

Threads OF Promise

CHRIST HAS DIED
CHRIST IS RISEN
CHRIST WILL COME AGAIN

2025
Advent Devotional Guide

Mountain Brook Baptist Church
BIRMINGHAM, ALABAMA

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INTRODUCTION

Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again. These threads of promise are woven throughout Scripture. In this year's devotional guide, we will focus on these promises to see how all of Scripture tells us the story of Christ's birth, life, death, resurrection, and return. We want to invite you into the journey of Advent as we walk through these passages together and discover the overarching story of the promises God has made for us in Christ and how these promises give meaning and hope to our own stories.

This year's guide has an updated format, set up in three sections and each corresponding with one of these threads of promise. This year's devotions have been written by staff and church members, and we hope these reflections will be a blessing to you during your Advent journey. On Sundays, you'll notice a break in the normal rhythm as we invite you to enter into Advent by reflecting on the sermon text through a participatory prayer, a song, reflection questions, and an intentional activity. We're structuring the guide in this way as a reminder that Advent is more than something that happens at church; we are all invited into the story of Advent and into the story of longing and waiting expectantly for Christ's long-anticipated return.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus.

Amy M. Hirsch

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DEVOTIONALS THROUGH OUR PROJECT
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A Note on
ADVENT, CHRISTMASTIDE, AND EPIPHANY
Kely Hatley

Although we think of January as marking the new year, the season of Advent actually marks the beginning of the Christian Year calendar. Advent begins four Sundays preceding Christmas Day. The four Sundays of Advent have two distinct themes acknowledging Christ's work of salvation. The first theme observed on the first two Sundays focuses on the future second coming of Christ. The second theme observed on the last two Sundays focuses on Christ's birth.

The importance of an Advent observance is remarkably clear in a time when our society's preoccupation with consumer spending pushes all references to Christmas back to Halloween in many places. The church has a wonderful opportunity to reclaim the season and return people's thoughts to what really matters during the bustling shopping mayhem. What matters is the spiritual preparations in our hearts to anticipate both the glorious second coming of our Lord, as well as to wait again for the story of Christ's birth to unfold before our eyes. Christopher Hill writes,

The Advent complex of season, liturgy, custom, and music has been worked out over a long time to evoke an experience of the divine. It's all there; it's wonderfully designed. The Church Year calls on a library of experiences stored deep in memory. Like a composer, it evokes and orchestrates these deep feelings and associations into a melody.¹

What does Hill mean? I believe that he is emphasizing that the wealth of years of celebrating Advent has allowed us to have a rich heritage to draw upon in preparing our minds for thinking about Christ's second coming and his birth. Jesus's earthly life obviously began with his birth. It is appropriate then that the church begins its observance of Christian time with a season to help its members prepare for that event of his first coming (his birth) and for the anticipated second coming of the Lord.

The season is a purposeful stretching of time. It calls us out of our daily lethargy to awaken within us the need both for holy remembrance and a deepening anticipation of Christ's return. The message of Advent helps to prepare our hearts for the anticipation of the glorious time to come when Christ shall come again in glory, as well as the celebration of our salvation heralded through the birth of our Savior, Jesus Christ.

Although we call an "Advent" devotional guide, it actually encompasses the seasons of Advent and Christmastide and goes into Epiphany. Christmas only begins on December 25 and actually lasts until January 5. Epiphany follows Christmastide on January 6 as we remember the wise men seeking Jesus and reflect on the truth that Jesus is the light of the world.

¹ Christopher Hill, *Holidays and Holy Nights: Celebrating Twelve Seasonal Festivals of the Christian Year* (Theosophical Publishing House, 2003), 63.

THE *Promise* OF *Return*

The promise of Christ's return is the central theme inaugurating the season of Advent. Advent is a season of waiting and longing. While Israel was waiting for the coming Messiah fulfilled in the birth of Jesus, we aren't waiting for a baby to be born but for a conquering king to return. We enter into Israel's longings for a Redeemer, but the difference is that we already know Jesus came, and now we are awaiting his return. In these beginning days of Advent, we turn our gaze ahead to ponder the promise that Christ will come again, and to consider how we should live now as we anticipate his return.

CHRIST WILL COME AGAIN

A Liturgy for

SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 30 | AMY HIRSCH

REFLECT:

What is something you've had to wait for? Did you find it difficult or easy to wait? Was the waiting worth it, once you received what you were promised? What helped you to wait patiently and faithfully?

READ:

1 Corinthians 1:1-9

SERMON THEME:

The Lord will sustain us by his grace while we wait for Jesus to be revealed.

LISTEN:

"O Come, O Come, Emmanuel"

INTENTIONAL ACTIVITY:

Think of someone in your life who has been waiting for something and choose a way to encourage them this week. (Some ideas include writing a card or sending a text, giving them a phone call, dropping off a thoughtful gift or a meal, or spending some intentional time with them.)

PRAY:

Lord, in this season of Advent and waiting, I identify with your people as they waited for a Messiah to deliver them.

I, too, find myself waiting, not for Christ to be born in the manger, but for Christ to come again and to right all that is wrong.

Whatever I am waiting for ... (*meditate on what you might be waiting for in this season, whether it is healing, or reconciliation, or justice, or God's deliverance or provision in some way*), my waiting shows me that ultimately, I am waiting for you, Lord.

I confess my sin (*spend a few moments in silent confession of sin*). I know that you hear my prayers, and that, in Christ Jesus, I am forgiven and found blameless.

I trust that you will sustain me to the end.

I believe that you will keep me by your grace.

I worship you, because you are faithful and you have not left me alone—you have given me the gift of fellowship with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and the communion of saints.

Help me, Lord, to wait faithfully for you, because those who wait on you will never be put to shame.

In the name of Jesus I pray, Amen.



SCAN FOR THIS WEEK'S
DIGITAL RESOURCES

If you're like me, you likely have recollections of bygone days, of Christmases spent with loved ones crowded around a table, with food covering every inch of the surface.

Perhaps those were "the good old days" for you. The holidays can be hard because they remind us that what once was is no longer the case. People we love leave, and the table seems a little more empty year after year. While it's meant to be a jolly season, for many of us, the holidays actually bring to light the sadness and the brokenness. We feel the sting of death, the effects of sin and the Fall, the "covering that is cast over all peoples" (Isaiah 25:7 ESV), don't we?

In Isaiah 25, after Isaiah spends chapters indicting the people for their sin and prophesying the Lord's coming judgment, he looks ahead with anticipation to the day when the Lord will return and gather with us in Mount Zion for a feast that will overshadow any Christmas extravaganza we've ever attended. Imagine all of the people crowded around the table filled with a feast prepared by the Lord of hosts himself.

Yet as wonderful as the food and drink might be, to me, the best part of this celebration comes in verses 7-9. On that day, we will feast in celebration because God will swallow up death forever. Death, in other words, will finally be dead, and along with it all of the ill effects of sin that have plagued the world since the Fall. No more brokenness. No more sin. No more strife. No more sickness. No more funerals. No more empty tables at Christmas.

And God himself will tenderly wipe away the tears from our faces as we behold the glory of the One who has come for us and saved us. He will speak, and our reproach will be taken away, and our response on that day will be, "Behold, this is our God." This, this is our God, the one we have been waiting for, the one who promised he would save us—and all of his promises have come true.

Oh Lord, in some ways this season feels so hard. Would you meet me in these broken places? Please sustain me with the promise that you will return. Remind me of the hope that one day, you will wipe away every tear from my eyes. Encourage me with the anticipation of being reunited with the people I am missing, and with those who have gone before me in Christ. You are my God; help me to wait faithfully for you, trusting that you will keep your promises. Amen.

"A GUARANTEED WIN"

Tuesday, December 2 | Psalm 98 | Caroline McVay

Christ
WILL COME AGAIN

Imagine cheering on your favorite sports team—but you already knew how their season would end with them winning the championship. Would you enjoy the season more, knowing that the outcome was victory? I know I would!

Psalm 98 is a song of victory for God's people. Three movements call his creation to action, to sing, shout, and resound (celebrate). Verses 1-3 recount the works that God has already completed; he has *"made his salvation known, and revealed himself to the nations"* (Psalm 98:2 NIV) through Jesus's life, death, and resurrection. Salvation has been accomplished, and it is freely ours. Verses 4-6 describe the joy of the world in a King who provided a Savior; the sounds of jubilation because we have a King who rules over us with love and faithfulness.

In the last section of the Psalm, the author describes all of creation—sea, land, rivers, and mountains—worshiping with humankind before God, for *"he comes to judge the earth, he will judge the world in righteousness and the peoples with equity"* (Psalm 98:9 NIV). For us, under the new covenant, this portion is speaking about the second advent, or coming, of Jesus Christ.

The outcome of our broken world is Christ's victory—but I forget this promise daily. It's difficult not to be distracted by the sin and sadness surrounding us. The present, temporary realities of our world can cloud our faith and tempt us to believe that the Church is "losing."

However, Psalm 98 reminds us that we know Jesus will return again as a conquering King. We know the end result: he will come, and he will set creation right again. We can already celebrate and praise him because victory is guaranteed!

We don't have to *wish* for a second advent of Christ; we can confidently expect it. Let us be encouraged! We should enjoy the season, because we *do* know the eternal reality to come: a people restored to perfect communion forever with our King.

Remind me, O Jesus, of your eternal victory. You have promised to set your creation right again, so it will be true. Your first coming brought me salvation, so help me to look through the brokenness of this world with hope of your second coming. Let me join your creation in a jubilant song because I know you reign forever! Amen.

SONG FOR REFLECTION: "LEAD ON, O KING ETERNAL" BY SARA GROVES



Most people don't like feeling alone, excluded, or left behind. Most likely, you have felt this way, and there's a good chance you've experienced disappointment, sadness, frustration, and a whole host of other emotions as a result. Robin Williams once said, "I used to think the worst thing in life was to end up all alone. It's not. The worst thing in life is to end up with people who make you feel all alone."²

Like many Old Testament prophets, Malachi was all alone, even though he was surrounded by people. During the time of his ministry (somewhere between 500-400 B.C.), Malachi was one of the few concerned with faithfulness to the Lord. Over the last 400 years, the Jewish people had a rough go of things: their united kingdom had split into two, empires had come in to usurp power, and outwardly it appeared there was no hope on the horizon. Jews had grown skeptical and disillusioned by all that had happened to them. In their minds, God had failed them.

Malachi comes onto the scene—all alone—and he has to deliver tough news to the people. It's not that God has failed you; it's that you doubt God's unconditional love for you (1:2), you bring half-hearted sacrifices (1:8), your priests don't do their job (2:7-9), you act unjustly (3:5), and you withhold your money and your best from the Lord (3:8-9). For a supposedly promised people, that's quite the catalog of unfaithfulness. Malachi is trying to get the people to see and accept their sin, but does his message actually get through to them? As it turns out, there were a faithful few who became the Lord's treasured possession; these would be the ones to whom God would extend his love and compassion (3:16-18). These people will revere the Lord's name and "the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its rays. And you will go out and frolic like well-fed calves" (Malachi 4:2 NIV). For those who are found faithful, their time will come.

In our Bibles, that time comes as we turn the next page to Matthew's gospel. Over 400 years later, John the Baptist, like Malachi, would "make ready a people prepared for the Lord" (Luke 1:17 NIV) and give "people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins" (Luke 1:77 NIV). This salvation and the forgiveness of sins would come through the babe born in the manger, Jesus Christ.

Robin Williams is right in one respect: the worst thing is not being alone. But as Malachi shows, faithfulness, even when you're all alone, is possible because of God's grace toward each of us. The worst thing, it turns out, is being alone and *having no hope*. Thankfully, we have Jesus our Savior, born in the manger, the one in whom "the hopes and fears of all the years are met."³

Father, when I feel alone, cast off, or not remembered, thank you that you see me, know me, and love me always. Grant me the eyes and the heart to hold on to the hope that you have set most fully in your Son, Jesus Christ. In your name I pray, Amen.

² *World's Greatest Dad*, directed by Bobcat Goldthwait (2009; New York, NY: Magnolia Pictures, 2009).

³ Phillip Brooks, "O Little Town of Bethlehem" (1868; Public Domain).

"PREPARED FOR THE WEDDING FEAST"

Thursday, December 4 | Matthew 25:1-13 | Ada Burris

Christ
WILL COME AGAIN

I have been a bridesmaid in three different weddings in the last year. Each time, I have joyously accepted, as I was so excited to celebrate my friends and be present for their big day. However, being a bridesmaid is not just about showing up on the wedding day and enjoying the party. There is a lot of preparation involved! Purchasing the right dress, getting alterations, arranging hair and makeup, and traveling to the venue are just a few of the tasks that need to be completed beforehand. Even small mistakes, like wearing the wrong shade or arriving late, can feel catastrophic. In the parable of the ten virgins (Matthew 25:1-13), we get a glimpse into wedding preparations in first-century Judea. These bridesmaids were tasked with meeting the bridegroom and escorting him to the wedding feast.

When the bridegroom was delayed, the girls had to wait into the night. The parable marks a division between the bridesmaids, describing five of them as foolish and five of them as wise. The foolish virgins forgot to bring oil with them to keep their lamps burning, while the wise virgins had enough oil to sustain the lamps during the bridegroom's delay. I can imagine the shame and panic the unprepared girls felt as they scrambled to find oil, even asking the other girls to spare some of theirs.

However, their lack of preparation caused them to miss the wedding entirely, as the bridegroom shut them out of the feast: "Truly, I say to you, I do not know you" (Matthew 25:12 ESV). These words are reminiscent of Jesus's words in Matthew 7, as he turns away those who outwardly profess faith but are not truly his disciples. In the kingdom of God, there is a vital distinction between those who are outwardly followers of Jesus yet inwardly unrepentant and those who are genuine believers ready for the Son of Man's return. We are called to be in constant anticipation of our Savior, prepared to wait with lamps burning until he comes back.

Although half of the girls are locked out of the celebration, the other half are welcomed in and rewarded for their preparation. What a joy it is to be invited into the celebration of heaven and known by Jesus! We know that Jesus is the good shepherd, as John 10 tells us that he knows his sheep and is willing to lay down his life to protect them. This parable reminds us that we must be prepared for Christ's return, our bridegroom arriving to receive us into the kingdom of heaven.

Dear Lord, thank you for being the bridegroom who will one day return for the Church, your bride, and invite us into the wedding feast of the kingdom of heaven. Help us prepare our hearts and minds for your return as we await the day when we will see you face to face. Amen.

Christ

WILL COME AGAIN

"HOME FOR THE HOLIDAYS"

Friday, December 5 | John 14:1-14 | Rachel Pitts

There was no feeling quite like walking through the front door of my childhood home at the end of a college fall semester. With exams finished and exhaustion deep in my bones, I could not wait to see the house my mother had lovingly prepared with cozy winter and Christmas decorations. My drive was filled with anticipation of a warm fire, hot cocoa, and lots of rest.

While my Christmas memories are mostly filled with warmth and joy, I know this is not the case for everyone. Even those with happy experiences like mine can't deny that Christmas often falls short of its cultural "hype." It's not all warm fires and cocoa, because the world doesn't stop being fallen in December. Sin still roams, corrupting what should be the purest of times. It's ironic how the season that should most remind us of our heavenly home often distracts us from the fact that our home is not here. Our home is in heaven.

In John 14, Jesus reminds his disciples of this truth before leaving earth. After years of walking daily with him, the disciples will have to endure life and its hardships without his physical presence. This must have been a burdensome thought. To comfort them, Jesus assures the disciples that they will join him one day. When this life and the suffering it brings are over, Jesus will be there to welcome them home to his Father's house. He will prepare a place for them, one infinitely better than our earthly holiday home. Can you imagine the peace and joy we will feel walking through that door?

This Christmas season, let us be people marked by gratitude that a place has been prepared for us. Let us wait in faithful anticipation for the day we walk through the gates of heaven and are overwhelmed with peace to be, for the first time, truly home for the holidays.

Father, thank you for going before us. Help us this season to recognize the insatiable longing we feel for what it truly is—homesickness. Fill us with joyous expectation to be home with you one day. Amen.

"THE PARABLE OF THE FIG TREE: A CALL TO WATCH AND WAIT"

Saturday, December 6 | Luke 21:25-38 | Clarke Skelton

Christ
WILL COME AGAIN

Chapters 19 through 21 of Luke's gospel recount the last days of the earthly ministry of Jesus, which led to his crucifixion and resurrection. When Jesus cleansed the temple, the Jewish leaders concluded that Jesus must be put to death because he directly challenged their authority. In Luke 21, Jesus warned his disciples that God's judgment would soon fall on Jerusalem and the temple. Today's passage recounts Jesus's instructions to his disciples about how to prepare for God's coming judgment, which would culminate with Jesus's victorious return at the end of time.

First, Jesus warned that, because God's creation would give evidence of God's judgment, many people would be worried about what was going to happen. However, Jesus told his followers that these troubling events were evidence that his victorious return to judge the world was coming soon. Jesus used an illustration (parable) of the fig tree and other trees to teach that his followers must watch and wait for his return. Jesus said that, just as his disciples knew that summer was near when they saw trees budding, they would also know that his victorious return was imminent when they saw things happening that Jesus told them would occur.

However, in verse 32, Jesus said that "this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened" (NIV). Although Bible scholars have proposed many different interpretations about what Jesus meant, the simplest explanation is usually the best. We know that all the followers to whom Jesus spoke lived to see Jesus's death and resurrection. Therefore, Jesus was teaching that his coming resurrection was the beginning of God's final judgment, which would culminate when Jesus returns in glory. This explanation is consistent with all other New Testament teachings that Christ's resurrection is a foretaste of God's final judgment that will occur with Jesus's victorious return at the end of time.

As we celebrate Advent, how can we apply Jesus's teaching in this parable of the fig tree, which is a call to watch and wait?

1. Remember that our hope is not in life's present difficulties but in our sure hope of Jesus's return that God promised us through Christ's resurrection.
2. Remember that the best way we "watch and wait" is through gathering, serving, and giving generously with God's people at MBBC and with other believers locally and globally.
3. Remember that Advent is not only a time of celebrating Jesus's birth at Christmas, but also a time of celebrating God's promise that "Christ will come again."

Heavenly Father, thank you for the parable of the fig tree, which reminds us that you call us to "watch and wait" as we anticipate your promise that "Christ will come again." Thank you for the truth that, just as we celebrate Jesus's first coming at Christmas, we also celebrate our assurance that Christ will return to wipe away our tears and make all things new. Help us to "watch and wait" by faithfully gathering, serving, and giving generously through our community of faith because of your promise that "Christ will come again." Amen.

A Liturgy for

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 7 | AMY HIRSCH

REFLECT:

As a child, it's likely that you heard, "Be patient!" countless times in your life. It's hard for kids to be patient, but the difficulty doesn't end there. Adults can struggle with patience too (perhaps they are just better at masking their frustrations!).

Would you describe yourself as a patient person? Today's passage reminds us that God is patient with us, but patience is hard to come by! What experiences in life have taught you about the importance of patience? How does the truth that God is patient with his children offer a word of encouragement to you?

READ: 2 Peter 3:3-18

SERMON THEME:

The Lord is patient and desires for all to come to faith in Jesus before Jesus returns.

LISTEN:

"View the Present Through the Promise"

INTENTIONAL ACTIVITY:

During the prayer section today (see next page), you were encouraged to think of someone in your life who doesn't know Jesus. Ask God to show you a way that you might share Christ's love with them in this season; perhaps you might consider inviting them over for a holiday gathering or inviting them to an activity at church, like one of our worship services or the Living Nativity, where they can hear the good news of Jesus's birth.

SANCTUARY CHOIR:

Christmas Choral Worship Service
December 7 | 9 a.m.

LIVING NATIVITY

December 20, 21, 22
Shows at 6:30 & 7:30 p.m.

GLORIOUS: *A Contemporary*

Worship Christmas Experience
December 14 | 11 a.m.

CHRISTMAS EVE SERVICES

December 24 | 3 p.m. (Band-led Service for Families), 5 & 7 p.m. (Candlelight Services)

PRAY:

Lord, I praise you, because you are a God who keeps his promises.

You are merciful and gracious. You are slow to anger. You are patient with me. You never grow weary of me. Your love is unconditional.

You long for others to come to know the hope you offer through Jesus Christ.

You tell us that you have not yet returned because you are patient with them, too. You don't want them to perish, but to come to repentance and experience eternal and abundant life.

Lord, I lift up the people I love, who do not yet know you. *(Spend some time praying for people in your life who don't know Jesus. Speak their names either aloud or silently in your heart.)*

God, thank you for being patient with them. Draw them to yourself. Show them your great love for them, your mercy, and the hope they can have because of Jesus.

Please help me to live as a faithful witness to them, and to others who don't know you, to walk in holiness and godliness as I wait for your return.

Even as I confess my sins ... *(spend some time in silent confession)*, I acknowledge that I am found without spot or blemish because of what you have done for me in Jesus. I share in Christ's perfect righteousness. Because of the cross, I am at peace with you.

Help me, Lord, to grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. I give him all the glory, now and forever. Amen.



SCAN FOR THIS WEEK'S
DIGITAL RESOURCES

Have you ever imagined what it will be like when the resurrection finally comes? I've pictured it often: sitting at the dinner table with my wife and daughters, then suddenly hearing the sound of the last trumpet, watching as the dead in Christ are raised, and we are all changed. What a day that will be, unlike any other, filled with awe, glory, and the ultimate victory over death.

In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul speaks directly to this glorious hope. He reveals a mystery: we will not all sleep, but we will all be changed. Our perishable bodies will put on the imperishable. What is mortal will become immortal. And death, our greatest enemy, will be swallowed up in victory. This is the resurrection promise, the final and complete triumph of Christ over sin, decay, and death itself. But Paul doesn't just leave us with a beautiful vision of the future; he calls us to respond in the present. In verse 58, he writes: "Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the Lord's work, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain" (NIV).

In a world full of distractions, demands, and discouragements, it's easy to lose sight of eternity. We say we believe in the resurrection, but are we living like it really matters? Are we letting that future victory shape our present reality?

Paul's "therefore" is a challenge. Because the resurrection is true, we are to be steadfast and immovable, not swayed by shifting cultural values or overwhelmed by the pressures of life. We're called to stand firm, grounded in the unshakable truth of the gospel.

He also urges us to be always abounding in the work of the Lord. Not just when it's easy. Not just when we feel like it. Always. Whether we're serving, giving, loving, praying, or sharing the gospel, we do it with the assurance that none of it is wasted. Nothing done for Christ is ever in vain.

This is how we live in light of resurrection hope: not with passivity or fear, but with purpose and passion. One day, in a moment, in the blink of an eye, the trumpet will sound, and we will be changed. Until that day, let us live as people of hope, rooted in eternity, abounding in love, and faithful in the work God has given us.

Because Jesus has already won. And in him, every moment of labor matters.

Heavenly Father, thank you for the victory over sin and death through our Lord Jesus Christ, and for giving us unshakable hope beyond the grave. We are grateful that our labor in you is never in vain, and we ask for strength to live each day in light of the resurrection. Help us to stand firm and abound in your work, with hearts full of joy and purpose. Amen.

"CHILDREN OF LIGHT"

Tuesday, December 9 | 1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11 | Cathy Benton

Christ
WILL COME AGAIN

A parent often hears these questions: "Who did that? What will it be like? When will we know? Where are you? Why did you do that?" The Greek word *parousia* ("come" in 1 Thessalonians 4:15) translates in the following ways: entry of a triumphal ruler and his army, entering a city; his loyal followers come out to welcome and accompany him as he enters.

Paul addresses the questions of believers: "When will Christ come again? Who will come with him? Where will I be? What will happen to those who have 'fallen asleep'? Why will it happen like that?" Paul answers "who" and "what" but reminds believers even Christ didn't know "when." Christians live NOT as those with no hope, but rather as those who hope in a living Savior. Before Christ, the Israelites lived in hope of a Messiah who would liberate them from foreign rulers. Christians wait in the expectant hope of our risen, triumphant King, entering our midst, surrounded by those who are "asleep in death," that great cloud of witnesses in Hebrews 12:1-2.

Although I don't know "when" Christ will come again, I know, with certainty, "what" will happen and "where" I will be. I will be in one of two places...either accompanying Christ and those who "sleep" in death—my parents, grandparents, and the many Christian mentors who helped form me—or I will be with earthly believers greeting the triumphal Christ returning to earth. Christ's return will be unexpected and sudden, as when a thief comes. I am to focus not on the "who, what, when, where, or why" questions but rather on the "how" ... how should I act, wait, and approach each day until Christ comes again?

1 Thessalonians 5:5-6 (AMP) says, "For you are all sons of light and sons of day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness. So then let us not sleep [in spiritual indifference] as the rest [of the world does], but let us keep wide awake [alert and cautious] and let us be sober [self-controlled, calm, and wise]." That great cloud of witnesses taught me to practice being the light of Christ to the world (Matthew 5), a lamp on a lampstand, a light to those with no hope, who may see how I act, live, and love Christ and come to a saving knowledge of him.

In her collection *Letters from Mother*, Mildred McMurry shares her experience during the Easter service of the 1964 Billy Graham crusade in Birmingham, Alabama: "In the afternoon sunlight one could not distinguish black from white—just a sea of faces. Light reduces differences and God's light reveals all his children as needy pensioners of his grace."⁴

Lord, send out your light and your truth; let them lead me to your holy hill and to your dwelling (Psalm 43:3). Since we are light in you, Lord, may we walk as children of light (Ephesians 5:8). Amen.

⁴ Billie McMurry Emmons, *Letters From Mother*, (Broadman Press, 1967) 86-87.

Christ

WILL COME AGAIN

"THE GREATEST TRUE STORY EVER TOLD"

Wednesday, December 10 | Revelation 1 | Britt Redden

I've always loved a good story—especially when it's true. There is something about a book or movie based on a "true story" that makes it that much more powerful, more meaningful, and more moving. That's why it's so important for us to remember that the Christmas story is not just a sweet tradition or a children's pageant: it is history. It is a true story!

Jesus was really born in a manger in Bethlehem. Mary really was a virgin. In faith, Joseph really did stand beside her. Real angels filled the night sky, real shepherds left their flocks to worship him, and real wise men traveled far to lay gifts at his feet.

The Christmas story is one that many of us have heard our whole lives and can probably say by memory (especially if you have participated for years in the Living Nativity). But Scripture reminds us that the same Jesus who came quietly into the world will one day return in power and in glory. In Revelation 1:7, John sees the vision of the Son of Man riding in on the clouds and says, "Look, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and all the peoples of the earth will mourn because of him" (NIV).

When Jesus returns, it won't be a secret return only to certain people; rather, the Bible tells us that **all** will know. At his first coming, Jesus was humble and almost hidden from the world. During his earthly ministry, he never made headlines. But when Jesus comes again, "every eye will see him" (1:7 NIV). The whole world will know. He will not return to a manger but to a throne. The same Jesus that we celebrate this Christmas season will return in all his glory as King of kings and Lord of lords to complete God's redemption story—the story that started long ago in the Garden of Eden, was secured at the cross, and will be fulfilled in the new heavens and the new earth.

Lord, fill our hearts with gratitude this Advent as we celebrate your first coming and with hopeful anticipation as we long for your return. Help us to live as people ready to meet our King. We already know the ending of the greatest true story of all: one day, you will return and take us home. Come, Lord Jesus, come! Amen.

"THE HEAVENLY WARRIOR DEFEATS THE BEAST"

Thursday, December 11 | Revelation 19:11-21 | Anne Rector

Christ
WILL COME AGAIN

"You may eat the flesh of kings..." (Revelation 19:18 NIV)

"Thrown alive into the fiery lake of burning sulfur" (19:20 NIV)

Upon reading the Scripture for today's devotional, you will encounter said phrases above alongside other descriptive language. The imagery is abundant, and therefore so are my subsequent questions. However, here is what is clear: *the heavenly warrior (Christ) will descend from heaven with his heavenly armies and dispose of evil once and for all.*

At the end of Ecclesiastes, the writer concludes the book with this verse: "For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil" (12:14 NIV).

Since the beginning of time, God has seen and known all things. His justice is coming, and for those who are not his children, what a terrifying passage this is! Yet praise God that we don't have to live in this fear. This is what we remember in this Christmas season. Where we could not stand before the throne, Jesus stands on our behalf. One day, he will make all things new (Revelation 21). For those who put their faith in Christ, the same warrior King in the imagery of this passage is the one who is watching and caring for us today. He sees injustice and evil. He forgives us of our sins and desires a relationship with us. The ordained winner of this cosmic battle has given us an open invitation to be on his side.

The excerpts at the beginning of today's Scripture are troubling images for those who are not in Christ. However, the passage's powerful imagery can also fuel us with hope...

"There before me was a white horse, whose rider (Christ) is called Faithful and True" (Revelation 19:11 NIV)

"On his head are many crowns" (19:12 NIV)

"His name is the Word of God" (19:13 NIV)

"King of Kings and Lord of Lords" (19:14 NIV)

While Alabama's winter is void of lakes of burning sulfur, we can draw comfort from Scripture that justice is coming. The more we turn our eyes to *who Christ is*, the more he empowers us to await our reunion with him.

Lord, in this Christmas season, help us to marvel in what you have already done on our behalf as we eagerly anticipate your return. As we lament the brokenness and evil in the world today, empower us to live in expectation that heavenly justice will rule the earth, as nothing is unseen in your world, Lord. Amen.

Christ

WILL COME AGAIN

"THE ULTIMATE DESTINATION"

Friday, December 12 | Revelation 21 | Elizabeth Jewell

As we travel through life, we constantly anticipate the next stage. In our teen years, we can't wait to finish high school and have more freedom. In our thirties, we can't wait for the newborn and toddler stages to end so our children will be independent and self-sufficient. In our sixties, we can't wait to retire and have more time with family. As pro-golfer Scottie Scheffler said, "You win it, you celebrate ... it's such an amazing moment. Then it's like, OK, now what are we going to eat for dinner? Life goes on."⁵

What if we stop wishing for the next worldly stage of life and cast our eyes on God's promise of the ultimate destination of the new heaven and earth? Revelation 21 describes the perfect city where we will dwell with God, and all things will be made new. There will be no pain, no suffering, no death. Why don't we start longing for that stage?

God provides us peace in knowing that even though we must endure hardships in life, it is temporary. Whatever you are facing today—loss, illness, loneliness, anxiety, stress—God promises a future where those burdens are gone. This doesn't mean we ignore our present pain, but we can endure it with hope, knowing that better days are ahead. God's plan is to bring complete healing and joy to his people.

So the next time you find yourself stressed in your current situation and longing for the next stage in life, pause and remember that you will never find contentment in earthly things. Don't be discouraged by the world around you. Let Revelation 21 remind you that God's story ends with restoration and all things made new.

Dear Lord, thank you for the promise of a new heaven and a new earth. Help us understand that when we suffer loss or experience pain in this world, it is temporary. Give us peace in knowing that our earthly troubles will be washed away and everything will be made new. Thank you for giving us hope. Amen.

⁵ Golf Channel, "Scottie Scheffler: We work so hard for such little moments, Live From The Open," NBC, July 15, 2025, video, 0:43-0:53, <https://youtu.be/twRwNWRwLPU?si=B4aNSATDeykhKrXJ>.

"GOD'S FINAL WORDS: EDEN RESTORED
AND HIS PROMISE FULFILLED"

Saturday, December 13 | Revelation 22 | John Piede

Christ
WILL COME AGAIN

Revelation 22 closes the Bible with a beautiful vision of hope, showing that God's story ends with joy and restoration. John sees the river of the water of life, and on each side the trees of life. The description is one of perfect peace and abundance and assures us that God will bring closure with a perfect and joyful ending in his presence.

This final chapter promises that there will no longer be any suffering. In God's restored creation, there is no darkness, pain, or separation. The leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations, symbolizing complete wholeness and peace. For those who carry grief, illness, or injustice, this passage declares, "It will not always be this way."

The angel affirms that the words of this prophecy are "trustworthy and true" (Revelation 22:6 NIV), urging us to believe them and live accordingly. In a world where truth is often distorted, God's Word remains a steady anchor. Believing means more than just agreeing. Rather, it means we need to allow his promises to shape our decisions, attitudes, and perseverance. Three times Jesus says, "I am coming soon!" (22:7, 12, 20 NIV). This is not meant to create fear, but instead to stir expectancy. His return is certain, and each day brings us closer to seeing him face-to-face. Living with that as a reality changes how we endure hardship, love others, and use our time.

This chapter matters deeply in today's world. We live in a time of conflict, moral confusion, and uncertainty. Revelation 22 reminds us that history is not spiraling without purpose. Rather, God is leading it toward his perfect conclusion. It assures us that the struggles of this world are temporary and that our hope is eternal. We can apply this truth daily by living with eternity in view, making choices that reflect lasting values rather than temporary gain. We can anchor ourselves in Scripture, extend Christ's invitation to those who are spiritually thirsty, and persevere with confidence, knowing the end of the story is secure.

Ultimately, Revelation 22 teaches us that God is faithful, his promises are certain, and our brokenness will be fully redeemed in Christ. He is the God who longs to dwell with his people, who heals every wound, and who replaces every sorrow with joy. Until that day, we live trusting in his grace to sustain us until we meet him face-to-face.

Lord Jesus, thank you for the promise that you are coming soon. Help me to live with eternity in mind, to keep your Word close to my heart, and to invite others to know you. Strengthen me to endure trials with hope, knowing that one day you will wipe away every tear and heal every hurt. Keep my eyes fixed on you until the day I see you face-to-face. Amen.

A Liturgy for

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 14 | AMY HIRSCH

REFLECT:

In a season of gift giving and gift receiving, it's easy to allow consumerism and cases of the "I wants" to blind us to the gifts God has already given us. In the prayer prompt, you'll spend some time thanking God for his provision. In preparation for that exercise, go ahead and reflect on a person, place, and thing you are thankful for in this season.

READ: 1 Thessalonians 5:12-28

SERMON THEME:

We don't have to wonder about the Lord's will for us while we wait for Jesus to return. He calls us to rejoice, pray, and give thanks at all times.

LISTEN:

"Rejoice"

INTENTIONAL ACTIVITY:

Who did you list as your person you are thankful for in this season? Find a way to express your gratitude to that person sometime this week.

PRAY:

Lord,

You are the God of peace who sanctifies us. Because of Jesus, we are made right with you.

Today, I rejoice because you are a God who is ...
(spend some time reflecting on the attributes of God).

I give thanks, God, for the ways I see you at work in the world and in my life. *(Spend some time thanking God for the ways you see him at work in the world around you and in your life.)*

I also give thanks, God, for your provision in my life. *(Spend some time reflecting on a person, place, and thing you are grateful for in this season.)*

I pray without ceasing, Lord, trusting that you care about my life and that you long for me to bring you my burdens. *(Spend some time praying for the things that are on your heart.)*

Lord, I know that the One who calls me is faithful and will hold me fast until the end. Guard me and guide me for your name's sake, as I wait with hope for your return. Help me to reject evil and to hold fast to what is good.

In the name of Jesus I pray, Amen



SCAN FOR THIS WEEK'S
DIGITAL RESOURCES

THE *Promise* OF THE *Redeemer*

When we declare the promise, “Christ has died,” we declare something more than just his death. We are declaring the whole truth of Scripture from the Old to the New Testament—from prophecies about his birth and death, to the stories in the gospel that show the fulfillment of these prophecies as we witness Jesus’s birth, life, death, and resurrection. God made a promise to send a Redeemer, and he has kept his promise. At first glance, it might seem odd to think about Christ’s death as we approach Christmas, the time we often read passages remembering his birth. But without the events of Good Friday and Easter, Christmas would have no meaning. We need God in the flesh to redeem us and to save us.

CHRIST HAS DIED

Like many of the chapters in Genesis, the third chapter of Genesis is densely packed with narrative details. Interpretation and theological implications from these 24 verses continue to provoke debate, conversation, and deep study. It begins with Eve encountering the serpent in the Garden of Eden. Their conversation and the actions taken afterward of eating the forbidden fruit impacted all of us. For this devotional, I wish to share a brief observation from rereading this chapter. Verse 15 features a messianic message, that is to say, a prophecy of the future Messiah Jesus, threaded through God's cursing of the serpent.

Translating ancient Hebrew into twenty-first-century American English is incredibly difficult, as cultural context, alliterations, and puns may be lost or obscured in the translation. But let us compare two translations:

First, the King James Version: *"And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel."*

Second, the English Standard Version or ESV: *"I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel."*

For American readers, the word "offspring" may be a clearer equivalent than "seed." But seed is, in my mind, a more accurate word. The word "seed" is used in the narratives of the patriarchs, and it held a multi-faceted brilliance to the earliest readers of Genesis as it connotes both food that nourishes, but also the future, as in future descendants.

And her seed came and grew. In fact, Luke 2:52 states that he "grew in wisdom and in stature, and with favor with both God and man" (NIV). And why did Christ come? To bring the remedy for sin as he is the seed of the woman who bruises the head of the serpent, though his heel is bruised in the process. Over the centuries, theologians across a wide spectrum of theological belief have come together to state that the third chapter of Genesis is the "first gospel"—the first good news after the devastating revelation that sin brought in the garden.

Today, my prayer for you and for me is that as we approach together the coming Winter Solstice and the darkest days of the year, let us reflect on the word *seed* as it relates to the promises made in the Garden of Eden and coming to *fruition* after Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Dear God, as the short days and long nights of winter come, let our light, which comes from you, illuminate and warm those we see here at church and in our community. Let us remember continually the daily opportunities we have to plant seeds of hope and joy in others, as you have done for us. Amen.

"GOD WORKS THROUGH THE UNEXPECTED"

Tuesday, December 16 | Isaiah 9:1-7 | Susan Ray

Christ
HAS DIED

So often, I approach God with my own plans neatly packaged—complete with instructions, timelines, and expectations. I lay it all out, hoping he'll follow the script I've written. And yet, I've learned that the most breathtaking moments come not when things go as I imagined, but when they take an unexpected turn. God delights in surprising us with his wisdom, leading us down paths we would never have considered—roads that reveal more beauty, joy, and purpose than we ever knew to hope for. In these moments, his power and love shine brightest.

Isaiah 9:6 unveils the astonishing way God chooses to intervene in our world—not through overwhelming force, but through a child. Isaiah brings word that even in the darkness of the world, God is at work in an unexpected way. God brings the light and hope of the world through a baby. The government rests on his shoulders, yet he arrives in humility. This is the paradox of divine power: strength cloaked in vulnerability; majesty wrapped in swaddling cloth. Each name given to this child in this passage reflects his character and mission. As the "Wonderful Counselor," Jesus governs with wisdom that transcends human understanding. In a world flooded with opinions and strategies, he offers divine insight. He knows exactly what to do in every situation, and his ways lead to life.

As "Mighty God," he has all the resources of heaven at his command. He meets our weakness with strength. The title "Everlasting Father" reveals that although he is the Son, he cares for us with the tenderness of a father—providing, protecting, and meeting our needs with compassion. And finally, as "Prince of Peace," Jesus brings peace at every level—peace with God, peace with others, and peace within ourselves. There is no peace apart from Jesus. He doesn't just make peace; he is peace. And his kingdom is one of joy, celebration, and wholeness for all eternity.

This is the unexpected wisdom of Christmas: the world's wisdom has failed, and nothing less than the presence of God could save us. The world says power comes through control, prestige, and dominance. But God says power comes through surrender, humility, and love. Jesus, born in a manger, makes foolish the wisdom of this world. To bow the knee to this child is to enter a kingdom that will never end—a kingdom of joy, justice, and peace. Who would have thought that surrender leads to celebration? Yet this is the miracle of Isaiah's prophecy: the light has come, and it shines brightest in the most unexpected way.

Father, we thank you for the strength and wisdom you provide for us as you work through the unexpected. We praise you for the ultimate gift of Jesus—Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Help us to trust your ways, even when they surprise us. Let your light shine through us, and may we carry the peace of Christ through every aspect of our lives. In your holy name we pray, Amen.

Isaiah's imagery paints some of the Bible's most vivid scenes of despair and redemption. At the time Isaiah was written around 700 B.C., Ahaz, a descendant of David and the king of Judah, faced attack on all sides. Despite Isaiah's efforts to encourage Ahaz to trust God, Ahaz puts his hope in Assyria's king. At the end of Isaiah 10, "the ax of divine judgment fell on the forest-like army of Assyria."⁶ To illustrate this metaphor, Isaiah 11 begins with the image of the stump of Jesse. When Christ was born, the house of David had not been in royal power for almost 600 years.⁷ Those who are awaiting a savior from David's line have been waiting a very long time. The circumstances feel hopeless.

And yet, a tiny shoot springs forth and grows to bear fruit. Isaiah foretells a ruler who is filled with the Spirit of the Lord and has perfect wisdom and might. Unlike earthly rulers, who are corruptible and make decisions based on the evidence before them, this king rules with the knowledge of the Lord and in perfect obedience to him. He administers righteous justice by restoring the downtrodden and rebuking the wicked. Under his rule, all will experience an Edenic paradise. In verses 6 through 9, the image of paradise comes into focus, as one can picture a leopard lying with the goat, a lion eating straw like an ox, and an infant playing near a cobra's den. On this holy mountain, there is no suffering or grief, because everything in it will live in perfect submission to Christ's authority.

The unfortunate reality is that 2025 A.D. is not too different from 700 B.C. Our world is still filled with injustice and strife. However, Isaiah promises a coming Savior. Although the paradise he describes will evade us until Christ returns, we cannot deny Christ's transformative power here on earth. It is only when we allow the power of the gospel to transform our hearts and minds that we can begin to experience peace with one another. By acting in obedience and delighting in fear of the Lord, we experience God and see glimmers of paradise. Further, Isaiah's prophecy reveals that a Messiah is coming, one who will stand in our place and exercise his power to eliminate suffering and make everything right.⁸ As we prepare our hearts to welcome the Christ child, may we be filled with the Holy Spirit and walk in obedience. May we point others to Christ and take hope that, one day, all will be restored.

Father God, we thank you for the gift of the Christ child and rejoice that we serve a king who rules with perfect wisdom and might. We ask that you would comfort those who feel hopeless and pray that you would fill their hearts with the hope of restoration. Until that day comes, we pray that, through the power of the gospel, you will transform our hearts so we can delight in your ways and walk in obedience, pointing others to Christ. Amen.

⁶ Geoffrey W. Grogan, "Isaiah," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Proverbs-Isaiah*, Vol. 6, ed. Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland (Zondervan, 2008), 554.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Dr. Timothy J. Keller, "Healing From Decay," Dec. 15, 2013, Redeemer Presbyterian Church, New York City, New York. MP3 Audio, 28:51. Gospel in Life, <https://gospelinlife.com/sermon/healing-from-decay/>.

"THE WHOLE STORY"

Thursday, December 18 | Isaiah 52:13-53:12 | Matthew Hirsch

Christ
HAS DIED

Most people who know me would tell you that I am a bit of a “history nerd.” On shelves throughout my house, I have books that reviewers have recently coined as part of the “dad history” genre. The intention of these titles is to enrapture the demographic of which I just so happen to be a part. The narratives they tell are not new, but they capture the empathy and imagination of the reader when they tell of the trials and sacrifices of the protagonists and regale with the victories won.

I have a confession about this, though. I have a bad habit of putting these books down around halfway through them. I have not identified the root cause of this action, but I imagine that knowing the result of each story plays a part. (Spoiler alert: America won the Revolutionary War, George Washington became our first president, and the Allies won WWII.) In a similar confession, I must admit that sometimes I struggle reading Scripture, especially prophetic, Old Testament books, for the same reason.

Eventually, I do tend to pick books back up to start over and finish. Ultimately, the beauty is not in the result of the story, but in the journey the protagonist took to get there. You know, the trials and sacrifices part? The same can be said about the Bible—all Scripture points to Jesus, and none more straightforward than this section of Isaiah. Isaiah’s prophecy is a clear and beautiful foreshadowing of the suffering and sacrifice Christ made for all of us. Our perspective—knowing the whole story on this side of the cross and empty tomb—is a great gift. As we see in these verses, he was pierced for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities, and like a lamb was led to slaughter. And here’s the best spoiler alert of all time: on the third day, he rose from the grave and now sits on the right hand of God the Father Almighty.

God, I am grateful that you are sovereign. You are the Alpha and the Omega, the Author and Perfector of my faith. Thank you for letting me be part of your story—the redemption story of Christ’s death and resurrection. Amen.

When I read Psalm 22, I immediately hear the haunting melody from this exact text that our choir sings at the end of every Maundy Thursday service. Accompanied only by a simple handbell chord, our Sanctuary altar is stripped of everything beautiful in preparation for us to leave in both silence and darkness, aching for Easter Sunday. Remarkably, one thousand years later, all four gospels record many of these exact words from Jesus. They eerily echo the Psalmist as he cries out to God from the cross and suffers the cruelty and scorn of the crowd. How could David have known the same spirit that filled his heart to pen the words to this song would use them as prophecy to bolster the faith of generations to come?

I'm so grateful our church has embraced the tradition of celebrating the seasons of the Christian year. This annual telling of the gospel story embeds within our hearts the full story of God's redemptive plan to save the world. Just as an Easter celebration seems to be missing depth without reflecting on Good Friday, Christmas can become less meaningful when we skip through the longing of Advent. If we only allow ourselves to be captivated by the sweet story of a newborn, we can miss the more complete joy that comes from knowing the purpose of why he willingly came into our world. A 1990s song from the Christmas cantata with the same title as today's devotion perfectly articulates the connection from Psalm 22 to our Advent preparation.

*He was born in a manger, a small, tiny stranger, in a quilt that was carelessly made.
Just some boards nailed together, not fit for a beggar, was the place where my Savior was laid.*

*Through the gates of the city crawled a man filled with pity, while bearing the weight of the Tree.
As they ruthlessly nailed him, it seemed the just Father had failed him, but he knew what his purpose must be.*

*It was on Sunday morning, he awoke with the dawning, shattering death's mighty hold.
Now he's back home in heaven, but soon he'll be coming, wearing a crown of pure gold.*

*Chorus: Down through the ages the people sang praises, for the light of God's love shining down;
As it shines, I can see the pathway before me, from cradle, to cross, to crown.⁹*

Dear Father, as we anticipate the celebration of receiving the greatest gift to mankind, may we remember what it cost you and respond with grateful hearts of service. Amen.

⁹ Roy Acuff and His Smokey Mountain Boys, "From Cradle to Cross to Crown," by Loney Hitchens, recorded 1963, track 18 on *Roy Acuff: Hand-Clapping Gospel Songs*, Hickory Records, 2008.

"THE BIRTH THAT CHANGED THE WORLD"

Saturday, December 20 | Luke 1:1-25 | Catherine Allen

Christ
HAS DIED

What if the Christmas story was your only experience with Jesus? Would it change your life forever? Try it. Instead of experiencing the story as a sweet thing for children, let it be a cataclysmic earth-shaker for adults. It's all about birth, life, death, and new life for eternity.

His mother, Mary, knew his story from his conception; she stayed by his side all the way to his death on the cross. She didn't always understand him, but she stayed with him. After he had died, resurrected, and ascended to heaven, she was an anchor for other believers.

His earthly father Joseph was his loyal protector, even dodging death from a royal decree, even fleeing to Egypt as a refugee. The baby survived and grew up because of Joseph.

His cousin John, who was known to history as John the Baptist, bravely worked with him. He was a few months older than Jesus, and his family told him all about the miraculous birth of Jesus.

John's own birth was miraculous because of Jesus. John lived and died because of what he knew about the birth.

The Christmas story sets the stage for living for Jesus. When children take the birth stories into their hearts, they can be transformed for life, and this is true for adults as well.

The birth story of Jesus is a vital step for following Jesus—to embrace him, support him, learn from him, protect him, and to risk everything to follow in his steps. In 2025, we must take the birth story as a life-changing, world-changing event to focus our lives for all time to come.

God, please allow the wonder of the Christmas story to change our hearts and our worlds. Help us to anchor our stories in these greater stories, and to order our lives in such a way that others come to know Jesus through our witness. Amen.

A Liturgy for

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 21 | AMY HIRSCH

REFLECT:

Sometimes God works in surprising ways! Think of a time in your life when you were really surprised and didn't see something coming. Perhaps it was an unexpected new job opportunity or just by "happenstance" meeting someone who ended up becoming your spouse. In what ways have you been surprised by God's work in your life?

Imagine you are Mary, receiving the surprising news that you would become pregnant with the son of God and give birth to the one who would reign on the throne of David forever. Gabriel's message must have come as a surprise to her while she was living in the midst of Roman occupation in the Promised Land, hundreds of years following the death of the last Davidic king, despite the promises God made to David about his eternal lineage in 2 Samuel 7. But God keeps his promises—sometimes in ways that might surprise us.

READ: Luke 1:26-38, 46-55

SERMON THEME:

Jesus Christ is the heir who will sit on the throne of King David forever.

LISTEN:

"This Is the Christ"



SCAN FOR
THIS WEEK'S
DIGITAL RESOURCES

INTENTIONAL ACTIVITY:

If you are in Birmingham, you have opportunities to participate in the Living Nativity on December 21 and 22 with shows at 6:30 and 7:30 p.m. Make plans to attend one of these shows, and as you watch the Christmas story enacted before you, slow down and make space in your heart to ponder the truth that God really came to earth in the person of Jesus. As you gaze upon the baby in the manger depicting the baby Jesus, experience the wonder and mystery of the truth that God took on flesh and came to us as a baby, keeping all of the promises he made to his people.

PRAY:

Lord, my soul magnifies you. My spirit rejoices in God my Savior.

(Spend a few moments reflecting on the character of God.)

Thank you for looking on the humble with kindness, and for showing mercy to those who fear you.

Forgive me for the pride that lurks so deeply within. Help me to see my need for you.

(Spend a few moments confessing to the Lord any areas of pride in your life.)

You are mighty and all-powerful, God. As I call out to you with the requests on my heart, help me to trust that you are good and that you are able.

(Spend a few moments lifting up your requests to God, trusting that he hears your prayers.)

I thank you for the ways I see you at work in my life, and even for the times you take me by surprise.

(Spend a few moments thanking God for how you have seen him at work in your life in recent days.)

You are faithful to your people. Thank you for remembering me, Lord.

Thank you for being a God who keeps the promises he makes, even when it seems like all hope has been lost.

Thank you for keeping your promises to Abraham and for inviting me into your family through the life, death, and resurrection of your son, Jesus.

I praise you for the promise that you are reigning, even now, Jesus. You are in control, and so I entrust to you all of the things beyond my control, believing that you care for me and that you are Lord. *(Spend a few moments lifting up to the Lord those things that are beyond your control, entrusting them to him.)*

Thank you for being my help and my hope. In your name I pray, Amen.

Perhaps no narrative of the Christmas story is as beloved as the one in Luke 2. The story of the baby in the manger, the angels' magnificent appearance in the hills over Bethlehem, and the shepherds kneeling by the manger bring a sense of the miracle of it all to believers everywhere. However, there is another important message in Luke 2, found in verses 25-35.

Simeon is only described as a "man in Jerusalem, who was righteous and devout" (Luke 2:25 NIV). We are also told that he was "waiting for the consolation of Israel," and that "the Holy Spirit was upon him" (2:25 NIV). Consolation is a word strongly associated with the concept of comfort. Israel, at the time of the birth of Christ, was deeply in need of comfort and consolation. The country was ruled by a foreign conqueror, Rome, which was known for its brutality to any who questioned its authority. In addition, the leaders of the Jewish religious governing body, the Sanhedrin, had adopted a worldly concept of leadership that was built upon the preservation of power more than the message of love conveyed by God over and over again throughout the Old Testament. Ordinary people in Israel were left powerless, bowed under the weight of both secular and religious burdens to bear. Indeed, they needed comfort and consolation.

Simeon had been promised by the Holy Spirit that he would not die until he had seen the Lord's Christ. When he saw Jesus in Mary's arms, he recognized him immediately as the one God had sent to provide salvation and hope. He took the baby in his arms and offered a prayer of praise. "Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel" (2:29-32 NIV).

God's promise has always been to bring salvation and hope to all people, no matter what their background or present circumstances may be. Simeon's story is a living example of how God always keeps his promises, even when we cannot see him working. It is unlikely that Simeon knew of the angels' message, nor was he present to bow in the straw to worship the newborn king. But he held fast to God's promise, and indeed, God kept his promise to Simeon. He keeps his promises to us, too. In today's uncertain world, when evil seems to win all too often, we must remember that God has promised life and peace to believers and that God always keeps his promises.

Holy Father, thank you for the baby in the manger, for Christ on the cross, and for the empty tomb. Help us to recognize the hope you provide for us just as Simeon did, and to rest in the assurance that you always keep your promises. In Jesus's name, Amen.

"THE WORD BECAME FLESH"

Tuesday, December 23 | John 1:1-14 | Jane Hauth

Christ
HAS DIED

When we read the words *"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God"* (John 1:1 NIV), they take us to the beginning of time. The baby in the manger was connected to the dawn of time. When we step into the stable and see the baby Jesus, we are seeing the beginning of Jesus's life as a human, but not the beginning of Christ. Christ saw the first ray of sunlight, he heard the first crashing of a wave, he felt the first drop of rain.

Colossians 1:15 (NLT): *Christ is the visible image of the invisible God. He existed before anything was created and is supreme over all creation.* The baby Jesus was born into this world, but the Word always existed. Christ didn't fashion the world out of preexisting raw material. He created everything out of nothing. All things were made through him. He is the firstborn of all creation.

1 Corinthians 8:6 (NLT): *And there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things were created, and through whom we live.* Christ did not separate himself from his creation. The Word of God entered the world with the cry of a baby. He dwelt among us while he lived in this world, and he wants to dwell in our hearts today. The beginning of our new relationship with God is made possible through Christ.

John 14:6 (ESV): *Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."*

How would you react if you saw a painter become oil on his own canvas or a potter melt into clay on his wheel? This is what happened when Christ became an embryo in the Virgin Mary: "The Word became flesh."

John 1:14 NIV: *"The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and the only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth."*

Dear Lord, thank you for your Word that has existed since creation. We are grateful that you chose to have your Word enter the world with the cry of a baby born in a manger, bringing us a new relationship with you. Thank you that when Christ became an embryo in the Virgin Mary, your Word became flesh and dwells in our hearts today. Amen.

Luke 22 describes the Last Supper when Jesus and his disciples are gathered to eat the Passover meal (a meal which commemorates the Israelites' liberation from slavery in Egypt with the sacrifice of a lamb). This symbolic event, perfectly timed by God, signified the impending sacrifice of Jesus for the sins of all humanity.

Luke 22:19-20 tells us that Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me." In the same way, after supper, he took the cup saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you" (NIV).

Not only does Jesus's birth in Bethlehem (which means "house of bread" in Hebrew) fulfill the prophecies, but it also gives foreshadowing to the Last Supper and Jesus as the "Bread of Life" (John 6:35 NIV). This Eucharist meal provides a way for us to remember his sacrifice for us and for him to remain sacramentally present with us.

That is not the only way God links the two events, however. The more I read the Bible and learn, the more I see how much God is in the details, in the foreshadowing, and in the unexpected. The Last Supper mirrors the same humility that is seen at Jesus's birth when he washes his disciples' feet, all while underscoring that this sacrificial love from God is for all people—from the diverse group at his birth to the diverse group at the table of the Last Supper.

From the birth of Jesus to the Last Supper and on to Jesus's sacrificial death that pays the debt for our sins, we are given a gift—the gift of God's overwhelming, never-ending, and perfect love and redemption. It is the most important gift you can ever receive.

This Christmas Eve, as you prepare your heart to celebrate the gift of Jesus that comes on Christmas Day with his birth, remember the stage that it sets for the Last Supper, another evening before the greatest gift ever given.

Heavenly Father God, thank you for the gift of love you have given us in Jesus. We see your love for us echoed throughout his life, from his birth to his death. We ask that you open our eyes and our hearts and help us to receive this gift. Bless us, Lord, with the knowledge of your will, a heart for you, and a heart for all people. Amen.

"CHRISTMAS IN THE GARDEN"

Thursday, December 25 | Luke 22:39-71 | Ethan McVay

Christ
HAS DIED

If you could spend Christmas Day anywhere in the world, where would you go? Who would be with you? Would you walk to the Rockefeller Center at night to see the massive tree in NYC? Would you travel to Leavenworth, Washington, to see a small town transform into a winter wonderland with over 500,000 lights? Or might you travel abroad to a Christmas market in Strasbourg, France? Today, we will visit an uncommon Christmas destination: the Garden of Gethsemane.

Unfortunately, we don't spend every Christmas at our dream destination or in the way we want. Christmas can be lonely, difficult, or somber. This Christmas, we spend time in the Garden of Gethsemane in order to remember this: Jesus has experienced the hardship of the garden on our behalf. For Jesus, the Garden of Gethsemane seems to be one of his hardest challenges and one of his most painful nights. As Jesus and his disciples walk to the garden, one disciple is betraying him. As Jesus prays so anxiously that he sweats blood, the disciples sleep. As Jesus is taken away, Peter denies him. The elders and teachers of the law, who should celebrate him as the Messiah, instead condemn him to death. Beginning in the garden, Jesus is abandoned by his disciples, his closest friends, and his people.

When you feel hardship this Christmas Day, remember that Jesus knows how you feel, he loves you, and his Spirit is with you even now. Whether you accidentally burn the turkey dinner, get upset with a family member, or grieve the absence of a loved one, Jesus identifies with you in your struggles. Remember the true joy of Christmas: Christ has come into the world. He understands you and me. He wants to be close to us and to have a relationship with us even now. The Garden of Gethsemane reminds us that Jesus empathizes with us in our pain and that through his death, he will restore us.

Revelation 21:3-4 says, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." (NIV) We all look forward to the day when Jesus, who suffers alongside us in this life, will heal us in the next. When God will again dwell among us, and we will be his people. He will then wipe away every tear, and there will be no more pain. On that day, we will not have Christmas in the Garden of Gethsemane, but we will have Christmas in a restored creation, like the Garden of Eden. So join me in celebrating this Christmas in the garden and in looking forward to the next.

Lord, we confess the ways that we are hurting to you. Immanuel, God with us, we ask that you would help us to feel your nearness this Christmas. Thank you for identifying with each of us, through every season we walk through. Help us look forward to your return and our full restoration. Amen.

Christ

HAS DIED

"JESUS'S TRIALS BEFORE PILOT AND HEROD"

Friday, December 26 | Luke 23:1-25 | Brenda Atkins

Following the night of Jesus's arrest, he was brought before the high priests for questioning, and the men holding Jesus in custody mocked him as they beat him. The chief priests consulted with the elders and scribes, and they handed Jesus over to Pilate. They accused him of misleading the nation, refusing to pay tribute to Caesar, and claiming to be king. "And Pilate asked him, 'Are you the King of the Jews?' And he answered him, 'You have said so'" (Luke 23:3 ESV). Pilate saw that Jesus was innocent, but the crowd maintained their accusations.

Then Pilate sent Jesus to King Herod. Herod wanted to see Jesus because he had heard about the miracles Jesus did, and he wanted to see for himself. He questioned Jesus, but Jesus did not answer him, fulfilling Isaiah's prophecy, "He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth" (53:7 ESV). The chief priests and scribes continued to accuse him and sent him back to Pilate (Luke 23:6-12). Pilate announced to the people that he found no guilt in Jesus after examining him, telling them that he did not deserve death. Herod also found nothing against him, but the crowd continued to demand that Jesus be crucified (Luke 23:13-16). It was customary for one prisoner to be released during the Passover. Pilate gave the crowd a choice between Jesus and the murderer, Barabbas. The chief priests persuaded the crowd to ask for Barabbas. Pilate asked them why he should crucify Jesus, since he had done no evil, but still they called out, "Let him be crucified!"

Then Pilate gave in to their demands. He had Jesus flogged. They put a crown of thorns on his head and a purple robe on him, saying, "Hail, king of the Jews," while they beat him. Then Pilate brought Jesus before the crowd again, and again told them that he found Jesus innocent. But still, the crowd cried out, "Crucify him." The Jews insisted that he must die because he claimed to be God. At this, Pilate was afraid. He questioned Jesus again, but Jesus did not answer his questions. He told Pilate that it is God who gives governors their authority, and the ones who brought him to him committed a worse sin. Pilate tried to release Jesus, but the people began to accuse him of opposing Caesar, and they kept up their ceaseless demand for Jesus' crucifixion, rejecting Jesus as their king, and claiming loyalty to Caesar. Pilate told the crowd, "I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves." And all the people answered, "His blood be on us and on our children" (Matthew 27:24-25 ESV).

Pilate asked the question that requires each of us to answer:

Pilate said to them, "Then what shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?" (Matthew 27:22 ESV)

Washing our hands will not take away our sin. Only by believing the Son of God, Jesus Christ, paid our debt by his death can we be reconciled to God. May our hearts be more humble and thankful each time we hear the crucifixion story.

Lord, we thank you for all you endured on our behalf through your death. Thank you for paying the debt of our sin on the cross. Thank you for the hope of reconciliation. Remind us of our humility and our dependence upon you. Amen.

"GOD'S PLAN REVEALED: FROM THE CRADLE
TO THE GRAVE, FROM CHRISTMAS TO EASTER"

Saturday, December 27 | Luke 23:25-56 | John Phillips

Christ

HAS DIED

Christ didn't come to live on earth without a purpose. He didn't come "slum it" with the "riffraff" like other gods. Christ's purpose was clearly foretold long before his birth. The Old Testament is full of prophetic proclamations of the birth, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Key prophecies that proclaim the birth of Christ include Isaiah 7:14, Micah 5:2, Isaiah 9:6 (thanks for that earworm, Handel!), Genesis 3:15, and 2 Samuel 7:12-13.

His ministry in Galilee was foretold in Isaiah 9:1-2. Later, Isaiah would foretell of him healing the sick and afflicted in Isaiah 35:5-6. In the book of Psalms, the writer prophesied that the Messiah would teach in parables. The prophet Zechariah in chapter 9:9 foretells Jesus's triumphal entry on a donkey, which was fulfilled in Matthew 21:1-11. Jesus's suffering and death were foretold in Isaiah 53:3, in the passage known as the suffering servant, saying he would be despised and rejected by many. Zechariah 11:12-13 even foretells that Jesus would be betrayed by Judas for 30 pieces of silver. God, in his deep love and wisdom, signaled his desire and plan to reconcile with us and end the necessity of ritualistic sacrifices.

God knows that our sin and rebellion have kept us in darkness, blinding us to his love and keeping us selfishly focused on our own needs and desires instead of loving and serving others as he commanded. John 1:4-5 says, "In [Jesus] was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it" (ESV). He shines a light on our sin and the darkness of its curse. With his death on the cross, the Light of the World dispelled the darkness of sin just as the light of the angels shone on the shepherds on that first Christmas, announcing the arrival of the promised Savior who came to take away the sins of the world.

The good news of the gospel is that it is for everyone. Luke's gospel emphasizes that Jesus came for the marginalized, sinful, outcast, and outsider, starting with the shepherds in Luke 2 and culminating with the criminal and centurion in today's reading. We are charged, as Christians, to go and make disciples of all nations in Matthew 28:19-20. In Acts 1:8, Jesus told his followers that they would be his witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and Samaria, and to the end of the earth. We are commanded to bring the good news of Christmas and Easter to people worldwide. Everyone we meet needs to see Christ's love for them in our words and deeds.

God, thank you for being the God of Prophecy, of Christmas and Easter, the Alpha and Omega. Thank you for being the Light of the World that dispels the darkness of sin. Forgive us of our sins; bring us into full fellowship with you. Help us to see others as you see them, to show your love to them, and to be a witness of your love, grace, and mercy to the whole world. We pray these things in Jesus's holy name. Amen!

A Liturgy for

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 28 | AMY HIRSCH

REFLECT:

At Christmas, we often give and receive gifts. These presents celebrate the merriment of the season, express our love, and serve as small tokens of the greatest gift that has been given to us through Christ. Spend some time reflecting on a gift you have either received or given someone. What made that gift so meaningful?

READ: Galatians 3:23-4:7

SERMON THEME: In the fullness of time, God sent forth Jesus Christ to be our perfect Redeemer that we might become sons of God

LISTEN:

“Hark! the Herald Angels Sing”

INTENTIONAL ACTIVITY:

We recently hosted a Foster Parents’ Night Out in partnership with the Alabama Baptist Children’s Home. Today’s passage reminds us that fostering and adoption are pictures of God’s steadfast love for us in Jesus. Consider partnering with Alabama Baptist Children’s Home as a prayer partner and praying alongside them for the children in their care, that they might know they have been loved by God and are called his children, and that the Lord might bring healing and hope into their lives.

PRAY:

Lord, in this season of Christmas, I celebrate the truth that you came to be with us and for us. At the right time, you were born of a woman, under the law, to redeem me, that I might be adopted into your family.

I praise you, because you are perfect in all of your ways. At just the right time, you sent your Son. I worship you because I see your sovereign hand at work through the history of the world to bring redemption through Jesus.

I acknowledge that you are the One who is in control of the cosmos, and that you are also the One who cares about the inner workings of my heart. You took on flesh. You know what it is like to be human. You empathize with me. I can draw near to you with confidence knowing that you care for me. *(Bring your needs to Jesus, the Great High Priest.)*

And you were born under the law, Lord, to redeem me. I confess the ways I break your law in thought, word, and deed. I confess the ways I sin and fall short of your glory. *(Spend a few moments in confession.)*

But you came and lived a perfect life, so that I might receive your righteous record and be called a child of God, adopted into your forever family, not by any merit of my own but because of your grace and mercy.

Thank you for sending your Spirit to live within me. Help me to see you as “Abba, Father” and to draw near to you, to be sensitive to the ways your Spirit is at work in my heart, and to live into this identity I have as your child.



SCAN FOR THIS WEEK'S
DIGITAL RESOURCES

THE
Promise
OF THE
Resurrection

I love Easter Sunday, when our congregation boldly declares, “Christ is risen indeed!” and we turn to share this good news with each other. This declaration is more than just a statement; it is a truth that holds a promise for us, because our resurrection hope is dependent upon Christ’s resurrection. As we continue through the season of Christmas and enter into Epiphany, we reflect on Christ’s resurrection and the implications of his resurrection: what difference does it make for us that he was raised to life? In the church calendar, Epiphany, which takes place on January 6, is the day we remember how the Gentile magi were drawn to the baby Jesus, the Light of the World. Just as the magi came to worship the baby Jesus, the disciples are called to proclaim that Christ is the light of the world to the nations—and we have this same missional calling as followers of Jesus. We end this season with a commissioning to “go and tell” the good news of Christ’s birth, death, resurrection, and anticipated return.

CHRIST IS RISEN

What is the best news that you have ever received? I have thought a lot about it—maybe when Larry said, “I love you.” Or, when I heard the good news of Jesus’s offer for salvation and went forward to ask Jesus to be my Savior, I was at the Billy Graham crusade. The choir started singing “Just As I Am,” and Dr. Graham said, “If you came in a bus, they will wait.” You see, our church had rented city buses to take our church family to the crusade. He said, “Come now and make the decision to follow Jesus. Don’t wait.” And there on the field at Legion Field, I trusted Jesus as my Savior. Trusting Jesus is the best decision that I have made. There are so many times that I had good news that it is hard to pick ONE! But, without a doubt, the women at the tomb heard some of the best news anyone has ever received when the angel said, “Don’t be alarmed, you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen!” (Mark 16:6 NIV).

Can you imagine the immense sadness that Jesus’s family and friends felt when he died on the cross? Family that grew up with Jesus. Friends and disciples who knew he did not sin. They saw the miracles. Jesus showed compassion to people that most would forget or pass by. Jesus was fully God and fully man. And Jesus, our Savior, tried to prepare his friends that he was going to die and return three days later, but they did not truly understand. Then, that morning at the tomb, they realized that Jesus was alive. He fulfilled prophecy. He fulfilled his promises. He is our living Savior.

As I think about this passage, I want to remember several things:

1. We serve a risen Savior, a Savior who loves us and a Savior who sacrificed his life so that we may live.
2. We must tell the good news. The women went to tell the disciples. Matthew 28:19-20 tells us to “therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to observe everything that I have commanded you” (NIV). Go means as you are going. It is a command. Everything that we say and do should point people to Jesus.
3. “I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:20 NIV). God never leaves us. As we wait for the day when we see him in heaven, we can know that we are never alone.

Father, thank you for Jesus and his willingness to die on the cross for my sins. Thank you that we serve a risen Savior. Help us to be good witnesses and point others to you. Amen.

"RECOGNIZING JESUS IN THE MUNDANE"

Tuesday, December 30 | Luke 24:13-35 | Chip Wann

Christ

IS RISEN

In today's Scripture reading, two disciples are walking on the road to Emmaus, a village about seven miles from Jerusalem. These disciples are Cleopas and an unnamed disciple. They are deep in conversation discussing the events of the last three days—Jesus's crucifixion and the reports of his resurrection. They are confused and filled with sorrow as they try to make sense of what has occurred.

As they walk, a stranger joins them—they did not recognize that this stranger was actually Jesus himself, as they were kept from recognizing him. Jesus engages them in conversation, asking what is troubling them. The disciples pour out their hearts, sharing their confusion and disappointment about the events over the last three days. As they reach Emmaus, the disciples invite the stranger to stay with them since it is getting late. They sit down to eat together and "as he sat at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them" (Luke 24:30 NKJV). It was then that the disciples' eyes were opened and they knew the stranger was actually Jesus. Immediately, the two disciples returned to Jerusalem and found the eleven and those who were with them to tell them that "the Lord is risen indeed" (Luke 24:34 NKJV).

Think of all the things each of us has encountered since Christmas Day (five days ago) or what has occurred over just the last three days—potentially looking for receipts, gift exchanges, visiting with family in town or possibly out of town, children out of school, trying to get back to "normal" or a routine, etc. It can be overwhelming, to say the least; however, not as overwhelming as the feelings the two disciples had on the road to Emmaus, as their last three days were filled with confusion, sorrow, and disappointment, as things had not transpired as they and many others had hoped.

If we can quiet our mind and our heart and reflect on our own last three days...our own road to Emmaus...did we recognize the presence of Jesus in ordinary, everyday moments? Did we recognize Jesus in small gestures of kindness from others?

The road to Emmaus speaks to the significance of recognizing the presence of Jesus in the mundane and routine aspects of our daily lives. It emphasizes the transformative power that can be found in recognizing him in the ordinary events of our lives, leading us to a deeper relationship with Jesus. "The Lord is risen indeed" (Luke 24:34 NKJV), and he is always walking with us, whether we recognize his presence or not.

Dear Lord, quiet our hearts and our minds and draw us nearer to you. Help us to see you in the ordinary events of our lives. Give us the confidence to know that, regardless of our circumstances, you are always walking with us. Amen.

How many times have we as humans struggled with believing something? Perhaps it is a post on social media that seems too good to be true. Or a news article that seems void of facts or unexpected. Sometimes we may catch ourselves saying, "I'll believe it when I see it." As humans, it can be hard for us to trust what others say. In Luke 24, Jesus appears to the disciples after the resurrection, but they are too frightened and surprised to believe that it is him.

In John 20, Jesus appears to the disciples, except Thomas. He later appears to Thomas, who had not believed that the disciples had actually seen Jesus and previously stated, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it" (John 20:25 NIV). But when Thomas sees Jesus, he believes. Jesus then says to him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed" (John 20:29 NIV).

The Lord is patient with us. He gives us multiple opportunities to come to believe and meets us in our shortcomings. In Luke 24, he reminds the disciples of the many prophecies and the fulfillment of God's plan. He then "opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures" (Luke 24:45 NIV). God is merciful and compassionate towards us, even as we struggle to comprehend what he is teaching us. His Holy Spirit is present in our lives, helping us understand and bring light to those around us.

As Christians, we are all called to fully believe in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. How beautiful that we, not because of our own works, but through our faith, can be wiped clean of our sins. This passage serves as a reminder of our human faults throughout history. But it also displays the redeeming love that God showers on his people.

Dear Lord, we thank you for your Word and the truths that are revealed in it. Thank you for how you meet each of us with patience in our times of doubt and fear. Help us to have open hearts to hear your Word and show others the love you have shown to us. Thank you for the cross and for Jesus. In his name we pray, Amen.

"THE PROMISE IN BAPTISM"

Thursday, January 1 | Romans 6:1-14 | Joel Burks

Christ

IS RISEN

I was 12 years old when I was baptized at a little church in Eva, Alabama. At that age, I knew baptism was something Christians did, and I wanted people to see that I was different. I had seen others be baptized, and I wanted to follow Jesus. But if I'm honest, I didn't really understand the depth of what was happening that day. It felt more like a marker of who I wanted to be than a picture of what Christ had already done for me.

Now, years later, every time I watch someone else get baptized on a Sunday morning, I think back to my own. And the words Dr. Splawn always says ring in my ears: *"Buried with Christ in baptism, raised to walk in newness of life."* That line reminds me of what Romans 6 is really talking about. Baptism isn't just a public statement; it's a picture of what Jesus has accomplished for us in his life, death, and resurrection.

Paul says that just like Jesus was buried, our old selves were buried with him. And just like Jesus was raised from the dead, we are raised to live a new life. That means my baptism wasn't just about me deciding to follow Jesus—it was about me being united with him. My baptism wasn't a finish line; it was the start of a lifelong journey.

But, if I'm honest, walking in that newness of life isn't always easy. I still mess up. I still get upset with myself when I realize I'm not living the way I want to live. Sometimes I wonder, "Why can't I be totally free of this sin?" That's when Scripture comes in. Romans 6 doesn't promise that we'll be perfect. What it promises is freedom. We're not slaves to sin anymore. It doesn't control us, and it doesn't define us.

That's what the gospel is about: Jesus lived the life we couldn't, he died the death we deserved, and he rose again so that sin would no longer have the final word. Because of him, I don't have to live under sin's power anymore. Instead, I get to live under the grace and freedom of God.

So, when I fall short, I don't have to beat myself up or wonder if I still belong to him. My baptism reminds me of who I am in Christ. I was buried with him. I was raised with him. And now I get to live for him, not as a slave but as someone set free.

Jesus, thank you for the freedom you give. Thank you that sin no longer owns us, because you've already defeated it. Help me to walk in the new life you've given me today. Amen.

I live in a neighborhood where life is lived through bows. To some, that might sound strange—but here, we tie bows to the mailboxes, the trees, and the porch rails outside our homes to speak what words sometimes can't. We use bows to celebrate new life—pink for girls, blue for boys. We tie bows to mark milestones—my oldest daughter proudly displayed one marking her last year of elementary school this year. We use bows to raise awareness, to show solidarity, to signal joy, and sometimes to grieve.

I hung a bow this summer—a light blue one—for a little girl who reminded me far too much of my youngest daughter. A life lost before it had the chance to truly begin. That same bow was for all the children lost to a flood at a summer camp, and for the neighbors whose hearts were breaking. Since moving here seven years ago, I've seen bows of every kind: triumphant bows, grieving bows, hopeful and honoring bows. If you drive down our streets, you can almost feel the heartbeat of the neighborhood in those ribbons.

The truth is, I don't always know what each bow means. Sometimes I have to look them up or ask a friend. But here's a secret: it doesn't really matter. Because whenever my daughters and I see a bow, we say a prayer. No matter the color. We ask God to be present in that home, to meet the family where they are, and to bless whatever lies heavy or joyful on their hearts.

As I sat with Romans 8, I couldn't stop thinking about the bows. This chapter speaks of a God who doesn't just dwell above or beyond us, but within us. A God who breathes life into weary lungs, hope into hurting hearts, and resurrection power into our every day. The Spirit of the living God—the same one who raised Jesus from the dead—dwells in our ordinary, mortal lives. He sees every bow. Every moment. Every house. Every need. And he doesn't just observe—he is there with us. He gives life.

Just as the bows signal the heartbeat of our neighborhood, the Spirit of God is always at work in our hearts—moving quietly but powerfully. And just as the world may not always understand the meaning of every bow, they may not understand every moment we walk through in our lives, but they see something different about us. And just as they see our bows outside, they see the Spirit dwelling within us. They see love and compassion. They see Jesus—because he lives in us—shining through us. And while the colors of the bows may change with the seasons of life, our hope remains steady. Because our hope isn't tied to a circumstance or a ribbon on our mailbox. Our hope is secured in the Spirit who brings life—real, everlasting life.

Holy Spirit, thank you for dwelling within me. When I feel weak, you are strong. When the world feels uncertain, you remind me that my hope is secure. Help me to be aware of your presence and sensitive to the needs around me. Use me as a vessel of prayer, compassion, and grace. May the life you give shine through me—in every season, through every color, and in every neighborhood. Amen.

"REST IN CHRIST"

Saturday, January 3 | Romans 8:31-39 | Lindsay Brown

Christ

IS RISEN

As a firstborn, people-pleasing perfectionist, it was natural for me to embrace a performance-based identity. I learned early on that obedience, achievements, and being nice brought me love and acceptance, while failure, failing to meet others' expectations, and disagreeing with others brought me shame and the sting of others' disappointment and rejection. Making all A's, winning awards in school and sports, thriving as a leader at church, and being liked by everyone helped silence the internal beliefs that I was not good enough, a burden, and a disappointment, along with the fear that I was one moment away from failure. When faced with threats to my success, whether a test at school, a relational conflict, or a painful GI condition, I refused to be defeated, possessing a drive that made me unstoppable until I accomplished my goal.

Since middle school, I have had my life mapped out—enjoy college; move to a new city with a successful career, active church life, and thriving social life; live independently for a few years, then enjoy marriage and a family. I believed that God and I were in accord that my life would play out this way. My plans fell apart as I walked through a less-than-ideal college experience and unforeseen health issues. As I failed to achieve the plans I had for my life, my performance-based identity told me that God did not love me, God was indifferent to me, and God delighted in others, but he could not delight in me. I began comparing my life and all that it lacked to those around me and, in doing so, started collecting evidence that God loved others more than me. I was doing all the "right" things, so shouldn't I receive the same gifts he had bestowed upon others?

The truth of Romans 8:31-39 is that God loves me so much that he delivered his Son over to condemnation, darkness, and death. While I was at my worst, Christ loved me to the fullest! Christ paid the penalty for my sins so that no one and nothing can condemn me! Every time I fail, don't measure up, or choose my sin over his Spirit, Jesus intercedes on my behalf and declares, "For that I paid in full with my death."

This passage contradicts the lies underlying my performance-based identity. It teaches me that I am a conqueror, not because my dreams came true, but because through my unmet expectations, tribulations, and inability to live out of my own strength, I have experienced Christ more fully and intimately. It instructs me to lay down my plans, striving, comparisons, and negative core beliefs, and to rest in Christ. It calls my shattered dreams, my inability to achieve my plans, and my daily struggles with a heart whose tendency is to put me first to rest in a love that cannot be thwarted, in a salvation that comes through faith alone, and in a Savior who is sovereign over all: life, death, angels, demons, time, space, unmet expectations, trials, tribulations, or anything in the universe.

Lord, I repent of my self-righteousness and attempts to be good enough for you. Please minister to the parts of me that are hurting and broken! Thank you for choosing me, interceding for me, and loving me. Thank you for your perfect, immeasurable, limitless love! May I rest in your love today. Amen.

A Liturgy for

SUNDAY, JANUARY 4 | AMY HIRSCH

REFLECT: What is your favorite way to ring in the New Year? What particularly memorable New Year's celebrations have you experienced?

READ: Ephesians 1:3-14

SERMON THEME:

In the fullness of time, God made known to us the mystery of his will in Jesus Christ.

LISTEN: "All Glory Be to Christ"

INTENTIONAL ACTIVITY:

Sometimes we tend to think that Christmas is over after December 25. However, in the Church calendar, 12 days of feasting follow, leading up to Epiphany on January 6, when we remember the wise men seeking Jesus and the truth that Jesus is the light of the world. Spend some time at night looking up at the stars and reflecting on the truth that Christ is the light of the world, and that the God who spoke the stars into being knows our name, put on flesh, and knows what it is like to be us. As you reflect on this last year and look ahead to 2026, how will you live in such a way that gives all glory to Christ?



SCAN FOR THIS WEEK'S
DIGITAL RESOURCES

PRAY:

Lord, I thank you for every blessing we receive in Christ:

For the blessing of being chosen as your child;

For the blessing of being holy and blameless in your sight because of what Christ has done for me;

For the blessing that my sin is forgiven and that I have been redeemed;

For the blessing of reconciliation, that you are uniting all things in heaven and on earth to yourself through the work of Jesus;

For the blessing of an inheritance that I will receive because of my hope in Christ;

For the blessing of the Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of that inheritance and who lives in me;

For the blessing of abundant and eternal life I receive through faith in Jesus.

(Spend some time in prayer offering thanks to God for other blessings in your life: your church, your community, your job, your family ...)

I praise you, God, trusting that your plan is perfect.

What was once a mystery has been made known to me: that your will for me is to know and follow Jesus all of my days, to cling to him and to trust in him, to confess your glory with every breath I breathe.

In your name I pray, Amen.

"EYES TO SEE HOPE"

Monday, January 5 | Ephesians 1:15-23 | Matt Wilson

Christ
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In this letter to the church in Ephesus, Paul pauses to pray that the eyes of their hearts would be enlightened. He wants them to understand the hope to which they have been called, the riches of God's inheritance in his people, and the immeasurable greatness of his power toward those who believe.

This passage calls us to slow down and see beyond our present circumstances. Paul isn't offering motivational words or vague encouragement. He's pointing to something real and rooted in history: "the working of [God's] great might that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand" (Ephesians 1:20 NIV). The resurrection is the foundation of our future. Christ has died, Christ is risen, and Christ will come again. This is the hope we live in and the power we live by.

Paul's prayer reminds us that our hope isn't wishful thinking. It's anchored in a risen and reigning Christ. Jesus is not simply a figure in our memories. He is "far above all rule and authority and power and dominion" (1:21 NIV).

During Advent, we wait. We remember Christ's first coming, and we long for his return. But we do not wait as those in the dark. We wait with eyes open, enlightened by the Spirit, trusting in the same power that raised Christ from the grave. That power is at work in all of us, even when we can't feel it or see it.

So, as we move through this season of anticipation, Paul's prayer can become our own: "Lord, open the eyes of my heart. Help me to see the hope I've been called to, the riches of being yours, and the power that is already at work in my life because Christ is alive."

May this Advent awaken us, not just with the story of Christ's birth, but to the full gospel that Paul clung to and proclaimed: Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.

Father, open the eyes of our hearts. Teach us to see the hope we have in Christ. Show us not just for tomorrow, but for today. Help us trust the power of the resurrection and live in anticipation of Christ's return. Amen.

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"THE EPIPHANY: JESUS AS THE FIRSTBORN OF THE DEAD"

Tuesday, January 6 | Colossians 1:15-23 | Julia Brasher

Today is Epiphany—the day commemorating the magi’s journey to find the new king, guided by a star. A miraculous journey that lays the foundation for our Savior, as he takes on human flesh. I wonder what the magi were thinking throughout their journey, and I wonder if they had some understanding of the miracle before them. They were meeting Mary and Joseph’s firstborn child, but they were also meeting “the firstborn over all creation” (Colossians 1:15 NIV). The star guided them to Jesus—“all things were created by him and for him” (Colossians 1:16 NIV). Would the magi understand in their lifetime that the child they visit “is before all things, and in him all things hold together” (Colossians 1:17 NIV)?

For believers today, verses 15-19 contain one of the most fundamental, powerful passages we can read and use to guide our faith. Jesus Christ is God, and he has the power of God, even before creation. This truth, while hard to comprehend, is on full display in every detail of Christ’s birth to his crucifixion. We can believe “he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead” (Colossians 1:18 NIV) because his death and resurrection are the first of all believers’ bodily resurrections. Matthew 28:6 records the announcement from the angel to Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, “He is not here; he has risen, just as he said” (NIV).

We say it each Sunday, “We believe in... the resurrection of the body,” but how do you explain this truth to nonbelievers or even reconcile it in your own mind? I often find myself praying words from Mark 9. When Jesus heals a boy, the boy’s father says to Jesus, “I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!” I can pray, asking for wisdom, just as James writes, “If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault” (James 1:5 NIV), and I can believe the biblical truth from James 4:8, “Come near to God and he will come near to you” (NIV).

As I begin the new year and make resolutions and promises to improve myself in my own strength, I don’t want to forget what Jesus has already done. “He has reconciled you by Christ’s physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation” (Colossians 1:22 NIV). So perhaps there isn’t a resolution I need to make this year, but rather accept Paul’s instructions: “Continue in your faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel” (1:23 NIV). It’s a clear task we follow, as we hold on to the promise of growing closer to him.

Lord, I rejoice in the truth that you hold all things together! You are the Creator of the cosmos and you are also the firstborn from the dead. You have reconciled me to God through your death on the cross. Because of you, I have resurrection hope. Help me to press on in my faith, firmly rooted in the gospel, as I await the day when my faith is made sight. In your name I pray, Amen.

"EMPTY PROMISES"

Wednesday, January 7 | 1 Corinthians 15:1-11 | Sarah Rich

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Several years ago, our parents tried a different method for the family Easter egg hunt. Tired of stuffing plastic eggs, they hid empty ones and assumed grandkids would be just as happy exchanging them for candy after the hunt. Unfortunately, it didn't go over well. Excited faces turned to consternation and then irritation when they discovered that every egg was empty. All of their hard work was for naught! They felt duped, despite the candy they ultimately received. We all know that feeling. As a kid, did you ever dig for the prize in the cereal box, only to discover that it wasn't worth the effort? Did you save up for the new toy featured in commercials, then realize it was a waste of money? Did you order the mouthwatering mega burger, but receive a disappointing disc of mystery meat with limp lettuce? Understandably, our childhood eagerness becomes adult skepticism. No one likes empty promises.

Paul's generation was no less skeptical. Greek philosophers taught that the physical world was inherently and irrevocably flawed, and all matter was fundamentally evil. Therefore, only souls could achieve immortality. Jewish Sadducees denied all forms of life after death. Mainstream Jewish teachers believed that righteous souls return to God, but bodily resurrection would only occur as a corporate event known as the "last days," the "Day of the Lord." As disparate as these cultures were, they agreed that Christian claims about Jesus were sheer lunacy. It was into this utter aversion that Paul spoke, because some Corinthian Christians wanted to water down Christ's resurrection to reconcile with cultural norms. Paul urged them to hold fast to the gospel. He reminded them that Jesus's bodily resurrection is verifiably historical, remains central to the faith, and changes those who believe.

Though we are far removed from Paul's time, we, too, must stake our faith on Easter truths. Tim Keller wrote, "If Jesus rose from the dead, then you have to accept all that he said; if he didn't rise from the dead, then why worry about any of what he said?"¹⁰ The resurrection is the ultimate proof that Jesus *is* who he claimed to be and *did* what he claimed to do. God, in his compassion, knew we would need hard evidence. Our risen Lord showed himself to hundreds. He ate. He spoke. He was touched. Early Christians were so convinced of the reality of Jesus that they were willing to lose their jobs, their standing, and even their lives. They stared down the reality of this ugly world and glimpsed the beauty of the next. We, too, can have that same assurance. As the song goes, "Because he lives, I can face tomorrow... Life is worth the living, just because he lives!"¹¹ God doesn't make empty promises.

Almighty God, thank you for understanding my need for credibility in a deceitful world. Help me to love you with my heart and my head. When I am tempted to water down your truth, help me stand firm. When my faith falters, remind me again that you keep your promises. Christ is risen indeed! Hallelujah! Amen.

¹⁰ Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (Penguin, 2009), 210.

¹¹ Gloria and Bill Gaither, "Because He Lives," recorded 1971.

Jesus, the son of the living God, died for me and rose again. He conquered death. I really believe this by the grace afforded to me through Christ. But is this truth transforming my life, my hopes, and my eternal future?

Are my prayers mostly devoted to my daily comforts in *this life*?

Are my dreams about accomplishments I can achieve *on earth* and be recognized for?

Are my financial goals to have more, spend more, and feel more rewarded *here*?

When we focus on earthly things, we can never consume enough or strive hard enough to feel satisfied. When we become Christians, we accept Christ's death and resurrection truth into our life. This is a *forever* journey of experiencing God's love for us and wanting more and more of him for all of eternity. At the moment of salvation, our sins were buried. They were covered. Our earthly pursuits become second priority. Praise God! But it gets even better—Christ immediately raises our spiritual souls to walk in a newness of life. This is the abundant life Jesus proclaims in John 10:10. We are citizens in a spiritual kingdom with individual ordained missions from God. Therefore, my hope in Christ cannot be focused on this earthly life alone. What a waste of energy and lack of satisfaction that brings!

We have work to do today for the kingdom of God. Let's ask, seek, and knock on God to show us how we can participate in his kingdom today. We each have divine appointments set by the Lord for this day, this month, and this year. May we look for the God "winks"—the whispers and the interactions with the spiritual realm that our hearts were made for. Your life was never intended to be pitied—it is to be glorified by the power of Christ!

Lord, since we have been raised with Christ, set our hearts on things above today where Christ is seated (Colossians 3:1-4). Set our minds on things above and not on earthly things. Thank you for dying for me and protecting my life with the blood of Christ. We look forward to Christ's return one day when we get to physically be where you are—in glory. Until then, Lord, we live with open hearts and hands to do your will in your kingdom. Amen.

"INEXPRESSIBLE AND GLORIOUS JOY"

Friday, January 9 | 1 Peter 1:1-9 | William Culpepper

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In 1 Peter, Peter writes to "... God's elect, exiles scattered throughout the provinces of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia" (1 Peter 1:1 NIV). Far from home and facing extreme persecution, these early believers must have been susceptible to great doubt and fear. The same Peter who sank beneath the waves in doubt and denied Jesus three times offers extraordinary encouragement.

Peter's message is simple. First, through faith in Christ and belief in the resurrection, we receive the gift of salvation. Second, having received that gift, we can face any hardships this world has to throw at us.

In 1 Peter 1:3, Peter goes straight to the heart of the matter—the living hope we have because of Christ's resurrection from the dead. The resurrection changes everything, offering us a new birth. As Spurgeon said, "Our first birth brought us into sin and sorrow, but our second birth brings us into purity and joy. We were born to die; now are we born never to die."¹² Everything on this earth will perish. Gold and riches will mean nothing at the end of our lives. But the gift of salvation endures forever, and it is far greater than anything we can experience on earth.

Because of our salvation, Peter explains that all believers are uniquely positioned to face the fleeting trials of this world, no matter how difficult. And it is not just that we can face hard times and get by. We should approach every circumstance with a posture of praise, rejoicing even in the midst of these temporary trials. If we approach difficult situations with joy, knowing our ultimate reward is in heaven, we will model the love of Jesus to a watching world, and our faith will grow deeper. Peter's language in verses 8-9 is incredibly powerful: "you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls" (1 Peter 1:8-9 NIV). Imagine being filled with "inexpressible and glorious joy!" Don't we all want that? It is an amazing gift that the Lord has given us through salvation. So, no matter what you are facing today, anchor back to the inexpressible and glorious joy that awaits us in heaven and be bold in modeling the love of Jesus in all circumstances.

Heavenly Father, thank you for the gift of salvation that we could never earn or deserve on our own merit. Help us to comprehend your majesty, your love, your grace. May the promise of salvation fill us with inexpressible and glorious joy. And may this joy give us strength every day and overflow from our lives in all circumstances. Amen.

¹² Charles Spurgeon, "Spurgeon's Verse Expositions of the Bible: 1 Peter 1," Truth According to Scripture. Mesa Biblical Church, 2019. <https://www.truthaccordingtoscripture.com/commentaries/spe/1-peter-1.php>

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"SHARE THE LOVE"

Saturday, January 10 | Acts 1:1-11 | Wayne Splawn

Gift giving is a significant part of our Christmas celebrations. There can surely be aspects of gift giving that reflect our inordinate love of material things and our consumerist culture. But, at their best, gifts reflect our love for other people. From a poinsettia given to a homebound family or church member to a new bike given to a child, we often give gifts to communicate our love for others.

Love is surely the motivation behind the greatest gift we celebrate during the Christmas season. In one of the most foundational passages in all of the Bible, John 3:16, we learn that God gave his Son to be our Savior because he so loved the world. The Lord saw us in our sin and distress and sent us the gift of Jesus as an expression of his great love for us. As we reflect on the love God has shown us in Jesus, our hearts ought to be moved with an ever-deepening love for God that causes us to pursue greater obedience to God's call on our lives.

In Acts 1:1-11, the disciples have encountered the risen Jesus and are about to watch him ascend into heaven. But, before he goes, he gives them an important command. He calls them to go into all the world to be his witnesses. In language that echoes the Great Commission in Matthew 28, Jesus tells the disciples to bear witness to him in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and even to the ends of the earth. They are to go and tell others of the great love God has given them in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

You and I share the same call on our lives today. As you reflect on the love God has shown you in Jesus Christ, ask the Holy Spirit to give you a deeper love for him and for other people that would move you to obediently go and tell others about the love of God in Jesus Christ. The material gifts we give others will come and go, and few will be remembered very long. But the gift of God's love in Jesus Christ is one that will truly transform lives for eternity. As you head into this new year, faithfully share the love of God with others by telling them of the great gift of salvation God has made possible through faith in Jesus Christ.

Father, we thank you for the great love you have shown us in the gift of your Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ. Holy Spirit, create in us a deeper love for you in response to all you have given us in Jesus and give us a greater love for others. Give us courage and boldness to share your love with those around us by telling them of the salvation available to them through faith in Jesus. We pray this prayer in Jesus's holy name, Amen.