep people from looking down on me."

Before women joined the ranks of the working, it was not as common to see pregnancy much after the age of thirty. Now it is more common and, perhaps, fashionable that pregnancies occur well into the thirties and even later. John the Baptist was born to a couple who, by all standards, were considered elderly. Their chances of becoming parents had long passed them. However, in God's wisdom, they were the perfect couple to bear a child who would pave the way for Jesus. God, of course, knew what he was doing. John the Baptist successfully told people of Jesus' coming, making followers out of many more.

God the Holy One!

Notes:

Wednesday, 12/2/26

by Stephen Wing

Psalm 130

With all my heart,
I am waiting, LORD, for you!
I trust your promises.
I wait for you more eagerly
than a soldier on guard duty
waits for the dawn.
Yes, I wait more eagerly
than a soldier on guard duty
waits for the dawn. (verses 5-6)

Not waiting for God to do something you want done.
Not waiting for God to be something you want God to be.
Not waiting on God, tapping your feet, as if God is late for an important appointment.
Not waiting with meager expectations or with ho-hum anticipation, "just in case."

More like waiting for someone you love.

Just a glimpse of them instantly makes you whole. They don't have to do anything or say anything. Them just being is enough for you. All your muscles relax. You can't help but smile. You let out a deep breath you know you had been holding in. Your arms begin to raise, and your hands are reaching out. Maybe your eyes begin to water. You feel enveloped in what the Sufi poet, Kabir, called "the Great Sound." In that instant, when all this is happening at once, you know, deep within you, you've been waiting for this — for God — "with all your heart", your whole life.

Journaling Prompt:
Describe how you think the different parts of your body would react if you were to see God.

Notes:

Thursday, 12/3/26

by Kevin Johnson

Habakkuk 2:1-3; 3:17-19 KJV

His Watchtower

1 I will stand upon my watch, and set me upon the tower, and will watch to see what he will say unto me, and what I shall answer when I am reproved. 2 And the LORD answered me, and said, "Write the vision, and make it plain upon tables, that he may run that readeth it. 3 For the vision is yet for an appointed time, but at the end it shall speak, and not lie: though it tarry, wait for it; because it will surely come, it will not tarry."

17 Although the fig tree shall not blossom,
Neither shall fruit be in the vines;
The labour of the olive shall fail,
And the fields shall yield no meat;
The flock shall be cut off from the fold,
And there shall be no herd in the stalls:
18 Yet I will rejoice in the LORD,
I will joy in the God of my salvation.
19 The LORD God is my strength,
And he will make my feet like hinds' feet,
And he will make me to walk upon mine high places.

HOPE Eternal

At times I wake up in the morning and make a list of all the chores I would like to get done that day. The list is often long and daunting. I put asterisks beside the chores that must get done and double asterisks beside the ones I would least like to do. Then I start in on the list, doing a fun chore, then a must-do chore, then one I just don't want to do.

Chores are called chores because they are not much fun. But they help us progress toward some future goal.

- I get a haircut so that I look presentable.
- I change the furnace filters so that the house is well maintained.
- I write and read Session documents so that I can participate meaningfully in our Session meetings.
- I clean the garage so that things are easier to find and it's easier to move around inside it.

And such are the rhythms of life.

God calls us. We often don't recognize these calls because they can feel like chores, and we want to avoid doing them. My father used to say, "Always go to the funeral." That can feel like a chore. It is not something we want to do, but showing up can mean more—to others and to us—than we understand.

At times God's call comes as that "I should do this" thought. We label it "guilt." We feel it when we consider not going to the funeral. We can clearly see the discomfort of going, but we may not see the good that can come from being there. Not going is the easy path, but deep down we know it may also be the less rewarding one. Because our joy comes when we are in community or in relationship with other people.

Habakkuk stands watch, listening for what God will say. He waits in hope, even when he cannot yet see how things will turn out. We, too, listen for God's call in the hope that our decisions will lead us toward God's Shalom. True peace. Our true home.

Listen for God when discomfort sets in. You may find the flowers of peace and joy drawing you into loving relationships. Relationship with God and with others.

Our true home is just around the corner, beckoning.

Friday, 12/4/26

Waiting in Hope by Rebecca Prater

Micah 7:7, Romans 8:24-25

From the Old Testament: Micah 7:7 (NRSVUE)
"But as for me, I will look to the LORD;
I will wait for the God of my salvation; my God will hear me."

It has been said that from the time of Malachi (the conclusion of the Old Testament) and the coming of the Messiah, approximately 400 hundred years passed.

400 years! Can you imagine waiting in hope for 400 years? And yet, they did.

They prayed and waited. God heard their prayers and at the right time God sent his only son to live among all peoples of the world as Emmanuel, God with us.

From the New Testament: Romans 8:24-25 (NRSVUE)
"For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope, for who hopes for what one already sees? But if we hope for what we do not see we wait for it with patience."

And what about us… today? We also pray in hope for what is unseen. We wait.

The road can be unsure, there can be roadblocks, and yet we keep walking and praying. Many times, what we hoped for becomes realized. However, sometimes the road doesn't lead us where we hoped to go. Yet on the other side, God is there to help us carry our sorrows and heal our wounds.

Personally, we went through a very difficult journey with our son. It included an undiagnosed illness that brought no treatment. There were behavioral issues that were crushing at times. We are thankful to say that, after ten years of seeking, praying, and waiting, he and we found healing through a diagnosis, treatment, and time.

I want to share with you the scripture that I taped to my office desk and prayed continually for our son's healing. God was gracious to me in the answering of those prayers.

Psalm 86:15-16
"But you, O LORD, are a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness. Turn to me and be gracious to me;
give your strength to your servant; save the child of your serving girl."

May God's grace, peace, and hope be with you always.

For your encouragement, I invite you to soak in the truth of "Canticle of Hope" composed by Joseph Martin.

https://youtu.be/26G8ZFKZ4I0?si=VV86Af_feT-bWfgt

Notes:

Saturday, 12/5/26

by Nancy Kalesz

Isaiah 40:28–31

For me, the entire book of Isaiah lives in my mind as a series of lyrics, words that surround us with the music of ancient times as poetry that the people of Israel received from their scriptures and teachings. Words that they carried in their hearts as they sought to understand, hoped and celebrated, that God has a plan — a pathway, that they are seeking to return to the promised land.

Verse 28 reminds the people that God is creator of the earth, and everything that was made, GOD made it. This reminder of the creation story is important to be remembered for the people of Israel then — and it is important to us today. God never gets tired or whines about how much God has created; and God never complains about (His) care for these whiney people. God has a plan for them, and hope for them to be restored to the land promised to Abraham. "God gives power to those with no power." God hears their complaints. God provides, creates, endures with humankind when we are groaning, or fainting, or just wondering! "How did we get here?" "How do we go on?" The word of the prophet saying, "Wait for the Lord"! God will provide, and renew, and give us strength and hope for our future.

These verses comfort us with the music we carry in our hearts as we sing together the words of the prophet. So, despite how weary we are of our current situations (be they personal or corporate) God lifts us up and shows us the way!

On Eagle's Wings by Michael Joncas
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nSjkJiuCaVI

Notes:

Sunday, 12/6/26

by Debbie Campbell

Luke 1:39-56

Luke tells us the angel Gabriel visited Mary, and she was greatly troubled at his words. Gabriel has told her that she is going to have a baby who will be the Son of God. Mary questions him but still accepts his message. She clearly wants to understand how this can be. She travels about 75 miles from Nazareth to the hill country of Judea seeking the wisdom of her cousin Elizabeth, who despite her old age is in the 6th month of her own very unexpected and wondrous first pregnancy.

Elizabeth believes Mary's news and tells Mary that she is blessed, because she believes God and has accepted His plan. Now full of understanding, Mary shares her statement of faith and belief in God. Luke 1:46-55 is Mary's response… For generations, God has kept his promises for people who believe in Him. I believe in God and I will serve God… These verses have become known as Mary's Song, the Magnificat, which is the first word in the Latin translation of this passage. With each phrase, we sense the deep peace Mary had knowing that she was faithful and following God, trusting fully in the goodness of God and the promises of God.

To do while we wait:

- Light two candles - the candle of peace and the candle of hope
- Listen to one of the many recordings of The Magnificat
    - Magnificat - Mary's Song composed by Todd Agnew and performed by Christy Nockels
    - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ofwt2VHO7pU
    - Mary's Song (Our King of Peace) featuring Page CXVI Wendell Kimbrough
    - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7VpYAi9j6hY
    - Mary's Song of Praise by Seeds Kids Worship https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n61KEDPoLuo
- Make a simple banner for your Christmas tree or wall using 36" of 3" wide ribbon adding cut out felt letters spelling "Peace Be with You"

Notes:

Monday, 12/7/26

by Dave Pack

Isaiah 9:6-7 (CEB)

"A child is born to us, a son is given to us, and authority will be on his shoulders. He will be named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace. There will be vast authority and endless peace for David's throne and for his kingdom, establishing and sustaining it with justice and righteousness now and forever. The zeal of the Lord of heavenly forces will do this."

It is believed that the first thirty-nine chapters of Isaiah were written in the time frame of 740 – 700 BC; so Chapter 9, verses 6-7, containing the messianic prophecy of Jesus coming, is a truly amazing early prophecy.

I am struck by the prophecy's reference to the coming Messiah as the "Prince of Peace," and then the suggestion that his coming will bring "endless peace." What a hopeful promise!

Beginning in the early 1980s, the Presbyterian Church USA started an emphasis on peacemaking, and I quickly became involved, as the pastor of our church in Tennessee asked me to be the peacemaking coordinator for the church. I later served in that role in a church in Ohio and in the early 1990s at Grace Covenant. It was too easy to assume that role everywhere I lived – as others had not much interest in it.

I don't talk about it much, but I am currently the chair of the Board of Directors of PeaceWorks Kansas City, a board I have been on for over thirty years. PeaceWorks has been around for more than forty years, but we have only about 150 members, and we are aging, and we are at risk.

The sad reality I see is that our society is just not into peace. I hope this passage motivates you to see that caring about the creation of peace should be part of your Christian life. Perhaps the words of the Messiah in Matthew 26:52 will further motivate you: "Then Jesus said to him, 'Put the sword back into its place. All those who use the sword will die by the sword.' "

Notes:

Tuesday, 12/8/26

by Cindy Schendel

Philippians 4:6-7

"Do not be anxious about anything but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

Anxiety is the most prevalent psychiatric diagnosis in the US, affecting about 19% of adults. Some version of "Be not afraid" appears in the Bible 70 – 100 times depending on the translation. God knows His children are prone to fear and worry and here Paul gives us an antidote:

Prayer and petition, with thanksgiving ----------> God's peace which guards our hearts and minds.

Seems so simple, yet I know I have often failed to practice this formula and have thus left my heart and mind unguarded by God's peace. The door stays open for fretting and worrying and trying to figure out on my own how to eliminate the source of my anxiety, which is usually out of my control.

Our Thursday morning Bible study has been using a study called "Embracing the Uncertain". Paul's anti-anxiety advice is a way to do that. Because it turns out that our attempts to find certainty and security actually fuel our fears. How much of your energy goes towards trying to hedge all the "what ifs" in your life? What if my investment doesn't pay off? What if my health fails? What if my loved ones are harmed? What if our leaders are corrupt and take our nation into decline?

One point that strikes me about this passage is that Paul does not say God will grant our requests, he says we will find peace and protection of our hearts and minds. The value is in bringing them to God and leaving the outcome in Her hands, not thinking our petitions will always be granted in the way we imagine. As Jesus tells us "... In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world." John 16:33 (emphasis added)

Prayer: Dearest Lord Jesus, please send your Spirit to move us to prayer and petition when we feel anxious. Grant us your peace, for we know you have overcome the trouble of this world. Thank you for loving us and guarding our hearts against worry and fear. Amen.

Notes:

Wednesday, 12/9/26

by Barbara Douglas

Luke 1:26-38

This familiar Bible story tells of the angel Gabriel coming to Mary to tell her she has been chosen by God to have a child who is the Messiah. Mary, being a young teen, was puzzled to say the least about what was happening. She was only about 16 years old, poor and unmarried and yet an angel says she will have a child by the Holy Spirit. She must have been frightened and incredulous to think that this could be happening to her!

What would we be thinking at 16 years old? I was in the midst of high school with nothing more to consider than how classes were going and what I would be doing with my friends after class! Granted in Mary's time, girls were not educated and it was certainly customary to be engaged by 16 years old. However, even in her time, she would not have given any thought to being met by an angel. I still believe Mary would have been so confused and probably a bit frightened. It was an unbelievable encounter. So much credit goes to Mary to believe the angel's message and then get to the conclusion that she has indeed been chosen and is in great favor with God. By the end of the encounter not only has she understood her place but had so great a faith that she was able to state: "I am the Lord's servant".

Mary is a clear example of giving oneself totally to the will of God. May we each be so in tune with God's will for us that we will be willing to serve Him in whatever way He has called us.

Notes:

Thursday, 12/10/26

by Stephen Wing

Psalm 85:8-13

"Faithfulness springs up from the ground…" (verse 11)

When I was pastoring part-time in western Kansas, I helped a rancher one summer putting in fence posts for a cattle pen. It was some of the hardest manual labor I have ever done. With a post hole digger, I had to dig the hole deep enough so the post would be pretty much immovable. When a 900-pound steer rubbed itself against the post, that post had to be unbudging.

That's the kind of faith the psalmist is describing. Buried deep in the ground, so fixed and rooted, that no matter what kind of weight life rubbed up against it, we stand fast.

Faithfulness is built from the ground up. There's an earthiness to it. It's a get-your-hands-dirty kind of steadfastness. It takes hard work to plant that kind of faith. It's not a pie-in-the-sky-by-and-by kind of faith. It's the kind of faith that dares that bully, trauma, rub up against it as we insist, "I'm. Not. Moving!"

Journaling Prompt:
What "900-pound steer" has pushed against your faithfulness? How well did your faithfulness hold up?

Notes:

Friday, 12/11/26

by Nancy Kalesz

John 14:27 (NIV) "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid."

The reading today is from John 14:27 and are words known to us as the benediction Jesus gave to his disciples just prior to his ascension to heaven.

"Peace," Jesus says, from me as I go to be with my heavenly father.

This peace is not the kind you seek here on earth (such as a lack of strife or release from conflict) or peace that comes and goes by the will of human endeavors.

Jesus is saying that God's peace lives in our hearts as a comfort and strength that God gives. Jesus is telling them that God will dwell in them by the power of the "Holy Spirit."

You may be wondering why the John 14:27 verse is inserted into the Advent liturgy. Isn't this more of an after-Easter story? What do you think? Jesus is assuring his disciples (and us) that even though he is no longer in human form, God is always with us by the power of the Holy Spirit. Peace is given by God to all of creation, and we need only claim this peace and live by its healing grace.

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost. As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be. World without end. Amen, Amen.

And so, from the words of Mary's song to the words of benediction by Jesus: peace and promise of "God With Us," we share this gift from God to all creation.

Saturday, 12/12/26

by Cindy Schendel

Numbers 6:24-26 "The Lord bless you and keep you, the Lord make His face to shine upon you and be gracious to you, the Lord turn His face toward you and give you peace."

I bet many of you heard a choir singing this priestly benediction as you read it. Music cements words into our brain (think "ABCD..."), and I could sing the Peter Lutkin version of this blessing from memory.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IlBAoKCVwIM

What does it mean to ask God to bless us, to shine His face on us, be gracious to us, give us peace? It is a much broader request then asking God to solve a particular problem or to change a particular situation. It is a request to bless our whole lives and to give us peace, not freedom from trouble.

I think we often ask for God's blessing in the moment and with a specific outcome to a problem in mind. Perhaps we should look back over the whole of our lives and pray for eyes to see how God has blessed us with His presence and Her peace through everything that has happened to us. Look especially for the unexpected sources of love and support, those angels who brought God's blessing when you needed it most. Doing so can build our faith that God will continue to bless us and keep us no matter what we may face. When I had cancer the first time, I kept a file on my laptop listing all the ways God held me up through that awful experience. It is very comforting to return to that list whenever current situations raise my anxiety. God will never leave us or forsake us, we just need to open our eyes to His presence.

Prayer:
Father, we thank you for your gracious blessing throughout our lives, personified in the greatest gift of Jesus. Help us to see the many ways you shine your love upon us, and use us to bring your blessing to others. Amen

Sunday, 12/13/26

by Nelson Townsend

Luke 1:39-56

Luke 1:41 When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit.

I have a friend from college who lives in South Korea. He has a Korean wife and two kids who are a few years younger than mine. He teaches English to college students, and he is a pastor for a small church of Americans.

We keep in touch with bi-weekly video calls early on Sunday mornings. When we chat, we spend a little more than an hour catching up on family, books, music, and what he's preaching. His zany sense of humor cheers me up! And sharing our ups and downs makes them more bearable.

He's going to come for a visit in January, and I'm hoping to see him a few times. When he visits, we'll eat barbeque and spend time shopping in downtown Lawrence.

I bet the cousins, Mary and Elizabeth, had a relationship similar to me and my friend. And when Mary came to visit, I bet they had a lot of catching up to do! I like how verse 56 includes the detail "Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months and then returned home." My house guests only stay for a few days at most! But… there was no video chat in first century Judea.

Mary brought good news; news that made Elizabeth's baby, the future John the Baptist, leap in her womb!

When was the last time you leaped or wanted to leap because of good news?

Perhaps, like Mary and Elizabeth, news of a baby on the way brought joy. Perhaps you got a promotion or raise or bonus at work. Perhaps a long-sought after goal was achieved. Perhaps a prayer was answered.

I know that I will leap for joy when I see my friend in January, and I'll give him a big hug!

In verse 45, Elizabeth says, "Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!"

Then, Mary delivers The Magnificat, which reminds me of the many promises God has made and kept. I am reminded that God loves me and forgives me for my sins. God will always be with me and grant me a profound, inner peace. God has a purpose for my life and provides strength when I encounter difficulties. And God takes care of my daily needs.

Prayer:
Holy One, thank you for your promises and constant care. Fill me with good things and be merciful. May it be so.

Notes:

Monday, 12/14/26

by Harold Frye

Zephaniah 3:17 "The Lord your God wins victory after victory and is always with you."

Everyone wants to be on the side of a winner. Unfortunately, fans of the Kansas City Royals didn't see things go their way in the 2026 season. With a record that kept the team out of the playoffs, fans moved on from baseball, hoping that next year would be different.

The Lord God is a winner. His record is never with losses. His team is the best one to support.

God is a winner!

Tuesday, 12/15/26

by Stephen Wing

Psalm 16:5-6

LORD, you are my allotted portion and my cup;
you maintain my boundaries:
the lines fall for me in pleasant places;
I am well content with my inheritance.

The famed Russian author, Leo Tolstoy, wrote a short story entitled, "How Much Land Is Enough For A Man?" The main character, Pahom, a peasant farmer, says that if he only had enough land, he wouldn't even fear the Devil. The Devil overhears and takes it as a challenge. Pahom buys some land, then wants more. He moves to a new region when he hears of better soil, and keeps expanding, always dissatisfied.

Eventually he hears of the Bashkirs, a nomadic people who will sell him as much land as he can walk around in one day for 1,000 rubles. The catch: he must return to his starting point by sunset or lose everything. Driven by greed, Pahom walks farther and farther, repeatedly deciding to take in just one more stretch of good land. Realizing he's running late, he sprints back, reaching the start just as the sun sets—then collapses and dies from exhaustion.

His servant buries him in a grave about six feet long. The final line of the story is, "Six feet from his head to his heels—land enough for a man."

Contentedness is not only a positive character trait—it is also, along with thankfulness, one of our most important responses to the "allotted portion" and "inheritance" that God has provided us. If we are always wanting more, we will eventually find out how little we really need in the end.

Journaling Prompt:
Make a list of the "allotted portion" and "inheritance" you have received from God. Once the list is done, circle the top three. Why are these three most treasured for you? Are they enough?

Notes:

Wednesday, 12/16/26

by Nancy Kalesz

Isaiah 55:12

You will go out in joy
  and be led forth in peace;
the mountains and hills
  will burst into song before you,
and all the trees of the field
  will clap their hands.

These words in verse 12 echo in my heart and head, hearing the tunes we have sung at GCPC with much energy and praise. For me, these words are a constant reminder of joy in the whole of all creation.

In the summer of 1963, I was fortunate to be a part of PCUSA's Youth in Mission Summer. My summer was spent at Mount Morris Presbyterian Church in Harlem (NYC). Among the mind and heart lessons I experienced was the very visual joy that surrounded us that summer by the greater community — while suffering the strife of that time — and all the different cultures we were exposed to. Rev. Arthur Adair opened a world of diversity to we three midwestern white girls — the melting pot of New York City.

Among our various experiences was a weekly evening song fest led by Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach for any and all who chose to come. His music was always positive and "motion prone" for his audiences (a mixture of people of all ages, cultures, religions, genders, colors, etc.). It was a true joyful experience! To this day, the words of Isaiah 55:12 make me happy.

So, think of these words when you see a sunset or a sliver of the moon on a dark night filled with stars, "Rejoice and be glad" — all creation — all that is created — all that is created by God! Again, I say, "Let us rejoice and be glad in it." Embrace the joy! And share it!

"Joy to the World" — Joyful, joyful, we adore thee. Amen.

Notes:

Thursday, 12/17/26

by Kevin Johnson

Nehemiah 8:10 (KJV)

Then he said unto them, "Go your way, eat the fat, and drink the sweet, and send portions unto them for whom nothing is prepared: for this day is holy unto our Lord: neither be ye sorry; for the joy of the LORD is your strength."

The Joy of the LORD

I often shy away from God's presence. I don't want to think about God because I have other things to do. More important things. Or perhaps things that I think would be more fun. "Who wants to think about God all the time?"

Here, Nehemiah invites us to experience life's joys in a more meaningful way. When we "eat the fat, and drink the sweet," we can turn our hearts toward gratitude for these gifts. And therein lies our joy and strength.

It seems that I want to turn toward God when things are going wrong. Often I will think, "Why me? What did I do to deserve this, God?" Or I will dive into, "God, help me. Help me get through this difficult time."

But when things are going well, I often just bask in the joy of the moment. Nehemiah is challenging the people—and me—to celebrate God's presence at those times too. And to share the bounty with others.

This will increase our joy. Because being in God's presence is finding our true home. Our center is there, in God. And the joy we experience when we recognize God's presence in those moments is our strength.

Notes:

Friday, 12/18/26

by Stephen Wing

Psalm 98

A tribute to GOD when he comes,
When he comes to set the earth right.
He'll straighten out the whole world,
He'll put the world right, and everyone in it. (verse 9)

But when? WHEN!?

One of the more prophetic Far Side cartoons shows a mason jar that has fallen from the heavens and hit the earth, cracking open. Running away from the jar is a naked man and woman. A Voice, speaking from the heavens, says, "Uh, oh."

I suppose we could blame God for this whole mess the world is in. God got it started with a wild experiment of putting humans on the earth. At the start of the experiment, God called it all "very good." How's that working out now, God? Was it worth it? Were we worth it? We keep thinking humans are the pinnacle of creation. Instead, we are its destroyer — most notably and horribly of each other. It all turned out to be very far from anything you could call "very good."

And if the imagery in the last book of the Bible, Revelation, is accurate, it's all going to get much worse before it gets "right." The four horsemen of the apocalypse (conquest, war, famine, death) pretty much explains the worst of the human condition. The whole human mess has been, and is, fueled by those four horsemen.

So, when? When does the "straightening" begin? When does everything finally and ultimately get put right? When will you come, O God? We're waiting.

Journaling Prompt:
Finish this sentence in as many ways you can think of: "I am so tired of…" What did you discover from all your finished sentences?

Notes:

Saturday, 12/19/26

by Cindy Schendel

John 15:9-11

"As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you. Now remain in my love. If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete."

Joy often seems out of reach today with so much pain and suffering all around us. It seems wrong to feel joy when so many are not OK for myriad reasons. Yet Jesus tells us to remain in His love, that he wants us to have His complete joy within us. The path to this joy is to follow His commands.

As in Matthew 22:36-40, "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the law?" Jesus replied: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

So loving God and neighbor will bring us joy. Not happiness or contentment which may come and go with changing circumstances, but deep joy that transcends the world's woes. It's a circular pattern because feeling that joy grows more love for God and neighbor, but our love must be acted out rather than merely professed.

What practice do you have that expresses your love of God outside of our weekly worship? Do you light a candle and thank God for your life? Sing hymns to God? Name what you are grateful for each day at dinner? Read a Bible chapter every day? How do you practice love of others? Do you mow your elderly neighbor's yard? Serve at the food pantry? Bring someone a meal when they are ill? Pray for whoever is having an emergency when you hear a siren? Give money to charities? GCPC provides many opportunities to serve each other and our community. Look for the ones that allow you to express your love of others.

By practicing love of God and neighbor we open a space within ourselves for the complete joy of Christ. Let us commit to embracing this gift as we prepare to meet the baby Jesus.

Prayer:
Dear Lord, fill us with your Spirit so that we might love you and each other as you have loved us. Give us joy joy joy joy down in our hearts! Amen.

Notes:

Sunday, 12/20/26

by Eileen Thomson

Luke 3:1-6

In this passage, John the Baptist calls out to the people to repent and prepare the way for the Lord. John refers to the words of the prophet Isaiah:

"Prepare the way for the Lord,
make straight paths for him.
Every valley shall be filled in,
every mountain and hill made low.
The crooked roads shall become straight,
the rough ways smooth."

The imagery in this passage suggests that with proper preparation our relationship with God will be unencumbered. The path is smooth and straight, nothing blocks our connection to God. An amazing transformation has occurred.

The reality for many people and typically, more so for women, preparing for Christmas involves lots of extra work, with activities such as decorating, baking, cooking, shopping, hosting guests, and the list goes on. Is this the kind of preparation that can be transformative?

These activities lift up the season. The season becomes special because of the all the added effort, the beautiful music, the extra outreach, and the caring for others that is all associated with the season and the anticipation of the Christ Child. It is not the activity in itself, but rather the intention and spirit with which these activities are undertaken that matter.

If the goal of all these activities is to be transformative, then we need to approach each activity with an awareness and an intention that our hearts are being set to be transformed as we connect with God.

Mindful engagement with each activity, whether we have done it every year that we can recall or whether we are doing something for the first time, needs to be embraced with a mindfulness that we are preparing our hearts to make the path smooth and straight and ready for the joyfulness in our connection with the Christ Child.

Enjoy the preparation!

Notes:

Monday, 12/21/26

by Harold Frye

Isaiah 40:1-5

Isaiah 40:4 "Fill in the valleys, flatten every hill and mountain. Level the rough and rugged ground. Then the glory of the Lord will appear for all to see."

Likely you have heard the phrase "Kansas—flatter than a pancake." A study undertaken in 2003 set out to prove that phrase one way or another. Using a pancake from IHOP, the study's results showed that Kansas is, in fact, flatter than a pancake.

What is the significance of flattening every hill and mountain? The second line, "Then the glory of the Lord will appear for all to see," indicates that, without obstructions of the landscape, the Lord will be visible to all without question.

As we approach Advent and the birth of the Savior child, let nothing get in the way between you and the Lord through faith.

Notes:

Tuesday, 12/22/26

by Cheryl Johnson

1 John 4:7-10

"Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins."

From the brief dip I took into the history of 1 John, there is some debate over whether this was written by the same John who wrote the Gospel of John and book of Revelation. I love history and researching things, but I forced myself not to go down that rabbit warren. Because what really matters – and why it made the "cut" when scholars decided what to include in the Bible – is what the book says.

Simply put, the book says that God is love. That he loved us so much, he sent Jesus into the world to save us. But that's not all. Because God loves us, we are to love each other. Does the hymn "They'll Know We Are Christians by Our Love" echo in your head about now? Sometimes, when I'm watching the news, reading magazine headlines at the grocery store or listening to someone complain about someone else, I think about that. We claim to love God and want to follow Jesus' example, but all too often we don't take the high road. It's more fun to point out someone else's failings.

This time of year, we're all stressed and busy. I usually have a list of things I intend to accomplish each day. Anyone who pushes a cart too slowly in front of me or causes me to get stopped at a red light is at risk of a mental tongue-lashing from me. This only adds to my stress level and certainly isn't showing God's love to anyone.

Instead, I'm trying to take a deep breath and remember that everyone is a child of God, deserving of our love and patience. With God's help, I can do it! (I'll add it to my list!)

Prayer:
Dear God, Thank you for the gift of your Son. Especially as we celebrate his birth, let us remember to spread your love in the world. Amen.

Notes:

Wednesday, 12/23/26

by Cheryl Johnson

John 3:16-17

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."

I was reluctant to sign up for this devotion because this passage is so familiar to all of us that I couldn't think of anything more to say. (Would it be funny if I just ended this devotion here?)

The truth is that there is a lot packed into these two verses. The first verse talks about the incredible amount of love God has for us that he allowed his son to suffer for our sins. Tomorrow night, we'll be celebrating the birth of Jesus, and the message of love will be reinforced.

So, just as we're reading about love and eternal life, that ugly word condemn jumps up at us. In choral anthems based on this verse, the music usually strikes a slightly discordant note to make it stand out as something uncomfortable. The idea of condemnation does seem incompatible with a baby's birth. Sadly, it does seem that many people see being a Christian as constantly pointing out the errors of other people's lives.

The thing to focus on is that Jesus is the pathway to eternal life. We can't earn eternal life; it is a gift freely given. Acceptance of that gift and believing in Jesus means that we will want to follow the example of love freely given and show God's love to the world.

Prayer:
Dear God, Help us to focus on loving all of your children and being grateful for the gift you've given us. Amen.

Notes:

Thursday, 12/24/26

The Song of the Angels by Karen Wright

Luke 2:8-20

"Angels We Have Heard on High"
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WHWqj6gKS9g

That evening, the shepherds were probably doing what they always did: watching the sheep, huddling around a fire to stay warm, and talking with one another. Then an angel arrived. Scripture tells us the shepherds were terrified. The angel proclaimed good news: the Messiah, the Lord, had been born in the City of David.

As if one angel were not terrifying enough, the heavenly host, an army of angels, appeared. A night like so many others was suddenly filled with light and with the singing of Gloria in excelsis Deo!

Then the angels departed, and the shepherds, ordinary people on a previously ordinary night, were drawn into the divine story. They left their sheep and journeyed to Bethlehem. They were not important people, nor were they prepared for their night to change so dramatically, but they were invited into the story nonetheless. After they found the child, they told others what they had experienced.

What if, this Christmas Eve, we listen for the song the angels sing on high? We can sing Gloria in excelsis Deo with them and let God enter the ordinary parts of our lives. We are invited into the story as we are, where we are, even without full understanding, to share in the joyous song proclaiming the birth of the Christ Child.

Prayer: God of surprising songs, open our ears to hear the Good News. Help us recognize your presence when you break into our ordinary lives and arrive in unexpected moments. Give us the courage of the shepherds to enter the song. Amen.

Notes:

Friday, 12/25/26

The Song of Love by Karen Wright

Luke 2:1-20

"In the Bleak Midwinter"
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cBCYZ9jIJkI

We often imagine a serene scene of the holy family gathered around the Christ Child with the animals on that first Christmas. What our culture leaves out is that Jesus was not born into a world free of problems and hardship. He was not born into an easy life, and the world did not change immediately upon his arrival.

Joseph and Mary traveled from Nazareth to Bethlehem, about 70 miles. On foot or by donkey, the journey would have taken several days. It was a trade route between the two villages, and the Holy Family would have stayed in villages along the way, traveling carefully because some parts of the year were more favorable for travel than others.

The reason for the journey was a decree from the Empire that everyone be counted in their own town. The people were on the move amid political anxiety, poverty, and uncertainty; and Mary was with child. God did not wait for perfect conditions to enter our human story. God enters the messy middle of our lives, in all their beauty and brokenness.

"In the Bleak Midwinter" describes an English winter rather than the weather in Palestine, yet it reminds us of the imperfect world into which Jesus arrived. Its final verse speaks to what we can bring: our hearts. Christmas is not only remembering something that happened 2,000 years ago. It is trusting that the divine love of Christ comes into the midst of our lives, unexpectedly and repeatedly.

Prayer: God of love, you came into a messy world to remind us of your unconditional love for us. Help us receive your love and grace and welcome your presence into our messy lives. Amen.

Notes:

Saturday, 12/26/26

by Barbara Douglas

John 1:1–14

John 1:1 "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning."

In John's gospel, he states right from the start that the Word was becoming flesh. No long birth story as we see in Matthew and Luke. John takes us right to the adult Jesus as the Word has become flesh. John the Baptist is mentioned as the voice coming as witness to this Light, but not the light. John only proclaims the coming of Jesus, the Light of the World.

John's gospel goes right to the heart of the purpose of Jesus coming to earth. This Messiah has come as the Light for the world. "The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it." The call is clear: Jesus has come into the world to save us all.

What shall we take away from John's message for us? We must realize that Jesus has come to us and we should listen and serve him as our Messiah. We must remember the message of John in verse 14: "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Ony, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth."

May we live in His Light with faith and love.

Sunday, 12/27/26

by Cheryl Johnson

Colossians 3:12-17

As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

The Thursday morning Bible study group has existed for about thirty years. (And we're always happy to welcome people to join!) In one of our Old Testament lessons, we learned that the word love is both a feeling and an action. So, we can love a picture of a field of beautiful flowers (feeling), and we can love people by handing them a warm, nutritious meal (action).

I thought about that when I read this passage. Clothe yourself with compassion. That's an action that brings to mind putting on a jacket lined with the fruits of the spirit. Or clothe yourself with love. Action words. I like this image because, when I think of love as a feeling, it seems as though it's something you can either feel or not feel. As in, "I don't feel like going to the gym today."

But, when it's an action, it's a decision we make. We're in control and we can choose to show love – even if we're not feeling it.

Prayer:
Dear God, Thank you for the people who actively love others – and help me to be one. Amen.

Monday, 12/28/26

by Dave Pack

Matthew 2:13-18 (CEB)

"When the magi had departed, an angel from the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, 'Get up. Take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod will soon search for the child in order to kill him.' Joseph got up and, during the night, took the child and his mother to Egypt. He stayed there until Herod died. This fulfilled what the Lord had spoken through the prophet: I have called my son out of Egypt.

"When Herod knew the magi had fooled him, he grew very angry. He sent soldiers to kill all the children in Bethlehem and in all the surrounding territory who were two years old and younger, according to the time he had learned from the magi. This fulfilled the word spoken through Jeremiah the prophet: A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and much grieving, Rachel weeping for her children, and she did not want to be comforted, because they were no more."

For me, this passage, about Jesus's early years and a powerful ruler's reaction to his birth, leads to thoughts of some of today's powerful rulers and their actions; actions that surely make God weep.

Jesus and Mary and Joseph were immigrants in Egypt for the first two to three years of Jesus' life. He needed what we now call "asylum" to be protected from the danger he faced in Israel. It was given to him. Thank God that he wasn't showing up at our country's border in 2026 looking for asylum. It would have been denied. The professed Christians currently in charge in our country are probably clueless to the reality that Jesus himself was an immigrant in his early life.

Sadly, Herod's act of killing children in Israel has been repeated by Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu since October 7, 2023. It is estimated that about 20,000 children age 17 or less have died in the area now called Gaza since that date, with about 5,000 of them being age 4 or less. Our country bears significant responsibility for supporting this politically and supplying the military weapons that have enabled it to happen.

God does indeed weep!

Notes:

Tuesday, 12/29/26

by Kevin Johnson

1 John 1:5-10; 2:1-2

5 This then is the message which we have heard of him, and declare unto you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all.

6 If we say that we have fellowship with him, and walk in darkness, we lie, and do not the truth: 7 but if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin. 8 If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. 9 If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. 10 If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

1 John 2:1-2 My little children, these things write I unto you, that ye sin not. And if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous: and he is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world.

The Parable of Enyadatta in "The Three Pillars of Zen"
by Roshi Philip Kapleau

> Enyadatta was a beautiful maiden who enjoyed nothing more than gazing at herself in the mirror each morning. One day when she looked into her mirror, she found no head reflected there. The shock was so great that she became frantic, rushing around demanding to know who had taken her head. "Who has my head? Where is my head? I shall die if I don't find it!" she cried. Though everyone told her, "Don't be silly, your head is on your shoulders where it has always been," she refused to believe it. "No, it isn't! No, it isn't! Somebody must have taken it!" she shouted, continuing her frenzied search. At length her friends, believing her mad, dragged her home and tied her to a pillar to prevent her harming herself.
>
> Slowly her close friends persuaded her that she had always had her head, and gradually she came to half-believe it. Her subconscious mind began to accept the fact that perhaps she was deluded in thinking she had lost her head.
>
> Suddenly one of her friends gave her a terrific clout on the head, upon which, in pain and shock, she yelled "Ouch!"
>
> "That's your head! There it is!" her friend exclaimed, and immediately Enyadatta saw that she had deluded herself into thinking she had lost her head, when in fact she had always had it.
>
> When this happened to Enyadatta, she was so elated that she rushed around exclaiming, "Oh, I've got it! I have my head after all! I'm so happy!" As her joy subsided, Enyadatta recovered from her half-mad state.

Of course this story is absurd. It is used in Zen teaching to highlight how we often do not realize that we already have that which we are searching for. God's presence is not something we need to travel somewhere to find. God's love burns as a spark inside of each of us. It is there now for us. We simply need to realize it is there and awake to the light it can bring into our world.

Wednesday, 12/30/26

by Stephen Wing

Psalm 148

Praise the LORD! (verse 1)

We're now past Christmas. The presents have been opened and ignored. All the leftovers are almost gone. As well as the relatives who came for a visit. The Lay-Z-Boy recliner isn't calling your name; it's shouting it.

One more holiday a day away. New Year's Eve, morphing into New Year's Day. New.

The old is almost done with its yearly work. The New, whatever that is going to be, is almost ready to begin its work. As you sit there, eyes closed, body eased to the edge of a much-desired nap, a word intrudes itself upon your relaxed posture: Praise. Praise!

In the Bible, the word literally means, Light. Or, to shine the light upon something or someone. In your mind's eye, a spotlight shines on an incident from the past year. It turns off, then comes on again exposing another experience from the past year. On and off it goes, showing you your past year in spots of light. Your mood has now changed.

But, suddenly, you get it. God was turning on those spotlights. God wanted to show you, that in each of those revealed experiences, what you had not noticed before: God was there. What was "brought to light" was not just your spot memories, but more importantly, the God who was there. You just needed enough light to see God. And now the New Year doesn't seem so scary.

Journaling Prompt:
What events/experiences would God shine a light on from your past year? Looking back, how do you see God in those events/experiences that you may have missed when they were happening?

Notes:

Thursday, 12/31/26

The Song of New Things by Karen Wright

Isaiah 43:16-21

"It Came upon the Midnight Clear"
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m71c9p9a1dA

As 2026 comes to a close, we often look back over the year, remembering what happened, how life has changed, and what we have accomplished. Reminiscing is good, because we can often see the path we walked more clearly in hindsight.

However, the prophet Isaiah reminds the people of Israel not to dwell on the past, for God is doing a new thing. This is not a call to erase the past, but neither should it hold us indefinitely. The Lord who made a way through the sea, letting the people walk on dry land as the Egyptians pursued, called them to let go of their slavery in Egypt and follow God into the new, even when they did not fully know what was coming.

God continues to move in and among our lives. As we look to the new year, we remember that, in this season of Christmas, God continues to work, if we remain attentive. Where might God be doing a new thing? Where is God making a way?

The hymn "It Came Upon the Midnight Clear" recalls the song of the angels and their call for peace on earth, even amid a weary world. It speaks of the world's suffering and the crushing load of life, and it invites us to rest and listen for the angels. I have always resonated with the final verse, which reminds us that God makes a way where there seems to be none and continues to do new things. May we perceive where God is at work.

Prayer: The final verse of the hymn

"For lo, the days are hastening on, by prophets seen of old
when with the ever-circling years shall come the time foretold,
When peace shall over all the earth its ancient splendors fling,
and the whole world give back the song which now the angels sing."

Notes:

Friday, 1/1/27

The Song of Recognition by Karen Wright

Luke 2:21-40

"Lord, Bid Your Servant Go in Peace"
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ukyeCmZ29lI

We often pass over the story of Simeon in Luke 2. Simeon is described as a righteous and devout man who had been told he would not see death until he had seen the Lord's Messiah (Luke 2:26). As Mary and Joseph followed Jewish custom, they brought Jesus to the temple to be circumcised. Led by the Spirit, Simeon came to the temple, too.

Simeon took Jesus in his arms and praised God. His song has become known as the Nunc Dimittis, or the Song of Simeon. Simeon had waited for a sign from God, and in waiting and being attentive, he recognized the new thing God was doing. In his waiting, he came to marvel and wonder at this child.

Waiting can be a spiritual practice. It is not doing nothing; it is looking for God at work, attending to the world around us and to where the Spirit is moving within us. As the new year begins, perhaps we can pause to notice where God is at work, so that we too may begin the journey anew with wonder and awe.

Prayer: God, meet us in our waiting. Quiet our minds and still our hearts so that we recognize when you are near. Keep us looking for signs that you are moving among your people. Amen.

Notes:

Saturday, 1/2/27

by Kevin Johnson

Ephesians 3:14-21

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

In the New Year we often reflect on changes we want to make. We look back at our lives and imagine a new year of change. Changes that we hope will bring happiness. Sometimes these reflections hurt. They remind us of what could have been.

> The Wind, One Brilliant Day
> By Antonio Machado (Translated by Robert Bly)
>
> The wind, one brilliant day, called
> to my soul with an odor of jasmine.
>
> "In return for the odor of my jasmine,
> I'd like all the odor of your roses."
>
> "I have no roses; all the flowers
> in my garden are dead."
>
> "Well then, I'll take the withered petals
> and the yellow leaves and the waters of the fountain."
>
> the wind left. And I wept. And I said to myself:
> "What have you done with the garden that was entrusted to you?"

But note that the wind accepts the withered petals and yellow leaves. Just so, God accepts us as we are. God accepts us even in the midst of our hurt and failure.

We might weep for our withered garden but hope springs anew as we open ourselves to God's spirit, still blowing through our lives.

Notes:

Sunday, 1/3/27

by Kevin Johnson

John 1:29-34

The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is he of whom I said, 'After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me.' I myself did not know him, but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel." And John testified, "I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.' And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Chosen One."

Advent is not simply about celebrating the birth of Jesus. It is about preparing ourselves to recognize the presence of Christ in our world and in our lives.

We spend weeks preparing for Christmas. We decorate our homes, attend worship, sing familiar hymns, and celebrate cherished traditions. But how often do we pause to recognize Christ in the ordinary moments of our lives?

Perhaps we become so focused on preparing for Christmas that we overlook the very presence of Christ for whom we are preparing.

This Advent, let us slow down, open our hearts, and rediscover the wonder of God's love all around us. For God's greatest power is revealed not through might or grandeur, but through the gift of His self-giving love.

Monday, 1/4/27

by Harold Frye

Matthew 4:12–17

Matthew 4:16 "Although your people live in darkness, they will see a bright light. Although they live in the shadow of death, a light will shine on them."

In 1966, armed with all the experiences of student teaching, a suit and tie (yes, that's what we wore then), all the teacher editions of textbooks, and a brand new attaché case, I entered my first teaching job, a classroom full of squirming fifth graders. I was confident that I could enlighten them in reading, math, science, and geography. I brought them the light of knowledge.

Jesus began his teaching in Capernaum, near the lake in Galilee. It really didn't matter that much what his message was, he was THE LIGHT. To his followers, he brought a faith that filled their lives and connected them to God.

Live in the LIGHT that is the Lord.

Notes:

Tuesday, 1/5/27

by Kevin Johnson

Isaiah 60:1-6

The Ingathering of the Dispersed

Arise, shine, for your light has come,
and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you.

For darkness shall cover the earth
and thick darkness the peoples,
but the LORD will arise upon you,
and his glory will appear over you.

Nations shall come to your light
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

Lift up your eyes and look around;
they all gather together; they come to you;
your sons shall come from far away,
and your daughters shall be carried in their nurses' arms.

Then you shall see and be radiant;
your heart shall thrill and rejoice,
because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you;
the wealth of the nations shall come to you.

A multitude of camels shall cover you,
the young camels of Midian and Ephah;
all those from Sheba shall come.
They shall bring gold and frankincense
and shall proclaim the praise of the LORD.

> The story of the Peace Child
> (from Lutheran Hour Ministries)
>
> In the early 1960s, missionary Don Richardson and his wife Carol lived among the Sawi people in what is now Indonesian Papua.
>
> Richardson described how two neighboring villages, long divided by warfare and distrust, established peace through an extraordinary custom.
>
> A family from one village would give their infant son to a family in the opposing village. The other village would reciprocate, giving one of its children to the first village.
>
> These children were called Peace Children.
>
> The children would be cared for and protected by their adoptive communities. As long as the children lived, the villages were bound to maintain peace.
>
> The extraordinary thing was that peace was established not through greater power, military victory, or threats, but through the giving of something precious: a beloved child.

And so, God sent His Son to be the light of the world. To draw together all people in love through his Holy Spirit (the light that burns in each one of us). Let your light shine brightly!

Wednesday, 1/6/27

The Song of the Journey by Karen Wright

Matthew 2:1-12

"What Star Is This, with Beams So Bright"
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g-Fz2KqQFqs

Epiphany marks the arrival of the Magi, who followed the star to find the child. They never knew the whole journey, only the step ahead. The star first led them to Herod, to the place where a king would be; yet they did not find the child there. They continued to follow the star, and by its light they were led to Bethlehem, where they presented gifts fit for a king.

The Magi were attentive. Once they had worshipped the child, they did not return to Herod but went home another way, directed in a dream. The visit changed their direction. They began their journey guided by the star's light and departed carrying the light of Christ into the world.

As we make the journey through Advent and Christmas, may we, in our waiting, be drawn by light to meet the Christ child again. May we enter the new year carrying the light of Christ into the world we inhabit, sharing that light step by step and day by day.

May the final verse of "What Star Is This, with Beams So Bright" journey with us:

"O Jesus, while the star of grace
Impels us on to seek your face,
Let not our slothful hearts refuse
The guidance of your light to use."

Prayer:

God of light, give us courage to follow where your light leads. Even when we cannot see beyond the next step, help us follow, trusting that you lead in ways of peace, justice, generosity, and love. Amen.

GRACE COVENANT
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

This Advent Devotions Booklet can be downloaded at gcpc.org/advent.

Worship is held each Sunday at 9:30am, followed by Sunday School at 10:45am.

Download the bulletin, announcements, and find other helpful links at gcpc.org/worship.

You may view the service live at the links below:

YouTube Channel: @gracecovenant443

Facebook Page: Facebook.com/GraceCovenantPresbyterian

Website: gcpc.org/livestream

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