

2025-2026
Advent to Epiphany
Devotional Book



Brecksville United Church of Christ

Introduction

A Season Born of Longing for Sacredness on Earth

Advent is a season born of longing — longing for life and the world to grow into what God is imagining we can become. At its heart, Advent begins with yearning: not the fleeting kind that fades when lights are strung or gifts are wrapped, but the deep pang of knowing the world is not yet as it should be. Advent begins in the restless space between promise and fulfillment — in the quiet hunger for mercy, justice, and peace to take flesh again among us.

Some of my most tender memories of Advent come from evenings around the table with our children, reading the stories and reflections shared by our church families in booklets like this one. In those wise words, we listened — even in the midst of the most ordinary days — for a greater hope to leap from the pages. Looking back, I think I learned in those moments that longing is not a weakness of faith but its beginning — the place where God meets us with the strength to keep watch and the courage to care.

That same longing fills our world now. Too many tables have grown small — not because the need is less, but while more and more people crawl on the floors around them, searching for crumbs and scraps. The table that once symbolized welcome and abundance for all has been disassembled, its promise narrowed by fear, fatigue, and the slow erosion of compassion. What was meant to nourish has been withheld, as though grace were a possession to protect rather than a gift to share. In such a world, the voices of the suffering are hushed and their hunger hidden from view. Yet the ache remains — reminding us how far we are

(Continued)

from the wholeness God imagines, and how readily some would allow that vision to be diminished still further.

Advent does not arrive merely because the calendar tells us it is time. Advent dares to proclaim that God is already drawing near — coming close in the places of hunger and humility. The Christ we await comes to the weary and the overlooked, to those who hunger for bread and for belonging. To prepare for such a coming is to serve, to listen, to feed, to make room.

So we wait — not passively, but with purpose. We string lights, light candles, hold one another in care, and ready our hearts for the One who still comes to set a larger table, where all are fed and all belong.

Jeff

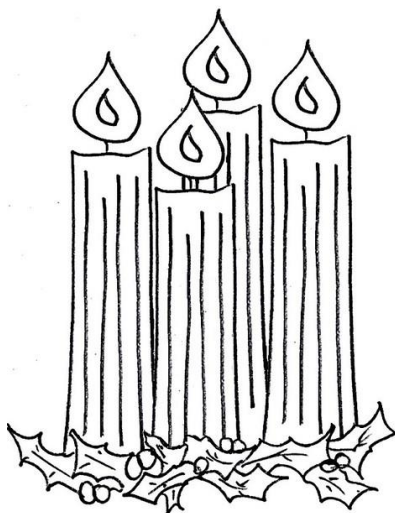


Sunday, November 30th, 2025

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.*



“In the days to come...” That phrase says to me that there is a promise to “wait for”, which is expected and something to be “longed for”. Something big is coming.

Advent is a time of waiting.

I have memories of being a child and waiting for Christmas. So far away, but it can't come soon enough. Checking off the days on our Advent Calendar. Counting the days until Christmas break. Waking up way too early on Christmas morning and eagerly, impatiently waiting to be called downstairs.

Now, as an older adult, time seems to rush by: “What? It's Advent already?” It seems like we were just putting away the decorations and now it's time to put them up again.

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

Monday, December 1st, 2025

Isaiah 2:4-5

The Lord will settle international disputes; all the nations will convert their weapons of war into implements of peace.[a] Then at the last all wars will stop and all military training will end. 5 O Israel, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord and be obedient to his laws!

This contemporary translation of “they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruninghooks...” is a world I fear we will never see and makes us feel even more helpless in a world dominated by institutions, systems and people who condone evil as justification for their goals and accomplishments. Ironically, this was also the world Jesus grew up in – perhaps what goes around comes around?

What can we do to offset any of this? Protest? Write Letters? Work Politically?

Yes, to all of that. But maybe we should start small. It's a kind of “re-gifting”. As children of God, God's love, joy and compassion dwell within us and are available for us to give at any time, in any place. Really seeing people and recognizing their dignity and humanity with a smile or a brief word of caring can truly change someone's day. They, in turn, might do the same for another, and on it goes...

You are simply giving away that which cannot be saved....your time, your laughter, your care and your concern. We cannot end the wars, but we can certainly spread the Peace.

Sherrill Witt

Tuesday, December 2nd, 2025

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.”

I do rejoice with my brothers and sisters as we gather together at the church!

I was raised here and had the incredible fortune to be touched by the many Saints who have passed through its doors. Their influence on me, though hard to measure, would be difficult to calculate. It is largely a part of the person I have become.

We are going through a “rocky patch” now and there have not been as many people passing through our gates. We’re going to thrive and grow again. We are a people of faith strong in our convictions. We’ll help each other through this time of uncertainty and glow in the glory.

So during this time of Advent our doors and hearts are open to all. Come join us in the celebration of the birth of the Christ child who is our symbol of eternal life and unending love and acceptance.

Be with us God of Love And
bless us with your enduring
Grace. Amen



Jill Zedan

Wednesday, December 3rd, 2025

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.

This psalm is a song of ascents and was written by King David to encourage the people to go up to Jerusalem, the site of the temple. Prayers will be asked for peace, prosperity and security for their homes. The familiar "peace be with you" is cited. Prayers for the well-being of the people will be said.

Prayers for peace, prosperity and security are timely for our time as we wait the celebration of the birth of Jesus.

Prayer:

Dear Lord, may there be peace, prosperity and security in our lifetime. Please hear out prayers as we struggle with life's adversities.

Amen

Bob Chandler

Thursday, December 4th, 2025

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.

These passages focus on time. I often feel that I don't have enough time- time for my wife and time to relax with family and friends and I always lament about those I have lost. My parents were 72 and 80 when they died and while I was devastated my parents were healthy and thriving until they died, my mom lived 12 years after my dad and became involved more in church choir and the Seven Hills silver sneakers program until she passed one night and rejoined my dad in heaven. Due to her passing, I got my girlhood home in Seven Hills. My move back to Ohio led to my finding my soulmate, my beautiful wife, Gayle and me finding my way to BUCC. I now have a wonderful life in Ohio and the richness of a great job and many new friends. Time and change are difficult, but God never gives me more than I can handle. He "explains" that with time, new opportunities are presented and I can "stay in the darkness" or I can "enjoy the new light" I've been given.

Lord, may we focus on quality not quantity, of time that we have. Only you know how many "sunsets we have left" so let us enjoy today and praise you.

Allison Colbert

Friday, December 5th, 2024

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.

Paul encourages all of us to clothe ourselves in Jesus Christ. To do this we need to look at Jesus' teachings and example. Much of what Jesus teaches goes contrary to human nature and society's values. By delving into His teachings and asking for insight we can change our hearts. When we change our hearts, our motivation is changed and we can find acceptance and peace in following His ways.

Those of us who have been learning about Jesus most of our lives should now be reflecting them. Jesus offered a new way of dealing with life to the Jewish and Gentile communities of his day, but his teachings have been the upbringing for many Christians today. The challenge is in avoiding the incentives of the world to disregard His teachings and follow ways that lead us away from God.

Every person we meet during this busy season, as always, is struggling in some way. Let's try to reflect Christ's teachings by showing respect, gratitude and kindness which are free gifts to give away.

Kathy Pastor

Saturday, December 6th, 2025

Matthew 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.

Life happens while you have other plans.

Yes, that's the theme of Jesus's pronouncement quoted in this passage from Matthew, an experience we all have had. We awaken with the sun, expecting today to be "normal." The morning, following that "normalcy" trajectory sees my wife Liz and me driving to our favorite museum, The Clark in Williamstown, Mass. The uneventful drive through the leafless Berkshires gets interrupted by a phone call, and my life changes forever: my son Simon's mother is in surgery in Montclair, New Jersey, where we all live, 175 miles away. Another phone call from Simon while at The Clark tells me that his mother has just died. We have to get back to Montclair, which we do after checking out of our hotel in Lenox, arriving at about 8 PM at Simon's home. My life has never been the same, my relationships, especially with Simon, changing dramatically. And his mother died four years ago.

"But about that day and hour no one knows," Jesus says, encapsulating the reality we all have had. Look, Oedipus, the king of Thebes, awakes with the sun, not knowing this particular morning that his wife is also his mother, that he had killed his real father years before, that his wife/mother would hang herself, that he would blind himself, and that he would wander for the rest of his life. (Continued...)

(Matthew 24:36-39 Continued...)

But it's not only tragic things that change life dramatically. Take Bill Campbell, whom I know from my New Jersey church. He awoke with the sun one October morning and, by noon, would have his life – and that of his family – change by a phone call: he is being awarded the Nobel Prize for his research and creation of a drug that cures river blindness, thereby saving – literally! – the lives of millions.

So, is there a way for us to deal in advance, on a daily basis, with not knowing “that day and hour”? Actually, yes, based on The Examen , a part of The Spiritual Exercises from 400 years ago, written by Ignatius Loyola, founder of the Jesuits. We can start, for example, with a prayer like this (by John Veltri, S.J.):

O God, I find myself at the beginning of another day.

I do not know what it will bring.

Please help me to be ready for whatever it may be.

From there we continue in our own words.

Robert L Petrus



Sunday, December 7th, 2025

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

There are two men. One is taken, the other left behind. Who is chosen and who is not? Only God knows. All we can do is remember the teachings of Jesus, and follow them. Love your neighbor as yourself. That is getting very difficult now at this time. We need to work harder at it. Keep those people in your prayers. Let the love of Christmas shine in your heart.

Evelyn Seager



Monday December 8th, 2025

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.

Let me get this straight, we're comparing Jesus' coming to a thief in the night? How scary! Now I know not – but there was a time during my teen years when friends convinced me to attend a fundamentalist church ("God said it, I believe it, that's good enough for me.") To question scripture was sinful; check your intellect at the door, thank you very much. History and context have no place here. Those were dark years. "No one comes to the Father but through Me" instilled real terror. I felt genuine pressure to convert my "unsaved" friends and family.

I look back at my evolution as a Christian and can breathe a sigh of relief. Age and a healthy church dialogue have taught me that the bible can speak honestly without being literal. This verse is pointing the reader toward spiritual preparedness – are we complacent? Or, more hopefully, do we embrace a future eager and willing to usher God's realm into existence?

During advent, may we look forward to a place and time when God's true word lives in the hearts of all mankind.

Betsey Wilson

Tuesday December 9th, 2025

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.



Isn't it wonderful to know that our God does not judge us by superficial appearances, but instead with righteousness and fairness? It takes some of us longer to realize that God's judgement is really all that matters and that God's wishes are quite simple. It took me a while to figure that out. From the time I could talk, I wanted nothing more than the praise of my parents. I worked hard to be good and help around the house. It wasn't always easy! As a child, in search of friendships, I behaved in ways that I thought would make me fit in with others, like wearing Jordache or Calvin Klien jeans, and buying pet rocks and mood rings. It took me a while to realize that public opinion and personal gain were not the goals, but rather sharing my love with others and with God. If I had realized this sooner, it would have saved me a lot of teenage anxiety.

Prayer:

Dear God, help us to focus our attention on your love and to not be so concerned about the judgement of others. Amen

Evie Novak

Wednesday December 10th, 2025

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.

This prophecy scripture from Isaiah brings back memories of my time in high school choir of the Kent Congregational Church. It was a privilege to sing in Mrs. Bumphrey's choir. One of the Christmas hymns was "Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming." For some reason this hymn has stayed in my memory. The words are as follows:

Lo, how a rose e'er blooming from tender stem has sprung!
Of Jesse's lineage coming as saints of old have sung.
It came a floweret bright, amid the cold of winter,
When half spent was the night

Isaiah had foretold it, the Rose I have in mind,
With Mary we behold it, the Virgin Mother kind.
To show God's love aright, She bore to us a Savior,
When half spent was the night

Lord, help us to remember that new life can come from the old.
Let us be aware that justice is more than just following the rules.
Give us the strength to do your work. Amen

Caroline Chandler (2004)

Thursday December 11th, 2025

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.

When people talk about the Lion and the lamb, I sometimes mention that's not what the Bible says. We have pictures, displays and ornaments and I even have carved a pumpkin with a lion and lamb on it. People get puzzled when I tell them it (the bible) speaks of the wolf & the lamb. And I tell them they should look it up. But all of that is really a beautiful message that animals will no longer harm one another. They will become safe to each other; even protective, so safe a child can even handle them. Animals will not hunt, hurt, kill or eat one another. They won't attack us & all snakes will be safe. I hope insects will be safe too!

I am so hoping that people everywhere follow that child's leading and that we too will live together in safety caring easily for each other. It gives me great hope and a great desire to see Jesus' return (my belief) and that a new reality will take place, and that everything that is opposed to this true peace and prosperity will no longer be around to hurt us ever again.

There is a Christmas carol "Oh Holy Night" where one verse contains a phrase (which is also written in the bible) All oppression shall cease. And that is how the wolf who lives with the lamb leads me to such great hopefulness.

Terry M Heiman

Friday December 12th, 2025

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.

The imagery about what might happen to babies and children is not pleasant; although the actual harm done is uncertain. In our times today, we are well aware of vulnerable little ones, and people of all ages, experiencing hunger, poverty, abuse, climate disasters, and all kinds of suffering. It is easy to feel overwhelmed and even hopeless about the events of our neighbors and in the world.

YET, Isaiah reassures us that the time will come when all this will be reversed. ALL people will be at blessed with peace. That is what we are waiting for in Advent

BUT, this will happen only when we each do our part to proclaim that God is on their way. So I ask myself: "What am I doing to bring God into our world today?" I need to get busy and take action and prepare their way.

Prayer:

I pray that I may demonstrate HOPE in all that I do to show that God is alive NOW.

Carol Miller



Saturday December 13th, 2025

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.

Give the king your justice, O God,
And your righteousness to a king's son.
May he judge your people with righteousness,
And your poor with justice.

With the crazy times we live in, this verse spoke to me. We live in a dark time where justice feels in short supply and false righteousness feels abundant. Judgment has become speedy and without reflection. True righteousness is woke and weak. And the poor are punished at every turn.

In these dark times, and as we head into the holidays, this verse becomes an important prayer. Asking God for justice for the poor. For judgment combined with grace. Asking the king (a bit too literal for our times) to give God's justice, not his own. These holidays will hit harder for the most vulnerable among us. God, we pray for Your justice for all people. Amen.



Tracey Gibb

Sunday December 14th, 2025

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.

I daresay this passage, in the middle of Psalms speaks volumes to all of us today. As I write this, we just passed a weekend where millions of Americans and allies worldwide, gathered to express the dislike for the current situation in the United States, where a King – like in King David's time is not an advocate for the poor or the humble. So few people these days are truly humble. If a leader is not humble, then likewise how would the people be humble. Many feel entitled or even act like they are kings. Too many kings!

Social Justice is so much needed in our country and our world. Is it up to a king to “lead” that? Is it up to God or Jesus to “lead” that? In this advent season we are reminded that God did send a King to us. And just like today in America.. we can accept or reject the “notion” of a King.. the realm of a King...

I try to focus on what I can do, today, this week, this month, this year. I personally was so affected by who, what, where, when or how.. etc.. when I was a MERE 18 year old on the first plane ride from my Pennsylvania Dutch family...and traveled to all places... Disneyworld...and saw the “It's a Small World” and I knew then, just like I do now that if we want to be a social justice guru for our village, city, state, country or world... it starts with me and in me. With myself. And with my humility.... I will never ever be better than the richest, the poorest, the weakest, the strongest, the “label” – whatever you choose.

Please join our social justice ministry and bring your ideas to fruition!

Diane Gressley

Monday December 15th, 2025

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.

A righteous person is one who acts and treats others with honesty, integrity and kindness and also stands up for what is right, even though it is difficult. Righteousness is severely lacking in many human lives today. The golden rule, "Do unto others..." and asking oneself WWJD (What Would Jesus Do) are 2 of the best reminders on how to be a better human being and experience and abundance of peace.

PRAYER

Lord In this world of distractions, continue to help us remember the gold rule and treat others with respect and dignity.

David Pastor



Tuesday December 16th, 2025

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."

Isaiah speaks of a voice crying in the woods, urging us to prepare the way of the Lord and make the paths straight. This is not merely about physical roads or paths; but rather a call for us to examine our hearts and lives. Are we creating a path for God in our busy schedules, clearing away any distractions that keep us from experiencing His love? The wilderness represents a barren place, a place of isolation. Yet, it is in the wilderness that God often speaks the loudest. We must listen, reflect, and respond to his messages. Are the paths we follow, straight and true, and guide us toward righteousness; or are they filled with obstacles and detours that try to lead us away from His purpose? We have had many of these obstacles at BUCC over the past months, but each one of us have the power to make these paths straight through acts of kindness, forgiveness, and love. By doing so, we not only prepare our own hearts, but we also become instruments of His grace in the lives of others. Let us be the voices in the wilderness and prepare for the way of the Lord in our lives and in our communities. Embrace this challenge with courage and conviction.

Peace and blessings my friends!

Armand Eusanio

Wednesday December 17th, 2025

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.

"Making Room Through Letting Go"

John the Baptist lived simply—wild honey, locusts, rough clothing; no frills. Yet crowds flocked to him, unburdening themselves through confession before baptism.

Last summer, backpacking with my kids Evelyn and Peter, everything we needed was on our backs or in front of us—each other. No phones. No grinding sports schedules. Just the trail, our packs, and conversation (though we missed Melanie!). In those stripped-down moments, away from all our usual distractions, we forged our deepest connections. The simplicity itself became sacred.

John's wilderness calls to us in this final Advent week: What weight can we set down? In our progressive faith, confession isn't shame—it's honestly naming what we can release. Maybe it's the pressure for a perfect Christmas, our over-scheduled lives, or patterns that no longer serve love. This week, what can you leave unpacked so there's room for what truly matters?



Paul Kuzmins

Thursday December 18th, 2025

Isaiah 7: 10-14

Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz, "Ask the Lord for a sign, whether in the deepest depths or in the highest heights." But Ahaz said, "I will not ask; I will not put the Lord to the test." Then Isaiah said, "Hear now, you house of David! Is it not enough to try the patience of men? Will you try the patience of my God also? Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.

Sometimes, the Old Testament God seems heavy-handed, maybe even ruthless, in His treatment of those who rebel against Him. Examples can be found in the early chapters of the book of Isaiah. During Isaiah's time (about 700 BC), the people of Jerusalem and Judah were steeped in corruption and idolatry. Isaiah 1: 21 metaphorically describes Jerusalem as a once faithful wife that has become a "harlot." It is a city of murderers and cheats who have forsaken God. They deserve to be punished, and Isaiah speaks of the doom and catastrophes that God will rain down on them.

But in today's devotional scripture, Isaiah gives a prophecy of hope. This is a sign given to Ahaz, the king of Judah, that God will vanquish his enemies: A virgin shall bear a son, and his name will be Immanuel (meaning God is with us). And Isaiah 9: 6-7 tells us more: "his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The Mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace." He will lead a peaceful world government and rule with perfect justice.

It is coming of a new order- a new covenant with God's people- the first Christmas gift.

Prayer:

Lord God, Open our hearts and minds during this Christmas season so that we celebrate what matters most- your perfect gift to an underserving people.

Paul Nicholas (2002)

Friday December 19th, 2025

Matthew 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.

I have always been a terrible gardener. I get distracted, forget to water my plants, and they eventually die. A few years ago, I decided to give it one more try and I bought a lemon tree. It was just a small seedling in a pot, but the directions assured me that if I took care of my plant, it would grow into a small tree, and I'd have lemons in two years. I bought the tree at the beginning of summer, put it on the back deck, watered it often and watched it grow long branches full of plenty of healthy green leaves. When the colder weather came, I brought the tree inside and placed it near the kitchen window. The bright sun coming through the window every day gave the tree encouragement, and it continued to grow. When summer rolled around again, I was so proud that I had kept this tree alive for a full year. I put it back outside, continued to care for it, and hoped that maybe my tree would defy expectations and produce some lemons that summer. It did not. It grew and it was healthy, but it made no lemons. When the weather grew cold again, it was time to bring the tree back inside. It had grown kind of large, and there were thorns on the branches. It was heavy and awkward and bringing it inside was a struggle. I continued to water the tree, and it continued to grow. The next summer I took it back outside. This was the summer I was waiting for. After two years, I expected lemons.

(Continued)

(Matthew 3:10-11 Continued)

I watered the tree all summer, but by the end, the tree was bigger and still healthy, but there were no lemons. So, I brought it back inside for a third winter. This time was different. The tree had fungus gnats, and I was constantly frustrated by these little bugs flying around the house. It took weeks of testing different concoctions to finally get rid of the fungus gnats and I couldn't wait for summer to roll around so I could put this stupid lemon tree back outside. It was a hot, dry summer. I was busy and distracted and frustrated with the tree, and I didn't care for it like I did the last two summers. By fall, all the leaves were gone, the soil had dried up, and the tree was dead.

I can't help but look back on this situation with a whole lot of guilt. I should have been more patient with the tree. I shouldn't have given up on it. A tree can't bear good fruit if it isn't given the love and encouragement it needs. I guess it is the same with people. When someone disappoints us, should we just give up on them, assume they will never bear fruit, cut them down, and throw them into the fire? Or do we have a responsibility to keep showing up, keep offering our support, and keep nurturing each other's growth? We are in a time of healing at BUCC, and I think it's important to remember the tremendous responsibility we have for each other as a church family. Some of us will bear fruit right away and some of us will need some time to figure it out, but if we continue to care for one another, extend a little grace, and have patience, we will all be ok.

Heidi Spangler



Saturday December 20th, 2025

Matthew 3:v.12

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.

This passage is a tough one...

Through all of Advent, we have been waiting for Jesus to come. Is this what we are

waiting for Him to do? Separate the wheat from the chaff? Am I “good enough”, solid

enough to be considered wheat worth saving? Or am I “too lightweight” and will blow

away, rejected and burned? Ouch. That image is a bit troubling to me.

Maybe we can look at this in terms of all our holiday plans and activities. Which ones

are really just fluff? Which ones are solid, bringing us closer to our loved ones and

God? To me, those are questions worth pondering.

Also 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.

Good and gracious God. Thank you for your guidance in what is true and valuable.

May I avoid being a lightweight, doing only fluffy things. May I be a solid member of

Your realm, focusing on things that celebrate Your love. Amen.

Jim Duffy

Sunday December 21st, 2025

Isaiah 35:3-4

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."

It was 1989, early December.

My mother and I would soon learn that we had our last Thanksgiving dinner together in the home in which I grew up. The snow had fallen and the air was freezing but the wood burning stove in the basement kept the home warm that night. Despite difficult times we were surviving without anyone's help.

That all changed at around 4 AM. Mom beat on my door and yelled the house is on fire. Unable to believe such nonsense, I wrapped my blanket around me left my room while she frantically dialed the phone in the kitchen. There was a loud crackling sound as I walked to the front room to see the wall to rippling with flames.

We made it out alive but lost everything.

This is when I learned the value of COMMUNITY. The days following the tragedy were filled with friends and neighbors opening their homes, feeding us, giving us clothes, cash, places to stay and most of all letting us know that we were going to be OK. We were alive and loved.

In time we were back on our feet. Not because we could do so ourselves but because a community helped us. They showed us that in our time of "weak hands and feeble knees" to be strong and not fear, for the love that our God has stirred in the hearts of our community was there indeed.

Tony Cunningham

Monday December 22nd, 2025

Isaiah 35:5-7

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.

The Old Testament prophets frequently promised a heavenly world to come for the people of Israel who were conquered, enslaved and disenfranchised time and again after angering God. Their sometimes punitive, sometimes parental, yet ever patient God always seemed to forgive them, although He would shake His Holy Finger at them for the errors of their ways. The prophet's lesson was that God loves us, no matter what, and the Messiah would be the earthly manifestation of that Love.

Jesus' arrival, as foretold by the prophets, brought an inclusive and simple social justice message to all who would listen, which I have always thought is the Realm of God. Jesus operated in the realities of His time and was not intimidated by class or brutal power systems. His humility and compassion, along with His universal message of "love God and treat others as you would like to be treated" knows no boundaries and still lives today in each of us. Maybe the words of Isaiah really paint for us the joy and fullness of spirit we experience as we continue to work with Jesus' message towards a compassionate, forgiving and just world -- where acceptance and a universal, loving God are the norm rather than the exception. Maybe this is what we call Hope.

Sherrill Witt

Tuesday December 23rd, 2025

Isaiah 35:v.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.*

A highway, metaphorically a path, that God gives to all of us as a way to live, what career should I go into? Should I have that cigarette/drink at a party? Big decisions and small, we all have to find our path. I left for college at 17 convinced I was going to be a neurologist. After pre-med for 3 years and working as a nursing assistant, I realized that nursing was my path. Much to my parent's dismay, I moved to Boston University to start their nursing program. After 1 year, their program closed and I moved to Richmond! I was at Virginia Commonwealth University for 1 year. I was bullied so badly for being gay I became a secretary for the VA State Police for 2 years and tried to figure life out. My "path" at that time felt like a gravel field with no lines of demarcation. My parents kept asking and supporting my decisions but were concerned that I'd never find that path to a good career. Life came together and I found my way back to Ohio where I finished nursing with a bachelors and masters degrees. I moved states again between and after those degrees while getting my PhD and God was always at the helm. My path led to Cleveland and recently Cleveland Clinic neurologists have saved my life so my path may continue.

Dearest Lord, may we follow you and follow your path knowing that you are always our guide.

Allison Colbert



Wednesday December 24th, 2025

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.

I was privileged to participate in the “No Kings” rally in downtown Cleveland in October. After a brutal year of this damaging administration, I can’t tell you what a relief it was to gather with like-minded Americans who love this country, regardless. We sang, we wore crowns, and “gladness and joy” overtook me as I leaned into the embrace of the overflowing crowd of concerned and committed marchers. The sun shone brightly, there was a cooling breeze, and we reclaimed our country for good. It was very much like the above passage, and I was grateful, with three years left of this slog to go, to catch a breath and release the sorrow and sighing; if only for a day. God willing, it will be enough to see me through.



Betsey Wilson

Thursday December 25th, 2025

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.

Merry Christmas to my church family! No matter where you are in your life circumstances, I hope this Christmas season brings feelings of hope, promise and opportunity to connect with God and your fellow man.

As I understand the psalmist, hope in the Lord makes both the good times better and the rough times less devastating. Who wouldn't want that? So if you have faith, you are truly blessed.

I see God as a benevolent Creator whose ways are beyond our understanding, sometimes breaking our hearts. It gives me joy though, that the story of Jesus is shrouded in working class problems and solutions. To me His life not only gives us His teachings and example, but the example of faith that his family and friends displayed while dealing with all sorts of troubles.

May your remembrance of His humble beginnings bring comfort, peace and gratitude.

Kathy Pastor



Friday December 26th,2025

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. We all just "finished" another whirlwind holiday season (oh wait, New Year's is around the corner). But it was another holiday season filled with many commitments and connections and not enough time for reflection. Many times we lose the message and meaning of Christmas in our non-stop busyness. And with that comes the doubts and the concerns just like John the Baptist expressed while he was in prison and many years after he baptized Jesus. Is he really the Messiah. Is Jesus really the one? Is he truly the one that will save us? And that is when Jesus answers by reporting back to John, the miraculous events that have been happening around him. And for those in today's world, we still see those miracles happening in medicine and in communities every day. It takes that childlike faith that dispels doubt, the very essence of Christmas itself. There are many messages of Christmas but believing in a Creator that brings hope and light into the world and restores faith and goodness in a very hurting world, is definitely the reason for the season.

Diane Gressley



Saturday December 27th, 2025

Matthew 1: 18-19

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly.

I have read these two verses many times throughout my life. Reflecting on what it must have meant to Joseph during Roman times, it is hard for me to imagine how difficult it must have been for him. Learning that his betrothed was pregnant had to have been a mammoth shock and hurt him deeply. How could the woman he loved seemingly break their trust and commitment like this? What would I have done had I been him? Would have been as compassionate as Joseph, toward my wife, for whom I have a deep abiding love for? Joseph shows a remarkable display of compassion and restraint by choosing to divorce Mary quietly, instead of publicly shaming her, as he easily could have done. It's a reminder to us all the power of forgiveness and the importance of handling difficult situations with grace and empathy. I would like to think I would also handle that situation with Joseph's grace and dignity, not knowing of the immaculate conception.

Fred Pedersen

Then he went down to Nazareth with them and was obedient to them. But his mother treasured all these things in her heart. And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men.

Mary had been overwhelmed and humbled by the Annunciation visit of the angel Gabriel years before. She was confirmed in her belief in this gift from God by the angel's warning Joseph to take his family to Egypt to avoid the Slaughter of the Innocents. She had just witnessed her son precociously conversing with the rabbis in the Temple in Jerusalem.

Mary and Joseph knew they were the earthly parents of a remarkable child. How were they going to raise him to become the man he promised to be? Surely they must have been loving but not indulgent. They must have included him in all the joys and chores of family and village life. They must have encouraged his learning and his wondering about the unanswerable questions. Did he come to them already aware of God, or did they and the synagogue nurture his extraordinary awareness of the presence of God?

Joseph did not live long, but through all her years, Mary kept in her heart their sure knowledge that Jesus was the greatest gift from God. And all her days she thanked God for the incredible, rich years of being the mother of God's son.

Even today, we as parents count the birth and raising of a child the most moving part of our lives. We thank God for our children and treasure in our hearts all the sad, funny, challenging, lovely and humbling times with them.

Holy God, hasten the day when all parents, rich or poor, wherever they may live, may raise their children in love and decent surroundings, and may keep them in their hearts their whole lives. Amen.

Betty Gifford (2003)

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”).

This brief phrase, “God is with us” is the crux of our mission as witnesses to our Lord: each of us is commissioned to demonstrate that God is with each and every person NOW. This phrase is not past tense- it is present tense- it is NOW. Every day we have opportunities to SHOW that God is here through our acts of kindness. These acts can be little, medium, or big, but they must be frequent and happen with everyone we meet.

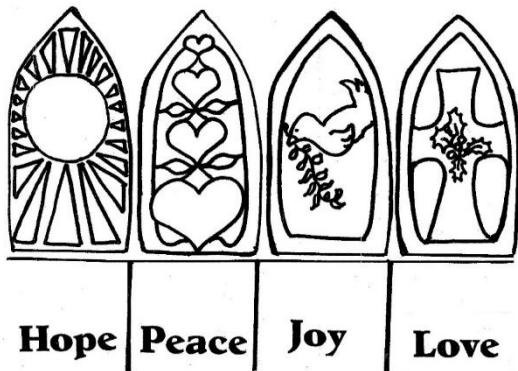
During my childhood, when our family packed our Christmas decorations, my parents kept one ornament out and hung it in the kitchen to remind us to live the spirit of Christmas every day. Now in our house we leave an ornament hanging on our china cabinet all year to remind us that we need to show that God is still here as we go about our daily lives.

Prayer:

Dear Lord, help me manifest your presence in our world today through my acts of kindness.

Peace

Carol Miller (2019)



Tuesday December 30th, 2025

Matthew. 1: 24-25

When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he names him Jesus.

Some of my clearest communications from God come during the small hours of the night, when my mind and body are at rest. During the day I've got my agenda, doggedly checking off to-do's, marching to the relentless beat of my own itinerary. There's always something to complete, purchase, plan-for or attend. The gentle voice of God can be hard to distinguish when it doesn't appear on "The List."

It's noteworthy that Joseph "awoke from sleep" hearing in his dream the Lord's clear, direct command while his mind was detached from the busyness of his daylight tasks. But Joseph, often unlike us, did as he was told. He didn't procrastinate, sulk or bargain, he simply complied. His reward? Nothing less than Jesus himself.

Perhaps if we open ourselves to the "still, small voice" in our hearts, we too will receive that most precious of gifts, Jesus the Christ. And if there was ever a night to listen, surely, it's tonight.

Thank you, Lord, for the gift of your Son this holy night. May we be opened to your call, and like the humble carpenter, bask in the joy that comes with obedience. Amen

Betsey Wilson (2019)

And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generation will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name."

Mary gives this testimony of faith soon after she receives the news that she will be the mother of God. During her visit to her cousin Elizabeth, she sings of God's salvation in this song known as the Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55 is the entire song).

In these verses Mary is singing out of deep gratitude and humility, even while facing future challenges. She empties herself as the lowest of servants. She knows God has filled her with His abundant goodness. Her deep faith allows her to realize that she is part of a holy plan because God has done great things for her.

Every time I hear or read this bible verse, I am reminded of a song from my previous church. This song speaks to me of Mary's acceptance and her transformation.

All that I am sings of the God who brings new life
to birth in me

My spirit soars on the wings of my Lord

My soul gives glory to the Lord

Rejoicing in my saving God

Who looks upon me in my state

And all the world will call me blessed

For God works marvels in my sight

And holy, holy is God's name

All that I am sings of the God who brings new life
to birth in me

My spirit soars on the wings of my Lord.

For your prayer time today I am encouraging you to use Mary's words. Since today is the last day of this year, perhaps you could review the highlights of 2025. Where have you experienced God doing great things for you? This would be wonderful daily practice also. For the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.

Peg Duffy

Thursday January 1st, 2026

Luke 1: 50-51

God's mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. God has shown strength with his arm; God has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors to Abraham and to his descendants forever.

These words, from the Magnificat, anticipate the coming of Jesus, and the works He will do. What goes through our minds as we anticipate the anniversary of His birth? What lies ahead for us as we wonder how best to follow His teachings? These and other questions hopefully will find meaningful answers as we together progress along our faith journeys.

Prayer:

Dear Lord, Remembering the words of Mary, help us anticipate the advent of Jesus. May we give thanks and sing His praises. Amen

Bob Chandler (2010)

Friday January 2nd, 2026

Luke 1:52-53

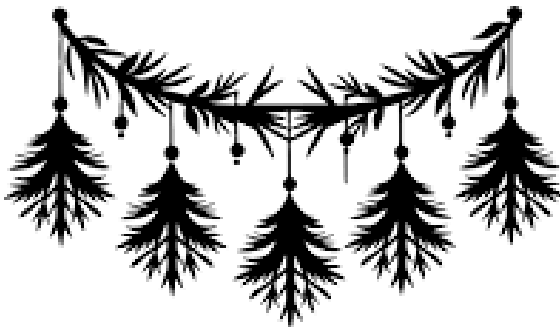
*...he has put down the mighty from their thrones,
and exalted those of low degree,
he has filled the hungry with good things.*

The last line is missing in verse 53 "And sent away the rich empty-handed...."

It has always been amazing to me how The Scriptures written thousands of years ago teaches us what to look out for and how to live in these modern times. This verse, a key part of Mary's song called the Magnificat, describes a reversal of fortunes, emphasizing God's preference for the humble and marginalized over the proud and wealthy. The ending of greed and selfishness and the beginning of service, honor and righteousness, is the only way for humanity to live as Jesus taught.

PRAYER Lord help the evil find empathy and humility. Help us all to be even more humble and empathetic and may our actions be a message to those who fall into the trap of greed and selfishness.

David Pastor



Saturday January 3rd, 2026

Luke 1:54-55

“God has helped his servant Isreal; in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise God made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”

"Promises in Kept in Unexpected Packages"

Mary sang of God lifting up the lowly and fulfilling ancient promises—through her teenage, unwed pregnancy.

Twenty-three years ago, I interviewed for my dream job at the Public Defender's office alongside candidates with better connections, more formidable resumes and from more prestigious law schools. I'm not spoiling the end, I was hired. What separated me? Sally, the night-time cleaning lady.

Years earlier, as a Court of Appeals intern, I'd chat with Sally during her evening rounds—about her family, her work. When I mentioned applying there during a chance street encounter, Sally reached out to the chief public defender. Unbeknownst to me, she'd switched to cleaning the PD's office. Her unsolicited recommendation opened the door to 23 years of serving the poor, despised, and voiceless. I still remember the chief defender telling me, “When Sally knocked on my door and introduced herself just to recommend you. I knew that you were public defender material.”

God's promises rarely arrive through expected channels. The UCC knows this—we've seen the Spirit move through people society overlooks, we've seen God's promise of inclusion fulfilled through marriages once forbidden, and voices once dismissed now leading transformation.

God who lifts the lowly, help us recognize your messengers in unexpected faces.

Paul Kuzmins

Sunday January 4th, 2026

Mark 6:37-38

But he answered them, “You give them something to eat.” They said to him, “Are we to go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread, and give it to them to eat?” And he said to them, “How many loaves have you? Go and see.” When they had found out, they said, “Five, and two fish.”

With the little that we offer, God does a lot. So let's not underestimate the power and value of any good that we can do. Even if we don't have half a year's wages to offer to help many people, if we help one person or good cause, it matters. Although some need is visible or obvious, everyone is in need to some extent and much pain is hidden.

A smile, a card, a word of encouragement, lifting someone up in prayer, providing something that is needed (a meal, a lift, a donation) - the effects of these can be multiplied by God. I know you understand this because I have seen SO many of our church members display kindness and care in these and so many other ways. In fact, the individuals in this church are a wonderful example and inspiration to me.

The work that was done to keep this church going through our recent “troubled times” was huge, and God is making it have great results. We enjoyed the contributions of Monica, David and Tom, our fill-in ministers. We are already being blessed with Rev. Jackson and his wife Audrey, Rob our music director, and Miranda our office manager. THANK YOU to all the people who worked together to get us here.

I look forward to the new year with hope, love and gratefulness.

We all survived the holidays, so now let's be still and know that God just wants us to offer what we can. It is enough.

Kathy Pastor

Monday January 5th, 2026

Isaiah 63: 7-9

I will tell of the kindnesses of the Lord, the deeds for which he is to be praised, according to all the Lord has done for us— yes, the many good things he has done for Israel, according to his compassion and many kindnesses. He said, “Surely they are my people, children who will be true to me”; and so he became their Savior. In all their distress he too was distressed, and the angel of his presence saved them. In his love and mercy he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old.

Hymn: Love Came Down at Christmas

Love came down at Christmas,
Love all Lovley, love divine,
Love was born at Christmas;
Star and angels gave the sign.

Worship we the Godhead,
Love incarnate, love divine;
Worship we our Jesus,
But where is God’s sacred sign?

Love shall be our token;
Love be yours and love be mine;
Love to God and neighbor,
Love for plea and gift and sign.

Christina G. Rossetti, 1885 #165, *The New Century Hymnal*

Prayer: Dear God, Love- that’s really the bottom line, isn’t it. Love for ourselves, our loved ones, our neighbors, the less fortunate, and all the animals in your kingdom. Help us to always love as you love us- without condition and with all our hearts. Amen

Jon K. Thompson (2011)

Tuesday January 6th, 2026

Mark 6:47-48

When evening came, the boat was out on the sea, and he was alone on the land. When he saw that they were straining at the oars against an adverse wind, he came towards them early in the morning, walking on the sea. He intended to pass them by.

In 2012 my daughter and I took a Road Scholar trip to Israel. We went to the River Jordan and saw groups being baptized. We went to the Western Wall in Jerusalem where I placed a prayer in a niche. We walked to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre where we were swept up the stairs with pilgrims. We swam in the Dead Sea. It was an amazing trip, and my daughter wants to go there again, perhaps with her husband.

There are places in Mark where Jesus was born and grew up such as Nazareth, but he carried his ministry to places less familiar. One town was Capernaum, the remains of which are located on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee.

One of the most memorable events on the trip was sailing on the Sea of Galilee from Capernaum. Just imagining Jesus in the boat, and then walking on water, still gives me goosebumps. It was a lovely day and the sea was calm.

We had two guides who were originally from New York, but they made their aliyah, which literally means return to the ancestral homeland. We enjoyed Friday night Shabbat and learned much about Judaism.

It is so sad that this land has been torn apart because of religion. My prayers are with all the people there. The Prophet Muhammad said, " Say your prayers standing; if you are unable, sitting; and if unable - on your side." Amen

Joy Garapic

Notes

This image shows a blank sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

Thank you to all our Writers!