Advent Devotional Guide 2026

Otterbein United Methodist Church



Advent Mission Focus:
Charterhouse School in Edinburg, VA

Charterhouse School in Edinburg, VA, is sponsored by United Methodist Family Services and is a place for students with special needs to get out of their comfort zones and start to get out into the world. They serve students ages 6 – 22 and are able to serve the needs of Autism, neurological differences, emotional, learning, intellectual, and development disabilities, as well other health impairments. If you would like to make a donation to the school, please make your check payable to Otterbein United Methodist Church and designate "UMFS – Charterhouse School" in the memo line.

Sunday, November 29
Psalm 80:1–7, 17–19

There are times in life when we feel distant from God. We may face personal struggles, family difficulties, or uncertainty about the future. During these seasons, Psalm 80 reminds us to turn to God and seek His restoring grace.

The psalmist calls upon God as the Shepherd of Israel, the One who watches over His people and guides them. Although the people are suffering, they continue to cry out for His help. Their prayer is repeated throughout the passage: "*Restore us, O Lord God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved.*"

This prayer is just as meaningful today during this Advent season. We all need God to renew our hearts, strengthen our faith, and guide us when life becomes difficult. Restoration may not mean that our circumstances immediately change, but that God gives us renewed hope and the strength to move forward.

The psalmist also promises continued faithfulness to God. We, too, are called to trust Him and share His love with others through kindness, forgiveness, and service.

Whatever challenges we face, we can remember that God remains our Shepherd. May we seek His presence daily, trusting Him to restore our hope and deepen our faith.

Prayer*: Heavenly Father, our Shepherd and Savior, restore our hearts and renew our faith. When we are discouraged, give us hope; when we are weak, give us strength. Let Your light shine upon us, guide our steps, and help us share Your love with others. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

Bill Pollard

Monday, November 30
Micah 4:1-5

Micah 4:1-5 starts with the phrase "*In the last days*" and goes on to tell us what Christians have to look forward to when, as promised by God, Christ returns. Paraphrasing it says many nations will want to learn about our God and will accept him as their own, there will be no more wars, people will live in peace and prosperity. Verse 4 says, "e*very man will sit under his own vine and under his own fig tree and no one will make him afraid.*" This suggests that when true justice and peace are established, the result is not just the absence of war, but the presence of personal security and domestic tranquility for every individual.

Matthew 24:36 states only God knows when the world will end. Until that time, how, as Christians, are we supposed to react to unsettling events in our world? We need to remind ourselves constantly of two things God has promised. One, there will be a second coming and two, the second coming will bring, to those who have become followers of Christ, a place of unbelievable beauty and peace. Until that time, we must strive to follow Christ's teachings of taking care of widows, orphans, and the poor. This means not to let differences get in the way to accomplishing the work, but work together to accomplish Christ's golden rule to "Love your neighbor as yourself."

Vicki Gaines

Tuesday, December 1
Micah 4:6-13

As we are starting to hear Christmas carols, thinking of gifts for our loved ones, baking cookies, and making cheerful core memories with our children…
let me just stop you right there with these verses in Micah. In reading this chapter, we see a lot of unpleasant words: anguish, perished, writhe, cry, defiled, crush, destruction. Quite the opposite of those joyful things, right? At first read, this and many of the other verses focused on during this season are looking at dark times, but what we need to see is the surrounding, deeper message. We are reminded why we need Light in our lives. Why we need a Savior. And if you are reading this message and you are already in a darker place, let this be your reminder that God does not just cater to those who are perfectly put-together, but he gathers up the "lame" or the "limping and bruised."

This season is about waiting and anticipating and serves as a reminder that we are a people in need of a Savior. Jesus arrives during a messy time to people who had been waiting so long and so desperately that they were writhing and crying out like a woman in labor. In the midst of our most desperate times we need this season to remind us that a Savior is indeed coming. So if you are one who feels like the Christmas season lifts a heavy and dark burden that you carry throughout the rest of the year, hold onto that and the hope and promise that the birth of our Savior brings. And if Christmas brings reminders of things lost and you still carry anxieties and grief, keep waiting and remember that our Savior will rescue and redeem you.

Erin Wenger

Wednesday, December 2
Micah 5:1-5a

The Lord says, "Bethlehem Ephrathah, you are one of the smallest towns in Judah, but out of you I will bring a ruler for Israel, whose family line goes back to ancient times."
Micah 5:2 (*Good News Version*)

Over the centuries, everyone with religious understanding knew that this text in Micah proclaimed that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. So, it was the logical quote for the priests to give to King Herod when the Magi showed up in Jerusalem.

But quoting Micah to King Herod in this context presents a couple ironic contrasts. First, in Micah's time, it was the idol-worshiping Assyrians that came from the East to invade and conquer the people of Israel. In Matthew's day, the Magi came from the East to locate and worship the ruler who had come to liberate Israel from her enslavement to sin. Second, Israel's learned teachers should have been the first to seek and worship the prophesied Deliverer. But instead it was the learned, yet unbelieving (at least until they came to see Jesus), Magi who traveled from afar and even defied a king.

In today's world, who will be the unexpected people to respond to God's call??

Ever wonder why here? Why Bethlehem of all places?

The prophet Micah certainly believed that this place was special. This WAS where King David was from. His father Jesse was a Bethlehemite because he was of the line of Boaz and Ruth who lived in Bethlehem.

Bethlehem, which, in Hebrew is translated as "House of Bread," becomes the birthplace of God's Son. No coincidence that Jesus would call himself the "bread of life" (John 6:35) The spiritual necessity of life, God's Word, was now here, in flesh and bone. What the world so desperately needed and longed for, was given!

You know…God commands US to be a part of that process. That's what Advent should be about: telling people about the gift of Jesus. Your sphere of influence includes your family, your friends, your workplace, your neighborhood, your church… the list goes on.

And though you may think you are "too little" to make an impact, let Bethlehem remind you how small towns make big impacts.

Are you offering the "bread of the life" to the people around you?

The promise of Micah is that God will be faithful and will appear in surprising ways. During this Advent season, Micah invites us to look for God's presence where we least expect it, and to be attuned to the voices of the small, the powerless, and the vulnerable.

Are you prepared to be surprised?
Are you prepared to welcome the Holy One into your midst?

Prayer: *Heavenly Father, help us to be on the lookout for ways to share God's love in unexpected places. May we be surprised as God works in mysterious ways. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

Linda Conrad

Thursday, December 3
I Thessalonians 1:2-10

In his letter to the church at Thessalonica, Paul commends the believers for their steadfast faith which resulted in their acts of faithfulness and love. He reminds them that they are chosen and beloved by God and urges them to continue to hold fast to their faith and hope in the love and grace of Jesus Christ. In these Advent days of waiting and watching, let us be aware of the times and places that we can be faithful in our actions as beloved children of God. Take time to encourage each other to be bold in caring for all of God's children and God's good creation. Let's not be stationery in our waiting and watching, but rather ready to act with mercy and with justice.

"Together we serve, united by love, inviting God's world to the glorious feast.
We work and we pray through sorrow and joy, extending your love to the last and the least.
We seek to become a beacon of hope, a lamp for the heart and a light for the feet.
We learn, year by year, to let love shine through until we see Christ in each person we meet.

We welcome the scarred, the wealthy, the poor, the busy the lonely, and all who need care.
We offer a home to those who will come, our hands quick to help, our hearts ready to dare.
Together, by grace, we witness and work, remembering Jesus, in whom we grow strong.
Together we serve in Spirit and truth, remembering love is the strength of our song."
(*The Faith We Sing,* #2175)

Grace and Peace, Pat Wingert

Friday, December 4
Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13; Jeremiah 1:4-10; Acts 11:19-26

That One Visitor

Day five of Advent begins and we are still early in our preparations, both for Christmas with the gifts and Advent of the Greatest Gift. As is human nature, we're no doubt still holding strong to our heart's preparation commitments, just like the first week of New Year's Resolutions for the secular calendar. In a few weeks, if not sooner, guests will be arriving and holidays will be in full swing. Most of your guests you await with eager anticipation, but there's often that one … or at some point there was that one. Maybe it's the political leanings, their football team preferences, that thing they did or said years ago that you still have never fully released in forgiveness creating that lingering, hidden resentment? Or worse of worse, that last minute uninvited guest that someone felt pity for being alone on the holidays so invited eagerly without first verifying your thoughts on the matter. What in the name of Heaven are we to do now? In the name of Earth, the answer is smile politely, while lying through our teeth it's not a problem at all and go out of our way to be gracious and welcoming as we endure this hiccup to the perfectly laid plans. Heaven's name has different parameters, obviously.

In Acts 11:19-26, after the great news of how far-reaching the Gospel had spread reached Jerusalem, Barnabas goes off and brings just that kind of guest back to the home church, having gone so far as to even seek him out. Saul comes to visit the church, yes that church he had spent how long trying to exterminate? Had some time in the Wilderness, possibly reflecting on the ancient words of Jeremiah about God knowing us "in the womb," really changed him? There were rumors but we are not to be wicked and listen to those after all. Barnabas, following God's heart, didn't care about the taboos or past wrongs of the company he keeps; he knows Saul is lonely and needs a warm community to stay in. God knew Saul was destined to be Paul, evangelist extraordinaire, after all. Maybe the detour was required; maybe it wasn't part of the original plan, but just shows how far he strayed by failing in his studies. Either way, Saul becoming Paul is only a surprise to us, not God. Just like that least-looked-forward-to Christmas guest has been known by God all along, warts and flaws included, just like you and me, come to think of it.

Prayer: *Heavenly Daddy, Help us to be welcoming as You have been to us. Remind us when tempers start flaring or patience is wearing thin of the many times You've graciously loved us in our sour moods and less than perfect moments and opinions. Help us open our hearts and homes to all this holiday season and beyond. In Jesus Name, Amen.*

Tara Eckenroad

Saturday, December 5
Ezekiel 36:24-28

Have you ever felt distant from God because of sin, painful experiences, disappointment or poor choices? We all struggle with sin, unhealthy attitudes and things that can take God's place in our lives. Think about the difference between trying to do the right thing because you are afraid of punishment and doing the right thing because your heart genuinely desires to please God. Have you ever sincerely wanted to change but struggled to overcome familiar habits, selfish desires, resentment, pride, or fear? The key lesson to this whole scripture is that God's ultimate purpose is not merely to make our circumstances better; it is to restore us to a right relationship with Him.

This scripture is a promise from God that He will restore His people, cleanse them from sin, give them a new heart, put His spirit within them, and bring them into a new relationship with Him.

God does not merely command His people to change; He works within them to help them live according to His will. God's purpose is not simply to change our behavior but to restore us to a right relationship with Him.

How does Ezekiel 36:24-28 apply to Christians today? Here are four significant applications:

1. **God can cleanse us from our past sins**. Your past does not have to define your relationship with God.
2. **God wants to transform your heart, not just your behavior.** This passage reminds us that genuine spiritual renewal involves the heart. God wants to shape our attitudes, motives, desires, and decisions.
3. **You do not have to depend on your strength alone.** This does not eliminate personal responsibility. It means we pursue obedience while depending on God's help.
4. **God desires a relationship with His people.** God's goal is not merely to make people behave better. The promise points toward a restored relationship with Him.

In closing, this scripture is a promise of God's restoring power: He cleanses His people, gives them a new heart, places His Spirit within them, and restores their relationship with Him. God promises not only to bring His people back to Him, but also to work within them so that they can walk in His ways.

Kim Zigler

Sunday, December 6
Mark 1:1-8

The scripture reading for today is a familiar passage about John the Baptist. During Advent especially, it reminds us of the reason for Jesus' birth and his death to come.

The words "prepare the way," in particular, stand out to me this season. If we are to follow in Jesus's example, we all should strive to prepare the way for others. That could mean in our religious practices, but I believe it just as easily can be applied in other

aspects of our work, social, and home lives. My job in one of our local high schools is to help students determine their career path, navigate any training they may need for it, and to take the steps required to reach their goals. More often than not, that path is complicated by home situations, immigrant status, or other factors, and despite often being called a "soft generation," the students I encounter are anything but. Many have faced far greater challenges in their short lives than I have at my age, and simply want an opportunity to live their dream despite sometimes significant obstacles. It is truly a privilege to help "prepare the way" to their future by providing the information they may not have, answering questions, helping them fill out college or employment applications, and generally being the listening ear that can frequently be what they need to feel better about the next step. Whether or not my interaction has a long-lasting impact I rarely know, but it has been said that "we are all just walking each other home," and in that vein, I know that for at least some part of their journey, I was there to make a difference. I believe we all have the capacity to follow Christ's example and assist others on their path through or towards something, whether it be supporting a friend through a difficult diagnosis, showing kindness by bringing a meal to a new family in the neighborhood, giving a stranger a smile that changes their outlook that day, or in a million other small and large ways. In this beautiful time of Advent, I encourage you to think about how you support those you encounter on their walk, and in doing so, model the very reason Christ was brought into your life.

Prayer for Today (Peace Prayer of St. Francis):

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace:
where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
where there is sadness, joy.

O divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek
to be consoled as to console,
to be understood as to understand,
to be loved as to love.
For it is in giving that we receive,
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.
Amen.

Melissa Malabad

Monday, December 7
Isaiah 26:7-15

The path of the righteous is level; you make level the way of the righteous. In the path of your judgments, O LORD, we wait for you; your name and remembrance are the desire of our soul.
Isaiah 26:7-8

The 'righteous' are people whose life-focus is to conduct their lives, their daily interactions in public places and in their homes in accordance with what has been and is shown to them by God as right-living. It is God, revealed to such people through studying and contemplating Scripture, through prayer, through teaching, through worship, through holding before them the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, who shows us the *level way, the path of Your (God's) judgments.* That path is not easy. In the midst of the world as we know it – a world of 'influencers' and podcasts, social media, bots, and AI, and malicious dis-information, and news that can boggle the mind and cause one's heart to tremble – the path of and for the righteous is a daily challenge. It is **THE** path one must choose, with God's help, every day.

There is a path I walk almost every morning. The path is on a ridge above a creek – Cub Run. The path is level and free from obstacles which allows me to walk without a worry of stumbling. This clear path, usually walked as the sun is rising or just after, even though quite familiar, is a cause for wonder and exclamatory words, sometimes songs, almost every day. This happens especially when I am paying attention to the sights, sounds, movements, the feel of the breeze, and the intangibles of being outside that accompanies each walk. The overwhelming sense of well-being (shalom) is a gift of God's love. Love is the level way. The level Way is God's love for us in Jesus our Savior; God's love with us as we travel the level path; God's love that fills us and overflows into love for others. The steadfast love of God that never fails, never dries up, never falters, and never ends, never ends, never ends……

In this holy season of Advent, may God send you reminders and set your heart onto the level path.

Jim Wingert

Tuesday, December 8
Acts 11:1-18

In this passage of Acts, Luke explains why Peter brought the good news of Jesus to the Gentiles also. Peter was criticized by devout Jews for going into the homes of Gentiles and eating their food. These devout Jews believed that both unclean food and unclean people were polluted. Peter told them of the vision he had regarding animals of the Earth - wild beasts, reptiles, and birds being carried down in a large sheet to where he was. Then he heard a voice telling him, "*Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.*" Peter replied "*Surely not, Lord! Nothing impure or unclean has ever entered my mouth.*" The voice spoke from heaven a

second time, “Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.” This happened three times, and then the sheet with all the animals was pulled up to heaven.

It was right then that three men who had been sent from Caesarea stopped at the house where Peter was staying. The Holy Spirit told Peter to have no hesitation about going with them. Six brothers also went with Peter. They entered the Gentile man’s house. The man told them how he had seen an angel appear and told him to “*Send to Joppa for Simon who is called Peter. He will bring you a message through which you and your household will be saved.*” As Peter began to speak, the Holy Spirit came unto them as He had indwelled the disciples at the beginning of their ministries. Peter remembered what the Lord had said: “*John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit. So, if God gave them the same gift He gave us who believed in the Lord, Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could stand in God’s way?*”

When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God saying, “*So then, even to Gentiles, God has granted repentance that leads to life.*”

With His love and mercy, Jesus came to save not only the Jews, but the Gentiles as well. The disciples were able to preach the good news everyone. From here forward, the early Church rapidly expanded with believers and spread quickly in the Middle East and beyond. Glory to God!

Liz Lawson

Wednesday, December 9
Luke 1:5-17

Waiting… Unanswered prayers… Unfairness… Shame… Waiting…

This passage about Zechariah and Elizabeth has several messages to me. Sometimes, no matter how hard I try to be positive and follow the teachings of Jesus, I can’t help but wonder if my prayers, silly as they sometimes seem (even to me), are being heard. I often remind myself that “no” or “not now” are still answers. Zechariah and Elizabeth are presented as good followers of God and yet, they were still disappointed by their lack of children. Sometimes bad things happen to good people.

The second message I see is not to underestimate God. He does hear prayers and we should not second guess His wisdom and power. If He can deliver a pregnancy to an older couple thought to be beyond child-bearing years, we cannot fathom what other wonderous things He can do. Do we really believe that God answers prayers, or are we underestimating God? Sometimes righteous people have disappointments in life, but we should not underestimate God.

The third message to me is that God answers in His way and in His time. God’s plan for Zechariah and Elizabeth turned their years of yearning into a wonderful story. God answered their prayers by not only fulfilling their personal desire for a child, but also giving them a son, known as John the Baptist, who would pave the way for Jesus Christ. What a blessing worth waiting for! Am I/are we grateful for answered prayers and do we give credit where credit is due?

Sometimes, God's timing is not just different from ours, it is infinitely wiser. His promises are fulfilled, often in ways that surprise us. This story reminds us that God's timing is perfect, even when it feels delayed. In this season, we anticipate the coming of the Christ child and His coming again to us. Let us take a breath, not be burdened by what we think of as unanswered prayers, and remember that God is faithful to us and will not disappoint us. We just need to keep the faith.

Janet Gloeckner

Thursday, December 10
Habakkuk 2:1-5

I will stand on my watchpost, and station myself on the rampart;
I will keep watch to see what he will say to me,
and what he will answer concerning my complaint.
Habakkuk 2:1, (NRSV)

When I wrote in the December 2025 *Tidings* on the symbolism depicted in the painted glass windows in the sanctuary, I mentioned the wooden watchtower in Annunciation To The Shepherds. I saw a crude wooden lookout post for shepherds tasked with guarding the flock, as well as the symbolism of God always keeping us in his care.

After studying today's scripture, I can see another meaning of the watchtower. Habakkuk is waiting on God, trusting God's timing, living by faith, and understanding that pride and wickedness will not have the final word. He wanted to be in a ready position to receive God's guidance. It's easy to understand his thought process. It's hard not to feel closer to God in high, serene settings. I've felt that during recent trips on Skyline Drive to take in the beauty of the changing leaves.

As children of God, we know that we can bring any and all questions to God. We wait on God in an active posture of prayer, attention, and expectation. Waiting expectantly requires patience realizing that God's timing may differ from our own impatient tendencies. While we wait, we continue to pray, obey, serve, and hope, demonstrating our trust in God's faithfulness.

It is also not lost on me that in the window art, the watchtower is facing Bethlehem. The faithful had been watching and waiting for the Messiah. We continue our symbolic climb to the watchtower as we live by faith and watch and listen for God's wisdom for our lives while we expectantly await the return of Christ when he will make all things new.

Carole Gaines

Friday, December 11
Philippians 3:12-16

When Paul the Apostle was in prison, he wrote many letters to people of different countries, encouraging them to follow the teachings of Jesus and to try to live like Him. In this letter to the people of Philippi, Paul said:

"I have not yet completely become the person that God wants me to be. But I am trying very hard to reach that place. That was Christ's purpose when he first chose me to belong to him. My Christian friends, I do not think that I have reached that place yet. But this is what I do. I do not think about past things that have already happened. Instead, I try hard to reach the things that are still in front. I am like a runner who wants to reach the end of the race. I run straight towards that place, so that I can win God's gift. Because I belong to Christ Jesus, God has called me to live with him in heaven. That is God's gift to me at the end of my life."

All of us should agree to live like that, if we properly understand God's message. If you think differently about some of these things, God will show you clearly what is right. But we should continue to live in the way that we already know is right.

What great advice for us today also! If we want to belong to Jesus and someday live in heaven with God, we must become the person that God wants us to be.

Susan Pollard

Saturday, December 12
Psalm 126

Those who sow with tears will reap with songs of joy.
Psalm 126:5

This Psalm reminds us that God is faithful to restore his people and turn sorrow into joy. The psalmist remembers how God brought his people out of captivity and filled their hearts with laughter. Even after difficult seasons, God gave them reason to rejoice.

Advent is a season of remembering and waiting. We remember the joy of Christ's birth and look forward with hope to his promised return. Just as God's people waited for restoration, we sometimes find ourselves waiting for answers, healing, and hope.

Psalm 126 reminds us that even when we sow tears, we can trust God for the harvest. Our struggles do not mean that God has forgotten us. Jesus came into a broken world to bring salvation, hope, and everlasting joy. Where do you need to trust God during this season of waiting and are you allowing his promises to give you hope even through difficult circumstances?

Prayer: *Heavenly Father, thank you for being our source of hope during this Advent season and help us to trust you through both joyful and difficult times. Remind us that tears do not have the final word because Jesus came to bring us hope. Amen.*

Kathy Billhimer

Sunday, December 13
1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

Paul's words of encouragement to the church he established in Thessalonica

Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. . . Test everything. Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil.
1 Thessalonians 5:16-18, 21-22 (NIV)

These words of Paul's are as applicable to us today as they were in his time.

I have been interested in politics ever since the fall of 1960 when my high school sophomore debate instructor assigned me to the "pro" team for Presidential candidate Senator John F. Kennedy. I came to believe in his candidacy. The following January 20th, I was inspired by his inaugural address, in which he exhorted: "And so, my fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for you--ask what you can do for your country."

During this election season, I have been re-reading Adam Hamilton's 2008 book, *Seeing Gray in a World of Black and White: Thoughts on Religion, Morality, and Politics*. Rev. Hamilton is the senior pastor of a church he and his wife founded in 1990, the United Methodist Church of the Resurrection in Leawood, Kansas, which has grown to be the largest United Methodist Church in the United States. Over the last 10 years or so, I have read 3 of Rev. Hamilton's books in Sunday School classes. I am inspired by his commitment to doing Christ's work on earth. I also believe the Holy Spirit nudged Rev. Hamilton to run for the Senate this year.

In chapter 11, on page 94 of *Seeing Gray…*, he wrote that he could picture Jesus "quietly entering the Oval Office, or the halls of Congress, to meet with all in power who claim to be his followers, and saying, 'Let's talk about what I meant when I told you to love your enemy.'"

The final chapter, 23, titled "The Radical Center," described how I believe Rev. Hamilton would view his role in the Senate. From pages 234 and 235: "[T]wo defining characteristics of the radical center will be a willingness to find what is good and true in others, and a commitment to practicing love. . . The radical center seeks to build bridges rather than walls, and refuses to be the wedge in anyone's theological or culture walls."

During this time between the election and the seating of the new Congress in January, I am praying for all winners and losers, and for the safety of all.

Prayer: *Dear Lord, Please help our leaders to keep our country safe. Help Congress to enact just laws. And help me always to adhere to Paul's encouraging words. In Jesus name, Amen.*
Susan Young

Monday, December 14
Ephesians 6:10-17

Several years ago, Susan and I had the opportunity of visiting the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. One of its most fascinating galleries is dedicated to the preservation and display of ancient arms and armor. Most interesting to me were the full-body steel suits of armor, composed of carefully fashioned and fitted metal plates designed to protect the whole human body, from the crown of the head to the soles of the feet. Some richly decorated armor was designed for the parade and tournament, but others were strictly practical and meant for the battlefield. I marveled at an extra-large one made for King Henry VIII and another fashioned to protect the head and flanks of a horse.

I couldn't imagine wearing any of those suits of armor. The museum indicated that most weighed over 50 pounds; one weighed in at 77 pounds! I think I'd feel a little bit like the shepherd boy, David, when King Saul tried to fit him with his own armor to go fight Goliath. The scripture said that wearing Saul's armor, David was unable to walk in it! (1 Sam. 17:38-39).

But there is another type of armor that the other Saul, Saul of Tarsus (we know him better as Paul), begs each Christian to put on. It's not a gleaming steel suit of armor fit for flesh and blood enemies. Rather, it is a spiritual armor, composed of truth and integrity and faith and peace and salvation and God's word. And it is desperately needed, Paul says, because there are forces of evil and ways of the world which directly oppose the walk of the Christian. Wherever there is evil, we who belong to Christ are called to resist it. Wherever there is untruth and injustice and hatred and cynicism, we need to use all the resources of God to stand firm and resist. We need to put on the whole armor of God.

And isn't that what we ask of every new believer when they join the church?

"Do you renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, reject the evil powers of this world, and repent of your sin?"

"Do you accept the freedom and power God gives you to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves?" (UMH, p. 34)

Now that's the type of armor that I can put on and live in and walk in!

May God's grace grant it!

Steve Young

Tuesday, December 15
Acts 3:17-4:4

And now friends, I know that you acted out of ignorance, as did also your rulers. In this way God fulfilled what he foretold all the prophets, that his Messiah would suffer. While Peter and John were speaking to the people, the priests, the captain of the temple and the Sadducees came to them much annoyed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming that in Jesus there is the resurrection of the dead.

Acts. 3:17-18, 4:1-2

Prior to Peter speaking to the Israelites, Peter and John had gone to the temple at the hour of prayer. They saw a lame man being carried in so he could ask for alms. Peter told him that they had no money, but what he had to give he gave in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth and then ordered the man to stand up and walk. Immediately the man was able to walk and leap. He entered the temple praising God. Peter did not take credit, but told them the God of Isaac, Jacob, and their ancestors had made the man strong. He reprimanded the Israelites for their part in rejecting the Holy and Righteous One. In their rejection they killed the Author of life whom God raised from the dead. The faith in this Jesus of the previously lame man had given him perfect health.

Acts 3:17-18 references Deuteronomy 18:17-19: *Then the Lord replied to me: "They are right in what I have said. I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their own people; I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet who shall speak to them everything I command. Anyone who does not heed the words that the prophet shall speak in my name, I myself will hold accountable."* Peter assured the crowd that all the prophets had predicted Jesus's death and resurrection.

The ignorance mentioned in Acts 3:17 is repeated In Luke 23:34 Jesus says, "Father forgive them, they know not what they do." Peter further implored the people gathered to repent and turn back from their current sinful lives and their sins would be wiped away and there would be restoration of all predicted by the prophets.

Opposition and persecution from the religious authorities began that moment when Peter and John were teaching the people and proclaiming that in Jesus there is resurrection of the dead. The gospel crossed from abstract idea to undeniable, life-transforming reality. The Sadducees were annoyed (disturbed) because the apostles were preaching resurrection from the dead through Jesus. If Jesus rose it proved the religious leaders guilty of murdering the Messiah. With placing Peter and John under arrest on suspicion of teaching dangerous ideas (resurrection and healing) began the persecution of the early church.

Today Jesus comes to us, but at times we reject him. In John 2:5 Mary says, "Do whatever he tells you." Are we guilty of choosing what we want rather than His will? After all Jesus suffered, how could God not forgive us when we ask for mercy?

Prayer: *God, help us to listen for your word and not the words of the world we live in and its leaders. When we see those in need let us help them in the name of Jesus. We pray for mercy for our misdeeds. Help us strive to be more like Jesus. Amen.*

Mary Sue Wenger

Wednesday, December 16
Psalm 125

As the mountains surround Jerusalem,
so the Lord surrounds his people both now and forevermore.
Psalm 125:2

The key verse above from Psalm 125 stood out for me among all the verses in the scripture selections I received. It reminds me of the protection that we have here in the Valley with nearby mountains to the east and to the west. It's like an embrace from God, being held between His hands. One of my favorite local scenes is Massanutten Peak, especially at sunrise. What is yours?

Our Creator God used mountain settings to connect to humans, for example Moses received the Ten Commandments on Mt. Sinai. Mountains become a meeting place for Heaven and Earth. Thinking about them led me to remember other scriptures such as Psalm 121: "*I lift up my eyes to the mountains— where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth."* And mountains and hills appear in hymns as well. One instance appears at the beginning of *The Old Rugged Cross*: "On a hill far away stood an old rugged cross…" I can recall my mother singing this hymn while she ran the washing machine Monday mornings. I suppose wash day was always Monday in our household to be prepared for the week ahead. Spend a few moments contemplating your favorite hymn and scripture about hills or mountains. Offer a simple prayer of thanks and praise to God for all creation.

As we continue our journey through Advent with its focus on hope, peace, joy, and love, how can we prepare for the time ahead? What gifts can we give to show our gratitude for the Christ-child who eventually gave His life on a hill far away?

Judy Richardson

Thursday, December 17
Psalm 89:1–4, 19–26

The Promises That Hold Us

In our closet, we have a box filled with old Bibles. Some are ours, replaced over the years with newer editions. But most belonged to members of our families who have gone before us. Donna's great-uncle has more Bibles in that box than anyone else. The pages of those Bibles are yellowed and the bindings worn, and they are filled with verses he underlined and the notes he wrote in the margins, offering handwritten glimpses into his faith. What was happening in his life when a particular verse spoke to him. Was he celebrating a blessing? Searching for an answer? Holding tightly to God's promises during a difficult season? Those old Bibles remind us that faith is not just something we experience today. It is something passed down through generations, strengthened through both joy and sorrow.

Psalm 89 begins with a beautiful declaration: "*I will sing of the steadfast love of the Lord, forever.*" The psalmist remembers God's covenant with David and His promise of faithfulness through the generations. Yet Israel's circumstances did not always seem to reflect those promises. Isn't that true of our lives as well? We have experienced answered prayers and unexpected blessings, but also disappointments, losses, and questions that remain unanswered. Sometimes we wonder where God is in the middle of it all.

Advent reminds us that God's faithfulness is not measured by how quickly our circumstances change. Generations waited for the promised Messiah, and in a humble manger, God fulfilled a promise that had been unfolding for centuries.

Jesus reminds us that God keeps His promises, even when we cannot see how the story will end.

This Advent, consider opening an old Bible, looking through family photographs, or remembering someone whose faith helped shape your own. Give thanks for the ways God's love has carried you through the years. And perhaps underline a verse or write a note in your own Bible. Someday, those words might encourage someone who comes after you. After all, the greatest legacy we leave is not simply the faith we remember, but the faith we continue to live.

Prayer: *Faithful God, thank You for the generations who have shown us Your love. When life is uncertain and answers seem far away, remind us that Your promises endure. Help us live our faith in ways that bring hope to others, trusting that You are still writing our story, one faithful day at a time. Amen.*

Dave & Donna Fickes

Friday, December 18

Beginning in the 8th century, if not before, in the days leading up to Christmas, the church remembers who Jesus is by singing a refrain or an antiphon. These antiphons are rooted in the prophecies about Jesus, and they form the basis of our Advent carol, *O Come, O Come, Emmanuel* (#211 in our hymnal).

Today, I invite us to reflect on the first antiphon.

Verse: O Come, thou Wisdom from on high, and order all things far and nigh; to us the path of knowledge show and cause us in her way to go.

Antiphon: O Wisdom, who came forth from the mouth of the Most High, reaching from end to end, and ordering all things mightily and sweetly: Come, and teach us the way of prudence.

Read Psalm 1. As we look to Christmas and beyond, what is the path of wisdom that God wants to lead us on? What wisdom do we learn from the life and ministry of Jesus? How can we apply that wisdom to our lives? What does it mean to live a life of prudence?

Pray this antiphon today.

Pastor Laura Stratton

Saturday, December 19
Today, I invite us to reflect on the second antiphon.

Verse: O come, O come, great Lord of might, who to thy tribes on Sinai's height in ancient times once gave the law in cloud and majesty and awe.

Antiphon: O Adonai and Leader of the house of Israel, who appeared to Moses in the flames of the bush and gave him the law on Sinai: Come, and with your outstretched arm redeem us.

Read Exodus 3:1-15 and Exodus 19:1-6, 16-20. These passages tell about the events in this verse and antiphon, and we hear about two encounters with God – a burning bush and a thick cloud accompanied by thunder and lightning. How are we encountering God this Advent season? How has God appeared in our life? What does it mean for God to redeem us? Consider, too, that the law was a gift to the ancient Israelites teaching them how to live in right relationship with God and with one another. What is God trying to teach us about living in community and living as a faithful disciple?

Pray this antiphon today.

Pastor Laura Stratton

Sunday, December 20
Today, I invite us to reflect on the third antiphon.

Verse: O come, thou Root of Jesse's tree, an ensign of they people be; before thee rulers silent fall; all peoples on thy mercy call.

Antiphon: O Root of Jesse, who stands for an ensign of the people, before whom kings shall keep silence and to whom the Gentiles shall make their supplication: Come, and deliver us and tarry not.

Read Psalm 89:1-4, 19-26 and Matthew 1:1-17. These verses remind us that God is faithful, and we see how God kept God's promises to David through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. How have we known the faithfulness of God in our own lives? How does remembering God's past faithfulness help when we are impatient and want Jesus to return immediately in order to bring about the full establishment of God's kingdom and set all things to right?

Pray this antiphon today.

Pastor Laura Stratton

Monday, December 21
Today, I invite us to reflect on the fourth antiphon.

Verse: O come, thou Key of David, come, and open wide our heavenly home. The captives from their prison free, and conquer death's deep misery.

Antiphon: O Key of David and Scepter of the house of Israel, who opens and no one shuts, who shuts and no one opens: Come, and bring forth from prison the captive who sits in darkness and in the shadow of death.

In Luke 4:14-21, we read about Jesus' purpose. He came to bring good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captive, recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed, and proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. This antiphon echoes that purpose of Jesus.

Read also Psalm 23. How do these familiar words comfort us when we read them thinking about Jesus as the Key of David?

What keeps us imprisoned? Is it sin? Temptation? Fear? Anger? Resentment? Imagine God setting us free. What does that look like? Feel like?

As we pray this antiphon today, pray for God to free us from whatever holds us captive.

Pastor Laura Stratton

Tuesday, December 22
Today, I invite us to reflect on the fifth antiphon.

Verse: O come, thou Dayspring, come and cheer our spirits by thy justice here; disperse the gloomy clouds of night, and death's dark shadows put to flight.

Antiphon: O Dayspring, Brightness of the light eternal and Sun of justice: Come, and enlighten those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death.

In John 1, we read that Jesus is the light of the world that is not overcome by any darkness. We know that in the midst of the suffering of the world, the light of Christ shines forth. Evil does not win. Death does not have the final say. Christ is triumphant, and the light of God's love will not be extinguished.

How are we seeing God's light shining even in the midst of difficulty, struggle, and despair? How is the light of love shining in our lives?

In Matthew 5:16-17, Jesus calls us, his disciples, the light of the world. How are we shining or reflecting Jesus' light for the world? How are we helping to disperse the gloomy clouds of night?

Pray this antiphon today.

Pastor Laura Stratton

Wednesday, December 23
Luke 1:46b-55; 1 Samuel 2:1-10; Mark 11:1-11

A Mother's Sacrifice

Two more days and we're there! The waiting is almost over and the celebration soon begins, though often tinged with sorrows as we age. In today's reading we have two extravagant prayers by loyal Moms; one so famous it's been set to music, and one, though very similar, much lesser known. In 1 Samuel 2 we hear Hannah's praise-filled prayer of dedication as she relinquishes her highly desired son to his priestly duties, only to see him when she comes to worship once a year. After waiting through painful years of infertility, she didn't hesitate to promise to return him to God, who blessed her with him in the first place. She did enjoy his first few years, savoring his presence as the gift God had given to her. Like the famed Magnificent, the elite of all our days are called to be cast down, the upside down ways of God lauded as once again, He topples how we think things should be. Salvation is rejoiced by Hannah, who might have not had any concept of the coming Messiah she proclaimed. Her baby boy had not yet met the Lord, let alone anointed the king who would set so much in action and receive the very promise of that said Messiah from his lineage. Hannah praises God's Salvation while Mary, steeped in years of prophecy she should have heard from her father returning from synagogue, praises her Savior Himself. Hannah knows the cost of her promise as she drops her son off with Eli; Mary is unaware what awaits the child growing within her. In Hannah's prayer we have an interesting prophetic line in v. 6 "*He brings down to the grave and brings up*." Mary later learns the sacrifice she has to make, as if the ostracizing beforehand wasn't enough. Even in the Mark passage no one knows the agony Jesus faces as He triumphantly enters the great Jerusalem, except Him. Sadly little has changed for the state of the Holy City or its religious houses since Hannah first offered her prayer. Both women get a hint of what God felt as He willingly sent His son to the cross. We doubtfully will be called to give up as much as these mothers, but we are called daily to make "lesser" sacrifices of our time, pride, convenience, happiness, and a whole host of other things in serving Him. May we be as willing as Hannah and Mary.

Prayer: *Dear Heavenly Daddy, Help us to remember and respect the sacrifices of our parents, especially Your ultimate sacrifice. Grant us the strength and courage to make the daily sacrifices You ask, especially at this time of approaching celebration, when our hearts are more focused on the joys than the costs needed to make them a reality. Thank you for all the hard choices our parents made for us. In Jesus Name, Amen.*

Tara Eckenroad

Thursday, December 24
Today, I invite us to reflect on the sixth antiphon.

Verse: O come, Desire of nations bind all peoples in one heart and mind. From dust thou brough us forth to life; deliver us from earthly strife.

Antiphon: O King of Gentiles and their Desired One, Cornerstone that makes both one: Come, and deliver us whom you formed out of the dust of the earth.

Each Advent, we light a candle for peace. We remember that Jesus is the Prince of Peace. We read this prophecy in Isaiah 9:2-7. Yet, we look around at the world and see war still waging. How do we hold in tension this hope and promise of God with the reality we see? What might God be calling us to do to be peacemakers? As we sing in the hymn "Let There Be Peace on Earth," how can we let peace begin with us?

Pray this antiphon today.

Pastor Laura Stratton

Friday, December 25
Today, I invite us to reflect on the seventh antiphon.

Verse: O come, O come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel, that mourns in lonely exile here until the Son of God appear.

Antiphon: O Emmanuel, our King and Lawgiver, the Expected of the nations and their Savior: Come and save us, O Lord, our God.

Merry Christmas! We rejoice that Christ has been born, and we look forward to Christ's return. Today's antiphon names Jesus the name we hear in Matthew 1:18-25. Emmanuel means "God is with us." This is such a powerful name. God is with us. The Almighty eternal God became human and became one of us. God was with us in the past in human form. God is with us now through the power of the Holy Spirit. God will continue to be with us. How are we feeling Christ's presence with us today?

A fun fact about the antiphons is that they also are an acrostic in Latin. If we move backwards from the seventh to the first, the names of Jesus are: Emmanuel, Rex, Oriens, Calvis, Radix, Adonai, Sapienta. The first letter of each name forms the Latin words *Ero cras*, which means "Tomorrow, I will come." Every Advent, we celebrate the birth of Christ, and we anticipate Christ's return. We give thanks that God is with us, and we trust in the promise that Christ will indeed come.

Pray this antiphon today.

Pastor Laura Stratton