

*The Presbyterian Church
of
Bowling Green*



*The Days Are Surely Coming:
Meditations on Advent 2025*

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November 30, 2025

"Handel's Messiah" by Julia Roberts

Isaiah 9:2, 6-7

The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light: they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined ...

For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace.

Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to order it, and to establish it with judgment and with justice from henceforth even for ever. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will perform this. (KJV)

★ ★ ★

These words in Isaiah 9:2 and 6-7 bring to my mind Handel's *Messiah*. In this great oratorio, the powerful words and the magnificent music ring out with majesty and might. The words in the libretto were written by Charles Jennens. He compiled biblical passages from the King James Bible and the Book of Common Prayer. Jennens assembled the text to present a cohesive Christian message, and he gave it to his friend, George Frideric Handel, who let the words gather dust until 1771 when he wrote the music in less than one month—twenty-four days, to be exact.

The *Messiah* tells the story of Jesus from birth to death to resurrection and beyond with words from the Old Testament and New Testament. Part I tells of God's plan to redeem humankind through a Messiah and the birth of Christ; Part II covers the death and resurrection of Christ; and Part III emphasizes the promise of resurrection and glorification of Christ.

In Part I, a bass-baritone aria proclaims from Isaiah 9:2, "The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light. And they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined." Then the chorus sings from Isaiah 9:6, "For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder; and his name shall be called Wonderful Counsellor, The mighty God, The Everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace."

My love of the *Messiah* may have started when I learned that my Grandfather Link was one of four soloists annually when the piece was performed in my hometown of Kirksville, Missouri. Grandfather Link passed away one month before I was born. Throughout my life, I have cherished playing Handel's work on records (vinyls, as they are called today) that allow me to enjoy the music and hear the scriptures any time I want.

Fairly recently, I had the opportunity to stand by the plaque that indicated the place where the *Messiah* was first performed in Dublin, Ireland. I was thrilled to be there.



December 1, 2025

"Many Messengers" by Kyle Otterbein

Mark 1:2-3

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight." (NRSV)



Advent begins our season of waiting and anticipation for the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ. As the gospel writer Mark makes so clear in the first verse of his gospel, the season is all about good news. I know that I always look forward to Christmas each year: no matter what may be going on in the world at large or in my own little world, Christmas always promises to bring love, joy, peace, and hope.

The coming of the Messiah, God's anointed king and savior, was long anticipated. The people had waited for centuries, enduring much suffering and hardship as they looked for the fulfillment of God's promises. Central to those promises was that God would return to his people to bring forgiveness, to save them from the powers of their enemies so they could enjoy freedom: "free to worship God without fear." While they waited, God sent many messengers to point to Jesus as God's savior and messiah, and he has continued to do so for us today. I am thankful for all these messengers: John the Baptist, the angels, Sunday School teachers, pastors, mothers and fathers, and all the rest.

I pray that as you prepare for Christmas, the ways and paths to the Christ child will be made straight for you; that you will experience new love, joy, peace, and hope; and that you will once again hear the good tidings of a great joy, God's good news for you, your family, and a world still longing for God's kingdom.

Prayer

O God, we thank you for the many messengers who have shared the good news of Jesus. Continue to prepare the way before us that we may enter your kingdom of peace and love. Keep us on the straight path that takes us into your presence where there is fullness of hope and joy.

Amen.

December 2, 2025

"Awaiting Peace" by Erika Solberg

Isaiah 11:1-2

Then a shoot will spring from the stem of Jesse,
And a Branch from his roots will bear fruit.
The Spirit of the Lord will rest on Him,
The spirit of wisdom and understanding,
The spirit of counsel and strength,
The spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. (NASB)

★ ★ ★

I heard a good joke recently: "Being an adult is saying, 'Next week should be less busy' over and over until you die." I laughed, and then I sighed. I definitely feel like I am always waiting for my life to slow down, get easier, and lose its complications—but it never does.

I'd accept that every week will be packed with responsibilities and activities if I could at least feel like I have control over what I'm in charge of—if I didn't have to keep finding new solutions to new problems. But so far, I keep waiting for what doesn't come.

In Advent, however, I am waiting for what *will* come, if I pay attention. Isaiah promises us the arrival of a shoot that will become a branch that will bear fruit. This event will not happen all at once, however—it takes time for a shoot to grow and a branch to bear fruit.

But if I am patient, the fruit will be worth waiting for, because that fruit is Jesus. He will have a spirit full of wisdom, understanding, counsel, might, knowledge, and fear of the Lord. Those qualities will help me find the peace in my life that I am looking for, that sense that even if a week is busy, I can handle it.

I want to feel my choices and actions arise from wisdom, understanding, and knowledge. I want counsel that helps me know where to go. I want a sense of might that assures me I can do what is asked of me, and a fear that will remind me that any competence I possess comes from God.

I want the mercy, love, and grace that Jesus promises us, no matter what any week holds.

And so I wait, and try to remember that in Christ, I can have peace in chaos, forgiveness after errors, and the strength to continue. The shoot will always spring from the stump of Jesse.

Prayer

Dear Lord, help us keep going even when the weeks are long and overwhelming. Help us remember that we are never alone, and that we have the counsel, understanding, and wisdom of Jesus with us always. Amen.

December 3, 2025

"The Spirit of the Lord is Upon Us" by Sam Evans

Isaiah 61:1-2

The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me,

because the Lord has anointed me

to proclaim good news to the poor.

He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,

to proclaim freedom for the captives

and release from darkness for the prisoners,

to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. (NIV)

★ ★ ★

Isaiah's words ring with power and purpose—a calling that resonates not just through the voice of the prophet but also the lives of those who have been called to serve today. This passage reminds us that we are not merely observers; we are called to serve others regardless of their station in life.

At our church, this calling comes alive through various programs and missions such as our Saturday Meals Program. One Saturday each month, members of our church, including youth, help prepare, package, and deliver meals to those who need assistance with getting enough to eat. This program provides more than food: it also builds a bond between the participants and those they serve in a dignified and caring manner.

Another program is David's Room in the Inn. On Thursday nights from November to March, our church opens its doors for those who don't have shelter. We provide a warm place to sleep, a hot evening meal, and a time for members of our congregation and unhoused members of our community to interact with each other.

Isaiah's message doesn't stop with food and shelter—it speaks of healing the brokenhearted and helping people walk out of darkness into light. Such transformation can happen through education, especially when done through a lens of leadership and compassion. Educators embody the sacred mission of helping others proclaim their freedom from self-doubt, generational limitations, and societal labels. Every week many of our members do this work in Sunday School, Youth Group, and other programs, participating in the Spirit's work of restoration.

God has anointed us not just to comfort, but to empower. Not just to serve, but to restore. Whether offering a hot meal, a warm bed, or the tools to unlock a person's fullest potential, we can fulfill Isaiah's prophetic vision.

May we continue to say "yes" to the Spirit's call—not just in word, but in action. May our church, our classrooms, and our lives be spaces where the broken find healing, the hungry are fed, and every person is reminded that they are beloved and worthy of hope.

Prayer

Spirit of the Sovereign Lord, thank You for anointing us to serve. Make us bold in our compassion and faithful in our calling. Use our hands to feed, our doors to shelter, and our leadership to empower.

May we proclaim Your favor through every act of love and justice. Amen.

December 4, 2025

"Be Watchful" by Kevin Fluit

Matthew 24:34-46

"No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying, and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away. That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding with a hand mill; one will be taken and the other left.

"Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. But understand this: If the owner of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house be broken into. So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him."



The overwhelming message from this verse in the gospel of Matthew can be summarized in two words: Be watchful.

Jesus speaks here of his second coming, its time elusive and known to no one except the Father. This passage provides two key points. First, it reveals God's glorious promise to return to gather His flock. Second, it contains a prophetic warning, urging personal vigilance and reflection on our position before God. If we were to know the hour of His return, our sinful nature of procrastination, coupled with our finite understanding of time, would prevent any deep contemplation on the state of our hearts before God.

While this passage mentions a physical return of Christ, it's important to note that He is with us at all times through the power of the Holy Spirit. We should all live our lives with a sense of integrity and accountability, not as if Christ were looking over our shoulders (however true that is) but instead feeling empowered and strengthened with the same Spirit that filled Christ himself when He walked this earth in physical form some two-thousand years ago.

The return of Christ is something to be anticipated and celebrated, but the reference to a "thief" implies a warning that He may come at any moment, regardless of whether or not we are ready or not. We should not wait to ask, knock, and seek for His gracious gift of salvation, because compared to the eternity ahead of us, we have a mere sliver of time before Christ comes again (Matthew 7:7-12). But if we surrender and submit to Christ, our names, too, may be written in the book of life forever (Revelations 3:5).

December 5, 2025

"Humble Beginnings" by Wayne Hendrix MD

Luke 2:1-7

And it came to pass in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This census first took place while Quirinius was governing Syria. So all went to be registered, everyone to his own city.

Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed wife, who was with child. So it was, that while they were there, the days were completed for her to be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.



These simple verses are the cornerstone of Christianity and among the most repeated and celebrated verses in the Bible. But I wish to concentrate on only one phrase in these majestic verses, namely, "and she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger."

To me, Christ's humble beginning in a manger sets the tone for His exemplary way of life, His ministry, and even His selfless act of eventual death on a simple wooden cross. At every step, Christ chooses a humble path.

One of many acts of Christ's humility is contained in John 13:12, when he washes the feet of His disciples. Jesus asks, "Do you understand what I have done to you?" Washing one's sandal-clad feet was a common practice in the dirty, dusty Middle East, but for someone to voluntarily perform the act for you was a most striking example of humility.

In his book *The Freedom of Self-Forgetfulness: The Path to the True Christian Joy*, author Tim Keller writes that humility "is not ... thinking less of myself, it's thinking of myself less." A few more among the many examples of the New Testament's teachings on humility include:

- James 4:6: "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."
- Philippians 2:3: "Do nothing for selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves."
- Matthew 23:2-3: "The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat, so observe and practice all they tell you, but do not do as they do. For they preach, but do not practice."

Jesus' birth in humble surroundings is only the beginning of the example he sets for us. His alignment with and compassion for the lame, the blind, the afflicted, the sinful, and the "lowest of these" throughout His life and ministry emphasizes this message of humility. May each of us find ways to practice humility and service to others in our daily lives.



December 6, 2025

"Christ the Foundation" by Millie Davenport

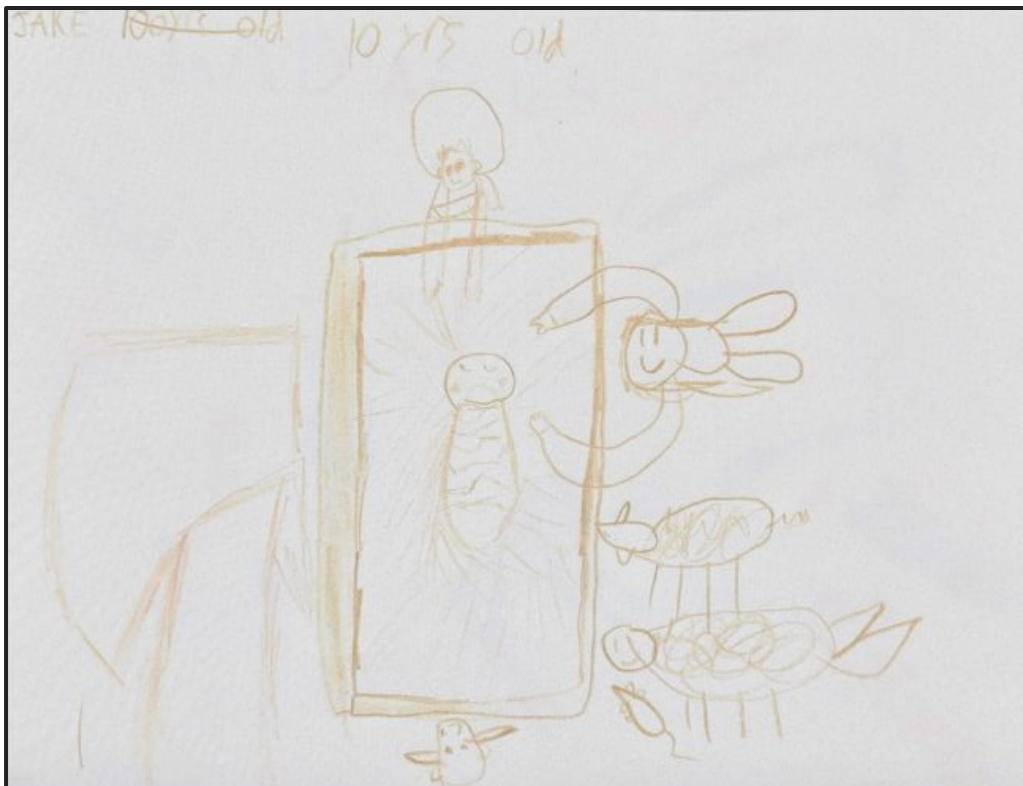
Zechariah 6:12-13

"...Thus says the Lord of hosts: 'Here is a man whose name is Branch: for he shall branch out in his place, and he shall build the temple of the Lord. It is he that shall build the temple of the Lord; he shall bear royal honor, and shall sit and rule on his throne. There shall be a priest by his throne, with peaceful understanding between the two of them.'" (NRSV)

Sometimes I feel that my life is moving very fast and is full of chaos. But I know that if I have faith in my church, Christ will be the foundation to build my life on, and he will do everything in his power to help my life stay strong.

Prayer

Lord, thank you for watching over us all our lives. Please keep supporting us until we join together with you. Amen.



Art by Jake Ellington

December 7, 2025

"Unexpected Places" by David Thomison

Micah 5:2

But thou, Bethlehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel; whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting.

★ ★ ★

"Ephratah" is the ancient name for the town of Bethlehem. Calling it "Bethlehem Ephratah" notably distinguishes it in this verse from another town named Bethlehem in northern Israel. "Ephratah" means "fruitful land," which is appropriate because although the town was relatively small and considered unimportant, it yielded the Messiah. A place that was "little among the thousands of Judah" brought forth "the ruler of Israel."

The rest of the verse emphasizes the divine origin of the Messiah, one who was with God from the beginning: "whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting." The word "everlasting" emphasizes how vast God and his son are—they stretch beyond the limits of any town.

It is a Christmas blessing to consider that Old Testament prophecies became New Testament reality. Great things can happen in small, unexpected places.



Art by Layla
Trickey

December 8, 2025

"The Star Shined Down" by LeAnn Otterbein

Matthew 2:1-2

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."

★ ★ ★

I love to look at the stars. I even have an app on my phone that tells me the names of the stars and planets I'm seeing. I use the brightest stars to help me find the constellations. The Magi followed a star to worship the child who was born king of the Jews. The scriptures tell us they also brought three gifts. These gifts are one of the reasons we give gifts at Christmas time. In our family, our children received three gifts to remind them of the gifts presented to the baby Jesus. When we sing the hymn "We Three Kings of Orient Are," we are reminded of the significance of these gifts: gold for a King, frankincense for worship, and myrrh to prepare a body for burial. The star shined down on the greatest gift, the one who gives us hope, the savior of the world.

from "We Three Kings of Orient Are"

Glorious now behold him arise;
King and God and sacrifice:
Alleluia, Alleluia,
sounds through the earth and skies.

Refrain:

O star of wonder, star of light,
star with royal beauty bright,
westward leading, still proceeding,
guide us to thy perfect light.

— John H. Hopkins



December 9, 2025

"Hope for a Fearful World" by Youth Sunday School

Matthew 2:1-6

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: 'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.'" (NRSV)

★ ★ ★

When King Herod hears the news that a new (and potential rival) king has been born to the Jews, we are told that he is frightened, and that all of Jerusalem is frightened. Does Herod feel threatened that a rightful ruler might threaten his rule? The people are living in fear—fear of what? Kings clashing? A civil war? A revolution and even worse living conditions?

We live in a world that still experiences fear. We don't always know what changes may come to our world. There are lots of possible threats around us: super-viruses, worsening economic conditions that may lead to the collapse of our economy, uses of AI that could threaten our jobs or the ways our communities live together. Maybe a short way to describe our fear is that we fear death.

The arrival of the wise men represents the arrival of hope for the world. They come expectantly and in faith that a good and just ruler has been born into the world and will bring peace. Even though the wise men are strangers to Israel, they are ready to put their trust in the true king of Israel. God's promises are true and about to be fulfilled.

Prayer

Lord, we thank you for the arrival of the wise men from the East. When we find ourselves afraid, may we look to the stars and be reminded that you have promised to come through your king to bring new hope, justice, and peace.



Art by Kenny Crocker

December 10, 2025
"Stretched Between Awe and Insignificance"
by Rev. Dr. Allen C. McSween

John 1:1-3

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. (NRSVUE)



To me, no one articulates the mystery and wonder of Christmas more profoundly than John in the opening words of his gospel. John sets before us not a humble manger in a stable but the vast panorama of creation. He takes us back not to first-century Palestine but to the very beginning, when God said, "Let there be light...and God saw that the light was good."

John offers us a different perspective from the other gospels on the birth of Jesus. Before John the Baptizer comes on the scene, before there are "shepherds keeping watch over their flocks by night," before Wise Men from the East bring their gifts to the Christ Child, John throws open the curtains of creation and declares: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being." John presses us to think big about what we celebrate at Christmas.

As I read the opening verses of John's gospel, I am reminded of the stunning photographs sent from the James Webb Space Telescope. One image seems to show thousands of stars. But each point of light is not a star—each is in fact a galaxy with its own *billions* of stars. It becomes clearer by day that the immensity of the universe is far beyond anything we could have imagined.

So how do we react? One response is a sense of awe: "The heavens are telling the glory of God..." But another response is a haunting sense of insignificance: "What are human beings that you are mindful of them...?" In a universe that is vast beyond all imagining, how could my fleeting little life have any real meaning?

Physicists can describe what they believe happened in the first seconds after the universe came into existence. But they cannot say why those events happened or why the physical forces were so incredibly "fine tuned" as to lead to the formation of atoms and stars and planets—and us. Had any of the original factors been even the slightest bit different, the universe as we know it would not have come into being. But it did—and we did!

Stretched between a sense of awe and insignificance, John speaks a profound word of gospel to us. John insists that behind all that is, and holding all that is together, is something vastly more than physical forces. This "something" is the personal, purposeful love of God revealed in what John calls the *Word*. From before creation and throughout creation, God has chosen to reveal himself decisively in the *Word* incarnate—Jesus Christ, who shares our joys and tastes our tears in full measure, whose birth we celebrate at Christmas.

John stretches our minds as he insists that in a universe vast beyond all our comprehension, all that is has come into being *through Christ* and *for Christ*. Ponder that for a moment—or a lifetime. This truth has everything to do with how we view our lives and how we care for creation. The one whose birth we celebrate at Christmas is no less and none other than the very embodiment of the plans and promises of Almighty God.

We may never comprehend all that John's words mean, but still we can sing "Joy to the World," trusting that the whole created order in all its incredible vastness, and our fleeting lives with all their triumphs and tragedies, are held forever in the relentless love of the *Word made flesh* in Jesus, son of Mary—Son of God, whose love binds all things in perfect harmony.

Prayer

Lord God, in the beginning, you called *all things* into being not merely by a word of power but by the living *Word* whose birth among us we celebrate at Christmas. In and through him, the whole created order and the entire span of time bear the stamp of your divine wisdom and love. By the power of your Spirit, enable us to receive gladly the promises of Christmas and, in trusting them, may we, too, sing and share "Joy to the World;" through Christ our Lord.

Amen.



Art by Charlotte Crocker

December 11, 2025

"Carrying the Christ-light" by Brianna Trickey

John 1:4-5

"In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."



This verse reminds me of the song "This Little Light of Mine." Its opening line says, "This little light of mine, I'm going to let it shine." In many ways, the world tries to extinguish Christ-light in the world. But we as Christians are here to show the world love and to continue to live as Jesus lived, to continue to shine his light.

It's easy to get caught up in the darkness that surrounds us, but this verse is a beautiful reminder that "Thy word [Jesus] is a Lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path" and that we are supposed to carry the word out into the world, to let it shine and not to allow it to be extinguished by the darkness of hate or war (Psalm 119:105).

We currently live in a darkness that can easily engulf us; however, we have the love of Jesus to lead us through this darkness and to show people that we are Christians by our love. As it is stated in Matthew 22:36-40, "Jesus replied: 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

By following these two commandments, we continue to carry Christ-light into the world. So remember that you can be the reason someone finds Christ-light and is taken out of the darkness. This holiday season, when it would be easy to show disdain, instead show love. When it would be easy to show hate, instead show kindness. When it would be easy to walk away, instead stay and give of yourself.

Be the light.



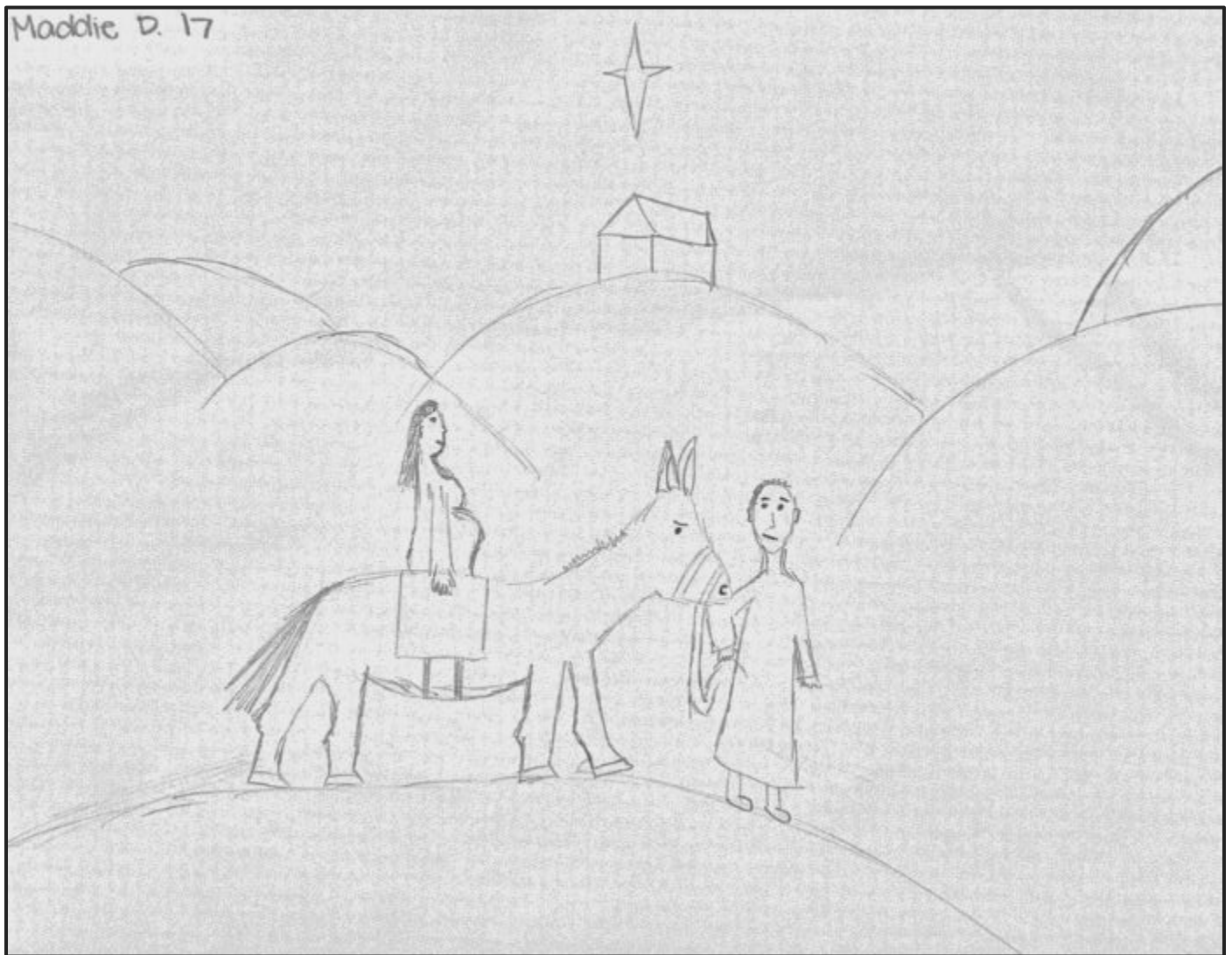
December 12, 2025

Artwork by Maddie Davenport

Luke 2: 4-5

So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. (NIV)

★ ★ ★



December 13, 2025

"Reminders" by Pamela Napier

John 7:42

"Has not the scripture said that the Messiah is descended from David and comes from Bethlehem, the village where David lived?" (NRSVUE)



You know how television or streaming shows often start with a few "previously on . . ." scenes so we all are reminded about what happened in the story before the current episode?

Well, Bible authors used a similar technique.

In John 7:42 (the "current episode"), we readers are reminded of what the prophets said about where the Messiah would come from and who the Messiah's ancestors would be.

So as part of today's devotion, I'm asking you to prepare for Christmas by reading or listening to two hymns: "Once in Royal David's City" (try searching online for Daniel O'Donnell's excellent version, available on YouTube) and "O Little Town of Bethlehem" (Nat King Cole's beautiful rendition can also be found easily online, including on YouTube). Both songs tell of a fulfillment of the prophecies foretold "previously on . . ."

Prayer

Gracious God, thank you for ancient prophets, for New Testament writers, and for favorite Advent and Christmas carols. Amen

from "Once in Royal David's City"
by Cecil Frances Alexander

Once in royal David's city
stood a lowly cattle shed,
where a mother laid her baby
in a manger for His bed:
Mary was that mother mild,
Jesus Christ her little Child.

He came down to earth from heaven
who is God and Lord of all,
and His shelter was a stable,
and His cradle was a stall:
with the poor, and meek, and lowly,
lived on earth our Savior holy.

from "O Little Town of Bethlehem"
by Phillip Brooks

O little town of Bethlehem,
how still we see thee lie!
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep
the silent stars go by.
Yet in thy dark streets shineth
the everlasting light;
the hopes and fears of all the years
are met in thee tonight.

For Christ is born of Mary;
and, gathered all above,
while mortals sleep, the angels keep
their watch of wond'ring love.
O morning stars, together
proclaim the holy birth,
and praises sing to God the King,
and peace to men on earth.

December 14, 2025

Your Turn

Psalms 80: 1-3

Hear us, Shepherd of Israel,
you who lead Joseph like a flock.
You who sit enthroned between the cherubim,
shine forth before Ephraim, Benjamin and Manasseh.
Awaken your might;
come and save us.
Restore us, O God;
make your face shine on us,
that we may be saved. (NIV)



A devotional is a short reflection on how a passage connects to God's teachings. Use the guidelines below to think about the above passage and perhaps even write down some of your thoughts.

1) Think.

- Read through the passage several times.
- Consider the context of the passage. You might want to read the whole psalm or even read up on the Psalms of Asaph, of which Psalm 80 is one.
- Are there any unfamiliar references that you might want to look up? For instance, who are Ephraim, Benjamin and Manasseh?
- What words or phrases jump out at you? Why?
- How does this passage relate to your life? Does it call up a memory of Christmas or Advent or another time in your life? Do the words comfort or challenge you? Does the passage confuse or reassure you?
- How does this passage relate to Advent? We are waiting for the arrival of the baby Jesus and anticipate the return of Christ. How does this psalm connect to those actions? How might it help us prepare?

2) Write.

- Record your responses to the questions above. You can do anything from making a list of words to forming whole paragraphs—whatever helps you to track your ideas.
- If you want, imagine you're talking to members of our congregation: tell them any thoughts you have or any questions you want to explore or share.
- Be yourself. Don't feel like you need to say something that's never been said before or that you need to sound like a minister.
- Later, you can look back at what you wrote and use it to meditate on the passage further. You could even share it with someone!

December 15, 2025

"Held Close to His Heart" by Mary Evans

Isaiah 40:11

He tends his flock like a shepherd;

He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart;

He gently leads those that have young. (NIV)



There is something beautiful and tender about the image of God as our shepherd. He is not distant or indifferent. He is near, attentive, and full of care.

I grew up on a farm in Missouri, and we raised sheep. When a newborn lamb was too weak to stay outside, my father would gently scoop it up and carry it into the warmth of our farmhouse. He'd place the lamb in a wooden box lined with straw near the stove, and my siblings and I would eagerly feed it warm milk from a bottle as we watched the little lamb's tail bob up and down. In that kitchen, we were keeping lambs alive by providing them safety, warmth, and love.

Isaiah 40:11 tells us that God does the same with us. Like a shepherd who cradles the most fragile lambs, He gathers us in His arms and carries us close to His heart. We are not left to struggle alone. When life leaves us weary or wounded, He holds us close—right where healing begins.

This truth comes alive beautifully through children as well. In our Sunday School class, the Parable of the Good Shepherd is a favorite story. One Sunday, Georgeanna brought a wooden lamb from her home and hid it in the indoor play area. We invited the children to search for the "lost sheep"—just as Jesus described in the parable. With squeals of excitement and determined hearts, they searched high and low. Their joy when they found the lamb was contagious. They begged to play this game on following Sundays—because they understood the heart of the Shepherd: He never stops seeking the one who is lost.

Just like those little lambs in the kitchen box, just like the wooden lamb tucked away in the playroom, we are pursued, gathered, and held close by our Shepherd. It does not matter where we are in life—young, caring for the young, middle-aged, older, or caring for elders, He leads us with gentleness and love.

Prayer

Shepherding God, thank you for carrying us close to your heart. Thank you for seeing our weakness and responding with tenderness, not judgment. Help us rest in your arms when we are weary. And may we reflect your gentle love to others, especially the vulnerable and the lost. Amen.

December 16, 2025

"Shepherding the Flock" by Rachel Crocker

Ezekiel 34:11-16

"For this is what the Sovereign Lord says: I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on a day of clouds and darkness. I will bring them out from the nations and gather them from the countries, and I will bring them into their own land. I will pasture them on the mountains of Israel, in the ravines and in all the settlements in the land. I will tend them in a good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel will be their grazing land. There they will lie down in good grazing land, and there they will feed in a rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. I myself will tend my sheep and have them lie down, declares the Sovereign Lord. I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak, but the sleek and the strong I will destroy. I will shepherd the flock with justice."

★ ★ ★

I'm someone who loves context. So, when these verses from Ezekiel resonated with me, I wanted to read the whole chapter. It begins with stating that the shepherds of Israel have failed the sheep—rather than caring for them, the shepherds have eaten the best food, worn the best clothes, and neglected the sick. This failure is why God states that he will be our shepherd in verses 11-16 and that he will "shepherd the flock with justice."

And I am glad. In these times, I am desperate to hear some good news about justice. We are living in an unjust world, so I am relieved to know that God will take care of those who have so little.

God promises to rescue his sheep from all the places they were scattered and tend them in good pasture. He also tells us that he will "bind up the injured and strengthen the weak, but the sleek and the strong I will destroy." In our culture, we often focus on the first part of that promise and forget the second half. But we need to acknowledge both because the first part is incomplete without the second. We all want people to be fed and clothed and cared for equally, but God also asserts later in the chapter that He will punish those who "shove with flank and shoulder, butting all the weak sheep with their horns until they have driven them away" (Ezekiel 34:21). Anyone who has cared for animals has seen this behavior, where the biggest, fattest members of a group (whether sheep, cows, or even puppies) push the little ones away so they can eat more of the food for themselves.

In Ezekiel 34:17, the Sovereign Lord goes on to say: "I will judge between one sheep and another... Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture? Must you also trample the rest of the pasture with your feet?" These lines reflect the anger I sometimes feel about the wastefulness in our community. Those who have plenty often don't share, even when they have more than they need or could ever use, even in ten-thousand lifetimes. It's comforting to know that God shares my anger toward greed and a lack of compassion.

Luckily, justice is not ours to mete out, but God's. I am relieved that God, not us, will make those decisions. Although I yearn for justice for the poor, I also know that all humans are fallible, and

we would make mistakes if we were to decide. What a comfort it is that God not only will tend his sheep, providing “good pastures” where they can lie down, but also will destroy those whom He judges to be the sleek and strong.

Ezekiel 34 ends by saying that the Sovereign Lord will judge between the fat and lean sheep and that he will save his flock, who will no longer be plundered. It ends on a positive note, reminding us of the peaceful, safe, and abundant place that God will prepare for his sheep to live with Him. The chapter closes with, “You are my sheep, the sheep of my pasture, and I am your God.” I’m glad to serve a just and loving God who loves us so much that he sent his Son to Earth for us.



Art by Quinn Ellington

December 17, 2025

"We are the Sheep" by Kyle Otterbein

Psalm 23: 1, 1 Peter 2:25

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. (Psalms 23:1 (NRSV))

For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls. (1 Peter 2:25 (NRSV))



You can't grow up in many churches without knowing the words of the twenty-third psalm: "The Lord is my shepherd." They are some of the most beloved words in the Bible. But I admit that I hadn't given much thought to what that phrase may say about me. If God is my shepherd, the clear conclusion is, "And I am a sheep." I didn't grow up on a farm, so I don't have a lot of experience with farm animals in general and have had few encounters with sheep. I do know, however, many of the stereotypes of sheep: that they are dumb, or weak, or vulnerable.

To learn more, I found a blog post by writer and rancher named Lisa Schmidt where she talks about becoming a shepherd and what she learned about sheep in the process. Here are a few of her observations:

- Sheep love habits and routine: they know what time it is to go to pasture and when to head to the corral.
- Sheep don't handle change well.
- Sheep are curious, yet afraid,
- Sheep respond to a strong leader.
- Sheep can be oblivious to the pain of their companions.
- Sheep are gullible and can be led with the promise of treats.
- Sheep react to situations; they don't plan. Sudden storms can leave them trapped.
- Sheep, if cornered, will step on other sheep, sacrificing them in an effort to survive.
- Sheep are safest in the company of the herd. Alone they panic and become immobilized due to fear.

(from "Characteristics of Sheep" by Lisa Schmidt, A Land of Grass Ranch.com, February 25, 2025)

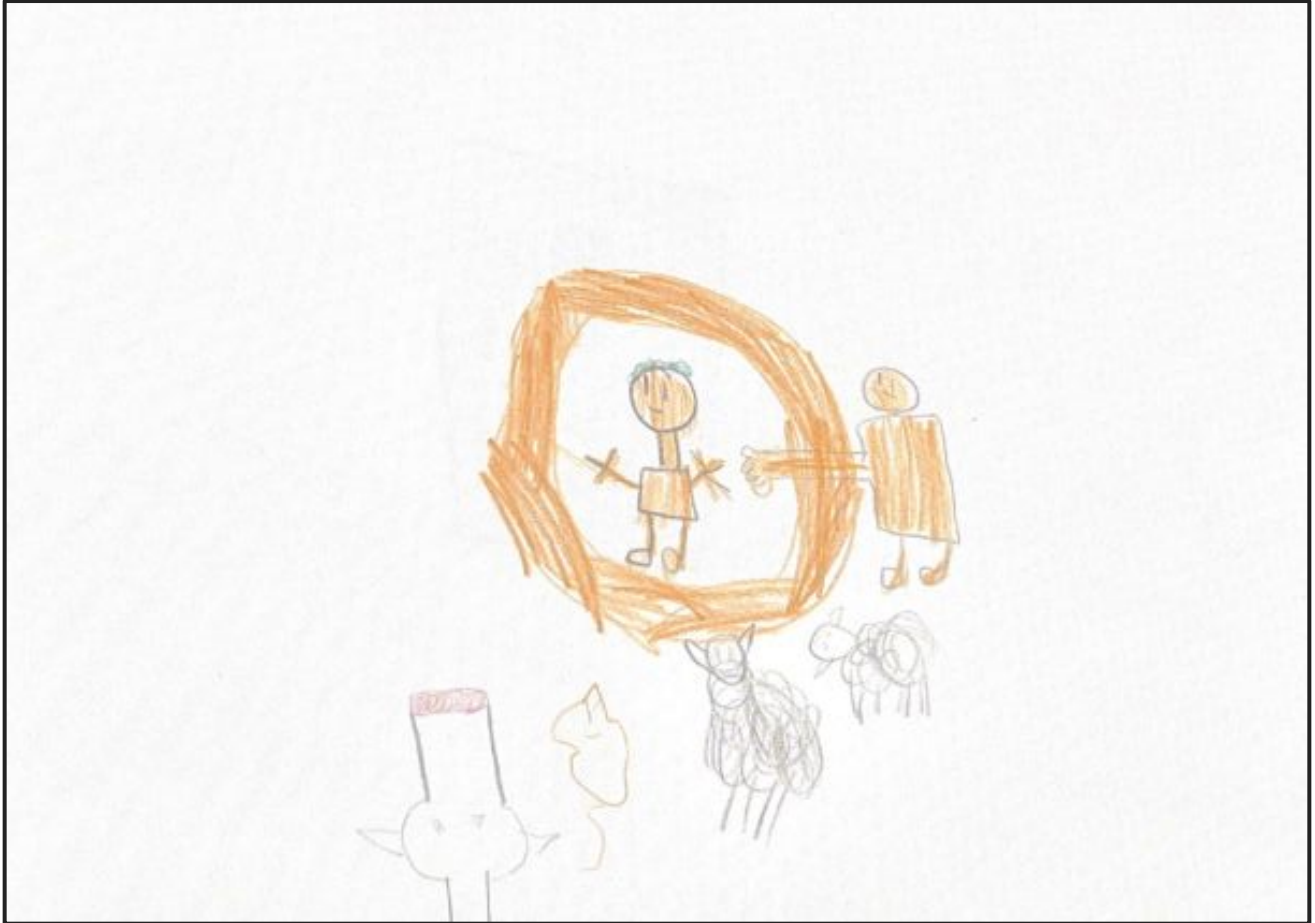
Hmmm ... a few of those descriptions come a little too close for comfort.

We may like to think of ourselves as strong, independent, self-sufficient, and ready for everything. But Peter is clearer-sighted: we tend to go astray and in going astray leave ourselves vulnerable to a world of problems and pains.

As I think about the gift of our Savior Jesus Christ at Christmas, I am glad he is our good shepherd and the guardian of our souls. May we learn to recognize his voice and be eager to follow wherever he may lead us.

Prayer

God, watch over us and protect us. Be our keeper and lead us into your presence this Christmas. If we fall into the valley of the shadow of death, come and find us and bring us home. Lead us into green pastures and beside the still waters. As we celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ, may you restore our souls with the love, joy, peace, and hope of Christmas.



Art by Grayson Trickey

December 18, 2025

"The Good Shepherd" by Margaret Stein

John 10:10-18

"The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.

"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep.

"I am the good shepherd. I know my own, and my own know me, just as the Father knows me, and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father."

★ ★ ★

During the frantic moments of Christmas Eve preparations, it's easy to lose sight of the deeper meaning behind our traditions. At our church, the children's Nativity rehearsal, with its laughter, chaos, and fleeting focus, reminds us that our efforts—even when imperfect—can reflect something sacred. All the effort builds toward a moment where the story of Christ's birth comes alive in a way only children can bring.

When I read the familiar passage from John 10:11-13, I was drawn back to a memory of one Nativity performance a few years ago when a small Charlotte C. was a playful sheep and the older Drew E. was a determined shepherd. In the middle of the performance at the front of the church, Charlotte declared something along the lines of, "You can't catch me!" and tore down the center aisle.

Immediately, Drew took off after her in hot pursuit. When he caught up, he coaxed her back to where she belonged with the rest of the flock. At the time I giggled along with the congregation, thinking he had acted just like a shepherd should—go get your sheep! But then I realized their unplanned scene was more than just a diversion from the usual pageant. It was an enacted parable: Drew didn't hesitate, chasing after his sheep out of love and responsibility, embodying the selfless care Jesus describes.

As we journey through Advent, we are invited to reflect on Jesus's example of the good shepherd. The Nativity story, retold by children year after year, calls us to live out this love—not as hired hands, but as members of Christ's community, shepherds to one another. May we, this Advent, seek ways to embody that care in our homes, our church, and our neighborhoods, following the Good Shepherd's lead with joy and devotion.



December 19, 2025

"Mary's Example" by Annette Parkerson

Luke 2:15-20

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them. (NRSV)



In this passage, after hearing from the angel that the Messiah had been born, the shepherds went "with haste" to find "the child lying in the manger." Once the shepherds found the baby Jesus, they shared with Mary and Joseph the good news that they had heard, and "Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart."

The lines about Mary resonate with me. I remember that when my children were born, I loved hearing other people compliment them. Yes, they were beautiful! And precious! Just wonderful! I felt such joy. At the same time, I sometimes wondered how their lives would unfold, years into the future. What would they be like? What work would they do? I imagine that the shepherds' testimony made Mary feel even more joyous at Jesus' birth as she "treasured all these words," but it also likely raised questions for her. What would her baby boy's life be like? What would He be like?

I assumed on first reading the verse that "pondering" meant "worrying," which is something I often do. Yet a quick dictionary check says to "ponder" means to "thoughtfully consider" and can even be a spiritual practice. Thus, Mary's pondering is an act of faith. She is joyful and aware of God's promises. What an example Mary is for all of us.

Prayer

Dear Lord, thank you for sending Jesus as a baby. May we feel joy as we remember His birth, His Life, and His Everlasting Love for us. Amen.



*Art by Drew
Ellington*

December 20, 2025

"The Righteous Branch" by Sheila Reeves

Jeremiah 23:5-6

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In his days Judah will be saved, and Israel will live in safety. And this is the name by which he will be called: "The Lord is our righteousness." (NRSV)



We all yearn for leaders who embody fairness and integrity. Jeremiah prophesied during a period when the Israelites faced war, exile, dissatisfaction with their leaders, corruption and chaos. Jeremiah's promise of a "righteous branch" is spoken against this backdrop, reminding the Israelites (and us) that God is always working behind the scenes to accomplish God's will.

We all want to live in safety and peace. Yet our actions suggest we are incapable of realizing these yearnings. We look in the material world for security or think only we can save ourselves. But our true protection comes from God. When we trust God as our righteous leader, we can be certain of His guidance and refuge. When we live in faith and obedience, we are increasingly able to receive the gift of God's safety and to reflect God's righteousness in our daily lives.

Jesus is the fulfillment of the promise to raise up for David a righteous branch. Jesus is "the Lord of Our Righteousness." Jesus is our King!

From "Joy to the World"

by Isaac Watts

Joy to the world, the Lord is come;

Let earth receive her King;

Let every heart prepare him room,

And heaven and nature sing ...

Joy to the world! The Savior reigns;

Let men their songs employ;

While fields and floods, rocks, hills, and plains

Repeat the sounding joy ...

No more let sins and sorrows grow,

Nor thorns infest the ground;

He comes to make His blessings flow

Far as the curse is found ...

He rules the world with truth and grace,

And makes the nations prove

The glories of His righteousness,

And wonders of His love!



December 21, 2025
A Poem for Psalm 89:5
and A Prayer for Psalm 148 1-2
by Children's Church

Psalm 89:5

The heavens praise your wonders, Lord,
your faithfulness too, in the assembly of the holy ones. (NIV)



The heavens sing an *amazing* song.
They praise the Lord the *whole* day long.
The stars all twinkle, *holy* and true,
They shout, "Dear God, we honor You!"
The moon and sun both clap and cheer,
For God's *great* love is always near.
His faithfulness will never end—
Our *wonderful* Maker, our best friend!
So lift your voice, both *loud* and clear,
And praise the Lord for all to hear!
For heaven's joy and earth's delight,
All sing of God's *great* love and light.

Adjectives chosen by 2025-2026 Children's Church Class



Psalms 148: 1-2

Praise the Lord.

Praise the Lord from the heavens;
praise him in the heights above.

Praise him, all his angels;
praise him, all his heavenly hosts. (NIV)

★ ★ ★

Dear God,

I lift my *happy* voice up to praise you! The sky above sings Your *holy* name, and the angels clap their *wonderful* hands with joy. You made the heavens so *great* and filled them with *colorful* light. Thank you for being so *powerful*, so *super*, and so near to me. Help my heart to sing with all creation—"Praise the Lord!"

Amen

Adjectives chosen by 2025-2026 Children's Church Class



December 22, 2025

"God's Timing" by Frederica Kernohan

Luke 1: 36-56

Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. For no word from God will ever fail."

"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled." Then the angel left her.

At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!"

And Mary said:

 "My soul glorifies the Lord
 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has been mindful
 of the humble state of his servant.
From now on all generations will call me blessed,
 for the Mighty One has done great things for me—
 holy is his name.
His mercy extends to those who fear him,
 from generation to generation.
He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;
 he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.
He has brought down rulers from their thrones
 but has lifted up the humble.
He has filled the hungry with good things
 but has sent the rich away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel,
 remembering to be merciful
to Abraham and his descendants forever,
 just as he promised our ancestors."

Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months and then returned home.

★★★

It is true—timing is everything.

Elizabeth was six months into her pregnancy when Mary travelled a hundred miles to stay with her until just before John the Baptist was born. Both women were in great need of support—they were living out God's plan, but with few details as to what that plan was or how it was to occur. Oh, what a comfort they must have been to each other when they met!

I often ponder the events of these verses and consider everything—EVERYTHING!—from all the viewpoints. I wonder about the relationship between young Mary and her elderly cousin, Elizabeth. I imagine their thoughts and feelings. I wonder about the timing, the traveling and logistics, their health and deliveries, and, most of all, the divine nature and characteristics of God that are revealed to us in this scripture.

There are multiple lessons and assurances provided in these verses, but there are two that I lean on (and have experienced) more times than I can count.

The first lesson is that we are not to know or comprehend how God's intentions for us or his plans on earth are to occur. We can only step forward with acceptance, knowing, as Gabriel stated in Luke, "with God nothing will be impossible." That is key. We are to allow God to orchestrate his purpose through us, even though we have no earthly idea how it will happen. He can make it happen. Divinely, we are sometimes allowed a glimpse of his plan and are washed over us with a feeling of relief, awe, and joy, just as when Mary saw Elizabeth and proclaimed her joy and praise in song.

The second message I treasure is that, mercifully, God sends or inserts others in our lives as support and affirmation when we need them—and often before we know we need them. Just as Elizabeth was "filled with the Holy Spirit" when Mary arrived at her home, so are we buoyed (and often saved) by the presence of others in our lives.

This story gives me peace and confidence, and assures me of God's active presence in our lives.

God's timing is perfect, and for that we are truly blessed.



Art by
John
Duncan
Andrews

December 23, 2025

"But Now..." by Rev. Dr. Allen McSween

Isaiah 43:1-5a

But now thus says the Lord,
 he who created you, O Jacob,
 he who formed you, O Israel:
"Fear not, for I have redeemed you;
 I have called you by name, you are mine.
When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
 and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,
 and the flame shall not consume you.
For I am the Lord your God,
 the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.
I give Egypt as your ransom,
 Cush and Seba in exchange for you.
Because you are precious in my sight
 and honored and I love you,
I give people in return for you,
 nations in exchange for your life.
Do not fear, for I am with you;
 I will bring your offspring from the east,
 and from the west I will gather you. (NRSVUE)

★ ★ ★

You have just read one of my favorite passages in scripture. A great deal of biblical faith is packed into these lovely words from the prophet Isaiah. But I hope you did not rush too quickly past the opening words, "But now..." Much of the gospel of Isaiah is found in those simple words. To a broken, dispirited people in exile, God speaks a word of powerful promise: "But now, thus says the Lord ... fear not, for I have redeemed you." To people who have lost almost everything they held dear, God says, "Fear not..."

The same promise echoes throughout scripture. Time and time again God reassures us, "Fear not, I am with you." The God who is with us is the One who calls us by name and holds us in steadfast love. God does not just love humanity in general. God does not call people in the abstract. God calls you and me by name. In the calling of your name is the wonderful particularity of God's grace.

The Lord, who calls you by name, keeps you in steadfast love. He goes on to say, "you are precious in my eyes and honored and I love you." The first and most important word about you and me is not that we are sinners, though surely we are. It is that we are precious in the sight of the Lord whose love will never let us go, even when we drive nails through His hands of love outstretched to the world in peace.

At the heart of biblical faith is the great assurance that despite all that we may have done that is wrong, God promises, “Do not be afraid for I have redeemed you. I have called you by name, you are mine you are precious in my eyes, and honored, and I love you.” Could there be any better news than that? You are a precious child of God, loved eternally by the One who has called you by name, and who will never fail or forsake you.

Prayer

Gracious and merciful God, you have promised always to be with me, and so you are. You have assured me that “nothing in life or death can separate me from your love in Jesus Christ our Lord.”

Give me grace to trust your promise as you call me by name, this and every day, to be your own beloved child of faith, through Christ my Redeemer.

Amen.



Art by Everly Compton

December 24, 2025

"Shine His Light" by Maddie Davenport

Isaiah 60:1-3 NRSV

Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you. Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

★ ★ ★

At times, life gets dark, confusing, and lonely for anyone and everyone. This verse reminds me that as a child of God, I have the ability to shine His light and to be a reflection of God's light myself. Darkness covers the earth and its people, but through God's people, his presence and glory will light this world.

Prayer

Thank you, God, for bringing light to the earth and to its people. Give us strength to continue to let your light shine through us to the world. Amen.



The Prince of Peace Christmas Reflections on
Isaiah 9:6

December 25, 2025

"The Baby Jesus" by Rob Hale

Luke 1:30-35

But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."

"How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"

The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. (NIV)

★ ★ ★

To me, the idea that God has sent a baby to save us all is the central and most powerful piece of the Christmas story. When babies arrive, they are completely powerless and totally dependent on caregivers. They are hungry, crying, erratic, messy beings. Why would God choose to start the story of the path to salvation with a baby?

We are all born hungry, crying, erratic, messy beings, governed mostly by our appetites and physical needs, but we all have the ability to grow out of that state. We all have the potential to mature and develop into people capable of almost anything.

Even when babies are small, they have a certain immense power. They are so lovable. They are cute, cuddly, magnets of attention. When a baby is carried into a room, our eyes are pulled to their small, perfect selves. Their vulnerability and innocence draw us in and, almost involuntarily, we joyfully smile and coo at them. They remind us that from the moment we come into being, our essence is to love and be loved.

The baby Jesus (that phrase always chokes me up, as my family will tell you) represents God's power to send the weakest and transform them into the strongest. The baby Jesus represents the potential we all have to grow and mature and to follow Christ's example to save/help/nurture/protect others just as our heavenly parent and earthly parents have saved/helped/nurtured/protected us.

This is the miracle: that the weakest can save us, and that not only Jesus but every baby born—those of us who are adults now as well the children among us, including my granddaughters, Royalty, Ivory, and Kayvori—has the potential to save us through the love of Christ. This miracle is what centers me during the Christmas season.



Advent Prayer by the 2025-2026 Children's Church Class

Dear God,

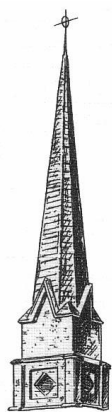
Thank you for watching over us and keeping us safe.

We thank you for giving us Jesus and our lives.

*During this Advent season, help us think of others
who might need a little help. Let us think of many
ways to make others happy.*

Amen





The Presbyterian Church
1003 State Street
Bowling Green, KY 42101
270-843-4707

