

Creation Awaits



2022 Advent Readings

Brecksville United Church of Christ
23 Public Square, Brecksville Ohio
440.526.4364

Welcome to the Season of Advent 2022

Advent means “coming.” We come to the place we belong. Christmas comes into view. Christ comes to us. The Light of the world comes to Earth.

The season of Advent is a time of actively waiting. We watch. We long. We pray. We work, alert and hopeful.

The good news that we live by is this: *“Before time itself was measured, the Voice was speaking. The Voice was and is God. This Voice filled all things with a living breathing light – A light that thrives in the depths of darkness. It cannot and will not be quenched.”* (John 1:1, 4-5 **The Voice Translation**)

This book is yours. It was written by you, the people of Brecksville UCC. It is inspired by God’s Voice, still speaking in our lives. This book breathes with your spirit and the events of your lives.

May I suggest that you use this booklet as a kind of Advent calendar. Open it at the same time every day. Perhaps in the early morning, or late in the evening. Let it help you to cultivate a daily habit of prayer.

And as we pray and reflect together, may we discover the good news of this community of faith. That love is stronger than hate, and hope is more powerful than fear. May we see the advent of Jesus as we pray with him, “Thy kingdom come.”

Rev. John King

Sunday, November 27, 2022

Isaiah 2:1-2

This is what Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem:

*In the last days,
the mountain of the Lord's temple will be established
as the highest of the mountains;
it will be exalted above the hills,
and all nations will stream to it.*

Prophet Isaiah is saying the Christian faith will have the most followers. All people/nations will come to it for the Christian values. Jesus loved everyone and actively showed that love everywhere he went. The Christian faith is open to all people and all people will come to it. As Christ's disciples we need to live our lives as examples of Christian faith. This shows people the many blessings living the Christian faith brings to us. The UCC and its members promote this prophecy by how we live our faith.

Thank you and Kind Regards,

Annette and Fred Pedersen

Monday, November 28, 2022

Isaiah 2:4-5

*He'll settle things fairly between nations. He'll make things right between many peoples. They'll turn their swords into shovels and their spears into hoes. No more will nations fight nations; they won't play war anymore. Come, family of Jacob, let's live in the light of God. (**The Message, the Bible in contemporary language**)*

Perhaps more than any other time in history, we need to “make things right between peoples.” Our world has a desperate need for us to turn weapons that are used for violence (swords and spears) into words and actions that are tools for planting, nurturing and spreading peace and kindness. This applies to people of all kinds, nations, colors, politics, religious beliefs, sexual orientation, gender identity and any additional way you can think of. Yes, and it even applies to those whom we may view as enemies, for those are the ones who are in most need of having things made right.

Certainly, war is no game to play and it should never be viewed as such. Unfortunately, our society often promotes “games” with video and audio enhancement that normalize acts of violence, although played out with animated figures. Let us be aware of the subtle ways in which violence is supported or tolerated and do our best to promote actions of peace and unity.

PRAYER: As people who live in the light of God, help us find opportunities to use our words and actions as tools for spreading kindness and fostering peaceful relationships. During advent, help us create a world where war is no longer played, and all peoples honor each other and their differences.

Carol Miller

Tuesday, November 29, 2022

Psalm 122:1-2

"I rejoiced with those who said to me 'Let us go to the house of the Lord.' Our feet are standing at your gates, Jerusalem."

After reading these two verses many times, thoughts and images kept running through my mind. Thoughts of people, filled with love and praise, going to the house of the Lord. The crowd standing and waiting to enter the gates of Jerusalem. I could almost feel the joy they felt.

My thoughts then moved on to what it meant to me personally and I started to recall memories of my paternal grandmother's home. My brother (1) and I (5) had to go to live in her home after my mom got T.B. and then died, 4 years later. Our dad, Grandma's son, left for the Army (WWII) the next year, and was wounded and lost the sight of one eye. We continued to live with her and her large family until we got married.

That home was filled with many happy and heart-touching memories. I remember the coffee pot was always on the kitchen stove. Whenever someone came to the door, they were always welcomed with open arms and whatever food that was available... sometimes it was only saltine crackers and margarine, but the warmth of love and thankfulness was always there. Smiles and laughter filled this home.

After my grandparent's children and my brother and I married, we all tried to visit on a daily or weekly schedule for a cup of coffee and her warmth and love. Every Sunday after church service, most of the family would come to share Grandma's big Sunday pasta dinner. I still miss my grandparents and their special home.

My grandparents, my mom and dad, brother and aunts and uncles, have all passed on. Our special home on 123rd Street in Little Italy was torn down a few years ago and modern new condos have replaced it, but I still have all the memories.

I hope that all of our church members and their families have experienced the same feeling of safety, love and comfort in their homes.

"Let us go to the house of the Lord," - the Brecksville United Church of Christ - for praise, love, and comfort.

Lois Lorenzo

Wednesday, November 30, 2022

Psalm 122:6-9

Pray for the peace of Jerusalem. May all go well for those who love you. May there be peace within your walls. May all go well within your houses. I will now say, "May peace be within you," for the good of my brothers and my friends. Because of the house of the Lord our God, I will pray for your good.

Peace can have several meanings: tranquility, free from war, or a friendly symbol/greeting, and the Nobel Peace Prize is given out yearly to groups such as the Red Cross or individuals such as Mother Teresa or Nelson Mandela.

In music, I've heard ***I've Got Peace Like a River*** at camp, and pastors have stated "Peace should flow through our lives like a river to help others, not be stagnant like a pond". But what really is peaceful in our lives, especially in the chaos of the "new normal"?

For me, peace is the comfort that God is with me. He has never given me ANYTHING in life that I can't handle. Abuse, success, deaths, illnesses, good, bad, or otherwise, I know that God has been there with me. I feel Him holding me, or cheering me on, or crying with me, or teaching me something, even if I don't "get it" at that moment. I have been sure of that since before I could put it into words, and even now, if I'm stressed or confused, hymns or Bible verses will randomly run through my mind and it's distracting and comforting.

PRAYER: God helps me in ways I might not realize today, but I know that He is always with me. And to me, that's peace. So, I'm grateful and I pray for peace and may peace be with you as well.

Allison Colbert

Thursday, December 1, 2022

Romans 13:11-12

Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.

Have you ever been half asleep in the early morning hours of a day that promises to be challenging or eventful in some way? Let me linger, we plead wearily, in the shadow-light of semi-consciousness, for another hour, then minutes, now only moments. I'm not ready, our gut insists, and we resist. But, as my father used to say, time waits for no one. Eventually we have to pull aside the blanket and rise from our stubborn stupor to face the realities awaiting us.

Now imagine our challenge – our reality – every day being to walk in the Way, as a Christian, with love in our hearts for God, ourselves, and everyone we encounter, and in so doing, putting aside "the works of darkness" and putting on "the armor of light"? Thank God for sending Jesus to show us how to do it!

PRAYER: O God, give us the courage and strength to face the challenges of each new day with love and grace. Amen.

David Debick

Friday, December 2, 2022

Romans 13:13-14

Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh.

Wow! How does one respond to that? Instead of trying, here's a quote from Mother Teresa:

"At this Christmas, when Christ comes, will he find a warm heart? Mark the season of Advent by loving and serving others with God's own love and concern."

Hope everyone has a wonderful Christmas!

Chad Sproul

Saturday, December 3, 2022

Mathew 24: 36-39

But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of Heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying, and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man.

Regardless of all the earthly turmoil that has been occurring and that is constantly changing our lives, our heavenly Father only wants all of us to show Love to one another in the form of compassion and kindness to everyone we meet while there is still time. In essence, he wants us to change our lives to be more like Him in every way possible. Remember that we are not promised tomorrow, and we do not know when, where or how He will call us to be judged.

At this time of Advent, we need to direct our Faith, Hope and Prayers to reaching that goal in life. We can never be as perfect as our Lord, but we can certainly try our best. AMEN.

Dave Bernard

Sunday, December 4, 2022

Matthew 24:40-42

Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding with a handmill; one will be taken and the other left. Therefore keep watch because you do not know on what day your Lord will appear.

The word here is one of warning. Be on your toes.

Back in Biblical times, Christians believed the second coming was imminent. We know now that was not the case. Whether we are talking about the second coming of Christ or just a word of everyday caution, it's always a good idea to be aware of our surroundings. You never know what might be right around the corner!

Jon Thompson

Monday, December 5, 2022

Matthew 24: 43- 44

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.

When Jesus was explaining the “future” - the end times to come, his message in the above verses was to always be ready, always be prepared. I am sure he would make an excellent Boy Scout. But I always envisioned that Jesus would return in a cloud and we could look up into the sky and see the glory and splendor of His return.

However, today, I am not so sure that he will return in a cloud or from up above. I think these days, everyone is always looking down, head bent over and engaged with their iPhone/Android, etc. There is no time to look up anymore. So maybe we will all miss His return. But then, I got to thinking, that God has always been very clever in how he reveals his grace and glory. I know the manger is an odd place as any to bring a Savior into the world.

So now after searching the app store, I am convinced that Jesus will return on an App on my phone. I searched for a “Jesus Returns” app in the app store . . . It is not there. So surely God is planning on “getting” that App to return Jesus to us and then take us to the Glory of heaven.

But wait . . . wait . . . what I am thinking, here . . . Exactly what Jesus warned me about . . . No one knows when and how he will return. Just like his arrival in the manger, no one could guess. So I lift my prayers and thank God that our Savior is coming and for now, will joyously celebrate this Christmas for the awesome gift of Jesus.

Diane Gressley

Tuesday, December 6, 2022

Isaiah 11:1-3

A small tree will begin to grow from the stump of Jesse. That branch will grow from Jesse's roots. The LORD's Spirit will always be with that new king to give him wisdom, understanding, guidance, and power. The Spirit will help him know and respect the LORD. He will find joy in obeying the LORD. This king will not judge people by the way things look. He will not judge by listening to rumors.

These verses begin by referring to a new king from David's family, but it is not clear just who that will be. What is clear is that the Lord's spirit will give that person understanding, wisdom, and insight. New Testament writers make it clear that Jesus is that fulfillment. (Paraphrased from **The Learning Bible**, pp.1240-50)

In The Plain Dealer's Oct.2, 2022 edition, "Letters to the Editor," the writer mentioned that the Archbishop of Canterbury, in his eulogy for Queen Elizabeth II, quoted the carol **Oh Little Town of Bethlehem**, 3rd verse. When I read this verse, I realized these lyrics explain how Christmas gives all who are receptive the Holy Spirit:

How silently, how silently,
the wondrous gift is giv'n!
So God imparts to human hearts
the blessings of his heav'n.
No ear may hear his coming,
but in this world of sin,
where meek souls will receive him, still
the dear Christ enters in.

Dot Bailey

Wednesday, December 7, 2022

Isaiah 11:3-5:

His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins.

I've written my share of letters to the editor of the Plain Dealer over the years. Whenever one was published in the paper, I'd think, "Score one for the good guys." In retrospect, there was a lot of pride involved in the equation.

And I don't think righteousness has much to do with pride. If anything, it has more to do with humility, humbleness, letting God do the judging while we do our best to proffer love, as often and consistently as we can in this life.

PRAYER: Jesus, winnow the self-righteousness and arrogance from my soul. May I remain meek and humble in your sight. Amen.

David Debick

Thursday, December 8, 2022

Isaiah 11:6-7:

The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them. The cow will feed with the bear, their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox.

I interpret Isaiah 11: 6-7 to be about tolerance, kindness and caring.

My father grew old and died never knowing who his biological father was. As a child he was physically abused by his mother, his aunt, and the nuns at school. Unfortunately, his stepfather, who was very kind to him, was killed as a part of a robbery in the train yards in Sandusky, Ohio. As a young man, my father was sexually abused in prison.

My father became a proponent of tolerance, kindness, and caring. So many times, during my growing up years I heard words from him that indicated that all peoples needed and wanted safety, food to eat, and shelter from the weather...simply to live and take care of their families.

When I was very young, I saw a Christmas card that had images of a lion, lamb, wolf, and calf lying at the feet of Jesus. My father explained that we should be tolerant, kind and caring to the people who were different from us and also to be tolerant, kind and caring to the people we regarded as enemies. My father also taught me to be kind and caring to our Earth.

PRAYER: May we all be tolerant, kind, and caring to those who are different than us. And, may we all be tolerant, kind, and caring to those we regard as enemies. May we all be kind and caring to our Earth. Amen

Pat Rehm

Friday, December 9, 2022

Isaiah 11:8-10

The infant will play near the cobra's den, and the young child will put its hand into the viper's nest. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. In that day the Root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples; the nations will rally to him, and his resting place will be glorious.

This is the “wolf and lamb will lie down together” and “a little child will lead them” chapter of the Old Testament, where Isaiah foretells of the unbelievably wonderful reign Jesus will usher in. In fact, this scripture sounds too good to be true, and what have we been told our entire lives? “If things seem too good to be true, they probably are.”

In a world of “alternate truths” and “doubling down” it can be hard to believe anything anymore. Taken a step further, how are we supposed to have faith when even FACTS are being thrown out with the dish water?

Regardless, I believe a time will come when, as promised in this verse, humanity will be “filled with the KNOWLEDGE of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.” How I look forward to time of certainty and hard truth. It will be such a relief to finally know without doubt.

But until then? I choose to believe. And I will continue to await a world in which “the nations will rally to him,” when we can rightly say “if things seem too good to be true, they are, in fact, even better!”

May it be so this Christmastime.

Betsey Wilson

Saturday, December 10, 2022

Psalm 72: 1-2

Endow the king with your justice, O God, the royal son with your righteousness. He will judge your people in righteousness, your afflicted ones with justice.

In the past I have looked over the selections and chosen a Bible verse I could relate to. This year it was random, and I think it was meant to be.

In May of this year, I went with friends to the Maltz Performing Arts Center to hear author Isabel Wilkerson speak about her second book, **Caste**. Over the next few months, I read it on my phone whenever I was at the doctor's or waiting for any reason. The subtitle of the book is **The Origins of our Discontents**.

Ms. Wilkerson relates how as a Harvard-educated, Pulitzer-Prize-winning black person she has been discriminated against on airplanes and in restaurants, to name a few places. She wrote that the election of 2016 "would set the United States on a course toward isolationism, tribalism, the walling in and protecting of one's own, the worship of wealth and acquisition at the expense of others, even of the planet itself."

The Nazis looked to the American South to see how the system kept Negroes as the lowest caste. They were astounded that it worked so well and learned from it. In the center of downtown Berlin, is a space the size of three football fields. There are two thousand seven hundred eleven concrete rectangles, separated by enough space for people to walk between them. This is the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe who perished during the Holocaust. The architect chose not to explain the meaning of the number 2711. It is intended to be unsettling. Lesser memorials can be seen throughout Berlin and Europe.

Interesting that Germany has no monuments to Nazi armed forces, unlike the United States which has put up monuments to slave owners like Jefferson Davis and Robert E. Lee. Instead, after decades of silence and soul-searching, Germany has chosen to erect memorials to the victims of its aggressions. In Germany, displaying the swastika is a crime punishable by up to three years in prison. In the United States, the rebel flag is incorporated into the official state flag of Mississippi.

(continued)

Saturday, December 10, 2022 (*continued*)

German students on tour of the history of the Third Reich are asked their reaction to what they have seen. They reply they did not do this, but for the generations that come after them they should be guardians of the truth.

PRAYER: Dear Father, Mother God: Pray for healing in this country; for justice for oppressed people everywhere. Help us to acknowledge wrong-doing whenever we see it. Amen

Joy Garapic

Sunday, December 11, 2022

Psalm 72: 3-4

Then the mountains of influence will be fruitful, and from your righteousness prosperity and peace will flow to all the people.

May the poor and humble have an advocate with the king. May he consider the children of the poor and crush the cruel oppressor.

We live in a time, like all times before, where the poor and humble are in need of an advocate. Prosperity and righteousness most certainly do not flow to all. Where shall this advocate for the poor and humble be found? I say within our own hearts.

My prayer for this season of Advent is that I may see the needs around me and as best I can meet them whether they be physical, mental or emotional. Will you join me in some small way this Advent season, to be the one who brings peace, prosperity and righteousness to just one of the poor and humble? We are they and they are us.

Rose Kaval

Monday, December 12, 2022

Psalm 72:5-8

May they fear You while the sun shines, and as long as the moon shines, throughout all generations.

May he come down like rain upon the mown grass, Like showers that water the earth.

May the righteous flourish in his days, As well as an abundance of peace, until the moon is no more.

May he also rule from sea to sea, and from the Euphrates River to the ends of the earth.

I never understood the phrase “the fear of God”. We grew up learning that God is kind, loving, and forgiving. The word fear means to be afraid or scared. I do not fear God. The only thing I do fear is disappointing Him and facing an unpleasant final damnation!

Walking alone thru the quiet and darkened hallways of the Cleveland Clinic on the morning of my transplant, I felt a real calmness. The nervousness and praying for a donor was over and I was focusing on the end result. As the surgery prep team was attending to me and my comfort, I said a little prayer. The next thing I knew I was in the recovery room, on a ventilator and seeing smiling faces! Thank you God!

Recovering was a daily challenge. So many rules. So many meds. So many doctors’ appointments. I couldn’t do any of this on my own. My bride Kathy was and is my primary caregiver and still is my rock. She is my gift from God.

Will I ever fear again? Yes, without a doubt! I am ready to face whatever God puts in front of me. In the meantime I will continue to live life to the fullest with a positive attitude and not live in fear!

PRAYER: May God bless us and our families this holiday season.

David Pastor

Tuesday, December 13, 2022

Matthew 3:1-3

In those days came John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judea, "Repent the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

For this he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said, "The voice of one crying in the wilderness; Prepare the way of the Lord, Make his paths straight."

This passage reminds me of singing in the choir. We sang a version of this many years ago when Jan Wardlaw was the choir director. We were a large and sometimes rowdy group back then, and she was almost always patient with us. God Bless Her!

Anyway, I loved the song, and we are still struggling to make those pathways straight!

PRAYER: Be with us Lord as we try to navigate our way in these tumultuous times. Guide us to be caring, compassionate people who do not judge, but rather strive to understand, accept and love. Amen.

Jill Zedan

Wednesday, December 14, 2022

Matthew 3:4-6

John's clothes were made of camel's hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey. People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.

It's interesting to imagine John the Baptist living out in the wild, with his crazy hair and clothing, eating off the land. He shouted to the people of Judea to repent and be baptized. Prepare the way of the Lord! He warns the people that they had better get right and end their evil ways. People came from all around Jerusalem and Judea to the Jordan River to be baptized by John. And soon Jesus would come to John to be baptized. And though John felt unworthy to be baptizing Jesus, John will consent.

I see this chapter of Matthew as an example that anyone, even someone as unexpected as John, can do great and important things in our world. John felt unworthy to baptize Jesus - of course he did! There are times that we all feel too unimportant to take on a big responsibility. We worry about failing. We worry about embarrassing ourselves. This story teaches us that we can do what God places before us! God invites all people to clean themselves off, confess their sins, be baptized, do better moving forward, and face life's challenges.

During this Advent season, I hope that each of you find a few moments to ask God for forgiveness and think about what your baptism means in your life. We are certain to have struggles and meet challenges as we move toward Christmas and the New Year. Be comforted knowing that you are not alone as you face these things. You have all the love of God to support you and get you through it.

Wishing you peace,

Bridget Sproul

Thursday, December 15, 2022

Matthew 3:7-9

But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not think you can say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham.

When I offered to contribute to the Advent Book this year, I just said to assign me any day that wasn't taken. I had no idea I'd end up with this passage, or that I'd struggle so much to try to understand it. I'm not very knowledgeable when it comes to interpreting The Bible, but I'm going to give this my best shot. When I read this passage, I couldn't help but focus on the concept of repentance, so my first step in tackling this assignment was to Google the word “repent”. Of course, doing this gave me all kinds of results – some made sense and some, not so much. When Google didn't work, I went to the UCC website, hoping I'd find something on the word “repent” that would inspire this piece (which is already late as I write this – I'm so sorry, Annel!) And there it was in the 6th bullet point of the UCC Statement of Mission: “To repent our silence and complicity with the forces of chaos and death.” Now that, I can write about.

When I read this, I couldn't help but think about the concept of silence and complicity. In this moment of self-reflection, I'll admit there are times when I've been guilty of it. The past couple of years have been filled with so much debate, so much controversy, and so much unbridled hate that it often feels too hard to fight the forces of chaos and death. If you're like me, you may feel exhausted. Over the past year, when I've encountered the forces of chaos and death, instead of wanting to fight them, I've just felt sad. Sad that people can be so hateful, cruel, racist, and self-righteous. The Heidi of a few years ago would have had the right words to take on the debate and openly fight those forces. She wasn't tired – she was brave and feisty and never would have left a conversation without putting those forces of chaos and death in their place.

(continued)

Thursday, December 15, 2022 *(continued)*

The Heidi of today sometimes feels defeated and overwhelmed. That is where the dangers of silence and complicity lurk.

If you identify with anything I'm writing here, you might be wondering what we can do to repent? I honestly don't know. How can we get our energy back to repent our silence and complicity? Living in such a divided country, when is the right moment to take a stand and how do we do it? Is voting enough? Registering voters? Working on campaigns? Protesting and marching? I think many of us are doing those things, but still, there are those moments when we can choose silence and complicity, or we can choose to take a stand. Those are the tough moments and the ones where I sometimes (ok, often) fail.

I just read this to my husband, who told me it sounds a little heavy and serious. I would agree with that. But in all this self-reflection, I do see a glimmer of hope. I know I have it in me to fight a little bit louder, push myself a little bit harder, and really take on the challenge of repentance. So, I'll close with an uplifting quote that I hope will inspire all of us to take a stand:

“The best way to not feel hopeless is to get up and do something. Don't wait for good things to happen to you. If you go out and make some good things happen, you will fill the world with hope, you will fill yourself with hope.”

— Barack Obama

To all my amazing friends at BUCC, I wish you the happiest of holidays and a season full of joy. Oh, and get some rest. We have work to do in 2023!

Heidi Spangler

Friday, December 16, 2022

Matt. 3:10-11

And the ax is already laid at the root of the trees; therefore, every tree that does not bear good fruit is being cut down and thrown into the fire. As for me, I baptize you with water for repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, and I am not fit to remove His sandals; He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

Bearing good fruit. It's important for me to be aware of the ways I fall short of obeying the teachings of Jesus and bearing good fruit. I can admit my struggles in prayer and ask for faith to do better. The reality is that this world encourages us to do so much that is in direct conflict with good fruit. Picking up my cross and following Jesus is harder than I want life to be, and that is why I fall short.

But in one of my favorite verses, Jesus said that He would help. "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." (**Matthew 11:28-30**)

In the verses above, John also refers to the Holy Spirit. Jesus offers the Holy Spirit. What an amazing gift! Of course the Spirit, like everything else about God, is beyond my complete understanding. But I can pray for guidance, and trust that the Spirit of God is always with me. I can see God doing things in my life and the lives of others. I can revel in the amazing tapestry and beauty of creation. When the darkness of evil is evident in the world, I can take comfort that God wants me to stay on the task of caring, working, helping, loving, and appreciating and enjoying all the Light that is in the world.

David and I are so thankful for our spirit filled church community. We are forever grateful for all the prayers that went up and the good wishes that we received during his illness and recovery. We wish everyone a joyous Christmas and a new year filled with faith, hope and love.

Kathy Pastor

Saturday, December 17, 2022

Matthew 3:12 (New International Version)

His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire.

In this metaphor of John the Baptist's, the wheat represents those who repent, and the chaff, those who do not. These words speak to how the Godly and ungodly, the good and the bad, are separated for eternity.

Although there are debates and questions about the existence of hell, we can absorb this passage with a different mindset. I do not know if there is hell or not. However, what I do know is that this message can be internalized so that each of us looks inward. What are the Godly parts of you? What are the ungodly? What things serve you in attempting to spread God's Realm on Earth? What parts do not serve that purpose? Can each of us sort out and keep the wheat we find in ourselves and burn the chaff?

As we look forward during the Advent season preparing for Jesus, let us each use that winnowing fork to sort out what we have, to spread God's Realm on Earth.

Ann Kelley

Sunday, December 18, 2022

Isaiah 35:3-4 (NRSV)

Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who are of a fearful heart, "Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God."

Dean invited me on an adventure. We would ride our bicycles around the circumference of Australia! It was my first year of college and unfortunately, I had more mundane things to do. So, he flew down under; I stayed home.

But I was concerned. Ohio's winter meant no biking for me while Dean biked all day in the southern hemisphere. When he came home, I wouldn't be able to keep up. So I set out to "make firm the feeble knees." I ran up and down the stairs at the University of Akron basketball arena. Week after week, I exercised to strengthen my legs for spring.

When spring came, I got a letter from Australia. Shortly after arriving, Dean got bored riding a bicycle. So he bought a motor scooter instead – about the same time I began running the stairs. All my exercise was futile!

These days, I exercise for different reasons. But it can still feel futile - especially when I step on the scale. But once I started exercising, I enjoyed the feeling. I liked the endorphins. I felt noticeably stronger. I decided to keep exercising. Dean would struggle to keep up with me!

Isaiah 35 is a lovely oracle by one who has been separated from family and homeland. It is a song of looking for strength in a time of loss. For the authors of Isaiah, the nation was, quite literally, being torn apart. This was a call for strength.

We exercise to strengthen body, mind and spirit. St. Ignatius wrote of "Spiritual Exercises." While our motivation for exercises (spiritual or physical) may change over time, the benefits remain. So, we take time for meditation, for prayer, for reflection. We gather on Sundays. We reflect during Advent. These are exercises. Sometimes they may seem futile or redundant.

But then challenges come. We grieve a loss. We try to rebuild. Somehow, we discover the strength that we need. Not because things went as planned, but because our spiritual exercises strengthened us to say "Here is our God."

Pastor John King

Monday, December 19, 2022

Isaiah 35:5–7 (The Message)

Blind eyes will be opened, deaf ears unstopped, lame men and women will leap like deer, the voiceless break into song. Springs of water will burst out in the wilderness, streams flow in the desert. Hot sands will become a cool oasis, thirsty ground a splashing fountain. Even lowly jackals will have water to drink, and barren grasslands flourish richly.

John the Baptist was on death row. That has a way of making you evaluate your priorities. So, John sent a friend to ask Jesus if he was really the one. Jesus answered in Luke 7:22 “Go back and tell John what you have just seen and heard: the blind see, the lame walk... the deaf hear.” In other words, don’t tell John what I SAY. Tell John what I DO. Because that, more than anything, should give John the Baptist some courage at a time when he desperately needed it.

The response Jesus gave refers to today’s text, Isaiah 35:5-7. Here, Isaiah describes bringing sight, hearing, mobility, and speech to people who had lost such abilities.

Isaiah prophesied to people under the boot of an oppressive political force during the Babylonian exile. And Jesus came during the time of the Roman occupation. Both proclaim a vision of greatness and glory to a people who are downtrodden. But it doesn’t look like force or warfare. Rather, greatness and glory are about giving voice to the voiceless, vision to those who’d lost it. The Reign of God means we get moving. We walk the walk.

This is our vision still. And it matters. Because people still ask the same question as John the Baptist. Is Jesus the One? Is Brecksville UCC the real deal? Or should I look elsewhere? Theodore Roosevelt said, “No one cares how much you know until they know how much you care.”

So let’s give them more than mere words. Let them see that we care. Let’s show them what it means to walk the walk, to see this vision, to hear this message, to give voice to the voiceless. For they won’t notice what we SAY, so much as what we DO. Then we will be, in the words of the prophet Isaiah, like a stream of fresh water, flowing through the desert.

Pastor John King

Tuesday, December 20, 2022

Isaiah 35:8

*And a highway will be there;
it will be called the Way of Holiness;
it will be for those who walk on that Way.*

*The unclean will not journey on it;
wicked fools will not go about on it.*

On this day, I remember my dear Aunt Jill, my birthday buddy, who enjoyed Christmas very much. While she was a member of BUCC, she loved singing in the choir, particularly the Christmas Cantata.

This holiday season, I remember the aunts, uncles and friends who joined my family as I was growing up to celebrate Christmas. Now, my parents and many of my older relatives are gone, but still fondly remembered. Now, I hope that I have helped to create memories for my children, nieces and nephews and grandchildren.

PRAYER: Heavenly Creator, as we anticipate and celebrate these special holidays this year, let us hear Your Voice in our hearts and be an instrument of Your Peace in this world. Amen.

Jim Duffy

Wednesday, December 21, 2022

Isaiah 35:9-10

No lion will be there.

Nor any ravenous beast.

They will not be found there.

But only the redeemed will walk there and those the Lord has redeemed will return. They will enter Zion with singing; everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away.

If I were to come upon a happy crowd like this, I might look after them with joy and also some sadness, believing there would be no place for me in that crowd. I am far from perfect. It's hard for me to believe that I have been redeemed in any way.

But redeemed I am, by the saving blood of Christ on the cross. Gladness and joy, and a whole lot of gratitude, serve to remind me that Christ has indeed redeemed me, and that is unchanged no matter what may occur in my life. I am his, and he is mine.

Jon Thompson

Thursday, December 22, 2022

Psalm 146:5-7

Blessed are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord their God. He is the Maker of heaven and earth, the sea, and everything in them - he remains faithful forever. He upholds the cause of the oppressed and gives food to the hungry. The Lord sets prisoners free.

Psalms are often called the songs of the Bible and since music is part of my DNA, I always think of music with Bible study. Recently, I heard a fascinating story about some well-known hymns. A gospel preacher was doing a documentary on music history and stated that what he termed “Negro Spirituals” like ***Everytime I Feel the Spirit***, ***Swing Low, Sweet Chariot***, and ***Amazing Grace***, all were written using only the 5 black keys of the piano. He said, musically, that these notes - F#, A flat, B flat, C#, E flat -were called the Pentatonic scale.

Amazing Grace’s words were written by John Newton, a wealthy southern businessman who converted thousands to Christianity and helped many with his wealth, began his career as a ruthless slave-ship captain. According to the Library of Congress music archives, it is said Newton heard melodies from the imprisoned slaves on his ships that first turned to him to God, and one of these slave chants became “how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me, I once was lost, but now am found, was blind but now I see”.

When I read this Psalm, and the lyrics to this hymn (one of my all-time favorites), I reflect on how much I need God in my life, and on the thought that we are all prisoners of something. Prisoners of our job, alcohol, a terminal disease, abuse, or money/debt. I’ve been a prisoner of mental illness all my life, which is even tracked yearly by the Board of Nursing and all my employers, according to the American Disabilities Act. I can be subject to drug screens and medical evaluations, because I’m on medications and am receiving psychological counseling. When these investigations occur, my response is always the same “would you rather I be a working Nurse Practitioner not taking my meds and taking care of myself at counseling?” Instead, I rise above, and like those long-ago slaves, I sing, and I have the patience of Job, and I don’t complain.

So may we all - black or white, free or imprisoned, straight or gay - find hope in the Lord who sets us all free.

Allison Colbert

Friday, December 23, 2022

Matthew 11:2-5

When John (the Baptist) heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, "are you the one who is to come or are we to wait for another?"

Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive sight.

The lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. Go tell John what you hear and see.

In this world there is so much hate and injustice now. To sit back and do nothing but hide our head in the sand like an ostrich is not what is wanted of us. There are places, even churches, where people are excluded because of their color, sexual orientation, or status in the community. Stand up for them, "go tell John".

Do Something.

PRAYER: Dear lord, may we be a people of love and understanding. May we be always ready to find help and justice for those in need, we ask this in the name of Jesus.

Evelyn Seager

Saturday, December 24, 2022

Matthew 1: 22-23

All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" (which means "God with us").

The words in Isaiah Chapter 7, tell of the coming of the Savior. The Old Testament provides us with a lengthy story of God's people that were not easily pleased or satisfied. They were always looking for the one who would save them or redeem them. Verse 14 reads, *"Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel."*

In the verse in Matthew, this same Old Testament prophecy from Isaiah 7: 14 is referenced. This prophetic moment points not only to the fact that Jesus is the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy, connecting the Old and New testaments as one gospel, but also to the unveiling of Jesus's divinity and purpose. The fact that his conception was not ordinary, but miraculous, confirms his divinity.

Along with the revelation of Jesus' divinity in his virgin birth, we see the Hebrew translation of "Immanuel", one of Jesus' names, which literally means "God with us". In this explanation of Jesus' name, Matthew draws a direct correlation between God and His son, claiming that God, through His Son, came to be with the people. Not only was Jesus's birth beyond ordinary, but his nature is divine, and his purpose is clear. God himself came to be with us and is still with us.

Diane Gressley

Sunday, December 25, 2022

Matthew 1:20-21

As he considered this, he fell asleep, and an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream. "Joseph, son of David," the angel said, "do not be afraid to go ahead with your marriage to Mary. For the child in her has been conceived by the Holy Spirit. And she will have a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.

It is Christmas Day! And the Savior is born (he will save his people from their sins). We celebrate many ways and things this time of the year. This simple passage from Matthew highlights family, fatherhood, marriage, not being afraid, and above all faith. These all contribute to our commitment to one another in a Christian community.

Now more than ever we need this community to sustain us. Let us celebrate not just today, but throughout the year because we have so much to be thankful for. Peace and Love!

Merry Christmas!

Vince Kaval

Monday, December 26, 2022

Luke 1:46-49

And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God My Savior, for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant. For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for he who is mighty has done great things for me."

Okay. So I really didn't want to write an advent piece this year, much less about Mary. BUT, when I explored the storyline around what is called the Magnificat, or "Mary's Song of Praise" (actually Luke 1:46-55) I was "in". Young teen-ager Mary is visited by the angel Gabriel and given the great (?) news that she has been chosen to give birth to the Son of God. Gabriel, a busy angel, has already notified Mary's much older and barren relative, Elizabeth, that she will be giving birth to John the Baptist. So, when Mary goes to visit Elizabeth for confirmation, and perhaps comfort, the baby in Elizabeth's womb leaps for joy at the sound of Mary's voice. These two women have both been empowered to bring forth something good and wonderful for the world. Mary is doing the impossible with her "virgin birth". They both had to have hope and faith and love – the quiet strength that let them surrender themselves to God.

That is the pattern that Jesus then embodies for his time on earth – maternal kindness, inclusiveness and forgiveness, and a receptivity and surrender to God's will. This is in total opposition to a world that believed, and perhaps still believes, that top-down power, greed, injustice and violence to others, to our environment and to our world, is the way to achieve anything. In Mary's story, God's true power is delivered in the feminine, not the masculine.

In today's world we so often feel that we are just human beings caught in difficult times on this fragile planet. Do not despair. Just look within. We have all been blessed with so much potential, creativity, love, compassion, kindness, skills, happiness, energy, and so many more good things that are "pregnant powers" within us.

(continued)

Monday, December 26, 2022 **(continued)**

Be kind to yourself, have faith, and surrender to give birth to God's gifts and power that live in you, to make your world and our world a better place.

PRAYER: Mary asked "let it be me according to your will". God, please help me deliver the best of me this week and this season with love, compassion, joy and always, hope for the future, by fulfilling your commandment to "love one another". Amen.

Sherrill Witt

Tuesday, December 27, 2022

Luke 1:50-51

And his mercy is on them that fear him from generation to generation. He hath shewed strength with his arm: he hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.

These verses and many others in the Bible include the words "generation to generation." We are being instructed to teach our children to study the Bible, learn Bible verses and attend services in the church.

I remember agreeing to teach a class for senior high students. The students didn't like me and to get even with their parents they refused to participate in class. I quit. By Tuesday, I was invited to lunch by five or six deacons. They twisted my arm, I agreed to tackle the class again.

We were moving toward the stewardship dinner. My class was to make a video about stewardship. But first, we had to study the church budget. We found and read everything in the Bible about giving to the church. One of the best scenes showed an offering plate filled with money; suddenly, the money flew out of the offering plate. The students received a standing ovation when the video was shown.

Now it's difficult to teach Bible verses and church attendance to our children who are scattered across the world. We only have to look a mile from our church to find children and adults who would enjoy services in our church. We can follow the teachings in the Bible and offer God's message to our neighbors.

David Ritchey

Wednesday, December 28, 2022

Mark 6:41-44

Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to his disciples to distribute to the people. He also divided the two fish among them all. They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces of bread and fish. The number of the men who had eaten was five thousand.

The story of the loaves and fishes reminds me of a time when I too was hungry. It was a difficult time for my family, but as God has his hand in all things he provided for us exactly as we needed. This story also reminds me of the last supper where Jesus took bread and broke it and gave it to the disciples. Again, Jesus feeds all not only with bread for physical needs but also with spiritual needs as Jesus is the bread of life. Just as the disciples were ministering to the crowd we too need to put others needs before our own and feed the flock of Jesus both physically and spiritually. Jesus will always give us rest and nourishment as we need. Trust in the Lord for he will supply all. As I reflect on those days of being hungry, I realize that we were not only hungry in the physical sense but also spiritually. I am well nourished now both physically and spiritually through the sacrifice of our Lord and I am so thankful for his obedience to the father.

We can never outgive the Lord but certainly we can use the gifts he has blessed us with for the good of others. In this advent season let us come together and focus on the gifts we have received and bless those that are hungry both physically and spiritually.

– Gayle Colbert

Thursday, December 29, 2022

Mark 6:37-38

But he answered, "You give them something to eat."

They said to him, "That would take more than half a year's wages! Are we to go and spend that much on bread and give it to them to eat?"

"How many loaves do you have?" he asked. "Go and see."

When they found out, they said "Five, and two fish."

Jesus had drawn a huge crowd to a hillside outside Jerusalem. As the day drew to a close, it was apparent those in the crowd had not come prepared for a meal to conclude the day. Jesus turned to his disciples and very simply instructed them to give those in the crowd something to eat. I'm sure there was some grumbling and rolling of eyes. After scouting about, it was established there was very little food to be had.

The lesson of the day was FAITH. The disciples set about to distribute what was available and were astounded when it stretched to feed hundreds of people with baskets of leftovers. Trust and believe and see what comes of it!

Jon Thompson

Friday, December 30, 2022

Luke 1:52-53

*...he has put down the mighty from their thrones,
and exalted those of low degree,
he has filled the hungry with good things.*

I'm not really sure why this passage was chosen for us to respond to, so I will leave YOU to it.

When I looked at the list I chose December 30. This, because it was the date of my mother's death. She passed away after two difficult years of dealing with cancer.

I was 16 and a junior in High School. A huge hole was left in my family's life, a hole which would never be filled. I'm not sure how I dealt with it, except I tried to be brave. I didn't really know what grief was all about. I put one foot in front of the other and lived my life.

Bobby was an exceptional woman. She lived a life of loving, kindness and compassion. I was blessed to have had her in my life for 16 years. She is always in my heart and I hope I am able, sometimes, to be a positive example of her legacy.

During this Holiday season, cherish all your loved ones - past and present.

PRAYER: Emmanuel, God is with us. Amen

Jill Zedan



The Spiritual Life Ministry:

Betsey Wilson, Chairperson

Allison Colbert

Sue Maier

Anne Melfo

Evelyn Seager

Kathy Smith



BRECKSVILLE UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

2022

