

DREAM

of Emmanuel



2024 Advent Devotionals

Forward

The four weeks of the Advent season are a time of waiting and preparing for the coming of the Christ child as Emmanuel, which means God with us. Our Advent theme this year will be Dream of Emmanuel and will focus on Joseph, the earthly father of Jesus. Joseph's place in the Nativity story is sometimes overlooked, but his life contains valuable lessons for all of us.

Our weekly Advent themes are Hope, Love, Peace and Joy, which are wonderful reminders of how we are called to offer Christ to one another by living the hope, love, peace, and joy of God's presence in the world.

The Advent and Christmas season is filled with gatherings, festive lights, candles glowing in windows, holiday foods, and gift-giving and receiving. In the midst of all the busyness, may we take daily time to ponder the Advent gift of God coming into our midst. God's coming is not just something that happened long ago, but becomes a reality every time we offer Christ through our prayers, our worship, our care of others, and our service in God's world.

We hope that you will use this devotional, created from the hearts of our Sun Prairie United Methodist Church family, as a guide through your own Advent journey. May God bless our journey through Advent together and fill us with the hope, love, peace and joy of God's coming among us as the Christ child!

*Come, thou long expected Jesus,
Born to set thy people free;
From our fears and sins release us,
Let us find our rest in thee.
Israel's strength and consolation,
Hope of all the earth thou art;
Dear desire of every nation,
Joy of every longing heart.*

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December 1

Sweet Dreams

"I bless the Lord who gives me counsel; in the night also my heart instructs me."

--Psalm 16:7

If you've ever had the experience of putting a small child into bed for the night, you may have said something like, "Sweet dreams," before you turned off the bedroom lights. It can be comforting to hear that someone wishes us sweet dreams as we get tucked into bed.

Sometimes we remember our sleeping dreams quite vividly and other times we wake up, not remembering whether we dreamt at all. Dreams that are written about in the Bible are often quite detailed and often have God or an angel giving directions or instructions about what is going to happen or what the person is supposed to do. Even the Psalmist reminds us that God offers counsel and instruction in the night.

As we move through the season of Advent, it is a season of preparation, longing and hope, in which we are reminded that the coming of the Christ child was, and is, a dream fulfilled—a dream that was whispered in the hearts of prophets, declared by angels, and anticipated by all of creation. The name Emmanuel means, 'God with us,' and carries the weight of this dream that has the power to transform our hearts.

The dream of Emmanuel is still a present invitation. It invites us to dream with God—dreams of hope, peace, love and joy. Sweet Dreams!

Loving God, as we enter this season of Advent, we thank you for the dream of Emmanuel. Thank you for coming to us in the stillness of the night and for bringing your wisdom, counsel and presence into our lives. Amen

Rev. Jenny Arneson

December 2

The Joy in Every Moment

"Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

--Phillippians 4:4-7

Over this past year, my faith taught me to see the good in every season, even when life wasn't at its brightest. As I leaned into God's promises, I found a steady sense of joy taking root, even on challenging days. Philippians says, "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!" This call to rejoice doesn't come from perfect circumstances but from a peace that only God can give. Learning to trust that God is working in all things has filled me with gratitude and a happiness I hadn't expected.

Faith has turned my focus from what's missing to what God is providing—God's constant love, strength, and guidance. Even when things aren't easy, I feel God's peace wash over me, steadying me and giving me strength.

Faith is like that first light in the morning, the sound of laughter after a hard week, or the scent of fresh rain—reminding me that there's always good in every day.

Lord, help me rejoice in all things, big or small, and remind me that You're always near. Amen

Natalie Halpin, High School Youth

December 3

God is Here

*"To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul."
--Psalm 25:1 (Read: Psalm 25: 1-10)*

Forgiveness is something that not everyone gets. Sometimes you do things you're embarrassed about and you want to pretend that they never happened, you want to erase them. God is meant to love every part of us, the good and the bad.

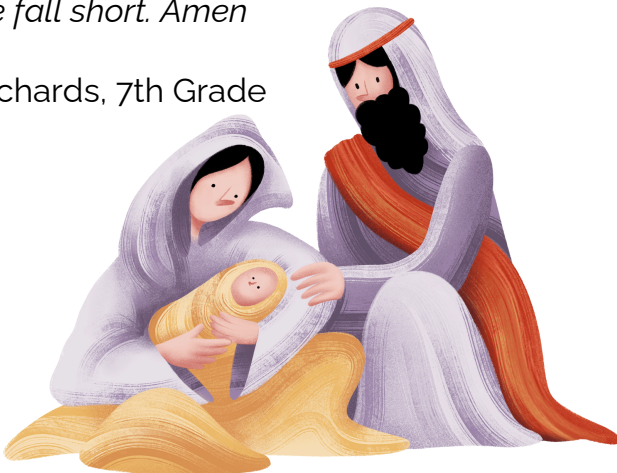
God is here for us. God is someone we can confide in and doesn't judge us no matter what we do. When we ask for God's forgiveness, God grants it. God does not shame us for our sins when we put our faith in Him.

"The Lord is good and does the right thing; he teaches sinners which way they should go." (Psalm 25:8). We put our hope in God to teach us His ways. "Lead us in your truth, teach it to us because you are the God who saves us." (Psalm 25:5)

The next time you want to erase something, remember that God is here and willing to forgive you if you put your faith in Him.

Thank you, God for leading us in your truth of love and forgiving us when we fall short. Amen

Addison Richards, 7th Grade



December 4

Rejoice

"With all my heart I glorify the Lord! In the depths of who I am I rejoice in God my savior."

--Luke 1:46-47

One of my favorite Christmas traditions is the lighting of the candles on Christmas Eve during the singing of Silent Night. The joy and anticipation of Jesus' birth shared together in the sanctuary, with the lights dimmed and soft candle glow, feels so reverent and spirit-filled.

Among the many Christmas Eve services I've attended, the one in 1987 was particularly memorable. Pat and I attended the service with our 2-year-old son while I was pregnant with our 2nd child. At 4-1/2 months along, I had already been feeling the flutters and gentle stirrings of the new life inside of me. But during that special Christmas Eve service, our daughter was making her presence known with enough movement. I was able to have Pat also feel her kicks for the first time. To share in the anticipation of our baby while celebrating the birth of Jesus in the same moment magnified my awe.

I imagine Elizabeth and Mary shared in the special bond of hope, promise, and awe while awaiting the births of John and Jesus. I agree with the words written by Virginia Kelley, "There is nothing like a newborn baby to renew your spirit and to buttress your resolve to make the world a better place."

*May we welcome the birth of Jesus with renewed hope and the promise to make the world a better place, in His holy name.
Amen*

Marcia Flaherty, Lay Member to Annual Conference, M & M Group, Reconciling Ministry Team



December 5

(His) Presence in my Pocket

"Look! The virgin will conceive a child! She will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel, which means 'God is with us.'"

--Matthew 1:23

During the later months of the year as warmer weather yields to cooler days and nights, I begin to look for warmer clothes, jackets, gloves, and hats. These clothes are moved and become center stage in the closet as they are used with increasing frequency.

I'm reminded that soon we will celebrate the birth of our Savior Jesus Christ. Recently, during the first walk on a cool, crisp morning I was reminded that God was with me when I put my hands in my coat pocket. There were two presents that reminded me of His presence in my life. A Kleenex and a stick of gum; just what I needed on that cool morning! I paused, smiled, and thanked God for the reminder that he walks with me now and all the days of my life.

Dear heavenly father, we are grateful that you are with us and put 'presents' in our life that draw us closer to you. During this Christmas season, may we experience your presence as we celebrate and look forward to your son's birth. Amen

Tom Jisa, Stephen Ministry Class, Men In Mission



December 6

But What if I Can't Remember

"After that I will pour out my spirit upon everyone; your sons and your daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, and your young men will see visions."

--Joel 2:28

Are you a dream 'rememberer'? Do you know when you have dreamed? Or do you forget?

We often have this discussion in our marriage. I remember dreams vividly and my husband, Dale, says he doesn't dream. I tell him that's impossible. Science tells us everyone dreams. There are just reasons we can't remember or things that might be getting in the way.

According to a blog post on calm.com, things like lack of sleep, stress, brain chemistry, your age, and lack of attention can get in the way of remembering your dreams. If you read further on their website, you can see that there are even strategies you can try to practice at home to help you improve your dream recollection.

As I was reading this article I did start to chuckle. Boy, this is why we need Advent! In a world where we are busy, tired, and stressed, Advent causes us to pause and prepare. We put into practice "strategies" around the ideas of hope, joy, peace, and love that help us remember the Savior is coming.

The strategies listed on this website can easily be adapted to our Advent practices. What if we did things like keep an Advent journal, prioritize quality over quantity every day, make plans centered around Advent, limit distractions during the season, tell others the story of Jesus, etc.

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Would our lives improve just like our dreams if we began to practice these things each day?

In this Advent season, may we implement strategies that guide us to a place where God can reach into our hearts and share his visions and dreams for the coming days.

God, there are often things that get in the way or make it hard for us to remember our dreams. Sometimes, these same things can get in the way of us remembering you too. Help us this Advent season practice strategies that allow us to remember you. Amen

Amanda Hinthorn

Director of Technology and Online Communications



December 7

Stay Focused

"May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit."

--Romans 15:13

Whew! Christmas is such a hectic time of year. So much to accomplish—Christmas letters to post, friends to visit, cookies to bake, presents to wrap, food to make, Christmas magic to create. And now, an Elf on the Shelf to move every single night too? Geez, I'm exhausted just thinking about the coming weeks of the Advent season.

I know that my faith in God will help me remain focused on the spirit of the season—those of hope, love, peace, and joy. Please help me to create feelings of calm and peace in the face of what can be a chaotic season, and help me to spread those feelings of hope, peace, and joy to others in my family, in my life, and in the world.

Dear God, allow us to experience the fullness of your hope, joy, peace, and love during this Christmas season. Please walk with us, so we are able to understand the love of Jesus. Amen

Hillary Lobenstein, Youth Leader



December 8

I'm Dreaming

*"For a child has been born for us, a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting
Father, Prince of Peace."
--Isaiah 9:6*

In 1942, amidst a world engulfed in a war, Irving Berlin wrote the song, "White Christmas." It was written for the movie, "Holiday Inn," starring Bing Crosby. The film was a box office success, and "White Christmas" topped the charts. But the song held special meaning in 1942 for another reason. It was the first Christmas when so many would be far from home, dreaming of a day when peace would return.

At the time of Jesus' birth, the people of Israel were also dreaming of a day when peace would return. Seven hundred years earlier, they became a conquered nation, and it had remained their fate ever since. But there was hope. Hope in the dream of a Messiah would set them free.

One of the first to give voice to this dream was the Prophet Isaiah who wrote, "For to us a child is born...he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."

During Advent, we're called to dream. To dream of a day when discord, division, and divisiveness no longer rules the day. To dream of a day when peace will reign in hearts and lives. Praise be to God.

Holy God, help us to hold to our dreams of a day when peace will reign. Amen

Brad Mather
Director of Caring Ministries

December 9

A Gift of Gratitude

"Always be joyful and never stop praying. Whatever happens, keep thanking God because of Jesus Christ. This is what God wants you to do."

--1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

While in Paris in 2012, we went to see the Cathedral of Notre Dame. We spent time looking closely at the architecture, which was a true monument to God. This was before the devastating fire. Finally, we ventured into the church itself. We were shocked at the size of the sanctuary and the Rose, stained glass. As we stood next to the extremely large pipe organ a little old French woman came up to us and said "You are American, no?" We said, "Yes" and she said "Follow me!"

As we walked down the aisle behind her, she would periodically stop and tap those sitting in the pews with the same question, each followed her, and as we walked, she told the history. She was 92 years old and had been baptized, confirmed and married in this cathedral. Her husband had been laid to rest there also. Now came the amazing part, she went on to say that the Americans in World War II had continually flown over the cathedral to keep it from being bombed by the Nazis. When she felt good enough, she would come and give a tour to Americans to say thank you for saving her church. We were the lucky ones that day and will never forget her story. She was amazing!

I thank God each night and then thank God each morning for giving me a new day to hopefully be like the French woman and make someone's day.

Dear Lord, thank you for giving us a very special time this Advent season to remember the lives that we have met. Amen!

Terry Twedell, Scholarship Chair, Welcome Center Host

December 10

God's Grace

"Yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand. You guide me with your council, and afterward you will take me into glory."

--Psalm 73:23-24

I will never be called upon to give anyone more grace than God has already given me. God's grace daily renews my soul. Each day I awake, I am presented with a new pathway to walk – not knowing what lies ahead or where I will end my day. The only sure thing I carry with me is I know I am a child of God. I believe God walks with my every step, gently reminding and testing my choices as I encounter this world God created.

Opportunities will present themselves to me and I have choices to make. I pray that God's grace, love, and wisdom will always help to guide my choices. I want to be an example of love, understanding, compassion, and knowledge all to reflect the love and grace I receive every day from God. Easy or difficult happenings await my day and I pray as I walk closely with God holding my right hand, guiding and teaching me always.

Dear Lord, especially in this season of great anticipation as we wait again to experience the birth of our Baby Jesus. Give me the patience and wisdom to listen to the quiet voice of God to guide my pathway and help with any encounter to experience the powerful love and peace of our Father. Amen

Connie Meyer, Lay Leader, Reconciling Ministry Team



December 11

Sharing Light

*"The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned. You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy; they rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest."
--Isaiah 9:2-7*

The best part of our church's Christmas Eve service is when the candlelight is passed along the pews from person to person. I remember it from childhood, and it still brings a sense of wonder and awe today.

I was thinking about the difference between the Old Testament and the New Testament recently. I'm no biblical scholar, but it seems to me the Old Testament is all about rules and the negative consequences of breaking those rules, from Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, to the Great Flood, to the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah.

The New Testament is very different, with numerous references to Jesus as a light in the darkness, from the star in the sky at Jesus' birth to the light shining from his robe at his ascension. Instead of chastising people about following rules in his messages, he was the embodiment of light in many senses, bringing a message of hope, love, forgiveness, and compassion. Importantly, in healing the sick, feeding the hungry, and sharing the message of love and forgiveness, Jesus shared his light with others. He shared it with ordinary, everyday people, including those the religious leaders of the time had ignored or vilified.

He also illuminated our understanding that all people have a light within, and that we can and should share that light with one another. We can do that by showing compassion, understanding, and forgiveness, even when the person we're interacting with is not our favorite.

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By refusing to judge and by finding common ground with those whose opinions we don't share, we are being Jesus-like. In this way, we all have the ability to light other people's inner flames. This is how we follow Jesus' example and help bring more light to the world.

Gracious God, strengthen us in showing and sharing the light of Jesus in our everyday interactions with people. Amen

Julie Bogle, Fellowship Time Team

December 12

Recognizing Hope

"Simeon took Jesus in his arms and praised God.

He said, 'Now, master, let your servant go in peace according to your word, because my eyes have seen your salvation.'"

--Luke 2:28-30 (Read: Luke 2:21-33)

In September our adopted daughter, Kate, gave birth to twin boys. They were about five weeks premature, and very tiny. They were also the first infants born into our family since 1960. One of my most precious lifetime memories has become the first moments I held these incredibly small but equally precious lives in my arms. It was the first time ever that we have been able to hold a newborn member of our family, and it is an awesome experience.

Less than a week old at the time, they each could fit on my arm between my elbow and my wrist with room to spare. Now two months old as these thoughts are written, they have grown exponentially, and take two arms to pick up and hold. They face challenges, but they are also thriving. They are blessed to have been born into a community where they can receive the best care possible. Not all of God's children are so fortunate.

When I hold our grandsons in my arms now, I see the challenges, but I also see the possibilities, and I have hope. Not just for them, but for all of us. Their future has not yet been written. No one's has. **(continued on the next page)**

When Jesus was eight days old his parents, Mary and Joseph – both people of faith – took him to the temple in Jerusalem to be circumcised and to be named, according to the Law of God and the customs of their people. There was an old, old, man named Simeon in the Temple. Simeon had been looking all his life for the fulfillment of God's promises to God's people. He listened to God and followed the leading of the Holy Spirit. He took the infant Jesus into his arms, and declared him to be the hope of God's oppressed people: “Lord, let your servant depart in peace... because my eyes have seen your salvation.”

Simeon recognized hope when God placed it in his path. I have often wondered what Joseph and Mary thought when they heard Simeon's declaration about their son. It was yet another moment in their incredible journey of faith that would give pause, elicit awe and amazement, raise questions, fears and doubts, and ultimately give hope to the whole world!

We don't really know very much about Joseph. The scriptures tell us more about Mary. But we can infer from the stories we do find in the scriptures that Joseph and Mary raised Jesus trusting in God, that they were willing to listen to the Holy Spirit, and that they followed God's Spirit wherever it might lead them. The scriptures tell us that their journey was not an easy one, but it was a journey they did not make alone.

The Good News is that Emmanuel – God with us – walks by our side, not only in the past and the present, but into the future. That is the Hope of Christmas. Because of Jesus, there is always hope, no matter how dark the past, the present, or the future may seem.

Do we have the courage to recognize Hope when God places it in our path, even in ways that may not always be obvious in the moment?

Loving God, grant us the wisdom and the courage to recognize your hope whenever and wherever we encounter it on our journey of faith. May we live our lives trusting in your promise to be near to us always, and in the knowledge that you will never let us go. Amen

Kevin Rice Myers, Clergy, Conference Staff

December 13

Relationships

*"Train up a child in the way he should go, and
when he is old he will not depart from it"*

--Proverbs 22:6.

We all dream of a church where faith connections are made and relationships are built. SPUMC has a long history of building and growing relationships, which in turn, strengthen the Kingdom of God.

This fall I had the opportunity to attend a wedding of a young woman who grew up in our church and whom I have known her entire life. It was especially heartwarming to see six other young adults who had grown up in our church at this wedding, supporting the bride and having fellowship together, even though they live in four different states and graduated 10 years ago.

These young adults grew up attending Wednesday night LOGOS, Sunday School, Confirmation, Mission Trips, and Youth Summit trips, first as children, then youth, and then young adults. They were loved into the faith by LOGOS, Sunday School, youth leaders, Colorado Youth Summit, mission trip leaders, church staff, confirmation mentors, and Pastors.

These seven kids came from different communities and different school districts, but had one thing in common: SPUMC. They learned to value the blessing of strong, committed relationships because they were loved and supported by the SPUMC faith community. And now, 10 years after graduation, they still show up to love and support each other because you – the Church – told them they were loved, and they mattered.

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You – the Church – dreamed of a children's and youth ministry that "works," that is life-giving and fruitful. They have made it a point to stay connected and to support each other during good times and hard times because You – the Church – invested in children and youth.

Thanks be to God for a church that dreams of making God's transformational love real and present to children and youth!

Gracious God, thank you for our children and youth. Please help us to invest in them and continue to be a church where relationships are built and faith connections are made. In Jesus name. Amen

Deb Mulhern
Director of Connecting Ministries



December 14

Sing Out

"Sing to the Lord, who has done glorious things; proclaim this throughout all the earth."

--Isaiah 12:5

The UMC is a singing church – we can “sing out” when asked and we can sing contemplative, too. When it comes to singing well known and beloved Christmas carols, we sing out!

There are times we really don't feel like “singing out”, but that may be the times for us to gather with friends and neighbors. Those are times we need to remember the positive and put the negative behind – if only for a little while – and it's easier to do so together.

We are now in Advent, the season that precedes Christmas – a good time to get our voices “in tune together” and practice singing out. So, Sun Prairie UMC, let's get ready to raise the roof with song! (Trustees – I don't mean literally but figuratively). May this be a blessed, musical season for us to share with family, friends and all those we meet.

Gracious God, thank you for music to lift our spirits and thank you for sending us Jesus. Amen

Brenda Wingfield, Retired Clergy, Fellowship Time Host



December 15

Father in Heaven and Fathers on Earth

"Show me your ways O Lord, teach me your paths: Guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my Savior."

--Psalm 25:4-5

Growing up, I remember loving the story of Jesus's birth. How Mary gave birth in a stable, how she was the mother of a precious baby, and how shepherds and wise men came to acknowledge the birth and worship her and the baby. Yes, Christmas is so much about Jesus and Mary. But wait, there was another member of that family, one we hear too little about. It was Joseph who led Mary's donkey and asked for lodging, who stood by his family as strangers came to their stable and whisked his family away to Egypt for safety, but really, the man gets little attention in the Christmas story.

It was the same in my family. Mom, Grandma, my aunts were all strong and loving and active women. We went to Mom with our problems, we loved visiting our aunts, and Dad was just in the background. But when I think back to what Dad did for us, I see that his role, like Joseph's, was often downplayed or obscured. Dad was the one who helped us with our 4-H steers, even when I know he had other work to do. He took the family on trips across the country, showing us places that nobody else in our farming community had ever been to. He welcomed relatives and friends to our farm. He served as a wonderful example to us in his community service work. Dad gave us a safe structure, a strong foundation to live and build our lives on. And he did it all quietly.

I imagine Joseph fathered his family in a similar way — providing a foundation, a safe home, loving support. Joseph, like my father, wasn't a great prophet or king or general. He didn't accomplish mighty deeds or sway multitudes with his words. He just provided a secure and caring home for his family, and really, what could be more important than that?

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So, I applaud Joseph, and my Dad, and all those countless other dads who just get on with doing their best for their family.

Blessings on all of those who have fathered us, supported us, mentored us, loved us and been there for us. Blessings on all families, however they are formed. Blessings on all peoples, as all people are filled with God's light and love. Amen

Patricia Harrington, Outreach Chair

December 16

Be the Light

"You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to God."

--Matthew 5: 14-16

I have always loved the Christmas season. My parents did a wonderful job preparing my siblings and I for the birth of Christ. One thing that my family always did was "light-up" the house with Christmas lights and decorations. As a young child, I had my certain jobs and as I got older, I earned more responsibility with the decorations.

Now, as an adult, I have continued my dad's tradition of "lighting-up" my own house with Christmas lights. As a child, these lights were a source of comfort during the long, dark winter months. Nowadays, these Christmas lights take on a little more meaning. To me, these lights are a beacon of hope that represents the light of the word God sent on Christmas Day. In a world that often looks dark, let Jesus's light shine bright for all to see.

Dear God, we thank you for sending your son to be our shining light in our world. In moments of darkness, may your presence be our guide and light. Help us reflect your light in all that we do that we may bring hope and peace to all those around us. Amen

Jason Pothof, Confirmation Mentor, Greeter

December 17

Catch Me If I Fall

"Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

--Philippians 4:4-7

In recent years, it has become harder for me to engage myself in the season of Advent. Between school, chores, extracurriculars, appointments, holiday preparations, and other commitments, the weeks become to-do lists with the singular goal of completing them, and Advent sneaks up on me too quickly. Instead of remembering and celebrating Advent, I find myself stressed by deadlines and the future. I forget that God will take care of me if I let go of my anxieties and focus on the present moment.

In the book of Philippians, the Apostle Paul describes how God continues to support us, even when our struggles serve as barriers between us and God. In society, there is a need to feel secure and in control, which we often get by being ahead in life and well-accomplished. However, the scripture reminds us that it is okay to not be okay because God is always there to guide and support us.

I have been trying to stay in the present this year as the season of Advent approaches, and to accept that I am going to struggle in life sometimes. I know the future will be far from easy, but if I let go of my stress and open myself to God, God will catch me if I fall, and help me move through Advent and the months to follow.

Dear God, help us to remember the meaning of Advent in the upcoming weeks. Help us relieve the stress from the burdens of tasks and commitments, and remind us that you are always there to support us and catch us if we fall. Amen

Dayna Woods, High School Youth, Usher and Greeter

December 18

Waiting

"God is indeed my salvation; I will trust and won't be afraid. Yes, the Lord is my strength and my shield; God has become my salvation."

--Isaiah 12:2

As the holiday season approaches, our hearts are filled with the sweet anticipation of Christmas. We dream of sugar plums, those delightful confections that dance in our imaginations, symbolizing the joy and wonder of this special time of year. But beyond the festive treats and twinkling lights, there is a deeper, more profound dream that stirs within us—the dream of Emmanuel, God with us.

In the quiet moments of reflection, we are reminded of the true meaning of Christmas. Emmanuel, the promised Savior, came to dwell among us, bringing hope, peace, and love. Just as children eagerly await the delights of Christmas morning, we too are invited to embrace the wonder of God's presence in our lives.

Let us take a moment to savor the sweetness of this season, not just in the treats we enjoy, but in the spiritual nourishment that comes from knowing Emmanuel. As we dream of sugar plums, let us also dream of the peace and joy that Emmanuel brings. May our hearts be filled with gratitude for the greatest gift of all—the gift of God's love, made manifest in the birth of Jesus.

This Christmas, let us hold onto the dreams of sugar plums as a reminder of the simple joys of life, and let us cherish the dream of Emmanuel as the source of our true and lasting joy. May we find comfort and inspiration in the knowledge that God is with us, now and always.

Thank you, God, for coming to us in Jesus the Christ and for being with us always. Amen

Christy Tubbs
Director of Children's Ministry

December 19

Peace that Passeth Understanding

*"Be careful for nothing; but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God. And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus."
--Philippians 4:6-7 (KJV)*

Growing up a preacher's kid (AKA, PK), I spent pretty much every Sunday morning in Sunday school and church. I have always been a huge music lover and to this day, fondly remember many of those old Sunday school songs I learned as a child. As I read this passage in Philippians, I was reminded of the old standard, "I have the Joy, Joy, Joy, Joy, Down in My Heart." My favorite verse of that song was "I've got the peace that passeth understanding down in my heart." It felt like a fun tongue twister, and I remember my friends and me singing it as quickly as we could and laughing when we messed up the words.

There is a lot to be anxious about these days, both in our daily personal lives and in the larger world around us. Peace can feel like an unrealistic pipe dream. However, this scripture suggests that God offers a peace beyond anything we can comprehend. When I bring the burdens of life and my fears about our world to God in prayer, and thank God for all I have received, I can experience the peace that passeth understanding down in my heart.

Dear Lord, as we prepare for the birth of Jesus, help us to turn to you in times of fear and uncertainty, so that we may experience a peace that is beyond anything we can comprehend. Amen

Amy Quaerna, Choir Member

December 20

Waiting and Preparing

"In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flocks by night."

--Luke 2:8 (Read: Luke 2: 8-14)

Waiting and preparing are what the Advent season is all about. This always brings me back to my childhood and preparing for our church Christmas program.

Growing up in my hometown church, nothing was more exciting than the weeks leading up to our church Christmas program. Every child participated in the program from kindergarten to high school with singing, acting, costumes and our own "piece" we each had to speak in front of church that we had been memorizing for weeks beforehand. So much excitement and preparation. After the Christmas program, every kid would race down to the basement to collect their Christmas gift bag from the church ladies filled with oranges, peanuts in the shell and a candy bar. So simple yet so exciting as we had waited and prepared for so long for that night.

Years later, I find myself no less excited for the Advent season but for different reasons. Now I wait with such excitement to see my own kids in the church Christmas program. Now I look forward to the lighting of the candles at the Christmas Eve service. As the candles are lit, the lights grow dim and we all sing Silent Night acapella, it transports me to the night of Jesus' birth as if we are singing with the multitudes of angels. What a humbling moment that is.

Dear Lord, the Advent season is so full of excitement wherever we turn. Please be with us as we continue to wait and prepare for the coming of Jesus. Let us never lose that childlike wonder of this season and find joy in the simple lighting of a candle. Amen

Lindsay Pothof, Confirmation Mentor, Greeter

December 21

Advent Hope

"I wait for the LORD, my whole being waits, and in his word I put my hope. I wait for the Lord more than watchmen wait for the morning... Israel, put your hope in the LORD for with the LORD is unfailing love and with him is full redemption." --Psalm 130:5-7

Advent is a season of waiting, hoping and praying. Each year we return to this season ready to wait with bated breath for the baby Jesus to appear. Even though we have heard the stories of Jesus' birth over and over again, we hope that this will be the year we humans get things right and when we awake on Christmas morning, we will find ourselves more faithful, more patient, more peaceful, and more loving.

But hope was never meant to be a passive word. Saint Augustine is believed to have said, "Hope has two beautiful daughters; their names are anger and courage. Anger at the way things are and Courage to see they do not remain as they are."

Perhaps if we hope to wake up this Christmas morning a changed people, we will need to start with ourselves. We will need to find our anger and courage and turn them into action. So, we may leave this Advent season with the kind of hope that can change the world.

Holy God of new beginnings, help us to become your active agents of hope this Advent season. That we may find ourselves on Christmas morning a transformed and hopeful people. Amen

Claire Douglass, Pastor of Youth & Young Adults



December 22

Dream Unseen

"And Mary said, 'My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.'" --Luke 1:46-47

My family and I recently saw the movie "The Best Christmas Pageant Ever." The movie is about how six unruly children, the Herdman's, volunteer to star in their town's Christmas pageant to almost everyone's disbelief, but ends up teaching the town the true meaning of Christmas. I related to the Herdman's, especially the eldest daughter, the most. Like her, my life circumstances forced me to become tough, but lost. I wished to live in a different reality than I had and would often have dreams of my future that I believed would not come true.

In Luke 1:46-55, Mary shares how God lifts the humble and fills the hungry. Even in moments where it feels like change can only occur in a dream, Mary reminds us through God's mercy and strength transformation is possible.

Dear Lord, please give me the strength to keep on the path you have paved for me, especially during times where it is most difficult to see the path before me.

Cassi Benedict, Reconciling Ministry Team



December 23

Growing More PEACE this Advent Season

*"By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things."
--Galatians 5:22-23*

As children of God, we are blessed with the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, forbearance (tolerance), kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

In our world, it seems that peace is in short supply, we live in a broken world. I long for more peace. I find that my peace feels diminished by the loss of friends, health concerns, politics, the suffering of others and concerns for family members. We all have issues which rob our joy and peace. When we are weary and our 'fruits' seem diminished, begin by finding rest for your spirit and body.

Christians may find that the more we walk 'in the Spirit', the more we will experience peace. Continuing to grow spiritually may involve things like; daily prayer time, bible study, devotions, joining a small church group, spiritual friendships, giving of oneself to good works, taking care of self, speaking truth and committing time of silence and time in nature.

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Peace may mean being kind when one doesn't want to be kind; being forgiving even if you don't hear an 'I'm sorry;' taking on a new opportunity to give and grow; reaching out to the lost and hurting in our world; balancing faith, family, friends, self. And peace during Advent may mean making room in our hearts and lives for the amazing gift of Jesus' birth, even when may be feeling unsettled and less peaceful than we want.

Dear Father, please bless our hurting world. Help us to increase the fruits of Your Spirit in our lives. Help us all to heal. Thank you for the gift of your Son at Christmas. Amen

Brenda Carlson-Hahn, Reconciling Ministries Team, M & M Group, Greeter



December 24

The Birth of Christ

"The Shepherds went quickly and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in the manger. When they saw this, they reported what they had been told about the child. Everyone who heard it was amazed at what the shepherds told them."

--Luke 2:16-18



Thank you, God for fulfilling the dream and revealing yourself to us as Emmanuel—God with us. Thank you for Jesus. Amen

Hattie Banks George, High School Youth

December 25

What is Love

Have you ever met someone who had such a love for life you found yourself getting annoyed just listening to them? So often when I think of love, I catch myself reminiscing about past experiences; the taste of Tiramisu, the view from a rooftop in Italy while on our honeymoon, or how I feel when I'm spending time with family. In reality, love is so much more than that and plays a role in everything we do.

First Corinthians 13 brings to light how we can have everything, but if we do not have love for one another, we have nothing. Our church shows Christ's love in action within our community through our many different groups such as Knit, Crochet, Pray, Outreach, Reconciling, and so many others. Within these groups we set aside our differences and work together for the greater good. May we remember to honor Christ's birth in this Christmas season by sharing his love in everything we do.

1 Corinthians 13:1-13

1. If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal.
2. If I have the gift of prophecy and cannot fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.
3. If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.
4. Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud.
5. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs.

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6. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth.
7. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, and always perseveres.
8. Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away.
9. For we know in part and we prophesy in part.
10. But when completeness comes, what is in part disappears.
11. When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me.
12. For now, we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.
13. And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love. Amen & Merry Christmas!

*Thank you, God for your love that came down to us at
Christmas in Jesus the Christ child. Amen*

Chris Hale, Church Office Administrative Assistant, Men in
Mission, Trustees



December 26

Be on Time for Yourself

Read, Titus 2:11-13

We are really good at being busy. Really, really, really good at it. The idea of a full calendar is embedded into American culture. Meetings are expected to be efficient. Small talk is supposed to stay small. To be early is to be on time. We juggle these expectations with rare moments to step back and enjoy ourselves, and it can be hard to justify a moment alone.

I often tell myself, "If I am taking a break, something isn't getting done that should be."

However, Titus 2:11-13 tells us, "For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly, while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ."

Let this scripture remind us all that we can do no good for others unless we first do good for ourselves.

Dear God, thank You for the opportunities You provide. Allow me to center myself in Your teachings and live out the life I am called to live. Amen

Gavin Denning, High School Youth, Conference Youth Council

Candlelight Christmas Eve Worship Schedule

5:00 pm

Worship with our Praise Team

7:00 pm

Worship with Chancel Choir

9:00 pm

Worship with Communion & Harp

