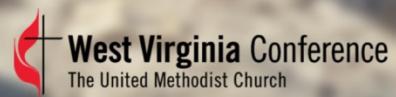




WALKING WITH JESUS

ADVENT STUDY



Prepared for the Family and Friends
of the West Virginia Conference
as a small group or individual study.
(with advent candle lighting meditations included)

Sandra L. Steiner Ball

Resident Bishop
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Walking with Jesus: Advent Study

FIRST SUNDAY IN ADVENT

Come, let us consider our Walk with Jesus. The first Sunday in Advent is the beginning of the Christian year in the life of the Church. What a wonderful gift God has given us! The opportunity for new beginnings. Walking with Jesus is a story and an experience of new beginnings, new life, new or renewed hope and light. It is a new opportunity for laity and clergy to hear God call our names and help us to discover or rediscover the gifts God has given to each of us to help bring life and light to all God's people. As we enter this advent of new beginnings and prepare to light the first candle on our Advent wreath, our thoughts go back to the future of God's house foretold by the prophets. As the followers of God waited for their Messiah, they prepared themselves for walking more closely with their Lord. How will you prepare to walk more closely with Jesus?

THE SCRIPTURE: ISAIAH 2: 1-5 (NRSV). The Future House of God

The word that Isaiah son of Amos saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.

²In days to come

the mountain of the LORD's house
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,
and shall be raised above the hills;
all the nations shall stream to it.

³ Many peoples shall come and say,

"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,
to the house of the God of Jacob;
that he may teach us his ways
and that we may walk in his paths."

For out of Zion shall go forth instruction,
and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.

⁴He shall judge between the nations,

and shall arbitrate for many peoples;
they shall beat their swords into plowshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more.

⁵O house of Jacob, come, let us walk

in the light of the LORD!

THE FUTURE HOUSE OF GOD



Pilgrims praying at the Western/Wailing Wall, at the base of the temple mount.

Questions for Reflection: I invite you to read this scripture slowly, two or three times. Let your heart and mind be open to phrases, words, and images that strike you as vital and important to your continued walk with Jesus and growing discipleship.

This passage is a vision of God's kingdom fulfilled. How might you become a part of sharing this vision of God's kingdom filled – "on earth as it is in heaven?"

Let a prayer form in response to spending this time with God's word and vision.

What about this prayer praises God and what do you hear God saying to you in this prayer as you continue walking with Jesus?

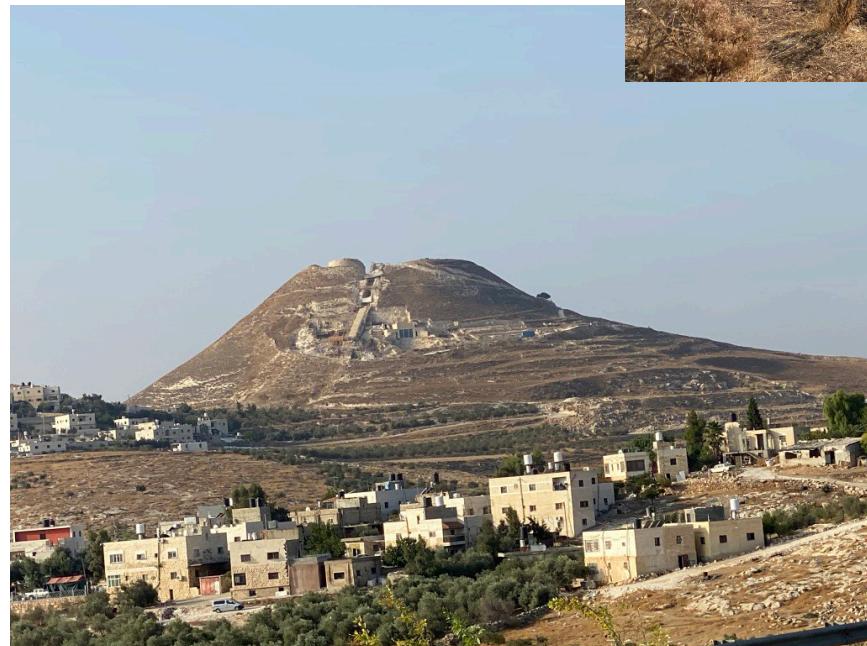
(Light the first purple advent candle as you ponder what God is saying to you.)

Reflection: In the Holy Lands, mountains take on a whole new meaning for me in my walk with Jesus as I encounter and reread scripture. Mountains are indeed a place of safety and sanctuary.

It was on the sides of mountains that people gathered to hear Jesus speak and teach. It was on the mountains that people could see clearly – they could see if enemies were approaching and from the advantage of a mountain people could identify an oasis where life giving water could be found.



Mount of Beatitudes overlooking Sea of Galilee



Herodian, a mountain King Herod had raised up, so that he could build one of his palaces.

Mountains were a sign of status and greatness – Herod the great even put people to work to increase, to double the size of a mountain for one of his great homes. Mountains – in the early mornings and the late evenings – give one the greatest advantage of participating in God's work of creating and concluding a day, moving those who experience this to praise. Mountains are challenging and hard work.

In Jesus' time these mountains were climbed on foot. People would have to work together to climb and to live, to find shelter, food, and collect from the rains or break through the earth to find water. Mountains – places of experiencing God anew.

Mountains – places where we can see more clearly. Mountains – places that call us to work together. Mountains – places that challenge us to learn and grow. In your walk with Jesus, what mountain is God calling you and your community to climb in order to fulfill the vision of God's Kingdom?

(See additional Walking with Jesus reflections for this week at <https://www.wvumc.org/walking-with-jesus-advent/>)

THE CAROL: “Go Tell It on the Mountain” – Cedarmont Kids

Source: [LyricFind](#) Songwriters: Aaron Joseph Neville / John W. Work, Go Tell It on the Mountain lyrics © Universal Music Publishing Group

Refrain:

Go tell it on the mountain
Over the hills and everywhere
Go tell it on the mountain
Our Jesus Christ is born

When I was a seeker
I sought both night and day
I asked the Lord to help me
And he showed me the way (Refrain)

He made me a watchman
Upon a city wall
And if I am a Christian
I am the least of all (Refrain)

THE PRAYER: O God, we thank You for mountain top experiences that are both life-giving and challenging. Thank you for sending Jesus Christ so that walking with him, we might learn more about you and hear your voice more clearly. Thank you for the vision of your Kingdom. Help us to accept your invitation to Come, walk in the light of the Lord and help us to prepare our hearts to receive Christ anew – in our lives, in our home and in our church; In Christ's name we pray. Amen.



A boat cruises the sea of Galilee with mountains in the background. A place Jesus and his disciples walked.

SECOND SUNDAY IN ADVENT

PREPARE THE WAY

What does it mean to prepare the way of the Lord?

THE SCRIPTURE Matthew 3: 1-11

The Proclamation of John the Baptist (NRSV)

3 In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming,² “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”³ This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said,

“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’”

⁴ Now John wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey.⁵ Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan,⁶ and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

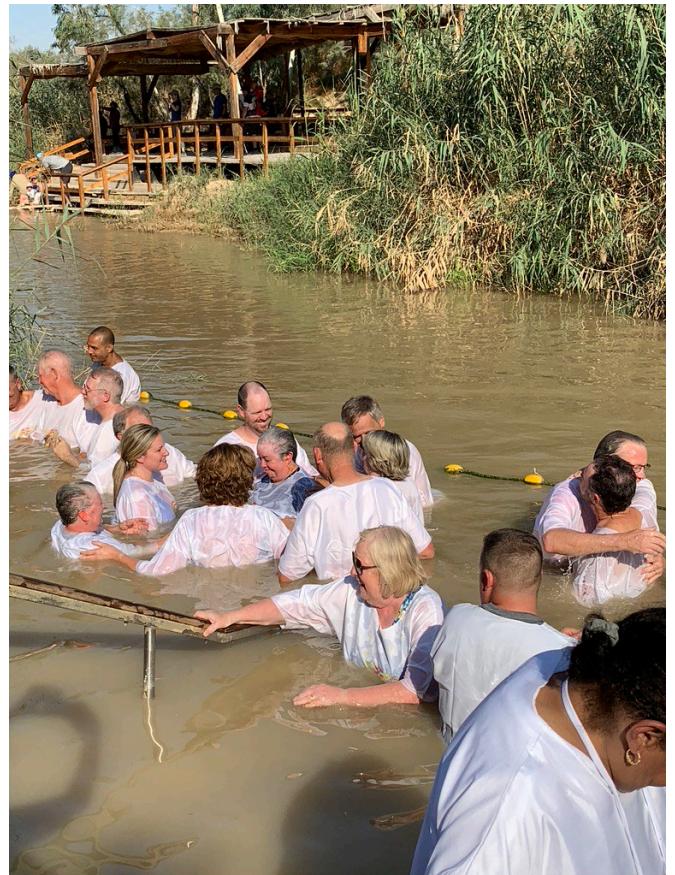
⁷ But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?⁸ Bear fruit worthy of repentance.⁹ Do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham.¹⁰ Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

¹¹ “I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

Reflection: The river Jordan – at least at the baptismal sites – is out in the middle of nowhere. It is desolate, isolated, wilderness. And, I always imagined the Jordan as a great, wide river, however it is narrow, and one could easily wade or swim across it – that is if the Jordanian soldiers were not on the other side of it with guns.

Oh, the people on the Jordan side were doing the same thing we were doing – baptisms and reaffirmation of baptisms – but still the confession and forgiveness of sins there in that place on both sides of the river has not yet brought down the dividing wall between countries and people.

On the Israel side – we arrived at the Jordan – passing through a still active mine field with well posted danger signs warning people not to step off the cleared pathway.



Baptism remembrance in the Jordan River.
The rope is the boundary between Israel and Jordan

John the Baptist's wilderness is still a wilderness area – spiritually, physically, politically. Make the pathways straight, make them easy, make them clear, make them safe and open in the wilderness areas of our physical, spiritual, material and political lives. Sounds easy.

However, in walking the terrain that Jesus and the disciples walked – you soon discover that there is no straight or level path anywhere anyway for more than a few steps. Every step is a challenge.

What John was preaching was challenging. It was new. I'm sure that some people thought it was crazy and impossible. But preparation for anything important is usually not all that easy is it? There are boundaries that have to be negotiated or even crossed. It involves change – usually of heart, mind, and spirit. Sometimes it even changes our life rhythms and patterns.

Preparation – it is not easy and preparing the way of the Lord – making paths straight – well now there is a challenge – but not an impossible one. It is not impossible because of the gift of Jesus himself.

You see even in the times we forget to walk with Jesus, Jesus is always walking with us, always calling our names, always reminding us that with him all things are possible.

Questions for Reflection: What land mines do you need to remove from your life to make straight the pathway for our Lord?

What work do you need to do to remove unforgiveness from your heart so that Jesus might more fully enter in?

What other challenges does this scripture bring to you in the Advent season as you intentionally turn to preparing to receive the birth of Christ anew in your life?

(See additional Walking with Jesus reflections for this week at <https://www.wvumc.org/walking-with-jesus-advent/>)

(Light the first and second purple advent candles)

THE CAROL: "JOY TO THE WORLD"

Joy to the world! The Lord is come:
Let earth receive her King;
Let every heart prepare Him room,
And heaven and nature sing,
And heaven and nature sing,
And heaven, and heaven and nature sing.

THE PRAYER: Almighty God, we thank You for the many wonderful things you have done for us. Help us to prepare to receive the movement of your Holy Spirit anew. In this Advent season help us to clear away the things in our lives – thoughts, words, and action – so that your love and grace will have a straighter pathway to travel as you enter our hearts and communities anew. Help us to be more open to hearing You speak and so guide us each day that we may know how You want us to walk and live, in Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Pictures from the Jordan River and the Dead Sea area



The Jordan River is the dividing line between Israel and Jordan



Remember your baptism, and give thanks!



A view of the Dead Sea, from the top of Masada



Qumran, where the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered

THIRD SUNDAY IN ADVENT

A Song of Praise

Mary's song of praise is lifted to God for God's treatment and recognition of her, but also extends her praise to how God has treated the righteous throughout the ages and how God will bring life to them in the future.

Mary has a thorough trust in God and possesses a mood of joy. She speaks for herself and for her community, the people of God throughout time. God is worthy of praise for what God is doing and will do.

Understanding God's blessing moves us, the believers, to joy and appreciation, since the Almighty cares personally for us and acts on our behalf. As we place our trust in God, and listen for God's voice, God will turn our time of fear and disappointment into times of joy and life.

THE SCRIPTURE: LUKE 1: 46-55 (NRSV)

Mary's Song of Praise

⁴⁶ And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord,
⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
⁴⁸ for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.
 Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
 and holy is his name.
⁵⁰ His mercy is for those who fear him
 from generation to generation.
⁵¹ He has shown strength with his arm;
 he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
⁵² He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
 and lifted up the lowly;
⁵³ he has filled the hungry with good things,
 and sent the rich away empty.
⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel,
 in remembrance of his mercy,
⁵⁵ according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
 to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

Reflection: Mary's prayer of praise is one that we can also pray. Her prayer can help us to increase the gratitude in our whole life. What couldn't be improved in our walk with Jesus by increasing our attitude and expression of gratitude?

Every phrase of Mary's prayer offers praise and thanksgiving to God for God's goodness, faithfulness, and the fulfillment of God's promises that go beyond our imagination.

Mary's soul magnifies the Lord. When we magnify something, it becomes greater and greater. When I think of magnifying something, I think of something becoming larger.

When I think about what it means for my soul to magnify the Lord, I think of a growing joy where I cannot but help to dance, sing, shout praises, smile, and shine. It is a movement that starts from my core and bursts forth and overwhelms my spirit so that I cannot contain the joy within my being. I need to let it out, to share it, to multiply it.

To magnify is to allow God's divine presence, the divine power with which you and I are made, to be in the drivers seat. It focuses you more on God than self. It helps you to focus more on helping others as you walk with Jesus.



When we do not allow God's spirit to move within us or spend time with God, we sacrifice the joy God wishes us to have in our lives. Magnify the Lord! Take time to praise God simply for who God is and for the love given in and through Jesus Christ, a love that will not let us go.

(See additional Walking with Jesus reflections for this week at <https://www.wvumc.org/walking-with-jesus-advent/>)

Questions for study and reflection: Re-read Mary's Song of Praise. How are you - how is your whole being praising the Lord - even in the midst of challenging or surprising, unexpected circumstances?

How has God blessed you and for what purpose? How are you being called to enter God's mission of filling the hungry with good things? - and remember hunger is not just related to food.

How would or could constant prayers of gratitude, praise, and thankfulness change your walk with Jesus and your congregation's walk with Jesus?

(Light the first, second, and third [pink] advent candles. Pink is understood as the color of joy.)

THE CAROL: "O Come, all Ye Faithful"

O come, all ye faithful, joyful and triumphant!
O come ye, O come ye to Bethlehem;
Come and behold him
Born the King of Angels:
O come, let us adore Him, (3x)
Christ the Lord.

Sing, choirs of angels, sing in exultation,
Sing, all ye citizens of Heaven above!
Glory to God, glory in the highest:
O come, let us adore Him, (3x)
Christ the Lord.



THEPRAYER: Creator God, thank you for our daily blessings. Thank you for the great joy of life, love, and hope that you gave to Mary and through her to the world. Mary had a choice in how she received the news from the angel, may we too find blessing us when you call us to challenging journeys.

Help us to seek your voice amid the challenges we encounter walking with your son and to follow the guidance of Jesus rather than being self-serving. Grant us new hope for a better future for ourselves and our families and give us contagious joy in ways that empower us to witness to your faithfulness and love; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Countries from around the world contributed art to the Chapel of the Annunciation in Nazareth to represent Mary. Shown here are pieces from the United States and Japan.

FOURTH SUNDAY IN ADVENT THE ANNOUNCEMENT

THE READING: The shepherds were frightened when the sky was suddenly flooded with a brilliant light. Not only did the message of the angels calm their fears, but this announcement meant that the long-awaited prophecy had been fulfilled.

As we continue walking with Jesus today, we know that the Spirit of God is always with us. God still speaks! God makes announcements today that bring life, hope, love, peace and joy to the world. Help us to turn aside from our busyness to experience the presence of the One who brings life abundant!

THE SCRIPTURE: LUKE 2: 8 – 12

There were shepherds out in the field,
keeping watch over their flocks by night.
And an angel of the Lord appeared to them ...
and they were filled with fear.
And the angel said to them,
“Be not afraid; for behold,
I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people;
for to you is born this day in the city of David a savior,
who is Christ the Lord.
And this shall be a sign for you;
you will find a babe wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.



Bedouin shepherd tending his flock



Gathered for worship in Shepherd's Chapel

Reflection

I cannot read this scripture without thinking of the Shepherds out in the fields and those shepherds that were lying in the doorways of caves – having gathered their flocks in for the evening. The doorways across which they were lying protected the sheep inside – but also gave the Shepherd the ability to look out over the fields. What a sight it must have been for those Shepherds on the evening the angels announced the birth. Something like that must have rocked their world. The first Christmas was all about turning the world upside down.



Gathered to worship in "Shepherd's Cave" visit wvumc.org/walking-with-Jesus-advent to hear one of our groups sing here

It was about God entering human history in a little town within an occupied territory. It was about shepherds, hearing and responding to God's messengers about God's gift to the world and rushing to see and meet a new-born Child of God. It's about how a visit from Shepherds was as treasured by a mother as a new Son and how these simple things and experiences were pondered and shared in ways that have changed the world and untold numbers of people across many generations.

Mary and the shepherds listened and responded. God's word bears fruit when we listen to it, treasure it, respond to it, and share it with others. God's word – it turns things upside down. God's word transforms everyday simple, ordinary things and experiences and makes them extraordinary and life giving.

But like the shepherds, we need to be watching, looking, listening. In this Advent season, we need to ready ourselves to hear God's voice through God's messengers, the voice that will excite our spirit, stir our passion, and ignite us to hurry and draw near to Christ.

Through God's word, great good news comes to us and those we touch. If we do not hurry to be in Christ's presence and to share God's light and love, then the whole world suffers. This day calls us not to an ordinary walk with Jesus, but to an extraordinary walk with Jesus. It calls us to prepare and to listen so that we too might hurry to the life-giving treasure of God.

(See additional Walking with Jesus reflections for this week at <https://www.wvumc.org/walking-with-jesus-advent/>)

Questions for discussion and reflection: Put yourself in the shepherd's shoes - what do you think it might have been like to experience the announcement from the Angels?

The shepherd's response to their experience was actually quite incredible - they hurried to the child! What keeps us from responding to the moments that God breaks through in our world and life the way the shepherds responded?

What keeps you from hurrying to Christ?

What is it that we need to do to better prepare and ready ourselves to see and hear what God and what Christ are doing in our world today?

(Light the first, second, third, and fourth (purple) advent candles)

THE CAROL: “Angels From the Realms of Glory”

1. Angels from the realms of glory,
wing your flight o'er all the earth;
ye who sang creation's story,
now proclaim Messiah's birth.

Refrain:

Come and worship, come and worship;
worship Christ, the newborn King.

2. Shepherds in the field abiding,
watching o'er your flocks by night:
God with us is now residing;
yonder shines the infant Light. (Refrain)

THE PRAYER: Dear Lord, we thank You that the message of the angels is still “good news” for us today. With your Spirit guiding us we know that we can face the future unafraid, and have the joy experienced by the shepherds in our hearts – always; in Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

CHRISTMAS EVE OR CHRISTMAS DAY

THE ADORATION

THE READING: As the shepherds came to the manger, they were thankful to be the first persons to actually see the fulfillment of the age-old prophecy. They expressed their gratitude by going and telling everyone they met the “good news” of the birth of Jesus. May we not be content to only worship God for God’s great gift on this special day, but may we also tell others about Christ and God’s love and may we shine light on where God and Christ are active in our world today.

THE SCRIPTURE: LUKE 2: 15 – 18

The shepherds said to one another,
“let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has
happened,
which the Lord has made known to us.”
And they went with haste, and found Mary and Joseph,
and the babe lying in a manger.
And when they made known the saying
which had been told them concerning this child;
all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them.



Bishop Sandra pauses to pray at the place Jesus was born

Reflection: In our walk with Jesus, this day calls us to so experience and ponder God’s gift, that we cannot bear the thought that others would miss out on receiving it.

This day calls us to take action, to multiply the message, witness, and invitation so that we and others may not miss out on the life-changing, life-giving treasure that God revealed to Mary and the shepherds and has given to all the world. May it be so! Merry Christmas!

Questions for discussion and reflection: Read the whole of the Christmas story in Luke 2. What new thing do you hear in this familiar scripture? For whom do you need to pray for daily to receive Christ into their lives?

Can you make a commitment to praying this prayer daily in the new year? What action will you and your congregation take to multiply the message, witness, and invitation of Christ in new ways and through the everyday ordinary stuff of the church?

Who do you need to invite to be a part of your faith community - inviting them to worship, to church mission and ministry activities? Who do you need to offer a ride - or pick up and bring with you so that they may experience the birth and blessing of Christ in their hearts, minds, spirits and accept Christ's invitation to true and eternal life?

(Light the four Advent candles and the White Christ Candle)

THE CAROL:

“SILENT NIGHT”

Silent night, holy night! All is calm, all is bright,
Round yon Virgin Mother and Child!
Holy infant, so tender and mild,
Sleep in heavenly peace, Sleep in heavenly peace.

The Carol: “O Little Town of Bethlehem”

O little town of Bethlehem
How still we see thee lie
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep
The silent stars go by
Yet in thy dark streets shineth
The everlasting Light
The hopes and fears of all the years
Are met in thee tonight

For Christ is born of Mary
And gathered all above
While mortals sleep, the angels keep
Their watch of wondering love
O morning stars together
Proclaim the holy birth
And praises sing to God the King
And Peace to men on earth

How silently, how silently
The wondrous gift is given
So God imparts to human hearts
The blessings of His heaven
No ear may hear His coming
But in this world of sin
Where meek souls will receive him still
The dear Christ enters in

O holy Child of Bethlehem
Descend to us, we pray
Cast out our sin and enter in
Be born to us today
We hear the Christmas angels
The great glad tidings tell
O come to us, abide with us
Our Lord Emmanuel
O come to us, abide with us
Our Lord Emmanuel



Recently completed statues representing the shepherds – in Bethlehem

THE PRAYER: O God of love, we celebrate your gift of the Savior. We thank You that the promise of the prophets was fulfilled, that Jesus Christ came to save us from our sins, and that we can know about You through Jesus. As we celebrate the coming of your Son our Savior into our lives again and anew, help us in our walking with Jesus to express our gratitude for your gift of new life and eternal life by the action of sharing the “good news” of Your love and Your Word to everyone, in the name of the Christ Child. Amen.

Prepared for the community of the West Virginia conference as they continue Walking with Jesus - 2019
Sandra L. Steiner Ball, Resident Bishop of the West Virginia Conference

BISHOP SANDRA'S ADVENT CALENDAR INVITATION 2019

- December 1: As I attend worship, I will reflect on where and how I need to strengthen my walk with Jesus.
- December 2: As we begin this Advent Season, I will allow God to be involved in all my preparations and activities. Walking with Jesus, I will listen for God's voice daily.
- December 3: This season I will worship as much as possible with my home congregation and community. I will commit to daily prayer seeking to see where God is at work and seeking to join God there.
- December 4: I'll remember that Jesus calls each of us not to lose our childlike faith.
- December 5: Walking with Jesus, I will seek to be a Blessing – sharing God's love and care with someone else.
- December 6: Today I will share a glory sighting, where I have seen God/Christ at work, with family and friends.
- December 7: As I seek to walk more closely with Jesus, I will write a special "Good News" note to 2 persons I know to share just how much they are a blessing to me.
- December 8: This day I will do something special for or with my family.
- December 9: Let me think of others today.
- December 10: As I begin this new week, I will take some cookies to a friend that I know is lonely.
- December 11: I will pray intentionally pray for 5 persons I know who are having a difficult time and could use the strength and blessing of prayer.
- December 12: I will call a member of my family that I have not talked to in a while.
- December 13: I will make a gift or card for someone in my community and I will get it to that person by the end of this week.
- December 14: I will volunteer to help someone with a chore.
- December 15: I will invite and volunteer to pick up a friend or neighbor and take them with me to Worship.
- December 16: I will re-read my favorite passage of scripture and discuss it with someone.
- December 17: I will visit someone who lives alone or who resides in a Nursing Home facility.
- December 18: I will be a friend to everyone I see in the name of Christ.
- December 19: I will read my Bible every day until Christmas in order to strengthen my walk with Jesus. (I am going to try to continue this discipline even after Christmas.)
- December 20: I will be a volunteer. I will volunteer my time somewhere to help in the community.
- December 21: Random Act of Kindness Day! Today I will do something totally unexpected as an act of kindness for a person or organization in the community.
- December 22: Blessing Day: Today I will share a Blessing – a kind word or act - with someone outside of my Church Community.
- December 23: I will pray for 10 persons who need to experience Christ.
- December 24: I will take time to read the Biblical Christmas story from Luke 2; and I will attend the Christmas Eve Service and greet everyone with a smile.
- December 25: Recommitting myself to walking with Jesus – not just some of the time, but all of the time, I will remember to share that the greatest gift given is Jesus Christ with my family and with all those with whom I share this Holiday. I commit myself to being a person who continually shares God's Good News at all times, in all places, all year long in 2020.