

# Advent Devotional



ADVENT 2018  
IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

# The Season of Advent

## **What is Advent?**

“Advent” means “coming” or “arrival.” During the season of Advent, we celebrate Christ’s coming into the world and watch with expectant hope for his coming again. The four weeks of Advent present an opportunity for communal discernment and personal examination, as the church prepares to celebrate the nativity of the Lord. During this time, we look with hope for Christ’s return and for the full realization of God’s vision for the world—a vision of justice and righteousness, a vision of hope, peace, joy, and love.

The prophet Jeremiah guides us through this season with words of hope.

*The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah” (Jeremiah 33:14).*

These words assured the ancient Hebrews that God is a keeper of promises who would never leave them—even in the most uncertain times. Many of us feel the uncertainty of these days, especially in this season. We find ourselves pushing away despair when reading the news, feeling the weight of sadness as we long for a missed loved one, worrying about what lies ahead. This Advent, we will remind one another of the promise of God we know in Jesus Christ, who meets us just as we are, and gives us faith that *the days are surely coming*.

## **What will you find in this booklet?**

In these pages, you will find a reflection and a prayer for each day written by a member of our faith community. These reflections are based on the Advent readings found in the lectionary. In addition, you will find an activity for each day taken from the Idlewild Advent calendar. Each week as we light a new candle on the Advent wreath, we remember the hope, peace, joy, and love that come to us through the impossibly good news that God took on flesh and dwelled among us, showing us divine love in human form.

My prayer is that God will use these words to encourage and guide us as a community over these weeks. Though the days grow shorter and the darkness seems to envelop us, may these reflections offered by our brothers and sisters in faith remind us to look for the light that is Emmanuel, “God with us.”

May the peace of Christ be with you this Advent season.

Rebekah Abel Lamar  
Advent 2018



Hope

The First Week of Advent

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 2 – SATURDAY, DECEMBER 8

## SUNDAY, DECEMBER 2

### **Read: Jeremiah 33:14–16**

*The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah shall be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: "The Lord is our righteousness."*

When Jeremiah was reminding the people of Jerusalem of the Lord's promises, it probably seemed an unlikely time for reassurance. Their world was about to turn upside down. They would soon be taken into exile, and much of Jerusalem would be reduced to rubble. Today, we also live in turbulent times, and our own futures seem uncertain. For many of us, it is a fearful time. Our world seems upside down whether it comes from the political world, economic challenges from home or abroad, environmental worries, or more immediate disruption of our personal lives. The reassurance of the Lord's promise may seem as incongruous to us today as it did at the time of the fall of Jerusalem.

As twenty-first-century Presbyterians, we may not immediately think of the promise of peace and justice that accompanies the return of Jerusalem to the people of Judah. For us, God's promise and the restoration of the house of David have been fulfilled by the coming of Jesus Christ. Each day we should recall that, despite the uncertainties all around our lives, we truly live with the certainty of God's love. The peace and love that flow from the active presence of Christ in our lives should reassure us and renew the hope for peace, for justice, and for our salvation. With Christ, through Christ, and in Christ, we too shall realize our deliverance from the chaos of a life apart from God.

This gift from God is given freely and with love, but it also comes with the need for us to accept Christ in our daily lives. We must act with reverence for God, keep his commandments, and love our neighbors as ourselves as Christ taught us. Too often our attention is diverted from God, or we are tempted to rely on ourselves to find the way forward in our lives. The gift of God's presence is in front of us every day, and the fulfillment of God's promise to us is ready to be given again and again if we accept it with an open heart.

**Prayer:** Heavenly Father, we humbly thank you for the gift of Jesus Christ. Your promise to mankind has been fulfilled with the coming of Jesus and his daily presence in our lives. Help to guide us in his ways and to enjoy your continuing love and mercy.

**Richard Baer** is retired Chief Operating Officer for UT Medical Group, Inc. He and wife, Toni, have been members of Idlewild since 2005 with two married daughters, Whitney in Memphis and Marley and one grandson in Weston, Florida. Currently an elder (Class of 2019) and Clerk of Session, he has served on the Evangelism Committee and currently serves on the Community Support and Budget and Finance Committees.



*Advent Calendar Activity:* Come to the Wholeness Service at 4:00 or take time to remember those you grieve.

## MONDAY, DECEMBER 3

### **Read: Mark 13:32–37**

If we read the thirteenth chapter of Mark leading up to this passage, we can see that these verses fit into a larger apocalyptic discourse in the gospel of Mark. In this chapter, Jesus describes a time of chaos, where the earth is filled with war, natural disaster, persecution, and friends and family turning on one another. Jesus also foresees the coming of a false prophet who claims to be the Christ and instructs his followers not to succumb to these lies and be led astray.

The world that Mark describes sounds eerily familiar to our own. In the past year, we have seen devastating destruction from hurricanes and witnessed the senseless violence of mass shootings, many of which are intertwined with racism, anti-Semitism, homophobia, and xenophobia. False prophets too exploit this division and play on our fears, offering easy solutions to not-so-easy problems.

Here, in our passage for today, Jesus tells his followers to “keep awake.” He tells them that a new world is on the horizon, but there is no way to know when it is coming. While Jesus instructs his followers to keep awake and be on the alert, he does not describe a passive form of waiting. Instead, Jesus compares this watchfulness to a head of house going away on a trip and leaving the servants in charge, “each with his work.” While they are waiting, there is *work* to be done. Everyone has a job to do and must do it with care and attention.

I do not think it is a coincidence that Jesus tells his followers to stay awake and that present-day activists also use the phrase “Stay Woke.” Both are instructions to pay attention—to notice the injustice taking place around us and to work to do something about it. But we are reminded that it is not up to us alone. We trust in the presence of the Holy Spirit to guide our actions; we place our hope in Christ for the revelation of the kingdom of God on Earth.

**Prayer:** Oh God of mercy and justice, we put our hope in you this Advent season. Open our eyes that we may stay awake, paying attention to the hurt in our world. Guide our actions to your will, that we may serve as a source of healing. Amen.

***Elizabeth H. Doolin*** serves at the Director of Young Adult Ministry at Idlewild Presbyterian Church and is also the UKirk Campus Minister for Rhodes College and the University of Memphis



*Advent Calendar Activity.* Pray for the Early Enrichment Center teachers who start today.

## TUESDAY, DECEMBER 4

### Read: I Corinthians 1:3–9

#### A Time of Remembrance and Anticipation.

The Apostle Paul, writing to the church in Corinth, tells the church faithful that, by God's grace, they have been strengthened in their testimony of Christ. Then Paul goes on to tell the Corinthians that they have grown in their spiritual gifts and that God will strengthen them further for their work in spreading the Gospel as they wait for the revealing of Christ.

How does this text connect to the Advent Season? The theme "waiting" is the strongest connection for me. In my experience, Advent is a time to reflect while we wait on the arrival of the Christ Child. During this time of waiting, hopefully we will have opportunities to enjoy hymns, carols, and religious songs of the season. We are blessed to have a rich tradition of Christmas music sung in church. Every year, I look forward to the coming of Advent and the opportunities to experience the season again by singing and listening to music that tells us the story of Jesus' arrival on earth and his purpose.

During Advent, we wait for the arrival of the Baby Jesus while also reflecting back on Christ's life and death and all the sufferings that he endured for our sakes. Christ promised to renew all creation. His arrival as a baby reminds us of the wonder of creation, of new life, and of hope for the future.

**Prayer:** Lord, thank you for the gift of your Son Jesus. Guide us toward a better understanding of what we should be doing with our lives and in our relationships with others. In Jesus' name, Amen

**Barry White** is an inactive Elder and Deacon at Idlewild, having served two three-year terms as Elder and one three-year term as Deacon. He has twice been Chair of the Worship & Music Committee and has served on several search committees over the years.



*Advent Calendar Activity:* Write "Jesus loves you" on your mirror in dry erase marker.

Remember Christ like kindness

## WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 5

### **Read: I Thessalonians 3:11–13**

In this passage, Paul is writing to the church he founded in the city of Thessalonica. He just found out that the church is thriving even after he was forced to leave some time ago. Now that he knows they're doing well, he gives thanks to God and wants to see them again!

For myself, Advent and Christmas are times of community. Family, friends, church, work, whatever—tis the season to get together! We humans are inherently social creatures, and being together in community is rejuvenating. We yearn to be together, especially at this time of year.

Sometimes this can be hard. You may live apart from family, have lost touch with old friends, or lack a strong network of new friends in a city you just moved to. This passage, however, offers us hope. There may be barriers to community, but they can't stop us from loving one another. Through this love, communities can form and grow stronger. God strengthens us through this love.

I challenge you, and especially myself, to actively love others this Advent season. This may look like reaching out to an old friend you haven't talked to in years. It might look like spending time with a relative you've had past arguments with. Or it might look like befriending someone who needs a friend. Whatever you do, Paul says that when you love others, that love multiplies.

**Prayer:** Dear God, help us to love one another in the way you love us. Help us to form and strengthen our communities during this time when we look forward to the coming of your Son.

***William Myers** joined Idlewild in 2013 and is married to Catie Jane Myers. He is a member of the choir and will be a new Deacon for the class of 2021.*



*Advent Calendar Activity:* Pray for our partner church, Juan G. Hall in Cuba.

## THURSDAY, DECEMBER 6

### Read: Psalm 126

This psalm sings an ultimate message of joy! But what calls to me is the inner, sorrowful work necessary for joy to manifest—the difficulty in stepping forward and sowing seeds by working through pain, struggling through difficulties, and ultimately trusting the Lord to bring joy.

Idlewild ended its Mexico Water Mission this year. For eleven years we worked with our partners in faith here and in rural southwest Mexico in the state of Guerrero, the poorest state in the country, installing clean water systems in five communities. When this mission began, everyone clamored enthusiastically for the gift of a water system. As we worked together, the reality and responsibilities of keeping a system running bubbled up—and sometimes overflowed.

By going there year after year, bringing equipment and supplies, listening to the people and working hard with them, we gradually earned their trust and helped keep clean water running in the face of enormous and unprecedented difficulties. The town of Ometepec—where we installed systems in an evangelical school and an indigenous elementary school—was hit by a major earthquake, yet the Colegio Carey Brenton kept the school's water system running and also carried many truckloads to low-lying areas on the coast after two devastating hurricanes flooded the area.

Huerto de Getsemani, a small Presbyterian church in Verde Rico, six thousand feet up in the mountains, has had to "share" their water with drug cartels who take all of it for three months out of the year.

The people of Rancho del Cura—mostly indigenous Amuzco who are (by Western standards) extremely poor—struggled with religious conflict and land ownership issues. With Idlewild's help and great determination, they ultimately dug in almost a mile of pipe from a spring to bring fresh water to the system in their small but growing Presbyterian church.

Our fifth community—a Catholic boarding school for boys and girls from the mountains who would not otherwise have access to an education—has maintained their water system impeccably in spite of personnel turnover every two years.

Through it all, evangelical missionaries and Catholics, previously openly hostile to one another, have begun to work together, acting as a financial resource, assisting each other with water system repairs, and allowing materials to be safely stored. Idlewild's work, my service, is finished here. The seeds are sown.

**Prayer:** Lord, be with our partners in Mexico. May your hardworking, faithful people in these communities continue to do everything it takes to sustain their water systems. In their faithfulness, let them continue to work together so that all the people in their communities may have access to the joy of God's living, flowing water.

***Pan Awsumb** spearheaded the water mission in Mexico for eleven years. She is now involved with MICAH as a member of the Education Committee and is also a volunteer and one of the founders of the Lynching Sites Project. Before retiring, Pan was Executive Director of Leadership Memphis and a founding member of Midtown Memphis Rotary Club.*



## FRIDAY, DECEMBER 7

### **Read: Isaiah 11:1-9**

When I was in my twenties, I worked in the New York metropolitan area. I was with a company that was growing rapidly, and we were working right up until Christmas Eve day and then back at it the day after Christmas. Previously as a teacher and, before that, a student, I was used to getting about two weeks off for Christmas. I was single and new to the company. I did not have much vacation time "accrued," so I put in long hours while those with families could take time off for the holidays. I was happy to do this and expected that the Christmas spirit would be hard to experience that year. To my welcome surprise, Manhattan at Christmas time kept me in the spirit.

After work, I would walk the streets of mid-Manhattan to get to my bus. I soon found myself staying longer in to take in the sights. While some would call the bright lights and decorated windows of the city's store fronts nothing but commercialism and the secularization of Christmas, I found them beautiful. They made for a cheery atmosphere that could be readily seen on the faces of fellow pedestrians and shoppers. I did not regularly attend church at that time, but the Christmas services at Fifth Avenue Presbyterian, St. Thomas, and St. Bart's beckoned. They made for a rich and meaningful Christmas experience. What was inescapable to me then and now was that the reason for the fun, happy atmosphere was the celebration of the arrival of Christ and the hope that the advent of his coming brings to our lives every December.

When I read the passage of Isaiah, it brings to mind what is a recurrent Biblical theme of Christmas and the Advent of the Christ child: hope. Isaiah prophesizes the coming of one who will be blessed by the spirit of the Lord. This Messiah will spring from the barren stump of Jesse, the House of David, and lead the children of Israel once again. Isaiah's words are words of hope and assurance for a people in need of it. To me, that is what Christmas is all about: hope and the promise of a better world with the arrival and presence of the Savior.

**Prayer:** Heavenly Father, at this special time of the year, we ask that the joy that was the news of the first Christmas fill us with hope for a better world for all of your children here on Earth.

***Pete Sanders** and his wife Tracey moved to Memphis in 2017. He is the Headmaster of Memphis University School. He has served as an Elder and Deacon at his previous churches.*



*Advent Calendar Activity:* Run an errand for a friend who is busy or let someone run one for you!

## SATURDAY, DECEMBER 8

### **Read: John 3:16–21**

This famous Bible verse speaks to the transformational power of God’s love. We Christians believe that God sent his beloved son to earth to die for our sins and redeem us. Advent is the season we anticipate Christ’s arrival, full of new possibilities and hope.

Few places on earth need new possibilities, hope, and the touch of God’s love more than South Sudan, a country close to my heart.

Life in South Sudan is crushingly difficult for its twenty-three million residents. There are few roads, virtually no electricity, no sanitation for most, little potable water, and—with 84 percent of women illiterate and few medical services—one in seven who die in childbirth. Waterborne dysenteric diseases are the number one killer of children, malaria is rampant, and people starve to death daily. Millions have been forced from their homes by ethnic violence.

Yet even in this poorest and most desperate of counties, Advent brings hope that God’s love can prevail. Gabriel Bol Deng was peacefully herding his father’s cattle. After the bombs dropped from Sudanese planes, he was an eight-year-old refugee, walking one thousand miles to a refugee camp in Kenya. Gabe came to the United States at twenty, learning English and graduating from Le Moyne College in Syracuse, New York, with a BA and MA in Education.

Armed with an education and advanced degree, Gabriel could easily have settled in the US to raise a family with his American wife, Elizabeth. But that was not the path he and God chose. Though he had left his family and clan in the small village of Ariang more than twenty years before, he dreamed of building a proper primary school for the boys and girls living there. With a herculean fundraising effort and with God’s grace working through him, he raised \$400,000 from generous Americans and built that school where five hundred boys and girls started classes in 2011.

Today there are 1,500 learners at the school—half girls, half boys—and because of the six wells he was able to drill, the school provides safe, clean water for the community. Girls now know about nutrition, health, and hygiene in addition to basic reading, writing, and computing. Education, especially for girls, changes everything.

**Prayer:** Creator God, as we celebrate Advent, we are grateful that even in the twenty-first century a former herd boy and refugee, through God’s grace, love, and hard work, can transform a small corner of the world.

**Barron Boyd** is the Director of the Buckman Center for International Education at Rhodes College, founding chair of the board for the Hope for Ariang foundation, and former Professor and Dean at Le Moyne College, Syracuse.



*Advent Calendar Activity:* Connect with a family member or friend whom you haven’t talked to for awhile.



## The Second Week of Advent

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 9– SATURDAY, DECEMBER 15

## SUNDAY, DECEMBER 9

### Read: Psalm 85:8–13

*Let me hear what God the LORD will speak,  
for he will speak peace to his people,  
to his faithful, to those who turn to him in their hearts.*

<sup>9</sup>*Surely his salvation is at hand for those who fear him,  
that his glory may dwell in our land.*

<sup>10</sup>*Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet;  
righteousness and peace will kiss each other.*

<sup>11</sup>*Faithfulness will spring up from the ground,  
and righteousness will look down from the sky.*

<sup>12</sup>*The LORD will give what is good,  
and our land will yield its increase.*

<sup>13</sup>*Righteousness will go before him,  
and will make a path for his steps.*

This text is a prayer. God will give salvation to his faithful, and righteousness and peace will kiss each other. What a wonderful promise. And the Lord will give what is good, and the land will be abundant. This text is telling us that we must be faithful and seek justice and that the Lord promises to be with us. Presbyterian Women are studying God's promise, which is to be with us always.

When we are faithful and don't turn to folly, God gives us peace, and his glory will dwell in our land. How great a promise is that? Sometimes we don't see God's promise. Sometimes we see all the bad things that are happening in our lives and our nation and in the world. But we forget how lucky we are. We live in a country where we can express our differences and not worry about our government punishing us. We can worship how we want with no retaliation.

**Prayer:** Lord, let us be instruments of your love and help bring peace and justice. Let us bring your compassion and understanding into our daily lives. May we live out your love in all that we do. Thank you for your promise of always being with us. Amen.

**Barbara Denley** is a lifelong Presbyterian who has a son and daughter and three grandchildren. She has been a member of Idlewild for nineteen years with a previous ten-year tenure interrupted by employment transfer. Currently, she is Moderator for Presbyterian Women, is a member of the Adult Ministry Committee and the Faith and Function Sunday School class, and serves on the Presbytery of the Mid-South Missions Committee.



*Advent Calendar Activity:* Give thanks to God for the choir and the cantata in worship today (join us in person or on Livestream)!

## MONDAY, DECEMBER 10

### **Read: Mark 1:1-8**

We can all agree that John the Baptist was somewhat of an outsider. His job was to point people to Jesus, which is one of the hardest jobs in the world. No college degree can perfect or teach all of the answers to the questions that will be asked when directing a non-believer to the light that they cannot yet see. As many of you know, I moved out of my home this past August, beginning my freshman year of college at the University of Memphis. I was not prepared for the culture shock I was about to feel when living in this different environment, without the influence of my parents and their opinions every day.

Since I have begun living on my own, away from their voices though, it has been difficult to know, for fact, anything I believe. In college, there are so many different opinions in every corner of every room and conversation. The main thing that I have really struggled with since moving out is my faith. I am now suddenly the only believer in my close circle of friends, and in this way, I feel close to John the Baptist in this text. The many conversations I have had with these friends include constant debates on what we believe, and I have become lost in those conversations, struggling to find the answers myself for the questions they ask me. All of my life, I have been surrounded by Christians, so for the first time in my life, I am suddenly the outsider, just like John. "I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way."

Just like in Advent, I am preparing the way for Jesus to be in my life fully by exposing myself to as many opinions and ways of seeing the world as possible. The more I am challenged in my faith, and the more I struggle with what I believe, the stronger I come out on the other end of it. Being challenged is good, because what are answers without the questions.

**Prayer:** Dear God, as we enter the Advent season, help us prepare for the coming of your love. Help us show others the kindness that you teach. Guide our paths and make them straight so that we might spend another Christmas season bettering ourselves for the sake of making a change in your world and finding grace in the confusion and unanswered questions. Amen.

***Bailey Bigger***, daughter of Dara and David Bigger and granddaughter of Donna and David Rhodes, is a freshman at the University of Memphis and has been attending and sharing her music with Idlewild for several years.



*Advent Calendar Activity:* Pray for the Room in the Inn ministry which Idlewild is hosting at Calvary tonight.

## TUESDAY, DECEMBER 11

### **Read: 2 Peter 3:14–19**

The Second Letter of Peter is all about patience—a plea to the small band of believers who constituted the early church not to lose faith but to find strength in God’s promise of the return of the Messiah. We are reminded earlier in Chapter 3 that “with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you” (2 Peter 3:8-9). And how! God understands our impatience but loves us anyway, and he challenges us to sustain our faith in the strength of his promise.

So what are we to do with ourselves while we wait? We are to “strive to be found by him at peace. . .” (2 Peter 3:14). OK, so far, so good—we can at least work on that. But later in the same verse, we are also encouraged to be found “without spot or blemish.” Modern beauty aids notwithstanding, how can you strive to be flawless?

The phrase echoes themes from Exodus 12:5, Song of Solomon 4:7, and Ephesians 5:27, where we are reminded that we are, in fact, “beloved.” (Notice the word “beloved” is repeated three times in our closing passage from 2 Peter.) As God’s beloved, through grace, we are rendered spotless, without any flaw, and holy. This is because Christ intercedes for us, washes us clean, and relieves the burden of our imperfections. Our faith redeems us and brings us peace.

**Prayer:** Gracious God, your Word and your world shows us, again and again, that we are in fact your beloved. Help us to be at peace, confident, and assured of your many blessings as we anticipate our Savior’s return. In his blessed name, Amen.

**Charles Key** is a health lawyer who came to Idlewild with his wife, Barbara, and daughters, Annie and Emily, in 2011. He is a former Clerk of Session and now leads the Covenanters Class on Sunday mornings.



*Advent Calendar Activity:* Compliment the first three people you see today.

## WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 12

### Read: John 3:22–30

Water is plentiful, and two bands of disciples are baptizing people who have followed them to the river. A man familiar with Jewish purification rites is curious. He may have asked some of John's band of disciples whether baptism is a purification rite, but more pointedly he asks them, 'Why it is that more people are going to be baptized by Jesus' band of disciples? Is his form of baptism more effective?' Out of a sense of envy, because they do not know this man who was with John at another time at the river, his disciples complain to John. John explains: 'Those who come to be baptized are sent by God; it is not the result of some unique, or distinctive, or more effective approach.

Remember, I am not the one that God has promised us. But I do stand as the best man at a wedding, and I take joy in the beginning of a new relationship between the bridegroom and bride. Now, these days are His, and theirs, to seize. With respect for the work we have done, our days are to diminish.'

Are there Advent overtones in this story from Jesus' early ministry? Here is a suggestion. It is difficult for us to experience joy at this particular moment in time and place. Children are callously separated from parents who seek better living conditions for their families. Blind tit-for-tat trade diplomacy overlooks real consequences closer to home. Unwarranted public ridicule of persons with whom we disagree elicits support from those who feel that they do not have a platform from which to do the very same thing. And, not to be overlooked, there is unnecessary demonization of persons in seats of power with whom we are disappointed because they did not vote as we would have voted had we been in those seats of power.

Yet, year in and year out, we stop and take this time of year to acknowledge that the days are surely coming, perhaps they are already here, when new and genuine relationships can be formed. We are the maids of honor and best men in this celebration as we affirm and take joy in the promise of Advent every year. As the angel at the first Advent sings, "I bring you tidings of great joy." *And you know this passage so well that you can complete what more the angel says.*

**Prayer:** Eternal and Loving God, we join our voices with many others to affirm the joy of this Advent season. May our hopes be genuine echoes of Your intentions for this world. May our actions name all persons as Your beloved children. May our joy, though blunted at times, never cease because we truly embrace Your promise to all people. And, like John in the passage we just read, may our own humble affirmations be signs of Your presence in this world. Amen.

*Bob Llewellyn is a retired college professor and former Dean of the College at Rhodes College. He and his wife, Lola, are members of Idlewild, and they raised their two children in this church. For three years as chair of the Adult Ministry Committee, Bob helped oversee the production of the yearly Advent Devotionals booklet. Turn-about-is-fair-play—this year he was asked to write one of the devotionals!*



*Advent Calendar Activity:* Come to a noon Advent worship service and stay for lunch!

## THURSDAY, DECEMBER 13

### **Read: Isaiah 40:1-11**

I have been in a choir most of my life. When asked to write an entry in Idlewild's 2018 Advent Devotional Booklet, it almost seemed providential that I was assigned Isaiah 40:1-11. As I read the opening passage, I could almost hear the clear tenor voice that I had experienced so often, echoing the beautiful words from Handel's *Messiah* based on this Biblical text: "Comfort, comfort ye my people." I immediately felt its deep relevance to our troubled world today.

The book of Isaiah is centered on the Babylonian exile when Nebuchadnezzar II destroyed Jerusalem, enslaved its people, and demolished its temple to punish the Jewish people for their sins. The exile ended when Cyrus of Persia allowed the Jews to return to rebuild their temple.

Jerusalem had paid a great price for her sins: "...cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins."

Chapter 40 proclaims a new beginning with new hope for God's people. The prophet is called to announce God's coming: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God." Spiritual obstacles of sin and lack of faith must be removed so that the Lord can return to take his place among them again. God's people must prepare for His coming in the "wilderness" of their lives and the "desert" of their hearts.

The season of Advent is a time when we remember that God sent Jesus as a fulfillment of His divine promise. We must "prepare the way for the glory of the Lord to be revealed" through prayer and the study of His words. We struggle with today's loss of morality and civility, frantically searching for stability in our lives. Isaiah tells us that our flesh is like the grass and will wither and fade, but the word of our God will stand forever.

His consoling message assures us that God is our Shepherd and will "gather his lambs in his arms and carry them in his bosom and gently lead those that are with young."

From the perspective of the choir loft, I had the advantage of seeing the individual faces of the congregation and the privilege of observing the expressions of those sitting in the pews. When the orchestra burst into Handel's "Hallelujah Chorus," I could always witness the deep expectation and joy in their eyes as "the glory of the Lord is revealed" in this magnificent music. May we rejoice in the comforting assurance of this Advent season.

**Prayer:** Dear Lord, guide us through this glorious time of Advent. May it enrich our lives and inspire us to grow in the wisdom to find our way through the "wilderness" around us. With assurance may we sing Hallelujah with joy in our hearts and know that God is here...always. Amen.

**Sissy Long:** *I became a member of Idlewild Church fifty-nine years ago when I married my husband, Bill. You can always find us in our regular seat every Sunday morning.*



*Advent Calendar Activity:* Help preserve God's creation—pickup litter, recycle, or turn off the light when you leave a room.

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 14

**Read: Matthew 11:2–15**

John the Baptist  
Declared all of our hope  
Is in Jesus.

Yet John questioned  
Still from his prison cell  
'And can this be?'

"Are you the one  
Or should we look further  
For another?"

The response came  
To John's messengers sent  
Asking for truth.

"What have you seen  
Or have ever been taught  
Of his coming?"

John the Baptist  
Prepared the road and path  
For his coming

Whom do you seek?  
What are you looking for?  
I am the one."

And so, Lord, I await in anticipation your coming this Advent season. Open my heart and awaken me to infinite grace. Help me not fall asleep in deep slumber, but give me the ears to hear the voice of the prophets. Deepen my trust in the fulfillment of promises, so that I too might one day depart this world peacefully.

**Prayer:** God, awaken our hearts this Advent season to seek and trust in the fulfillment of your promises in these coming days.

**Alan Sefton** serves on the NaCoMe Planning Committee and is a faithful member of the *Lectio Divina* Sunday School class. He joined Idlewild Presbyterian Church in 2014.



*Advent Calendar Activity.* Christ brings joy! Make someone smile today—tell a joke or make a funny face.

## SATURDAY, DECEMBER 15

### **Read: I Thessalonians 5: 1–11**

Much of Paul's message deals with the certainty of Jesus' return, the uncertain timing of this event, and the startling experience that it will be. What speaks to me most, however, is the hope that is offered to us all, the focus on being the light, and the encouragement that we can be for one another in the midst of our waiting.

Despite the positive simplicity of this message, I often find myself in periods of uncertainty and lacking in hope. Especially so when I reflect on the daily refrain of intractable issues and hurt in our community, country, and the world. And, as an only child who wrestles with depression, my natural tendency can be to isolate and to fixate on what is broken. It can be challenging at times to both identify with and to live out Paul's loving guidance to the Thessalonians.

Still, there is a place where I can consistently experience hope, offer light, and exchange encouragement. This place is among our incarcerated brothers and sisters—our fellow citizens. Despite their often trauma-filled childhoods, unfair sentencing treatment, and deprived daily existence inside prison, my intimate interaction with these brothers each week is a place where I see God and have my certainty restored.

These men show me how the regulated pace of prison life provides an opportunity to reflect on who they are and whose they are. They embody how to look forward in the midst of a dark place with a renewed sense of possibility and reconnection to earlier dreams. They reflect the freedom that can come from facing mistakes and turning over regrets to God. They seek light by intentionally creating stillness when they awake early to read the Bible, write in a journal, or meditate. They vulnerably reveal their longing for connection and express the desire to better love their family and friends. And we are reminded together of how being present and sharing our stories brings understanding, compassion, and a desire to encourage one another in our individual humanity.

During a recent visit to the prison, when I told my brother Willard about my uncertainty of having something meaningful to share in my devotional assignment, he replied quickly and caringly to "keep it simple and be encouraging, like you do with me." For sure, the hope, light, and loving encouragement found in my brothers touches me as I imagine Paul's letter might have done for the Thessalonians.

**Prayer:** Lord, help me to remember that we all belong to one another. That we heal in community. That hope abounds. That we each need encouragement. And that God offers light, comfort, and the promise of salvation for all. Amen.

***Stephen McIntosh** is a native of Wisconsin who raised Matthew and Elizabeth during the last twenty years with his wife Mary and the support of Idlewild, while making Memphis home, serving as an elder, enjoying the outdoors, and striving to love better.*



*Advent Calendar Activity:* When you'd rather not, give someone the benefit of the doubt.



## The Third Week of Advent

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 16 – SATURDAY, DECEMBER 22

## SUNDAY, DECEMBER 16

### **Read: I Thessalonians 5:12–28**

Paul's words to the church in Thessalonica are a challenge to us these days to "live at peace among yourselves," "aim at what is best for each other and for all," and "always be joyful." Spoken primarily to a particular church about how life within the boundaries of that church should be conducted, they are a challenge to us as well during this season of expectation which we call Advent. How we face this challenge seems timely in the midst of deep and painful divisions that rent communities asunder. And Paul gives guidance: "Be patient with everyone...see to it that no one pays back wrong for wrong." As we embark on this Advent journey, these "impossible possibilities" take on more urgency.

The early Christian communities were doubtlessly influenced by Jewish thought and echoed the ancient Israelite notion of a community set apart by God. As a community, they sought to understand what it meant to be faithful to God. And we see the emphasis is in God's indwelling Spirit, itself holy, which will bring together wisdom and fortitude to act with Advent hope in the **world**. Martin Luther King Jr. quoted the abolitionist Theodore Parker: "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice." This means that we must be active rather than passive even as we work with patience. We are to rejoice and give thanks even when we do not feel that we can. We are to pray without ceasing because a life of seeking to honor God and doing what we perceive as God's will means constantly giving thanks, regardless of our situations. And we must be able to recognize the call of the Spirit in all matters, not just in the four walls that we call "church."

For many along the Gulf Coast, North Carolina, Puerto Rico, and Mexico, this year has become a year of unexpected exile—homes flooded, communities destroyed, families separated. As we help one another move forward imagining new futures, we, the church, face a world that desperately needs to hear of the mercies of God which are proclaimed during Advent. May the Spirit give us courage.

**Prayer:** Creator God, you call us to step out of our comfort zones, to risk and move courageously in the world. May we persevere in this Advent journey, paying attention to the ways your Spirit beckons. Help us to respond faithfully. Amen.

***Mary Allie McLellan** has been a member of Idlewild since 1997. For many years, she served as the administrator for two foreign study programs at Rhodes College and still works part-time with the European Studies Abroad Program there. She is the happy grandmother of ten!*



*Advent Calendar Activity:* Visit someone who is lonely and take a poinsettia or flowers.

## MONDAY, DECEMBER 17

### **Read: Jude 17–25**

I bow down to pray  
I try to make the worst seem better  
Lord, show me the way...  
I've got a hundred million reasons to walk away  
But baby, I just need one good one to stay.

"Million Reasons" (Mark Ronson, Hillary Lindsey, Stefani Joanne Angelina Germanotta)

When I read the news, my heart sinks, and I am overcome with weariness. Discord. Violence. Abuse. Fear. Ungodliness. Harshness. Division. Bombastic speech.

Where is our Christ? But, the Holy Spirit will not allow me to sit in despair. Love bends down, and the Spirit gently breathes Jude's words into my soul, "But you, beloved, must remember..."

Build yourselves up on your most holy faith.

Pray in the Holy Spirit.

Keep yourselves in the love of God.

Look forward to the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The Spirit whispers, "But you, beloved," are the body of Christ. We are the body of Christ.

I forget that Christ is here. In me. In you. In us.

This Advent season...when the ground beneath us feels uncertain...let us, beloved, remember and turn, again and again, toward the thrilling hope that it is through Jesus Christ that we receive our most holy faith as a firm foundation.

What a gift. And what a good reason to stay.

**Prayer:** To the God who calls us beloved and keeps us from falling...help us to remember your promises. Help us remember that Christ is indeed here. Keep us secure in your love and remind us of your glory, majesty, power, and authority. Amen.

**Courtney Veazey** is a school counselor and an Inquirer for Ministry with the Presbytery of the Mid-South.



*Advent Calendar Activity:* Leave a note on someone's car telling them how awesome they parked.

## TUESDAY, DECEMBER 18

### **Read: John 1:1-5**

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.*

In the summer, I enjoy going to the Rockbound Chapel for hymn sings. The chapel is located in a rural coastal community. Many people in the area make their living on the water. Consequently, it is not surprising that a favorite request is the wonderful old hymn of life and light, "Let the Lower Lights Be Burning" by Philip P. Bliss. The first verse is

*Brightly beams our Father's mercy, From his lighthouse evermore,  
But to us He gives the keeping, Of the lights along the shore.*

Light and life are powerful images, no matter whether you are in a storm-tossed sea or trying to navigate the difficulties of everyday life faced by so many here in Memphis.

In the days before modern navigational tools, lighthouses identified a location and a serious hazard, usually rocks. Lighthouses gave a critical point of reference but did not give a seaman the course needed to reach a harbor. The lights along the shore—or "lower lights"—did that. These lights were carefully placed one behind the other. When a seaman lined them up, he had a safe path to a harbor and life.

To me, Idlewild is in the lower light business and does it well. Our lower lights are our many ministries which lead so many into safe harbor. Just look at our web site to see a comprehensive list of personal Christian growth and outreach possibilities. Idlewild works hard to keep our lamps "trimmed and kept bright." Our lower lights provide life giving support to so many, yet we know there is more to do. "More Idlewild" is a testament to our recognition of that need and our commitment to continue making the lower lights burn brightly.

Advent with all of its joy can be a stark reminder that, in spite of our best efforts, there is still much to be done. With Christmas just seven days away, this is peak time for the annual display of lights associated with the season. We will do well to remember and should be guided by the knowledge that many in need will see the ubiquitous red and green lights but sadly will not see lower lights and must live their lives in perilous waters. Pray for those in need and for Idlewild at this special time.

*But to us He gives the keeping, Of the lights along the shore.*

**Prayer:** Dear God, thank you for Jesus, the ultimate keeper of the lower lights. May we never forget how important our support of Idlewild is to lead those in need to a safe harbor. Amen.

**Page Williamson** has been a member of Idlewild since 1987. He has served as an Elder and on various committees including Christian Education and Long Range Planning. Page is a member of the Timothy Class.



*Advent Calendar Activity:* When you hear that discouraging voice in your head, tell yourself something positive.

## WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 19

### **Read: Luke 1:5–25**

As we experience the season of Advent, I am impressed in this text by the scope of preparation that God put in place to ready the world for Jesus and His message. People were not looking for the Messiah any time soon. In fact, this text is about John's conception of how he had to grow to be a man and prepare the way for Jesus.

Today, there is little we do that takes decades to yield an outcome. God knew that people needed time and multiple messengers to prepare for Jesus and his new ideas. Imagine God's patience and planning, so that people could be prepared and able to see what was happening.

How often God taps us on the shoulder, whispers in our ear, opens our eye, trips us, tackles us, hugs us so we can know Him, so we will stop or turn or go.

I am awed whenever God steps in with the kindness of a stranger, the unexpected call from a friend, or the impossible becoming possible. How often a door has opened or closed for my good.

In Advent, I enjoy reflecting on the expectation of what is to come—what is next, what is new, what is to be. I also seek to trust that whatever it is, it is what God has planned—so thoughtfully, so deliberately.

All is well, safely rest. God is nigh.

**Prayer:** Dear Lord, thank you for sending your Son to show us how to love in this world. Thank you for preparing the way for our good and for Your message to repeatedly find a way into our lives. Let us live each day expecting You to be with us and for us. Use us to share Your hope and love with one another. Amen.

*Joellyn Sullivan is a longtime member of Idlewild. She currently is chair of the Board for Children and Family Enrichment, and is the owner of Silky O'Sullivan's on Beale Street.*



*Advent Calendar Activity:* Introduce yourself to an Idlewild staff member you don't know.

Thank them for their work.

## THURSDAY, DECEMBER 20

### **Read: John 1:10–18**

Imagine this scenario, if you will.

You wanted to give your family a chance for a better life. You built a house in another community, a wonderful house, for your loved ones. You got them moved in and settled, arranging to join them when you could. You finally arrived but found that your family did not even recognize you and that they wouldn't even allow you into your own home.

John tells us this rejection happened to our Christ. His own people didn't want him.

*"He came into the very world he created, but the world didn't recognize him. He came to his own people, and even they rejected him." John 1:10-11 New Living Translation (NLT)*

Surprisingly, instead of turning his back on the human race, this Christ extended to us the right and the privilege of becoming his children. What an offer! As with most people we know, our lives are full. We have distractions, both routine and unexpected. We've had much joy and happiness, and we have experienced great sorrow and grief. Our exhaustion from these events and emotions has made us numb. However, while comparing different translations of this reading from the book of John, our attention was grabbed by several phrases:

"He was full of unfailing love and faithfulness."

"...overflowing with tender mercy and truth!"

"...generous inside and out, true from start to finish."

"We all live off his generous bounty, gift after gift after gift...this endless knowing and understanding—all this came through Jesus, the Messiah."

"And from him we receive grace heaped upon more grace!... Jesus, the Anointed One, unveils truth wrapped in tender mercy."

These particular words of love and mercy are helping us wake up again to the meaning of Advent, to our faith, and to our Idlewild family. We are grateful.

John declares, "Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ."

May the grace revealed in these verses be the focus of your Advent season.

**Prayer:** Dear Lord, Thank you for your son Jesus Christ. We are grateful that he has shown us what you are like and that he has revealed you to us. Amen.

***Paul and Barbara Presley** have attended Idlewild since their marriage in 1977. They have raised two fine sons with the nurturing help of Idlewild's staff and congregation. Celebrating this time of the year is a highlight of their faith journey.*



*Advent Calendar Activity:* Share with someone else. MIFA Family Service Day is a great way to help!

## FRIDAY, DECEMBER 21

### **Read: Luke 1:39–56**

Oh, she rejoices! I was so happy to be assigned this passage. In the Catholic Church, this prayer of Mary's is called the *Magnificat*. We can imagine Mary and Elizabeth with light in their eyes, running to greet each other, voices loud and expressive, safe to finally speak their full truth to one another. Very few people could be in on their miraculous secret at that early time. Brought safely together, their full faith in their God and in each other immediately came spilling out of them.

Mary visits Elizabeth in her home in this passage, beginning a stay that will last three months. In her pregnancy, Mary sought the community of a trusted family member. They likely spent a lot of time talking while they did work around the house or walked to get water. I'm sure that Elizabeth was eager to share any of the latest advice she knew about birth preparations and home remedies for each new change in Mary's body. From this passage, I feel assured that Mary felt safe and loved and understood.

Looking carefully, I find Elizabeth calling me to offer safety and community to moms here in this life.

Maybe, like me, you have memories of a time when you ran to a cousin or a sister, words spilling out between shrieks of joy and laughter, unable to contain your emotions, suddenly relieved and fearless in the arms of a dear friend. Or perhaps you can recall seeing how a group of moms gather to air their stories, eager for the camaraderie of people in the same state of awe, humbled by how miraculous but wildly challenging their common experience is.

God's Spirit will always knock us down with its glorious power. The Lord breathes life into and out of our bodies. Let us all run to catch our sisters.

**Prayer:** God of all the generations, thank you for the witness of Elizabeth and Mary. Thank you for the earth-shattering gift of baby Jesus. Help us to align our work to yours. Help us protect and empower vulnerable mothers and families. Give us the grace to see your miracles in the faces of our friends and to call your great works by name. Amplify our voices when we praise you and make us fearless in proclaiming the glory of your redeeming creation.

*Emily Mulqueen is a lifelong Catholic who joined Idlewild in 2016. She is particularly inspired by the role of Mary in the Bible. She is involved with YPW and MICAH and serves as a current deacon. She is married to Matt and has two sons, Oskar and Dylan.*



*Advent Calendar Activity:* Take a deep breath. Be present. "Be still and know that I am God."

## SATURDAY, DECEMBER 22

### **Read: Luke 1:67–80**

"We know something about galaxies speeding away from each other at eighty thousand miles per second. We now know the once indivisible atom is composed of particles racing around a nucleus at phenomenal speeds. Much is known about the worlds of the large and the small. We are prone to ask the academic speculations to give us answers to the cave man's questions. Logic, reason, experiment, and research carry us a long distance, but not all the way. We continue to look for the key in the cosmic haystack that unlocks the universe and our place in it. Scientists, philosophers, and theologians are on the search teams. The key eludes us as it has all other generations. "

"I have lived with mystery and wondered longer than most who read this have lived. That may or may not be an advantage. The wonder is still with me. I am as enveloped in mystery now as I was as a child. I have struggled to break out of the shell into the broad daylight of an unfolded mystery. It has not happened. I have the vocabulary and logic to say, "I know," when only I wonder, and defend it with documentation and precedent. My documentation would be from others who said, "I know." My experience and documentation would not satisfy your wonder. Every person must do her own wondering and dying. No surrogates can stand in for you."

"What is Advent about? It is the festival of the Virgin. It is the lesser mystery designed to explain the larger mystery, the one to be called Immanuel. Take away the stories of birth, resurrection, nature miracles, healings, and God-in-the flesh, and we have a Jesus stripped of mystery, the primary ingredient of religion. Myth has some analogy to love, hate, fear, wonder, worship, hope, and faith. They have no existence or standing on their own. They cannot be explained and described as a thing, as an entity in themselves, but they can be experienced. They defy description. We can, however, tell stories about them that resonate with our experience. The old yellowed love letters will not stand the test of facts and reason. Love itself will stand the test of time. And so will Advent, and so it has." [With permission from Marcia Rhodes, these selections submitted from the essays of her father, Dr. Lewis E. Rhodes (1917-2001)].

**Prayer:** May we be surprised when your presence is felt in our commonplace experiences. We will have to settle for less than the spectacular. May a child too weak and sick to cry bear your presence. We do not ask, require, expect, or need a miracle to convince us of your presence. Your presence will be felt, if not recognized, where love, trust, and hope converge. And may it be so. Amen.

*Jimmy Powell was a research chemist at Schering Plough. He and his wife, Barbara, joined Idlewild in 2004.*



*Advent Calendar Activity: Share the Christmas story with a friend.*

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 23



The Fourth Week of Advent

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 23 –TUESDAY, DECEMBER 25

## SUNDAY, DECEMBER 23

### **Read: Isaiah 9:2–7**

I can't help but think of *The Lord of the Rings* when I read this passage, specifically the scene at the battle of Helm's Deep when King Théoden has given up hope. The heroes are barricaded in a tower with nowhere left to retreat, and they are truly in the midst of deep darkness and despairing. King Théoden says, utterly defeated, "What can men do against such reckless hate?" They are surrounded by enemies and hopeless, but they decide to make a stand and meet their fate. Gimli then announces the sun is rising, and as they prepare to make their last stand, he sounds the horn of Helm Hammerhand. The last survivors are heartened and ride out with the breaking light. As the battle plays out, the greatest hero of the whole epic, Samwise Gamgee, is heard: "How could the world go back to the way it was when so much bad happened? But in the end, it's only a passing thing, this shadow. Even darkness must pass. A new day will come. And when the sun shines, it will shine out the clearer." The sun rises over the scene, and we see the forces of evil are driven away and defeated.

The parallel is no mistake, in my opinion, as the scene is meant to show that there is hope at the darkest of times. Despite the hopeless odds, despite walking in the darkness, the promise of the dawn inspires us all to have faith, to believe that God indeed makes all things new.

I also can't help but think of us, as a nation, when I read of a people walking in darkness. As much as we try to focus on the positives, the news of shootings, rancor, and unrest always persists. Every new day there is some new outrage, some new tragedy that baffles the understanding. The darkness waits, surrounding us and blocking out the light. Perhaps we're not in the same situation as the ancient Israelites that Isaiah addressed, but I don't remember this kind of continual disconnect between us all at any other time in my life. We've forgotten that more brings us together than separates us.

Tolkien said his storytelling will "reflect a splintered fragment of the true light, the eternal truth that is with God." When I am in the midst of the strife we encounter every day, I consciously seek this light. The season of Advent fills us with a fierce hope for a promise of delivery from darkness. This and every Christmas, we will again celebrate the birth of the light, the Prince of Peace and our Messiah. We will each sound our own horn and confront darkness with the faith that all the strife before us now will indeed be erased, our burdens will be alleviated, and justice will reign forever when dawn finally breaks.

**Prayer:** Lord, grant us hope and the will to find the strength to drag darkness into the light. Help us find that fierce joy that the promise of your birth awakens in us. Amen.

*Caroline Cox and Galen Gower are both new members of Idlewild and have found much joy and hope awakened in their spirits within the walls.*



*Advent Calendar Activity:* Come to Waffle Sunday at 9.40 and join in Christmas carol singing—or sing a carol with a friend!

# CHRISTMAS EVE

MONDAY, DECEMBER 24

## Read: Luke 2:1-7

All of us have knocked on the wooden door of the inn, stared the landlord in the eyes, and known the sting of rejection when we are told that there is not a place for us, no room at the table. We have felt the burn of shame redden our cheeks and tremble our knees when we are turned away from warmth, comfort, or acceptance and forced to return to the environment described by the hymn "In the Bleak Midwinter":

*Earth hard as iron, water like a stone.*

Yet when we are rejected, forsaken, and broken, we must remember that even our Lord Jesus Christ was turned away from the inn. As we stand at the manger, shivering in the cattle stall among shepherds and angels, we too can take comfort in knowing that we are called Children of God: eternally beloved, even when we are faced with desertion or abandonment.

The homeless man is called Child of God. The teenager struggling with mental illness is called Child of God. The elderly woman ignored by her family is called Child of God. The controversial politician with a marred reputation is called Child of God. Those who turn away from the church are called Children of God. The weak, sick, lost, confused, and ashamed are called Children of God. You, too, are called Child of God. We are all called Children of God.

It is our responsibility as Christians and human beings alike to fully love our neighbor and to gather one (or two or three) people more into the inn in abundance and graciousness. We must face this bleak midwinter of fear, the unknown, and pain with fellowship and the unconditional love we are called to show unto others.

The hymn asks, "*What can I give him, poor as I am?*" We are able to share our time, money, prayers, and hope. We can give up resentment and fear of scarcity and fully allow ourselves to truly be seen, accepting our identities as Children of God. We are all capable of giving and forgiving, rejoicing in the blinding light of grace.

*If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb;*

*If I were a wise man, I would do my part;*

*Yet what can I give Him? Give my heart.*

**Prayer:** Keeper of Promises, Living Waters, Almighty God, hold us in the Everlasting Arms. Move through us so that we may be known as your blessed children. Let us gather and rejoice together in the inn, carrying the burdens and blessings of our human lives. *Grant us wisdom, grant us courage, for the facing of this hour* now and forever more. Amen.

**Jessica Joshi** is a sophomore at St. Mary's Episcopal School. She is an active BASIC youth group member and serves on the Youth Ministries Committee.



*Advent Calendar Activity: **Come to Worship!*** 3:00 p.m. Child-Led Service

5:00 p.m. Lessons and Carols

11:00 p.m. Youth-led Communion Service

# CHRISTMAS DAY

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 25

**Read: Luke 2:8–20**

Some years ago, Clarence Jordan, a farmer in south Georgia with a Ph.D. in New Testament Greek, translated the Bible from Greek into “southern,” with Jesus being born in Gainesville and dying in Atlanta! But the most controversial translation he made was when he wrote that the farmers (not shepherds!) found Joseph and Mary and the baby...in an apple crate!

He got hate mail and even threats because he took all the “dignity” out of the Christmas story and let Jesus be a human being! As Clarence wrote, “They couldn’t stand his incarnation. They only wanted his deity.”

The glory (or, rather, the *dignity*) of this story is that it is a story about God to be sure, but God coming into the world, *our* world; God revealed in a human life; God living among us; God revealed as he was born and lived and worked and laughed and loved; God revealed as he taught and healed and challenged religious convention; God revealed as he reached out to touch the lives of *all*—his best friends, their families, lawyers and priests, poor and oppressed, outcast and marginalized; God revealed in that man’s honest, strong, unconditional love; God revealed as he suffered and died.

The Christmas story is about a God who reigns not from a magnificent throne in a far-off corner of heaven, but from a stable in Bethlehem, a cross on Calvary, a table where bread was broken and wine shared and where all were welcome.

“God comes that close to us.”

And one thing more: a generation after he lived, one of his followers, thinking about him and what he did and what it all means, an old man, probably, wrote these words:

“In him was life and the life was the light of all people...  
The light shines in darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.”

It was a dark world then, and there is plenty of darkness today. So please...make a place in your heart for that light today. Keep it burning today, tomorrow, and all the days ahead.

“For the glory of God,” Iraneaus wrote, “is a human being fully alive!”

**Prayer:** *“I know that I have life  
Only insofar as I have love.  
I have no love  
Except it come from Thee.  
Help me, please, to carry  
This candle against the wind.” Amen.*

—from “Sabbaths 2005-2008” by Wendell Berry

**Steve Montgomery, Pastor**







Idlewild Presbyterian Church  
1750 Union Avenue  
Memphis TN 38104  
[www.idlewildchurch.org](http://www.idlewildchurch.org)  
901-726-4681