

ADVENT DEVOTIONAL 2025

HOPE

PEACE

JOY

LOVE



Dear Reader,

Welcome to the spiritual journey of Advent. During this season of deep reflection, we prepare to celebrate Christmas, the coming of the Christ Child.

Our theme this year is “Hope.”

We hope these writings will provide a framework for your own Advent ponderings. The writers are a diverse group of people, though all are from this congregation.

We invite you to join us in any of all our opportunities for worship, service, prayer and observance. The calendar for the season is available on our website:

www.santamonicaumc.org/advent

Further information is also available by calling the church office at (310) 393-8258.

May you find these days to be holy and blessed.

Mary Crawford

First United Methodist Church of Santa Monica
Spiritual Formation Council

First Sunday of Advent - NOVEMBER 30

Matthew 24:36-44

Can you reflect on a time when you lost hope? You may have felt fear, frustration, anger, anxiety, vulnerability, or depression. It may have come from a personal experience or natural disasters or world events. It may have lasted for a short or long time, but it could have impacted your whole outlook on life.

I personally have had “down times” in my life, especially after my divorce, but I credit my faith and my friends for restoring my hope in the future.

My faith let me see the “rainbows” in life – all that is good, to heal both spiritually and emotionally, and helped me to be able to offer hope to others in their life struggles. Even a kind word, a smile or a hug can help others heal and being a good listener is very important.

Here are some sayings, Bible verses, & a hymn about hope:

Hope can lead us out of darkness and into the sunshine.

Hope is believing in what you prayed for.

Hope is confidence in what God can do.

Hope sees the invisible, feels the intangible, and achieves the impossible. (Helen Keller)

Even in the depths of sorrow, hope breathes. (Maureen Rank)

Hope deferred makes the heart sick. Proverbs 13:12

Hope does not disappoint us. Romans 5:05

O God, our help in ages past,
Our hope for years to come,
Our shelter from the stormy blast,
And our eternal home.



–Joyce Landsverk

DECEMBER 1

Isaiah 2:1-5

Isaiah's vision provides hope for redemption and restoration of humanity in times of conflict and uncertainty. Our modern times draw similarities to the strife that the people of God faced. Isaiah reminds us that we too should look towards God's light and follow His path in our daily lives.

As parents of two very young children, Brian and I turn to God to find meaning in our lives and do our part to make our community a better place. We emphasize the values God has instilled in us. Simply consolidated for our children and practical for daily life use, we came up with 'R.I.C.K.' (**Resilience, Improvement, Common Sense, Kindness**) as our family values:

Isaiah's prophecy is a message of **resiliency** for God's people to persevere through troubled times. We must be optimistic for the future and not fear hardship. We can actively change our path for the better and God is on our side the whole way.

The scripture's vision is not a passive message of hope but a call for action. We too should be our own agents of change. **Improve** our own lives and the lives of those in our community every day and with every opportunity. That is God's way.

Our son, who was 4 at the time, proposed **common sense** for his contribution to the family values. It adds a bit of humor and practicality to what can be rote in our daily lives. Pause, think critically, and decide for yourself if something makes sense. Don't just follow the masses. Use God's light as your North Star.

Kindness is the core of faith in action. We can choose kindness in every choice we make. It uplifts both the individual and our community when we make this choice. God's omnipresence is a reminder we should always be kind.

– Annie Lee Wong

DECEMBER 2

Psalm 122

On its face, Psalm 122 may seem a simple tale of the joyful pilgrimage of Israelites to Jerusalem to worship God in the temple. As we know, Bible verses are never quite that simple.

Have you noticed that when you are preparing to do something “good,” you are usually in a good mood? We all find joy in sharing our individual talents, but that experience is magnified when we are working as part of a community.

This psalm reminds us of that special sense of belonging which comes from gathering with others to celebrate, to be grateful, and to pray for peace in our world. Church services on Sunday provide us with an opportunity to not only find peace and hope for ourselves, but also to reach out and share those things with our church community as we gather with that common purpose in mind. We are all on this spiritual journey toward God.

Imagine how the world might be different if we could generate that kind of attitude in our daily lives and interactions with others. Whether we are in line for filling our gas tanks, or on the freeway at rush hour, or even waiting to check out at the grocery store, we are acting as part of a unique community. What if we try to engage in our daily activities as acts of worship; celebrating, showing gratitude, and praying for peace in our current circumstance? I wonder...

– Laurie Charchut

DECEMBER 3

Romans 13:11-14

“Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. (Romans 13:11)

During my youth and young adult years, I set an alarm to awaken each day. Sleep was easy and long in those early years, and I needed help to awaken and rise for the day’s activities. Now as an older adult, I no longer set an alarm; I awaken in the early morning without prompting, my body’s internal clock moving me out of the bed to make the coffee and start the day.

Paul uses this metaphor to describe the coming of Christ. The world had been changed through his life, death, and resurrection, and now they awaited the completion of Christ’s work with his second coming. The Kingdom of God was at hand, and the moment to wake from their sleep had arrived.

One of J.S. Bach’s great works is a church cantata entitled “Wachet Auf” (“Sleepers Awake”), composed in 1731. It is one of the musical pieces I always look forward to during Advent with its intricate weaving of the chorale’s voices into one. The lyrics of the hymn were written by Philipp Nicolai in 1599:

*Wake, awake for night is flying;
The watchmen on the heights are crying:
Awake, Jerusalem, at last!*

When I hear Bach’s music and sing those lyrics, my heart stirs, for I know the time has come to prepare for the arrival of Christ. I am awake and ready to welcome him once again.

“For salvation is nearer to us now when we became believers: the night is far gone, the day is near.” (Romans 13:12)

– **Greg Batson**

DECEMBER 4

Isaiah 40:3-5

Life can feel like a wilderness sometimes. You're doing your best to move forward, but the path feels bumpy and unclear. You hit patches of exhaustion, worry, or just plain uncertainty. And you start to wonder where God is in all of it.

Isaiah's words come like a breath of hope: "Prepare the way of the Lord." He's not just talking about clearing a literal road; he's talking about the landscape inside us. The valleys of discouragement, the mountains of stress or fear, the rough patches where we feel stuck - God wants to meet us right there.

And the good news is, we don't have to fix it all first. God comes into the wilderness, not after it's cleaned up, but while it's still wild. He's already working to smooth out the rough edges, to lift what's low and bring down what feels impossibly high.

Maybe you're carrying something heavy right now. Or maybe you're just weary from trying to hold it all together. Isaiah reminds us that hope is on the move. God's glory isn't waiting for a better season. It's coming right here, right now, to shine through the cracks.

So maybe today, we just make a little space. Take a breath. Clear a path, even a small one, in your heart. Hope is coming down the road - and God is closer than you think.

– Anne Premer

DECEMBER 5

Psalm 130

I had never read this Psalm before and was immediately drawn in by the first phrase – Out of the depths I called to thee. The author is reaching out, in his lowest moment, to God for help. God knows that we all have failings and perhaps not deserving of his mercy and forgiveness. But we hope for guidance, for understanding, for a fresh start, another chance.

This is such a universal truth that each of us has experienced a myriad of times in the crooked journey of life. We have been laid low by work problems, family drama, love, death, loneliness, health issues, financial crises, political concerns. Who can offer an understanding hand? Where is the love, empathy, patience, acceptance that can make us keep moving forward, day after day, when all we want to do is lie down?

The answer is the Lord. We wait for the Lord's blessing. For his reassurance. For his voice to give us hope. The Lord will provide what we need when we need it. Are we deserving of his love and comfort? Yes, we are, as his love is unending for his children who seek him.

And in this Advent season, as we hope for the coming of our savior, this Old Testament exhortation is a foreshadowing of the New Testament deliverance of Christ Jesus. His forgiveness of all our sins so we can have eternal life is our constant hope for everlasting life in heaven. We are all children again, waiting for Christmas morning when we open up a package, hoping it is a special gift. And we are about to receive the greatest gift of all. Thanks be to God for the gift of Hope.

– Michael V. Lamb

DECEMBER 6

James 5:7-10

I'm an impatient person. I want quick results. I like fast food, fast fashion, fast acting pain relief. I want overnight deliveries, MLB pitch timers, immediate answers to my texts. I don't care for lines or long movies; I can't drive 55. I have skipped the museum and gone straight to the gift shop. I want answers NOW. Patience may be a virtue, but speed is golden, time is money.

My dad moves at a different pace. He was once a voluble lawyer, a great raconteur, local politician, lay lector, a confident and persuasive public speaker. His mind is still strong, but in recent years Parkinson's disease has robbed him of his verbal gifts. He talks softly and at one-eighth speed. To combat the frustrating stutter he's developed, he will tap out the syllables of each word he is trying to speak. He has learned to shout in order to reach what we would consider normal volume. And he condenses every sentence to its shortest form so as not to lose the thread of the conversation entirely. For him, every hour of every day is an exercise in patience.

James says we must be patient in the face of our suffering. In Romans, Paul tells us suffering produces endurance, endurance produces character, and character produces hope. For my dad, hope is not a cure for Parkinson's. Hope is a successful transaction at the bank, a lucid exchange with a stranger about the weather.

The Victorian poet George MacDonald brought hope and patience together in a poem whose central metaphor is a chick in an egg. I like this final couplet:

*Hope is the bird with its dim sensations;
The shell that keeps it alive is Patience.*

– Sam Johnson

Second Sunday of Advent - DECEMBER 7

Matthew 3:1-6

Advent is a time when we slow down and remember that Jesus is coming. Matthew 3:1–6 talks about John the Baptist preparing the way for Jesus. He tells people to get ready, to change their hearts, and to look toward something new that God is doing. That connects perfectly with Advent, because Advent is all about preparing our hearts and making room for hope.

I like that John appeared in the wilderness, because the wilderness can feel empty or quiet, kind of like the waiting we often feel during Advent. Sometimes waiting is hard. We want answers now, or we want things to get better right away. But Advent teaches us that hope grows during the waiting.

This passage reminds me that hope is not just about wishing; it's about trusting that God is with us and doing something good. Advent is our chance to pause, pray, and remember that Jesus brings light into dark places. Even when life feels busy or stressful, we can hold onto hope because God keeps His promises. As we move through Advent, we can prepare our hearts just like the people who listened to John, by turning toward God and opening ourselves to the hope that Jesus brings.

— **Cady Senior**

DECEMBER 8

Matthew 3:7-12

REPENTANCE Is The Pathway to REDEMPTION

Theme: "HOPE"

Jesus Christ is our "Hope" to all believers in Christ. Amen.

Our Hope is built on nothing less than Jesus Christ our Righteousness.
Amen.

Verse 7:

John the Baptist was the forerunner of Our Lord Jesus Christ. Luke 1. John was full of the Holy Ghost and power which enabled him to speak with boldness the truth of the Word of the Lord to us and the world. We all need the power of the Holy Spirit to preach the truth of Christ to the world.

Verse 8:

John the Baptist preached "Repentance." For the kingdom of Heaven is at hand. 21st Century preaching is the same message, "Repentance."

Merriam Webster English Dictionary - definition:

- * Repentance is the act or process of repenting especially for misdeeds or moral shortcomings.
- * Feeling of responsibility for wrongdoing.
- * Repentance is the first pathway of redemption.

Personal Definition:

Turning from Darkness to LIGHT. Jesus Christ is the Light.

Verse 9:

Coming to Church is not Repentance! Repentance is having an encounter with the Lord Jesus Christ e.g. Saul (now Paul) had an encounter with Christ on his way to Damascus to persecute the Christians (Act 8.)

Verse 10:

This is God's Judgment to those who refuse to accept Our Lord Jesus Christ as their Lord & Saviour. Heavenly Father is a God of Love and Judgement. Whether you believe or not! There is judgment for rebellious souls Unrepentant.

Hebrew 12: "God is a consuming Fire" Spirit of Judgment.

Verse 11:

John introduces the Lord Christ to his audience. The full fulfillment of Luke 1:13-17.

Act 2, V. 1-3

Pentecost Sunday after the Resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. The disciples gathered at the Upper Room to pray. Suddenly a sound like blowing of violent wind came from Heaven fire purification of life and become like Jesus Christ that is filled with the Holy Spirit.

Verse 12:

This is a warning of the coming Judgment. The chaff and wheat shall be separated on the Judgment Day (Matthew 13:30). The chaff shall be burnt in unquenchable fire, while the Wheat will be taken to Heaven.

Lesson of Life: Be the Nation and Kingdom of the WORD of God and Holy Spirit. Amen.

— **Titi Osoba**

DECEMBER 9

Isaiah 11:1-5

Sometimes it feels like everything good has been cut down: the world in ruins, our leaders gone astray, our hope gone. Yet Isaiah delivers a promise that out of what seems lifeless, God will bring new life.

“A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse...”

What a picture of hope! Even when the old tree is gone, God’s purposes are not. From Jesse’s line King David’s family, a new branch will grow: the Messiah. Christians recognize this as a prophecy of Jesus, who came not with armies or political power, but with the Spirit of the Lord resting on Him, wisdom, understanding, counsel, might, knowledge, and reverence for God.

These are the qualities that make for true leadership, true holiness, and true peace. Jesus doesn’t judge by appearances or hearsay; He sees to the heart. He stands up for the poor and meek, and His justice isn’t swayed by status or strength.

And even today, this same Spirit works in us to make us shoots of new life in a weary world. When we act with fairness, listen with understanding, stand for what’s right and live faithfully; we reflect on the One who wears righteousness and faithfulness like a belt around His waist.

So, if you feel like you’re looking at a stump, something cut down, broken, or finished, remember: God specializes in bringing life from what looks dead. Look again. You might just see a tiny green shoot or two, a sign that God’s promises still take root.

Prayer: Lord, when all seems lost, help us to remember that You bring life from stumps and hope from ruins. Let Your Spirit rest on us, give us wisdom to see clearly, courage to act justly, and faithfulness to live for You. Amen.

With Hope & Joy,
— **Sandra Jones**

DECEMBER 10

Isaiah 11:6-10

Tanka Poem - Hope's Harmony

Knowledge. Remnant stands.

Binary prey, predator.

Now harmonious.

Former order realigned.

Awesome glory now abounds.

— **Art Dodd. Jr.**

DECEMBER 11

Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19

When I was a young girl, my sisters and I would write our letters to Santa and help him know exactly the Barbie, games, or books we wanted. Every year the United States Postal Service receives tens of thousands of letters addressed to Santa Claus that hold their hearts' desires for toys and items they hope to see under the tree on Christmas morning. In 1912, US Postmaster Frank Hitchcock began Operation Santa Claus authorizing local postmasters to open these letters to Santa and respond to the children. This tradition of response has now grown to include all Americans who can read a child's letter to Santa and go online and shop to fulfill a child's Christmas wish.

Psalm 72 is also a list from the heart of the Psalmist to God for God to send a king to reign over the world. The Psalmist prays for a king that will bring to the earth God's righteousness, justice for the afflicted, prosperity for the needy and to crush the oppressor. In the poetry of the psalm, the impact of the king is compared to life giving water upon freshly mown soil and the hope is that God's king will reign till the moon is no more.

My letters to Santa usually resulted in one or two things I asked for specifically. But Santa also brought me things I actually needed. When Jesus was born, God answered the Psalmists wish list. God heard the Psalmist's cry and gave the world what we truly needed—a new way to live into God's hope for us. Jesus was not a king with a crown but a loving savior. He came to bring light into the darkness, give hope to the hopeless, inspire peace among the nations, instill joy in every heart and command that we love one another. Thanks be to God!

— **Tania Batson**

DECEMBER 12

Luke 3:15-18

The theme for Advent is Hope. Hope can have many meanings: a feeling or desire for something to happen, coupled with a belief that it might, a desire for something to happen with a reasonable expectation that it will happen or Hope can be an object, a source, or confidence.

In this passage John the Baptist is the messenger of Hope. John knows that he cannot carry the weight of the Messiah and is not the Messiah, but he knows that one who will come who can carry the mantle, that one will be mightier than he can ever be. Jesus the Christ is a source to bring Hope to the world. John reminds us that he can only prepare the way to the path to hope. John lets the people know **Be the Hope...**

John can only baptize with water but the one that is coming can baptize with spirit and fire. John is telling the people to be calm and not lose sight that a new day—a new teacher—will come who will bring light out of the darkness. But first he needs to be born into this world, and the people need to prepare and wait for that night when the child enters the world.

*In a road full of darkness, I still see the light
Get down on my knees and thank the Lord every night
I feel the power of Jesus, and His bible I read
These hard times are taking a toll
There's a war going on for my heart and my soul
Look up towards the sky, the King still on His throne
Stand strong in your faith and be the hope**

As we wait for the birth of Jesus we must stand strong in our faith and be the hope.

— **Chris Reagh**

**Written and performed by Creed Fisher, "All These Songs I Wrote" 2021.*

DECEMBER 13

Romans 15:4-13

Only our God of Hope can fill us with joy and peace so that we might have Hope in a world filled with despair. When world circumstances tempt us to give up, endurance helps us to continue with faith, confident that God will keep His promises.

As we are enduring the many challenges of life, we are in need of encouragement. Reading Scripture will fill us with Hope because God's Word comforts our souls. The Scriptures, which were written long ago for us, lift up God who is our ultimate Hope and provide wisdom that gives us encouragement.

As we read stories of God's ability to perform miracles and of God's power to turn intended evil to good, we can rest knowing that God has our best interest in His heart. Stories of healing, redemption and protection reveal God's deep fatherly love for His beloved children.

God's compassion should inspire us to put our prejudices aside when we are with people different from us. We seek to live as followers of God's only Son Jesus Christ, who welcomed all people, not just Jews but Gentiles as well. Our God is just, hears the cries of His people and knows when His children hunger and thirst for righteousness. God hears us when we call, grieves with us when we grieve, and hopes with us.

Renewed Hope requires nourishment. There can be no Christianity without community. Each time we break bread and share the Body of Christ, we are reminded of the hope of the resurrected Jesus, our salvation, our reconciler and redeemer. We will find sustenance in Christ's sacrifice as we seek to live in harmony and community with one another. We will find peace knowing God can be trusted to extend our words and our actions far beyond where and what we can imagine.

Rejoice in Hope! Be the Hope!

— Rose Kujawa

Third Sunday of Advent - DECEMBER 14

Luke 1:46-55

Just as Mary gave her son for us, she also gives us her song. Mary's *Magnificat*, proclaims God's love in the world. God looks on the lowly and calls them blessed. God has filled the hungry with good things, and the poor God has lifted up. Mary knows this truth because Jesus is alive inside of her. Mary offers us this song so that it may also be our song. We don't know that Mary always felt such joy and hope, but we imagine she didn't. For example, when she frantically searches for Jesus in the temple, or when she tells him to do something about the lack of wine, or when she experiences the chaos and loss of the crucifixion. Reading Mary's song during Advent is an opportunity to reflect on the joy and hope of God's love that we have experienced, even if we don't feel it all the time. No matter where you find yourself on Christmas may Jesus be alive in you. May you see and proclaim God's work in the world. May you let your heart sing!

Blessings!

— Rev. Keri, Rev. Josh, and Elly Paget



(Art by Elly Paget: Mary Singing to Elizabeth)

DECEMBER 15

Isaiah 35:1-4

This passage from Isaiah, which presents a vision of a future full of hope and joy, also acknowledges that we have our human moments of fear and weakness, when we forget God's divine presence and care.

On a recent trip to Indianapolis, we were on our way to a performance at Clowes Hall, on the Butler University campus. The evening air was crisp and cool, the leaves on the trees were turning beautiful colors of red, orange, and yellow. We were happy to be together for a special date night.

But then, in our oversized rental pickup truck (don't even ask Ann about that!), we were focused only on getting there on time, maneuvering multiple detours that required careful driving as the street narrowed to one lane, somehow managing to park in a parking garage designed for regular-sized cars, getting our mobile ticket app up and running, and finally emerging from the garage elevator.

Then the bells in the bell tower started to ring. We stopped to listen. The beautiful Hall glowed with lights. And it hit us, what's really important: how blessed we are. It was as if a reset button had been pushed. The experience reminded us of the poem, "Christmas Bells" by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, especially the last stanza:

Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:
"God is not dead, nor doth He sleep;
The Wrong shall fail, the Right prevail,
With peace on earth, good-will to men."

— Ann and David Wilson

DECEMBER 16

Isaiah 35:5-10

Many scholars believe that this is one of the many poems predicting that God will smooth the homeward journey of the Jews living in exile in Babylon. But the very next chapter places this one in the days of the Assyrian invasions that led to the total destruction of the Northern Kingdom, Israel, while Hezekiah was king of the Southern Kingdom, Judah. His descendants presided over the exile to Babylon. Either way, the poem is appropriate. God will fix all the physical problems (presumably, mental ones, too) of the exiles and send them home on a straight highway from their place of exile to Jerusalem. This road will be completely free of every kind of pothole – and will have lots of well-maintained rest stops. But verses 8 and 9 tell us that only “redeemed” people will be able to use it, anyway. No “unclean” folks at all. That rules out a lot of us; at least that will keep the traffic from getting too bad.

Whether or not such a road is even possible outside our dreams is debatable. But as a dream, this is a very pretty one. And dreams are Good Things. They can keep us from getting too depressed by reality. They can provide us with goals, both for ourselves and our world. They can give us hope.

And, when life’s road has an unexpected turn in it, dreams can be modified to fit the new circumstance. I grew up wanting to be an astronomer. I went to school and received a PhD for my efforts in that field. Only then did I discover that, in the year I graduated, there were essentially no jobs for new astronomers. This was not part of my dream. But I eventually realized that my training taught me other skills, and so I became a numerical analyst, and that worked out fine. I don’t know if God’s hand was involved, but when I looked around me, I saw a smoother road than the one I’d been on, and I took it. And I’m grateful.

— **Dick Crawford**

DECEMBER 17

Matthew 11:2-6

Many of us are always looking for proof as to the existence of God and God at work in our lives and in our world. How often have we asked for a sign. “Please give me a sign, God, to let me know you are there, to let me know to trust you.”

I know the world is hurting. I know you may be hurting, at times, even right now. I know the world is unfair; filled with greed and injustices. I've worked my career as a licensed social worker; trying to help the vulnerable, the sick, the struggling. I grew up as a young girl, jealous of all those who had more: who appeared to have happy, stable families and live in big houses, or girls who had more Barbie Doll clothing than me. Now, I am a woman with some wisdom, experience and a wider perspective. I see the signs of God in so many of you, yes... You!

Your kindness and sharing of resources, your showing up, your good words and good deeds. I know the power of kind neighbors reaching out with a meal or a ride when I was ill. I know the surprise of finding a loving note in my mailbox or at my door. I know the generosity of friends who sent a check or deposited money into my account when I was unable to work.

God is in each of you. God Expresses LOVE through you; your actions, your prayers, your perseverance.

Yes, we would like to see a sign, written in the sky, to reassure us and comfort us. Let us ask God to help us see these signs through those we encounter. Please take the time to think about who has been kind to you, who has lifted you up or made your work day a little better, your struggle a little easier, your journey a little lighter.

If you are unable to see that sign, BE that sign for someone else. Be Hope for another. It may be easier than you think. Pray about it. Give thanks and forgiveness, again and again. Find compassion. Dig deep. Feel the love that is, and has been, poured out unto you.

— **Cindy McQuade**

DECEMBER 18

Matthew 11:7-11

As John's disciples departed, Jesus turned to the crowd and said: "Truly I tell you, among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he" (Matthew 11:11, NIV). In this single statement, Jesus distinguishes the present world from the world to come. John stands as the greatest among those "born of women," a phrase describing every mortal born into the natural order, living by faith yet still awaiting redemption. His courage, devotion, and faithfulness placed him at the pinnacle of human calling. He prepared the way for the Messiah and lived without compromise. Yet even his greatness could not open the gates of the kingdom.

Then Jesus reveals something astonishing: "Whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he." With these words, He unveils the new covenant. Those who belong to Christ, who have entered the kingdom through faith and share in His life, stand within a reality that John could only glimpse. Their greatness does not come from status, effort, or even righteousness of their own, but from union with God through Christ, freed from sin and death.

Advent draws us into this turning point. It reminds us that human strength, discipline, or even prophetic faithfulness is not enough. The earnest hope of Advent lies beyond human greatness. It rests in God's act of divine grace, in the birth of Christ, through whom we enter a life that no mortal can achieve alone. Hope in Christ is anchored in the faithfulness and goodness of God, who is love, grace, and wholeness everlasting. We wait, then, not as those striving to prove our worth, but as those already invited into God's kingdom. That is the hope Advent proclaims: that through Jesus, what was unreachable has been opened, and what was imperfect has been made whole.

— Verna Porter Buxton

DECEMBER 19

Romans 1:1-7

And you also are among those Gentiles who are called to belong to Jesus Christ. (Romans 1:6 NIV)

To me this is double the Good News! How blessed are we as Gentiles to be saved and welcomed into the Kingdom of God along with the Jews!

By now, many of you have seen my interview for the church's anniversary video where I recount my story of having first joined the choir here. I expressed my interest to Dr. Smith but was worried because I was "not a member" of this particular church. Dr. Smith responded with something like, "Not a member?! We have Jews in the choir!" (He may have mentioned atheists, too.)

Fast forward to the current day, and I am working as a professional choir singer around Los Angeles at both churches and synagogues. For the last few years, I have regularly worked at Temple Isaiah in West L.A. I am the Christian singing in the Jewish choir. I have grown to love this so very much!

Temple Isaiah often joins with First AME Los Angeles for a Martin Luther King Jr. Day celebration. One year, we were rehearsing at FAME in their choir loft. One of the Jewish singers picked up a Bible and said something like, "I love this book! Do you know why? Because it's the next part of the story!" I was so moved by this!

I feel connected to my own Christian faith in new and deeper ways through my experience with these Jewish friends. I am so blessed to have been welcomed among them.

— **Holly Pitrago**

DECEMBER 20

Psalm 146:5-10

Many of our leaders and media use misinformation to sow fear, dissent, and division so they can consolidate their power and money. They issue warnings and spread fake news of violence and destruction to exact greater control over our public and private lives. They paint a bleak picture of our society through recycled images while claiming only they have the solutions. They wear us down by spreading cynicism and turning us against anyone who looks or thinks differently than we do.

I have always fought against these forces. I strive to remain positive, to concentrate on the good and turn away from the darkness. Though things have not always been sunshine and roses, I am grateful for the many blessings bestowed to me in my life. Though I have had obstacles and difficulties, my faith in the Lord keeps me hopeful and optimistic that I will get the rewards in life I deserve.

Today's passage in Psalm 146 deals exactly with these coping skills. In the verses directly before today's passage, Psalm 146 says "Do not put your trust in princes, in human beings, who cannot save." Instead, we are supposed to look to God for help and hope. We should put our faith in the one of Creation, the one who "upholds the cause of the oppressed, and gives food to the hungry," the one who "lifts up those who are bowed" and who "loves the righteous."

Listening to the doom sayers tell us how to act and think stains the creation the Lord has built. Following their lead to enrich ourselves at the expense of others divides and isolates us. The Lord's creation is limitless. Hope is limitless, Love is limitless. Do not let other humans box us in with their narrow view of the world. Live in relationship with the Lord, follow his example of love for all, show respect for and help the less fortunate. For when we follow the Lord, we all can share the hope and happiness of his creation.

— Ben Ing

Fourth Sunday of Advent - DECEMBER 21

Matthew 1:18-25

The first word that comes to mind upon reading this passage is *trust*. Joseph found himself in a very unsettling situation, and his first thought was to pursue the path which most people in his time deemed socially acceptable. However, God soon made it clear that He had other plans in this upcoming unexpected, miraculous birth. After hearing those plans in a dream, Joseph trusted God, and the incarnation of God among us and salvation followed.

The Bible is full of stories of women and men who trusted when God led them into unexpected situations that seemed out of step with society. Noah built an ark. After three days in the belly of a whale, Jonah brought a message of repentance and salvation to the people of Ninevah, whom many viewed as beyond redemption. A widow shared her last flour and oil with Elijah, and she and her son miraculously had enough left to survive a drought.

Trust is more than just an emotional belief. It is a bold action, stepping forward into uncertain situations, knowing that, just as God has delivered ordinary individuals and peoples from danger, illnesses, and oppression, God will do the same for us. When faced with difficult circumstances, we are encouraged to pray, study the Bible and other Christian writings, and seek the advice of others to discern the plan that God is calling us to pursue, trusting the outcome to God's infinite love for and commitment to us.

Commit your way to the Lord;
trust in him and he will do this.
- Psalm 37:5

— **Bill Buxton**

DECEMBER 22

Psalm 80:1-7

The phrase “restore us” stands out in this passage. As does the shepherd imagery; we are but a gentle flock, and we need to be herded to be led, to be unified. Stir up Your might, o God, and help us restore something we have lost.

It’s easy to feel lost during the Christmas season. In addition to the usual bustle of preparing the home for the holiday – hosting traveling family members, perhaps, or gathering gifts, or having parties, or merely decorating – there can be a wave of hardship and sadness that accompanies the joy of the season. Much ink has been spilled about seasonal depression, which can spring from myriad sources. It’s during these bleak moments that we can feel, like the writer of the above Psalm, that God is angry with them. That we are being fed nothing but tears to eat and drink.

And we look out at the world and see the unjust prevailing. Our enemies laugh among themselves. We look within, and our inner enemies – despair and guilt – are also laughing.

Christ came not just to offer a new philosophy of gentleness and equality, but to ensure us that God is not angry. That we will no longer drink cups of tears and wither away from lack of emotional nutrition. We must be saved, and the birth of the Messiah will provide it.

And the Messiah is nearly here. The birth of Christ is the rebirth of all of us. Out of that personal despair, out of that emptiness, away from the meal of tears. Every year on Christmas, we are reminded that we can be pulled out of that mire. The sadness will be with us every year, but, more so, so will the freedom from it.

— **Witney Seibold**

DECEMBER 23

Psalm 80:14-19

We are so interdependent upon each other. This makes the metaphor of the grapevine, in today's verse, carry such meaning. There are times that this interdependence becomes so powerful in our world that God takes a back seat in our lives. That is, until life delivers a blow to our interdependent world that may affect us individually, but also as a local group, nation and even as our world.

It is at this point we utter the words that open today's reading, "Return to us, God Almighty!" This "vine" has been cut and burnt and lies in ashes and only the power of God has the ability, through our faith, to make our lives right again.

From this point, the writer of this Psalm (Asaph, a worship leader appointed by King David) writes a plea for God to restore us and to have God's face to shine upon us once again.

In our celebration of our 150th year as the First United Methodist Church of Santa Monica, we looked back in time to see the hope that we lived by throughout our history. What we also saw were the highs and lows of our church history, as well as our lives. The one constant that we depended on, and continue to depend on: our God, will always be our hope, where we can call upon our Holy Father to renew and restore us all.

Prayer:

Dear God,

You are our hope and restorer. Help us to remember that all we are, and all we hope to be, will be through you.

Amen.

— **Ron Theile**

Christmas Eve - DECEMBER 24

Luke 2:8-20

When I read this in the scripture, “shepherds in the fields, keeping watch through the night over their flock,” I immediately remembered a time when I was leading my Marines in a battle charging up a hill known as Charlie Ridge, during the first part of my tour of duty in the Vietnam War in 1967.

It took us all afternoon to reach the top and by then it was dark and quiet. I was concerned the enemy might attack us with artillery projectiles and I took care of my Marines (my flock) by making sure they dug defensive bunkers. The enemy did fire projectiles, some of which exploded in the tree branches above my men and rained deadly shrapnel upon us. By creating our bunkers, we were protected and took no casualties.

During a lull in the barrage, it became very quiet and still. It was then that I noticed a beautiful and serene sight, the moon shining through the branches of the jungle trees. I couldn't believe this beautiful image, right after a very challenging battle. As I looked at it, I felt a spiritual message, people back home and elsewhere who are not in battle are also seeing this moon, there is another world away from war and I felt a great sense of HOPE!

I believed the Angel of the Lord was speaking to me and telling me that Jesus was indeed with us and was born as our savior. As in the scripture, “the Messiah, the Lord” was born unto us. As a result, I felt the Lord's presence often times throughout the many battles I led Marines through during my tour of duty.

I never fully realized the importance of the presence of the moon that night, I knew I felt something special, but reading this scripture helped put everything in perspective. In my case the moon was the “Angel.” Once again, this church has helped me understand the reason for some significant events in my life.

— **Larry Wilson**

Christmas Day - DECEMBER 25

John 1:1-14

Christmas is a season of many themes: love, joy, gratitude, good will, to name just a few. Too often they seem to fade away once our seasonal celebration is over. So, what can we hang onto because Christ has been born among us? For me the answer is hope—hope for what our lives can become, and hope for our fragmented and divided world. It is hope that God is not done with us yet, and we have a future worth looking forward to.

What is our basis for hope? The birth narratives depict Jesus' coming as a low-key, almost inconspicuous event—nor something that augurs positively for something as weighty as human hope. That's why we need the words from John's gospel telling us that the baby born in a manger is none other than the incarnation of the eternal God, the Creator of life itself. "The Word was GodAnd the Word became flesh and lived among us." In him we are given light that gives life, and know the sustaining love of the Gift-giver.

The hymn "Hope of the World" by Georgia Harkness (#178 in our hymnal) puts this into words I can relate to. Verse 2 reads:

Hope of the world, God's gift from highest heaven,
bringing to hungry souls the bread of life,
still let thy spirit unto us be given,
to heal earth's wounds and end all bitter strife.

May this Christmas bring all of us a new season of hope!

— **Rev. Larry Young**



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