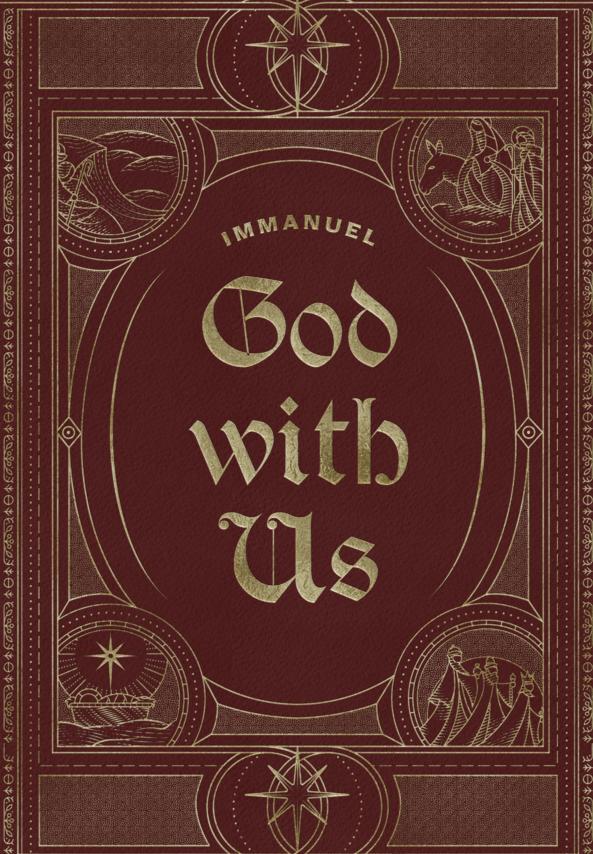


COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH



Introduction

"Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth (40:28)." The prophet Isaiah's words reverberate throughout Israel's heart calling God's people to perceive the unfolding story of God's deliverance through the Messiah, Jesus Christ. The book of Isaiah has sometimes been referred to as the "fifth gospel" because it is filled with prophecies that foretell of the Messiah who will come to save his people. Perhaps most famous among Isaiah's prophecies is the suffering servant passage found in Isaiah 53. Speaking of the Messiah who is to come, he narrates that "he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed (53:5)."

How are we healed through his wounds? How could a shoot suddenly come out from the stump of David (11:1)? How are the mysteries of God revealed through pain, brokenness, and a crucified savior? Isaiah invites us to ponder these questions by fixing our eyes on Christ who is the fulfillment of Israel's Scriptures.

Isaiah will be our guiding voice as we move our way through Advent towards the miracle of Christmas day. In the commercialized world we live in, we are tempted to sentimentalize the Christmas story through fixation on an infant child. It is right that we marvel at the vulnerability of the Christ child, but Isaiah pushes us to look deeper into the deliverance that will come through Christ. Christ will be rejected by the world he came to save, but God's love will prevail even amidst our rejection of him. With Isaiah we celebrate and long for the day when swords will be beat into plowshares (2:4) and the wolf will live with the lamb (9:11). With Isaiah, we wait for the day when all things will finally be made new.

Thow to Use this Devotional

This devotional is written by the people of Covenant Presbyterian Church. Months before Advent, our authors have begun the process of meditating on the coming of Christ in hopes that you will enter fully into the work of preparing your heart for Christ's coming. Each year we remember the historical event of the incarnation which inaugurated the present reality we all live in today. God is with us. Use this devotional to slow down with the God who wants to be with you.

To that end, spend time with the guiding Scripture each day as you read each entry. Open your hearts to the new thing God might want to do in your life. Carve out space to be with God because God wants to be with you. Come to understand the joy of the incarnation as a movement of God directly to you. And from that communion with God, allow the good news to flow out of you and become good news for all you encounter.

Throughout this edition you will find poetry written by the Anglican priest and author Malcom Guite. We have intentionally highlighted his work this Advent because he will be joining us for our Foundation Lectures on January 30th and 31st. Receive the gifts of his poetry, and mark your calendars to join us as we welcome him to our campus.

BEN DAVISON

Associate Pastor for Discipleship

Advent Events

KIDS ADVENT WREATH-MAKING EVENT

Sunday, November 30

4:00 - 6:00 p.m. | FE200

Register at covenant.org/wreath

KIDS VERY MERRY ADVENT DINNER

Sunday, December 7

5:00 - 6:30 p.m. | Sanctuary & FE200

Register at covenant.org/verymerry

YOUTH THANKSMAS PARTY

Wednesday, December 10

Middle School at 6:00 - 7:30 p.m. | FE400

High School at 6:45 - 8:30 p.m. | FE400

ADVENT SILENT RETREAT

Saturday, December 13

9:00 a.m. - 12:00 p.m. | FE400

Register at covenant.org/retreat

CHRISTMAS CONCERT

Sunday, December 14

2:30 p.m.

For more details visit covenant.org/advent

KIDS BIRTHDAY PARTY FOR JESUS

Sunday, December 14

9:30 - 10:30 a.m. | FE300

YOUNG ADULT CHRISTMAS BRUNCH

Sunday, December 21

12:15 - 2:00 p.m. | Home of Pansy and Elliott Flick

Register at covenant.org/yabrunch

Worship Services

HANGING OF THE GREEN

Sunday, November 30

9:30 a.m. | Sanctuary 11:00 a.m. | FE200

LESSONS & CAROLS WORSHIP SERVICES

Sunday, December 14

8:15 & 9:30 a.m. | Sanctuary

11:00 a.m. | FE200

CHRISTMAS EVE WORSHIP SERVICES

Wednesday, December 24

2:00 p.m. Traditional Candlelight Service | Sanctuary

4:00 p.m. Children & Family Service | Sanctuary

5:00 p.m. Contemporary Candlelight Service | FE200 & Online

8:30 p.m. Traditional Candlelight Service | Sanctuary & Online



TAMALE SALES FOR MANOS DE CRISTO

Through December 1
Pickup December 5 on campus
Order online at covenant.org/tamale

POINSETTIA DONATIONS

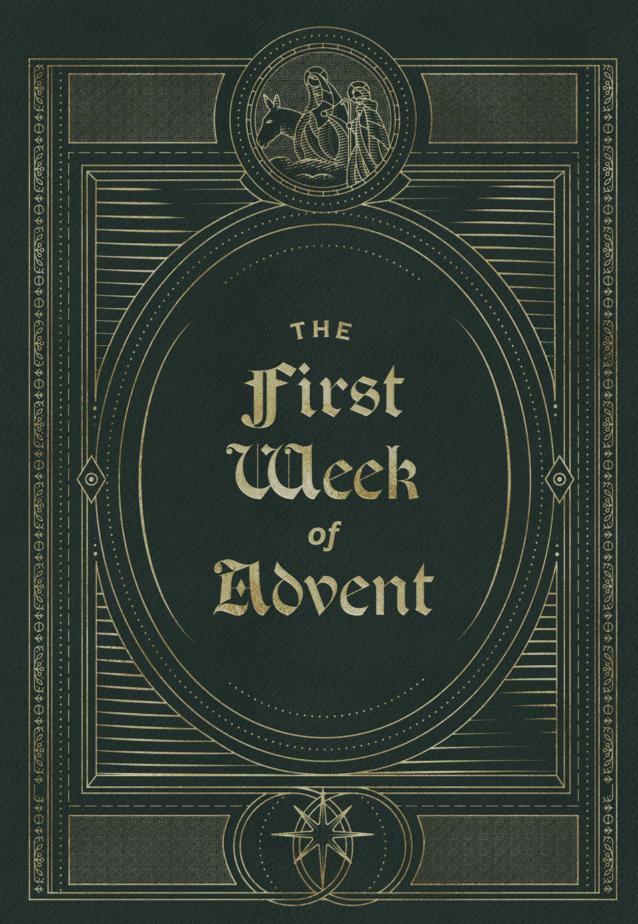
Through December 14

Order online at covenant.org/poinsettia

CHRISTMAS GIVING TREE

Through December 21

Learn more at covenant.org/cgt



Making Room: An Advent of Surrender

SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 30

Emily Ross

Every December, the lists grow – gift lists, grocery lists, event lists. Mix these with the voice in my head rehearsing all the big conversations and traditions I expect to orchestrate for my family, and we've got ourselves a circus! Advent is supposed to be a time of preparation, but somewhere between wrapping paper and Christmas cards, "prepare" can feel a lot like "perform."

In Luke 21:14, Jesus flips the script on preparing in a way we typically don't hear it used during Advent.

"So make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance; for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict."

It's a strange verse to think about right now, on the first day of Advent. The whole season centers on waiting and preparing our hearts for Christ's coming. But here, Jesus tells his followers not to prepare. He's not calling for lists or rehearsed conversations. He's calling for us to surrender and trust him to meet us in every moment. To simply pray, "God, I don't have the words. Or even all the answers. But you do."

This Advent, what if we stopped rehearsing what to say, who to be, or how to make everything magical and, instead, let the Spirit whisper the right words and moments into our hearts as they come? Could we trust that God is in control of our future and live into the blessing of 1 Thessalonians 5:5 as "children of light?"

Maybe the truest Christmas preparation isn't about getting everything right. Maybe it's about letting go and trusting that God already has.

PRAYER

Lord, still my thoughts when they race ahead. Help my preparations be ones of love and humbleness. Teach me to trust you with my words, my time, my heart, my country, and my world. Fill me with your peace this Advent season. Amen.

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTOR

Emily and her family have been members at Covenant for seven years. She is most recognizable walking off the shuttle with her husband, Brian, and the horde of girls they bring to church, including their three daughters: Lyla (8), Elise (7), and Hannah (5). Emily has been honored to serve on Session, the CNC and the Discipleship Committee, and volunteer in Children's Ministry. She is a writer and content creator, and – much to her husband's chagrin – will never play pickleball again (IYKYK! haha!).

SCRIPTURE

Luke 21:5-19

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

Am I Boing to Jerusalem?

MONDAY, DECEMBER 1

Kit Chenault

The sea, it beckons me so

It tugs at my being and pulls at my frame.

Wraps me snugly and tells me of the house

of the Lord

The clear skies above

Wind caressing the waves

Sounds swirling endlessly

The sparkle

The spray.

Is it the pull of the sea or ship's destination

That draws me onward

For I see sails full of wind and power

Beckoning my direction

Potential being harnessed

To pull me onward.

Further and

Further along toward Jerusalem

Yet here am I tethered to the wharf

Rubbing and chaffing

At the dock of responsibility

Held by the lines of

Time and tradition

Binding me away

From the story of truth

And change.

Do these sails come by my haunts,

This position of responsibility

To encourage, to tantalize

Or challenge?

To be a partner of action

A sense of completeness

A tapestry of complexity

A painting influential

A soulmate divine.

Encouraging a sense of power

Sailing free in clear air

With fully trimmed sails

And a full sense of direction

To wash away the tears of inner turmoil

That may allow those sails

To go over the horizon

With the great worry that they may not

To tug at my being

And the mooring

Of bitter days

Of better days

lost.

PRAYER

Dear Lord, I pray you will always understand my questions when I raise them to you. I understand you know full well my thoughts and peculiarities, and I hope our understanding goes to these questions and maybe the answers too. My hope is always that you know where I am coming from and will lead me through the waters of life in a manner that is pleasing to you. I pray you will continue to give me opportunities to serve your people and the communities you're building. Amen.

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTOR

Kit grew up on an orange grove in southern California where he learned to sail from the L.A. Harbor to Catalina Island. He attended medical school in Houston where he met and married a sweet Texas girl, Sara. The two traveled for further studies but returned to Texas for practice of Orthopedic surgery. Kit enjoys many hobbies, like repairing tractors and singing in choir. Kit and Sara have been at Covenant since 1972. He has taught Sunday school, served as a deacon, sang in the choir for over 30 years, and been Covenant's liaison to the Drive a Senior ministry for 18 years.

SCRIPTURE Psalm 122

Remembering

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 2

In his second letter, Peter writes in a time after the death and resurrection of Jesus. The Christian faith was in its fledgling years as the first churches were established all over the ancient world. In this passage, Peter knows he is going to die soon.

In his writing, he wants to impart his final words of wisdom upon these new churches. To remind them – though they know already – that the gospel is not some interesting story or "cleverly devised myths."

He adds credibility to the events he's relaying when he writes, "we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty." Peter was also one of the disciples to behold the Transfiguration of Jesus (Matthew 17:1-8, Mark 9:2-8, and Luke 9:28-36), where Jesus was joined by Elijah and Moses, and God the Father declares Jesus as his Son: "This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

The recipients of this second letter would understand that these events are proof of fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies. The Messiah, the one for whom Israel has eagerly awaited, is Jesus of Nazareth, and they do not need to wait any longer. The prophecies – which were spoken by God through humans – have been satisfied in Jesus.

God has kept his promises, Peter writes, "you will do well to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place."

What would it mean if we were to believe that the Bible is not just "cleverly devised myths?" How can we remember God's faithfulness in fulfilling his promises during this season of Advent?

PRAYER

Father God, you have kept your promises. You first spoke by the Holy Spirit and continue to speak to us today. Teach us to pay attention to how you continue to speak to us. Help us to remember your glory and love everyday. Your steadfast love endures forever. Amen.

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTOR

Mary Elise and her husband, Ben, have been part of Covenant for 1.5 years. In June they welcomed their first baby boy, Knox! Mary Elise works as a pediatric genetic counselor at Dell Children's, and in her free time she loves to read, bake, and adventure outdoors.

SCRIPTURE

2 Peter 1:12-21

Our Loving and Faithful God

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 3

Kay and John Braziel

What an awesome God we have. It is often only in retrospect that we truly appreciate what God has given us. The great planner of the universe has given us a blueprint to guide our lives from the time he "knitted us in the womb" until we see Christ himself, as Peter tells us what will occur in the last days. With the craziness going on in our world lately, maybe we are closer to the last days, after all.

How blessed we have been to grow up in godly families - one of us baptized in Ward Memorial Methodist Church in Austin and another baptized in a muddy lake outside of Emory, Texas. As we wander toward our 90s years, we have seen the hand of God in our lives through several iterations of church communities and, finally, ending up at our 33-year home at Covenant. It's been a privilege to watch many recent blessings at Covenant like our gifted pastoral staff, especially the grace of Thomas and Beth Daniel, the flourishing of our congregation post-covid, and the generosity that's poured in for Eaton Hall. We know we have been where God wanted us to be.

It has been so exciting to see where all God has led us, sometimes through the wilderness and yet faithfully to become partners with him in spreading the Word. God has spoken (or maybe whispered!) to us when we went through hard times raising our two, wonderfully kind and loving children. And God has blessed us with four best friends, our grandchildren.

As we age, we are more and more convinced of God's glorious hand over our 63 years of partnership too, helping build our loving life together. How could we have missed

that miracle for so long? How many have wondered when the time for redemption, spoken of in 2 Peter, will come?

In looking over our lives, we know his timing is perfect, even when we can see it only in retrospect. We know he wants as many as possible welcomed into his "new heaven and new earth." His perfect plan is in place and has been since he created our world. If God had not wanted us to have our reward with him in heaven, he would not have given us his "only begotten Son." What a gift. Hallelujah and Amen.

PRAYER

May you help us to honor your Son, Jesus Christ, during this holy season of Advent with observant hearts and minds. Knowing that you desire us to be intentional about this season, reflecting on all you have done for us throughout our lives. May we not take for granted your loving concern for us. May we be drawn closer to all you have to teach us. We pray for your guidance and love. In your holy name, we pray.

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTOR

Kay and John Braziel have been members of Covenant for 33 years. They got involved early with the Kairos Class taught by Sel Harris. Kay is still involved in Kairos, one of the few original members! John has been in Community Bible Study for over 35 years. Kay was a school librarian in Austin for over 30 years, and John was in the real estate development business.

SCRIPTURE

2 Peter 3: 1-10

Subtlety? Mot for Me

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 4

In my home office, I have a framed poster of a Renaissance-era woman bearing this phrase in oversized yellow letters: I WAS NOT MADE TO BE SUBTLE.

It's true. I'm an extrovert with a loud voice, a big laugh, and (if I'm not careful) an unfiltered opinion. I do my best work on "big picture" things.

In today's passage, God's word to the prophet Amos and the people of Israel is certainly not subtle. God brought multiple disasters upon Israel: famine, drought, crop failure, plague, war, and the overthrowing of cities. Can you imagine our loving God putting these things into motion? But the disasters weren't intended as punishments. The Israelites had forgotten God, and these life-altering occasions were wake-up calls – things God knew they could not ignore.

Discipline, not vengeance, was the goal. And by the end of the passage, we're reminded that the same God who created these horrific events also created picturesque mountains and cool breezes.

If you've ever been close to a natural disaster, you might remember the distinct difference in how we behave immediately afterward as compared to how life shifts after the shock wears off. At first, we're action-oriented – extra kind to each other, more generous with resources, more helpful to our neighbors. And yet, it doesn't take long for life's routines to kick back in and for "normal" to return. Our level of

loving kindness seems to drop off as the urgency decreases.

Are we like the Israelites, so out of touch with God or buried in the minutia and routine of life that we need something horrible to happen to remind us of his sovereignty? Or are we looking up each day, grateful for his love, nature's beauty, and the ability to experience both?

PRAYER

Heavenly Father, thank you for asking us to return to you again and again. Your patience and mercy are beyond comprehension. Give us ears that hear and eyes that see long before we need a wake-up call like the ones you gave the Israelites. We thank you for your authority, your power, and the beauty you've given us. Forgive us when we allow other things to take your place. Encourage us to encourage each other. Amen.

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTOR

Kelly Olson joined the Covenant family in 2022. She serves as a Deacon and attends the Sunday morning Faith, Community, and the Word small group. When she's not writing proposals for a Midwestern construction and engineering company, she enjoys not-so-subtle hobbies like karaoke and watching SEC football with her husband Chris.

SCRIPTURE

Amos 4:6-13

Worth Bod's Time

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 5

I find it difficult to relate to this psalmist. My bones don't "burn like glowing embers," and my heart isn't "blighted and withered like grass." I don't "eat ashes as my food and mingle my drink with tears." I don't feel like God has "taken me up and thrown me aside." While reading this psalm, I felt ashamed and embarrassed.

First, were I in this author's situation, I am not especially confident that I would be able to maintain the same belief that God will hear and answer my prayers.

Second, when I lie awake at night, it is not because of problems that compare to what this author had to endure. There are countless people around the world, across this country, and even in this congregation that are afflicted with tragedies that I have never experienced and cannot even begin to comprehend.

How can my prayer be worth God's time when there are people suffering in Gaza and Ukraine who are still waiting for answers to their prayers? Why am I worried about my own productivity and motivation when I have loved ones dealing with sickness and loss?

Whenever I remember that God is infinite and doesn't pick and choose who he listens to, I still wonder if my own time would be better spent praying for those with greater need of it. Even as I am writing this reflection, I worry that I'm too focused on my own privileged reaction to others' suffering instead of the suffering itself. I

don't know if I should be praying differently, but I do know that I don't have these same concerns when I apply these reflections to others' prayers.

When I pray for someone else, no matter how "small," I am never worried about wasting God's time or my own. For example, I could never call any single prayer from a child insignificant. I do not feel the need to question the scale of anyone else's pain, and I don't believe God would either – maybe I shouldn't treat my prayers any differently.

PRAYER

Hear my prayer, O Lord; let my cry for help come to you. Help us to remember that because you endure forever and remain the same, your mercies to those who look to you for salvation will not fail no matter how big or small the prayer may be. Amen.

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTOR

Matt has been a member of Covenant since 2020 and a Presbyterian since 2nd grade when he felt left out during Communion and cried until his parents agreed to have him baptized. He works as a biomechanical engineer, designing orthopedic implants. He and his wife, Stefani, are currently having the best time learning to be parents to their new baby daughter, Kirby.

SCRIPTURE

Psalm 102

O Adonai

Unsayable, you chose to speak one tongue,
Unseeable, you gave yourself away,
The Adonai, the Tetragramaton
Grew by a wayside in the light of day.
O you who dared to be a tribal God,
To own a language, people and a place,
Who chose to be exploited and betrayed,
If so you might be met with face to face,
Come to us here, who would not find you there,
Who chose to know the skin and not the pith,
Who heard no more than thunder in the air,
Who marked the mere events and not the myth.
Touch the bare branches of our unbelief
And blaze again like fire in every leaf.

MALCOLM GUITE

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Praise the Lord!

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 7

In one of our family's favorite Christmas movies, "Prancer" (1989), eight-year-old Jessica Riggs has fallen out of a tree and is recuperating at home. We hear the father's side of a phone call with the doctor:

"I think maybe she came home from the hospital too soon... She doesn't want to get out of bed. She doesn't want to play her Christmas records... Oh, no, you don't understand. My daughter plays Christmas records all year."

Christmas music.

I remember singing "What Child is This?" in children's choir at church and being moved in ways I was yet too young to understand. Singing "Silent Night" at Christmas Eve service was, and still is, an ethereal experience. I sang "O Holy Night" solo in a school concert in sixth grade and to this day hearing the intro to that piece brings wonderful associations of all my Christmases past.

Christmas music may not be all clanging and clashing cymbals, but it definitely is trumpet, lute, and harp, strings and pipe, organ and piano, and voices! Many voices raised in joyful praise of the coming miracle!

Music can connect us to God by preparing our hearts, transforming our spirits and fostering within us a sense of peace, faith, and gratitude. And for me, no music does that more profoundly than the music of Christmas.

In the days ahead, as we approach the celebration of the birth of Jesus, keep your ears and hearts open. Every time you hear a piece of Christmas music, take time to listen. If it's a familiar song, join in (out

loud, if possible, or in your heart, at least). If it's new to you, let it create a new channel for praise and a new anchor for memories. If it makes you joyful, what a blessing! If it makes you sad, know that sadness is part of the season as well. Sadness allows for deeper connection and the processing of past losses, and for appreciating the joy of the season more fully.

Let music be an umbrella for all your Christmas sadness and joy this year.

PRAYER

O Lord, I come to you in this season of advent with a wide array of emotions, sometimes so numerous and so powerful that I find it difficult to process it all. Thank you for the gift of music, and especially for all the amazing and profound music of Christmas. Help me to use that gift to probe all the feelings that this season can arise. And help me to use that gift to praise you and to praise the birth of Jesus Christ, whose birth we will celebrate soon and in whose loving and powerful name we pray. Amen

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTOR

Mike Austin and his wife, Kay, joined Covenant shortly after Kay became Jill William's first admin assistant. Receiving his Certificate in Ministry from APTS in 2015, he has been leading worship as a pulpit supply preacher for various churches throughout central Texas for several years. Yes, he did sing the solo "O Holy Night" in sixth grade, mostly because no one else in his class would volunteer, and yes, he still loves that music despite the experience!

SCRIPTURE

Psalm 150

Anticipating the Birth of the Truth

MONDAY, DECEMBER 8

Laurel Reed

Waiting, waiting... waiting is hard. At this time of Advent, we watch and wait. We can get impatient, even as we look forward to the birth of Jesus with joyful expectation. We, today, are blessed with the knowledge of what is to come – the birth of the Truth, the Light. And yet the waiting is still hard for us. We need Jesus!

As we read today's New Testament reading, we find the Sadducees questioning Jesus, "What if this? What if that?" Rapid fire questions intended to trip him up and confuse him.

Did they not see him as the Truth? Jesus calmly answers them with the truth of God's word. His answers to their questions silenced them and quelled any doubts about who he is and why he came to earth as Emmanual, God with us. He points out to the Sadducees that they were in error because they did not know the scriptures or the power of God.

Let us prepare our hearts for the coming of the Savior, the Truth and the Light. Let us not be deceived by the doubters, but rely on the Truth as we live out our days on this earth.

PRAYER

O God, we are endlessly grateful for the great gift of your Son, Jesus, our Savior. Enable us to know the scriptures and the power of God. Let us hold your word in our hearts always. Amen.

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTOR

Laurel and her husband, Joel, have been at Covenant for three years. She has participated in various Bible studies for many years (one of which is Lamplighters), is now in the (Sarah Elizabeth) Horizons class for Presbyterian women, and enjoys her small group. Laurel is a retired special education teacher and loves music of (almost!) all kinds, being outdoors, traveling, reading, entertaining, and gardening. She and Joel are the parents of three children and three grandchildren, Harrison (8), Olivia (7), and Mila (5).

SCRIPTURE

Matthew 22: 23-33

The Greatest Commandment

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 9

Eddie Burns

Today's lectionary scripture from Matthew includes the greatest commandment Jesus gave to us, one that endures forever.

"Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" He (Jesus) said to him, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'

- Matthew 22: 36-39

As we celebrate the Advent Season, the birth of our Lord Jesus and his second coming, this passage is a humbling reminder of how we should set our life and daily priorities. Remembering the overwhelming love that God has for us, and that he gave his only begotten son so that we may have everlasting life. Loving God is our primary and greatest commandment.

For this second commandment, we are challenged to love not only our physical neighbors but also those people we encounter in our lives, and to love them all just the same as we love ourselves. That's not so easy, though. We encounter many different types of people daily: drivers that cut us off, angry neighbors, nasty social media commenters... It's in these times that we should take a step back and remember we are to love them as we love ourselves. They are our neighbors, too.

As Christmas approaches, let us look anew at others and strive to see the person inside, the person Jesus loves. Let us remember Jesus loves us too, much more than we can ever understand.

PRAYER

Heavenly Father, we confess that we do not always love others as ourselves. Help us to stop and remember that we are to love our neighbors just as you love us. In the name of Jesus we ask these things, Amen.

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTOR

Eddie and his wife, Ann, have been members of Covenant since 2018 and deacons since 2023. Both are retired and enjoy being with any and all of their six grandkids when they get the chance. They also enjoy traveling, including long road trips (they have now set foot in all 50 states!) and international adventures.

SCRIPTURE

Matthew 22:34-46

What Gives God Joy?

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 10

At this stage in my life, I realize how hard it is to work daily on my walk with God. Have you ever felt like your daily journey gets harder during the holidays? We give thanks and love on Thanksgiving, and then POOF it turns to gifts, baking, decorating and - SELF! We can get caught up in our own "busy-ness," but it's important to remember who we are and to whom we belong.

David starts in Psalm 17, begging the Lord to "Hear, oh Lord, my righteous plea..." David uses strong action words like "give ear, call, rise up, and rescue me." He seeks the only one that can save him. He shows us exactly what is needed: to know God. Only by knowing him are we able to understand what God wants most - US!

I tell myself each year that I wont let the chaos of the season overshadow the peace and joy of our Savior's birth. As we turn to Psalm 147 1:1-11, we see what the writer was seeking and what I wanted: peace, love, and joy. Because we crave these three emotions, we need to ask ourselves, "What gives God joy?"

We see many things that God does for us, but also what we should do during this Christ-mas time. Verses 10 and 11 tell us the answer to our question. "The Lord delights in those who fear Him, who put their hope in His unfailing love." While it is easier to fear and be in awe of God, it seems difficult to remember our relationship is what brings him joy. This gets lost in the hustle, bustle of the season. When I start and end my day with God, the day (chaotic or not) becomes manageable. I'm reminded that my thankfulness will always bring me back to God.

This season I want to remember to walk with Jesus, feel the Spirit move me, and know when I do this, I bring God joy!

Want to join me?

PRAYER

Dear Heavenly Father, we praise and seek you daily. We confess we haven't always started our day looking to you. You bring so much joy and love into this dark world. We know you delight in your children. May our days be filled with moments that draw us in to you, Lord. Show us how to honor and exalt you during this season and every day. We fear and exalt Your Name. You are our Joy! Amen.

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTOR

Daye Virostek has been a member of Covenant since 2001. She enjoys leading a small group in Lamplighters, reading, and spending time with her husband, Jon, and daughter, Ella. She's a die-hard college football fan who went to UGA - GO DAWGS!!

SCRIPTURE

Psalm 17, 147:1-11

When Jaith Becomes a Platform

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 11

Anthony Garcia

By the time we get to Matthew 23, Jesus is getting close to the end of his ministry. Crowds are still gathering, but his message has turned urgent and tender. There's a sense of grief in his words, not because people have rejected their faith, but because they've twisted it. The ones he's addressing in this passage aren't outsiders, they're insiders. People who speak in God's name but along the way have lost God's heart.

They're still preaching, still giving, still doing the "right things." But along the way, their faith has become more of a performance – a way to prove holiness rather than pursue holiness. They've turned devotion into division, using religion as a system of control instead of a posture of humility.

If that doesn't sound familiar today, we may not be listening close enough. In our world, faith is often used to draw lines – to prove who's in and who's out, who's right and who's wrong. Jesus didn't shy away from hard truth or righteous anger, but his goal was always restoration, not exclusion. His harshest words weren't for the doubter or the seeker, but for those who claimed to speak for God while living in a way that contradicted his character.

It's often easier for us, myself included, to practice the parts that feel safe and measurable — to give, serve, or post something inspiring online — than to let God confront what's within us. Yet Jesus reminds us that true obedience starts there, in the hidden places of our hearts.

Take a moment to consider where we, as followers of Christ, may have confused certainty with faithfulness. Have we become more focused on being right than being Christ-like? Advent invites us to loosen our hold on the need to have all the answers and instead cling to the one who is the answer: Jesus.

PRAYER

Lord, protect us from using your name to build our own platforms. Soften our hearts where pride has taken root and teach us to love as you love. In a world quick to divide, make us instruments of your compassion, humility and grace. Amen.

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTOR

Anthony Garcia joined Covenant in 2023 and serves as a co-leader for one of the church's young adult small groups and on the Discipleship Committee. A Baylor graduate who has called Austin home for ten years, he teaches high school journalism and advises students in broadcast, newspaper and yearbook. Outside of work, he enjoys cooking, hosting a monthly dinner club, hitting the Town Lake trail and convincing friends to try karaoke.

SCRIPTURE

Matthew 23:13-16



FRIDAY, DECEMBER 12

"Yestertime" is what my three-year-old grandson calls yesterday. I don't think he knows that it is also the title of a time travel series by Andrew Cunningham, first published in late 2020.

Why think of "yestertime" at Advent? As the years go by, my life is transitioning from less time laboring and more time leisureing. I've moved from a homeowner to a retirement community dweller. I celebrate my youngest daughter's marriage and, likely, my last grandchild's growth into a thoughtful human being (How else could he have come up with "yestertime?").

The significance of stories about the past fills me now, and I find myself telling stories frequently. I have surmised that all life boils down to a series of stories.

In the excerpts from Psalm 102 we hear a call to record God's deeds for generations to come so that people not yet created may praise the Lord (Psalm 102:18). The Psalmist, as do I, has confidence that future generations will continue to praise God. Psalm 102:28 emphasizes that faith is an enduring legacy, one to be shared with future generations through worship, prayer, and righteous living.

When a family gets together, whether to celebrate a wedding, funeral, graduation, or holiday, there are many stories to be told. That is how we celebrate "yestertime." The story of our faith, God's love, and his gift of the Lord Jesus Christ – whose birth we celebrate in this Season, are pillars of our

intergenerational faith. As we gather with others during this Advent Season, I challenge us to share stories of faith and "yestertime."

PRAYER

Lord, hear our prayer. Grant us the gift of fellowship with family and friends in this season. Give us the wisdom to share the stories of our lives. Encourage us to tell stories of your grace and our faith. "Yestertime" is your time and your time is forever. Forever, and forever. Amen.

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTOR

Rhonda and her husband, Bob, have been members of Covenant since the second senior pastor arrived - about 45 years ago! She has served in many roles at the church, most currently serving in her third deacon term. Her legal career ended when a chance to teach her passion (estate planning, family wealth management and philanthropy) at McCombs School of Business at UT arrived. She cherishes living within approximately 70 miles of her three children and four grandchildren. She enjoys explaining that she was "BOI" (born on island - a term for Galveston, Texas natives).

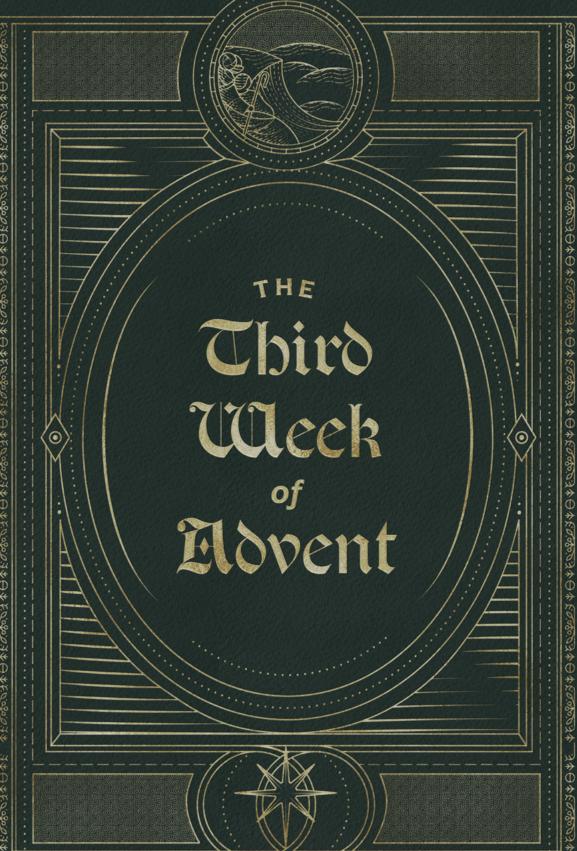
SCRIPTURE

Psalm 102

O IRex Gentium

O King of our desire whom we despise,
King of the nations never on the throne,
Unfound foundation, cast-off cornerstone,
Rejected joiner, making many one,
You have no form or beauty for our eyes,
A King who comes to give away his crown,
A King within our rags of flesh and bone.
We pierce the flesh that pierces our disguise,
For we ourselves are found in you alone.
Come to us now and find in us your throne,
O King within the child within the clay,
O hidden King who shapes us in the play
Of all creation. Shape us for the day
Your coming Kingdom comes into its own.

MALCOLM GUITE



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Ulhose Approval Are You Living For?

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 14

Cheryl Stephens

In this scripture, Jesus rebuked the religious leaders who claimed to follow Moses and honor Scripture but missed the very one Moses pointed to – Jesus himself. They sought human approval rather than God's truth, which blinds them from recognizing the Messiah standing before them.

I love reading inspirational books and learning from others about faith, but this passage reminds me of the importance of reading the Bible not just for knowledge, but also to encounter Jesus.

It's easy to point fingers at the Pharisees, yet we face the same temptations to seek validation from others more than from God. Are we chasing reputation, applause, or appearances instead of cultivating real faith? Are we reading Scripture for information or to meet the living Christ?

Faith must be deeply rooted in understanding God's word, not in habits, traditions, or the opinions of others. True faith flows from a heart that loves God and seeks his approval above all else. The people in Jesus' time rejected him because he didn't fit their expectations. We, too, must guard against dismissing truth just because it's uncomfortable. Humility keeps our hearts open to God's voice, even when it challenges us.

PRACTICAL STEP

Pray regularly not just for needs, but to grow in love and desire for God.

ASK YOURSELF

In what ways do I seek approval from others more than from God?

Is my time in Scripture drawing me closer to Jesus or just checking a box?

What needs to change in my heart to love God more deeply?

PRAYER

Lord, you see my heart. You know how easily I seek validation from people instead of you. Forgive me for the times I place human approval above your truth. Help me to love you deeply and sincerely. Let your word lead me to know you more, and to care more about what you think than anyone else. Teach me to seek the glory that comes from you alone. In Jesus' name, amen.

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTOR

Cheryl has attended Covenant for three years, serving as a deacon, small group member, and usher. She works on a global team managing vendor partners at Visa. Cheryl and her husband, Joe, have two daughters, Caroline (20) and Cate (17). She enjoys hosting friends for backyard pool gatherings with Joe's BBQ and listening to live music. Once they're empty nesters, Cheryl and Joe plan to visit small Texas dance halls together.

SCRIPTURE

John 5:41-47

Psalm 67 is both a poem and a song . It begins with, "May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face shine on us -" (NIV)

As Christians, we believe in a personal God; not a god that is an abstract concept or a distant deity. In Psalm 67 the psalmist describes a divine being that is so personal that God has a face that shines or, according to some translations, smiles on us. What is more personal than a face?

The writer continues with remarks about God's active presence through his saving grace, concerns for justice and provides "the land that yields its harvest."

In November of 1970, George Harrison of Beatles fame released a record of his own that became a worldwide hit. The song was "My Sweet Lord." The lyrics, according to Wikipedia, reflected Harrison's "oftenstated desire for a direct relationship with God, expressed in simple words that all believers could affirm, regardless of their religion." He sings that he really wants to see and be with his Lord. From the ancient psalmists to today's lyricists there is the universal desire for a relationship with the one who is the living Lord.

God has been gracious to us by sending Jesus to be born in human likeness and became the face of God. As Jesus himself pronounced according to John 14: 9, "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father."

During this joyous time of the year, let us raise our voices in songs of praise to our God whose face has shined on us in Jesus and continues to be reflected in the faces of all humankind, particularly in "the least of these."

PRAYER

Lord of the Sun, the Moon, and the Harvests we praise your holy name. You have made your face to shine on us from the ancient of days. You have shown your face in Jesus, the Christ, the one whose face was innocent and yet willingly bore the scourges of our sin.

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTOR

Don and his wife Jean have been active members of Covenant since the mideighties. Don has been an elder and served on several pastoral nominating committees. He has also been a Sunday School teacher for youth and adults and enjoys working in Reel Ministry.

SCRIPTURE

Psalm 67

Don't Be Lukewarm...

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 16

Mary Henderson

As Christ teaches, we must stand for our faith and be bold to witness our faith. He stands at the door and knocks and all we must do is open the door. (Rev.3:20). It sounds so simple, doesn't it? How difficult is it for us sometimes to just answer the door, to say "hello" to a stranger, to ask a colleague "how are you?" and really look them in the eye, take time from our day and really mean it? How do we share our love in Christ where we live, work and play? That is the mission that we profess as a church, but is it how we truly live our lives?

Christ wants us to be zealous for him, to be eager and hungry to know God's word; not just on the holidays, and not only in preparation as we celebrate his birth, but every day. With so much compromise of principles we see in the news and in the world today, our values and staying true to our faith is now more important than ever.

It was such a blessing and privilege to travel to Cuba last fall to visit our sister church, Iglesia Presbiteriana Reformada en Luyano, Havana. Our comparative worldly possessions are incomprehensibly greater, yet the love of Christ they have as a church body and the way the family of God share whatever they have with each other was more of a ministry to us than we could ever give them. In witnessing how our sister church members showed their deep love for each other reminded me of these words. from Christ about what it truly means to love one another and care for each other as Christ cares for the church. In our faith we must be alert, as our Lord will come

when we least expect him in a way we may not fathom (Matt 24:42). Let us be mindful, be present, and live boldly as God's love never fails.

PRAYER

Dear God, We thank you for instilling an urgency within us to not stand idly by, but to care for and love those in our communities and In this world, as we are assured your love is everlasting.

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTOR

Mary Taylor Henderson is married to Adrian Henderson and they have three grown children and two Golden doodles. When not singing in the Sanctuary Choir or practicing law you may find Mary enjoying the Hill Country or planning her next mission trip.

SCRIPTURE

Matthew 24:32-44 Revelation 3:14-22

Remembering God

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 17

The past twelve months have been an incredible year, both in amazement and anguish. And even in the midst of Advent, the world around us feels as if it is hanging on by a thread, and at points over the last year, I felt the same.

The many passages I read for today shared a similar theme. One of remembering:

- Remembering to stay focused on God and away from the wicked of the world (Psalm 17)
- Remembering that our God is powerful and will protect his people (Psalm 50)
- Remembering that we do not know when he is coming and must stay vigilant and honorable to him in our actions (Matthew 24)
- Remembering that his is the Lord God Almighty, who was, is, and is to come (Revelation 4)

This theme of remembering was something I often struggled with this last year: Remembering that God knows me and what is to come. He knows all and is in control of everything – and I am most definitely not. We do not know his plan, but know that he is moving in us and around us to fulfill his plan and promises.

Remember that in spite of all the challenges and fear surrounding us and that we face, God remains steadfast. What about God do you need to remember? Do you need to remember how he guides and protects us as his sheep? Do you need to remember that he will destroy the wicked of this world? Do you need to remember that he is in control, now and forever? I challenge you to remember God's power, love, and protection in times of trial and celebration throughout the Advent season and the year to come.

PRAYER

Dear Lord, help us to remember who you are: the power you have, the love you bestow, and the protection you give. We ask that you provide us opportunities to remember you as we move through our day and the Advent season. Remind us that you are in control and everything is happening for your will to be done. Amen.

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTOR

Kathleen See has been a member of Covenant since 2021, along with her husband Daniel. You'll often find Kathleen and Daniel running after their two-year-old daughter Michela and Tank, their Corgi.

SCRIPTURE

Psalm 50; 17 Revelation 4:1-8 Matthew 24:45-51

(God only is the) Trock of my Salvation

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 18

Danny Powell

As a young boy, I liked to collect interesting rocks. Rocks reminded me of God's solid-as-a-rock love. I collected rocks with spiral fossils, rocks with interesting honeycombs, rocks with every color under the sun. On a scout campout, I found my most precious stone, a simple river rock, perfectly oval-shaped and as smooth as it could be. I've never seen another like it. For years, I kept that rock in a prominent place, where it reminded me of God's perfect presence: God is with me, always.

Eventually, I lost that rock. Occasionally, I misplaced my faith.

In college, I had a professor who maintained a rock garden near his campus office. Curious, one day I wandered into the labyrinth of his collection. Prominently, in the center of the garden, was an inscription on a rock: "God only is the rock of my salvation." The phrasing struck me as odd, somehow putting a limitation on God. I mean, if he is "only" that, well, that's kind of small. Still, the phrase got stuck in my head, and I contemplated its meaning from time to time.

A year later, a close friend was senselessly murdered by a stranger he was trying to help. The inconceivable and devastating loss took the ground out from under me. How could this happen? A promising life wasted. So I decided I might as well drown my sorrows with other mourning friends. I almost missed Trent's memorial service, mentally lost and despondent, feeling at rock bottom. But when we started singing "My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness, no merit of my own I claim, but wholly lean on Jesus' name," at that moment, I fell to my knees and unmistakably felt the peace that surpasses all understanding.

God was with me! "On Christ, the solid rock I stand, all other ground is sinking sand."

In Psalm 18, after God delivered David from his enemies and the hand of Saul, David wrote "I love you, O Lord, my strength. The Lord is my rock, my fortress, and my deliverer...In my distress, I called upon the Lord and cried to my God for help. He heard my voice, He drew me out of many waters, He delivered me from my strong enemy...but the Lord was my stay. He rescued me, because He delights in me."

God was there for me. He always had been. It was my standing on sinking sand that got me lost. And about the rock, there it is, right in Psalm 62! David prays "wait in silence for God only, for my hope is from Him. He only is my rock and my salvation, my stronghold, I shall not be shaken."

PRAYER

God, you are for us. What does it matter who will be against us – because in the end, you will prevail. Strengthen our faith in you, to become rock-steady in the midst of a world of sinking sand. Selah.

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTOR

Danny Powell is a retired CPA, married 43+ years to Jill, who is also a retired CPA. She handles the finances. After retirement, they joined Covenant in 2023, having served 42 years in a downtown Austin church. It's nice not having to go downtown anymore! Danny was once a competitive golfer, but that was ruined by steady employment. Now he realizes it's a pretty good game to play with friends. He and Jill like to travel and spend time with their three adult children, their spouses, and three grandchildren. God is good!

SCRIPTURE Psalm 18:1-20; 62

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 19

Growing up I was encouraged to be a "Do-Bee." It seemed if I did good and followed the rules that surely God would bless me. Fast forward to the sermon on the Mount with Jesus saying some followers will hear, "I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!" Wow...I never knew you?

Zephaniah 3:14-20 shifts from judgment to joy, offering a powerful vision of God's presence and love. The prophet calls God's people to rejoice because the Lord has taken away their punishment, driven back their enemies, and chosen to dwell in their midst. Most strikingly, verse 17 shows God not only as a mighty warrior who saves but also as a father who delights in his children and rejoices over them with singing.

For us Christians, this passage finds fulfillment in Christ. Through his death and resurrection, Jesus removed our guilt and conquered sin and death. By his Spirit, God's presence is now within us, and his promises assure us of ultimate restoration.

So, we can hold on to these truths. God has dealt with our greatest enemies. We no longer need to be ruled by anxiety or shame. Our Lord doesn't just tolerate us; he delights in us! Let this truth replace feelings of unworthiness. Joy is not found in circumstances but in knowing that God is with us, singing over us. What is broken in our lives, God promises to gather, heal and renew in his time.

What can we do for Jesus to know us? Jesus simply wants us!! He wants a relationship with us where we completely trust and follow him. Our efforts are always going to be inadequate without his intervention.

He does the essential hard and heart work in and through us for him and his kingdom. We are called to be image bearers for Christ. Let this be the holy mindset and heart position that our Lord graciously continues to develop and grow in us.

PRAYER

Father, thank you for being both mighty to save and tender in love. Help us to live free from fear, to rest in your delight, and rejoice in your presence daily. Strengthen our hope in the restoration you promise. Amen.

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTOR

Living in the neighborhood 25 years ago originally brought us to CPC where my three young sons and I were involved in IHN, VBS, and children's Sunday school. That entire time I have been shaped by the women's ministry of Lamplighters serving for many years as a small group leader. I also participate in two CPC funded programs at Padron Elementary, will be traveling to Belize with the team for a third time this spring, and am currently in a CPC spiritual formation cohort. My husband and I have lived in the heart of east Austin for six years where God has richly blessed me with a daily mission field. I can regularly be found out walking my puppy Mocha, bicycling, working in the yard, and listening to Tim Keller sermons or Bible Project podcasts. Another passion is my nutrition background which mostly plays out in healthy eating (including cider beer and chocolate).

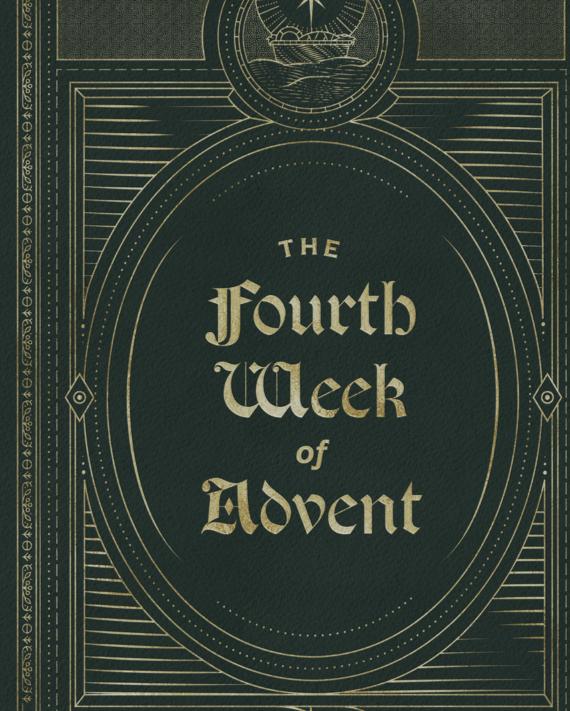
SCRIPTURE

Zephaniah 3:14-20

O Emmanuel

O come, O come, and be our God-with-us
O long-sought With-ness for a world without,
O secret seed, O hidden spring of light.
Come to us Wisdom, come unspoken Name
Come Root, and Key, and King, and holy Flame,
O quickened little wick so tightly curled,
Be folded with us into time and place,
Unfold for us the mystery of grace
And make a womb of all this wounded world.
O heart of heaven beating in the earth,
O tiny hope within our hopelessness
Come to be born, to bear us to our birth,
To touch a dying world with new-made hands
And make these rags of time our swaddling bands.

MALCOLM GUITE



Praise and Glorify the Lord

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 21

Shannon Knisely

It was a Sunday morning in August 2004 and I was lost; but as I would come to know, God has a way of showing up. In that moment, he did show up, in a big way, and I decided then and there to dedicate my life to something more than myself, to the triune God.

There is a recognition that comes with revelation. A recognition that God deserves the glory. That he was, and is, and forever will be the ultimate answer to all important questions. That recognition reminds us of why the Psalmist wrote, "Let everything that has breath praise the Lord" (Psalm 150:6). Mary, the mother of Jesus, had every natural reason to be fearful and worried as she prepared to give birth, but instead she chose to glorify God and trust in his promises. In Luke Chapter 1, Mary sings "My Soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my savior . . . for the Mighty One has done great things for me . . . he has performed mighty deeds with his arm."

I have seen God act in big ways: healing fractured relationships, guiding my children through difficult and formative moments, and restoring my marriage. But I see God's power in the little moments of my life too - when I am holding the hand of a friend, sipping coffee on my porch while the sun rises, or listening to a song with my daughter and seeing a smile appear on her face. God deserves our praise for both his mighty acts and also for what we might think of the small things we experience in life. We are called to glorify him because, in any given moment all things are possible due to the power of God. Whether we are faced with the insurmountable or are surrounded by the ordinary we experience the power of God. And so we are called to praise him for

his surpassing greatness and for all he has done, all that he is doing, and all that he will do in the future, for you, and for me.

Today, in this season of Advent, seek the presence of God. Look for him and remember his mighty moments, but also seek him in the small, ordinary circumstances of life. What choice is there but to rejoice and glorify our Lord in the face of who he is?

PRAYER

Heavenly Father, we come before you and praise and glorify you. Let us praise you with our voices, our instruments, our dances, and our hearts. Let us praise and glorify all the ways you extend us mercy and give thanks for all the blessings that pour out from you, both small and mighty. It is in your Son's heavenly name that we pray, Amen.

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTOR

My husband Michael grew up attending Covenant and we have been members for over 15 years. We have three children, Ashton (19), Brammer (17) and Carolina (12). I currently serve as an elder, have served as a deacon, and I have been a member of the leadership team for Lamplighters Bible Study for 14 years. I am forever grateful that I have had the amazing opportunity along with Michael and our sons and other members of Covenant to visit our sister church in Luyano, Cuba on three different occasions and now half my heart is always in Cuba with my Cuban sisters and brothers.

SCRIPTURE

Psalm 150 Luke 1:39-48b During the time that Elizabeth was expecting the birth of John, later known as John the Baptist, her husband, Zechariah, was rendered mute; he could not speak a word. Only after the child was born and Elizabeth broke the present-day rule by saying the name, "John" could Zechariah finally speak. He agreed and said, "His name is John."

This account is similar in some ways to the incredible experience of young Mary, who was mostly silent and could not fully explain publicly her condition during the days of expecting a miracle Christ child. The two boys, John and Jesus, would grow up to be men unlike any other. Their actions were heroic, pure, and beyond the expectations of any others. They were men of God.

Many years ago, during the Great Depression, my father was a young boy growing up on a family farm and attending a nearby, one-room school. As Christmas neared, the class drew names of other children to provide a small gift for a party. My father saw his name was drawn by a very poor child who, even by depression standards, had no money. My father was angry and disappointed, knowing he would not get a gift. Sure enough, on the day of the party, not only was there no gift in evidence, but the poor child was also absent from school.

Later in the evening at home, there was a knock at the door. There stood the poor child, shivering in the cold. He held out his hand, his bare fingers purple, presenting a toy, a one-penny, wooden top as a gift for my dad. The boy had spent the entire day walking to town and back, a distance of nine miles one way. My father had no idea

how the family had found even one penny, nor how the boy had walked eighteen miles on a cold, winter day. My grandmother brought the child into the house and warmed him by the kitchen stove. A pair of mittens were drying on the back of a chair and she put them on the boy and walked him out to return home. My father burst into tears, sobbing in shame and remorse that he had been so angry at the poor child's poverty.

Some people are capable of heroic deeds in the face of adverse circumstances. With John and Jesus as our examples, we know we can do all things by him who strengthens us. Into his 90's, my father would occasionally repeat the Christmas story, choking with tears as he spoke.

Can we offer ourselves to act beyond our comfort zones as a living sacrifice to the God of our creation; to reach out and help others?

PRAYER

Dear heavenly Father, thank you for the lives of our Christian heroes whose examples teach us, guide us, and help us to act in ways that honor you.

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTOR

Dana Hoffmann is a multi-generational Presbyterian who has attended Covenant for several years. After growing up in Midland, she attended college at UT, lived in Chicago, and called Dallas home for over forty years. She has two children who have blessed her with grandchildren.

SCRIPTURE

Luke 1: 57-66

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 23

When I was in my 30s, I had the opportunity to visit the Austin History Center. (I was a history major in college and remain a history buff.)

At the time, the center was located in a limestone building from the 1930s that looks out on downtown's Wooldridge Square Park. The front doors opened to a large, high-ceilinged foyer. Photos lined the walls, each showing an eminent person from Austin's past. I walked slowly along the room's perimeter, staring at the photos. As I did, I wondered, "Will I live a life that is worthy of my photo being on this wall?"

Worthy. To me, it meant a career filled with professional accomplishments that engendered public recognition. I found myself sympathetic to the older son's dismay in Jesus' parable of the Prodigal Son. Why was the father celebrating the younger son - who had squandered his inheritance - while seeming to take for granted the older son, who had lived by the rules? What was the purpose of the rules if someone could openly flout them but have a celebratory feast thrown in his honor?

Paul opens Galatians 3 with stern words for that view. At the time he wrote this letter, Paul had recently learned that the church in Galatia had reverted to the ways of the Pharisees: Only by adhering strictly to the church's laws could one earn God's grace.

"Who has bewitched you?" Paul asks the Galatians at the opening of chapter 3. "Did you receive the Spirit by doing the works of the law or by believing what you had heard" about Christ?

Rules are not unimportant, Paul writes. They exist because we are sinful. Like roads, they guide and limit paths we take. But like roads, rules are not our destination nor the justification for our travels. The justification for our journey comes from God's love for us, and we can only receive this justification through faith in him.

I have experienced triumphs and disappointments in my life. All of us have. But Paul reminds us of this truth: they are not the measure of our worth. God promised us his enduring, unconditional love. He kept that promise, his words living among us in his Son, Jesus Christ.

PRAYER

Father, too often I let myself get caught up in the things of this world. I judge myself and others based on worldly expectations. You promised us a love that comes before, and is not conditioned on, our worldly pursuits. Thank you for loving us unconditionally. Thank you for keeping your promise to us by sending your Son Jesus Christ to dwell among us, justify us, and save us.

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTOR

Forthe pastthree years, Brewster has served as a D-group leader of middle school boys in Covenant's Sunday School program. He grew up in Corpus Christi, where his all-time favorite teacher was 3rd-grade teacher Barbara Moorman, the mother of Covenant member Marilyn Adams. The husband of deacon Sarah McCracken and the dad of Ford (college senior), Stella (high school freshman), and Lucy (5th grader), he channels his inner Clark Griswold each Christmas and Halloween with increasingly ambitious holiday decorations.

SCRIPTURE

Galatians 3:15-22

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 24

Perfect love casts out all fear.

It's easy to understand why the shepherds were terrified when the angel of the Lord appeared to them. To begin, the event is astonishing in itself. The whole heavenly host bursts forth in the night proclaiming the glory of God, celebrating that our great peacemaker has been born in human flesh. The spectacle itself must have been astonishing. But I imagine the shepherds were also terrified because of who they were and the role they held in society. Why would God appear to a motley group of shepherds to announce the in-breaking of the kingdom? The shepherds must have thought, "We don't smell good, we have the wrong accent, and we live on the wrong side of town. Surely God made a wrong turn somewhere up in the celestial skies and accidentally ended up in this pasture."

But God doesn't make mistakes. Love looked upon them that day, called them by name, and proclaimed to them the greatest message the world has ever heard. And not only did God appear to them in a single moment, but he also invited them to peer deeper into the mysteries of God's unfolding salvation. They hurry to Bethlehem and are invited to gaze upon the one named Love and ponder the great promises of God fulfilled in Jesus. I like to imagine that the sparkle in their eyes and the fluttering in their voices never faded as they recounted this story to everyone they knew for the rest of their lives.

Perfect love casts out all fear. Love looks upon each of us and bids us to draw near and gaze upon the face of Christ. Ponder his great love.

PRAYER

God of love who looks upon the lowly and calls us by name. Be born again in us today as we await your coming. Make our hearts your dwelling place, so that we may serve you with joy all of our days.

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTOR

Ben is the associate pastor for discipleship here at Covenant Presbyterian. He is married to the wonderful Mary Elise, and they are celebrating their first Christmas with baby Knox who was born this summer. It is his great privilege and honor to serve this congregation.

SCRIPTURE

Luke 2:1-20

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 25

Christmas Day

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. ² (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) ³ And everyone went to their own town to register.

⁴ So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. ⁵ He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. ⁶ While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, ⁷ and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

⁸ And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. ⁹ An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰ But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. ¹¹ Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹² This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

¹³Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

¹⁴ "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests."

¹⁵When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about."

¹⁶ So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. ¹⁷ When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, ¹⁸ and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. ¹⁹ But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰ The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

What's Mext?

The birth of Christ is, of course, the beginning of Christ's life. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and now we can turn our attention to the shape of Christ's presence with us. If you have been a Christian for a while and grown familiar with the stories of the life of Christ, you might be tempted to think you have heard most of this before. If we are not careful, familiarity can breed complacency and apathy.

Afaithful reading of Scripture requires that we nurture a curiosity around God's word. This is especially true of the passages that "we already know." We are invited to plumb the depths of Scripture by humbly submitting ourselves to every word, grammatical construction, and punctuation mark. We do so with a conviction that God's word is alive and speaks to each particular moment of our lives.

SO WHAT'S NEXT?

Let's cultivate humility and curiosity around God's word. Let's lean in as he speaks to us through Scripture, the people around us, and creation itself. Let's prayerfully ask God to make us attentive to the new thing he is doing in us and through us.

How's that for a new year's resolution?

Christmas Eve Worship Services

2:00 P.M. TRADITIONAL CANDLELIGHT SERVICE

Sanctuary

4:00 P.M. CHILDREN & FAMILY SERVICE

Sanctuary

5:00 P.M. CONTEMPORARY CANDLELIGHT SERVICE

FE200 & covenant.org/worship-online

8:30 P.M. TRADITIONAL CANDLELIGHT SERVICE

ONLINE SERVICE

Sanctuary & covenant.org/worship-online



To see a full list of Advent events and worship services at Covenant, visit us online at **covenant.org/advent**