

ADVENT 2020 DEVOTIONALS



Written by the Laity of the



**West Virginia Conference
The United Methodist Church**

Dear West Virginia Annual Conference Family and Friends,

You are invited!

We will soon enter the season of Advent as we prepare for the birth of our Savior. I anticipate experiencing Advent differently this year and I suspect the same may be true for you. However, I also know what won't change. Advent will still be an **expectant season**. Christmas will continue to be a **twelve-day celebration**. And Epiphany remains an example of the **discipleship journey**.

I invite you to join me and others from the West Virginia Conference on this journey of expectation and celebration through our annual Advent Study. This year, the study begins on the first Sunday of Advent (November 29) and continues to Epiphany (January 6). I hope you will participate in these daily devotions by pondering scripture, reading a short message, and sharing in the closing prayer.

You don't want to miss these devotions. As I read each one and prepared them to be shared with you, it quickly became evident that these messages of hope, peace, love, light, understanding and joy are all Spirit-led and Spirit-filled. I hope you enjoy them as much as I have. I am certain they will be an important part of your Advent, Christmas and Epiphany seasons. Please invite your church, your family, and your friends to enjoy these daily devotions as well.

I am grateful to Eva Hensley Faulkner, our new Associate Lay Leader, for her leadership in compiling and editing the devotions. I am also grateful for each of our gifted lay persons who served as authors of the devotions. We are fortunate to have a truly wonderful, dedicated group of lay leaders throughout our Conference!

If you would like to receive a digital version of this devotional daily via email, please go to the conference website at **wvumc.org** and subscribe. Scroll down to the bottom of the opening landing page and click on the Explore Subscriptions button.

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EXPLORE SUBSCRIPTIONS

I wish you abundant blessings throughout the holiday season, and a happy and healthy new year 2021. May we continue to offer God's grace to all.

Kristi Wilkerson
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How can we get ready?
How can we prepare this shared space, our sacred spaces?



We can remember.
We can focus on growing together, on sharing this,
God's music, with others.

How can we prepare our hearts?

We shift our attention from the clatter.
We close our eyes or open our eyes
and position ourselves to see, to hear a new song,
even when this world makes it so difficult to do so.

We welcome the words that the prophets sing.
And, we deepen our commitments to harmonize.

How can we prepare our hearts?
We make every effort to see, to listen to the sounds of

Advent.

Look.
Listen.



West Virginia Conference
The United Methodist Church

(Africana Worship resources
Rev. Ashley Johnson, adapted)

ADVENT

Finally, something about 2020 that resembles ‘familiar’. And such a relief it is.

**God is still present in our world and in our hearts.
His Son Jesus is still the Greatest Gift ever given.
We are still thankful that the Love of God is
always a constant in our lives.**

My personal prayer for this project has been the following:

God, at the conclusion of this year of trauma, drama, and uncertainty, guide us to present words that will be prayerfully written, uplifting, and encouraging.

And I believe God answered with something very beautiful. Now...

I pray that our ears, hearts, and minds will be open to receive these words and use them as guiding inspirations for living lives of Peace and Love in the year 2021.

Members and friends of the West Virginia United Methodist Conference, please enjoy this Advent Devotional as our gift to you.

Merry Christmas, love, prayers, and blessings upon you in the coming year.

Eva
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Please note: email addresses are included with each devotion. We encourage you to send compliments notes of appreciation, and other gracious comments to our writers.

Also, if you feel a call to contribute to the Lenten Devotional, please send Eva a note as soon as possible. We will soon be assigning Scripture references and sending guidelines to writers.

THE YEAR OF THE LORD'S FAVOR

Scripture: Isaiah 61:1-4

November 29, 2020

Message:

The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor and the day of vengeance of our God, and to comfort all who mourn...

Isaiah 61:1-2

As the Civil War was coming to an end, Abraham Lincoln challenged a broken and divided nation ... “With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation’s wounds.” With today’s divisions, loss of civility, and seeming rise in hatred, we can relate to Lincoln’s call. We live in a broken world where we often feel trapped. Guilt, depression, financial burdens, fear, bitterness, loneliness, grief, racism, addiction … there are so many prisons we find ourselves trapped within. Darkness may seem to engulf us. And yet ...

The prophet Isaiah foretells of a messiah, Jesus, who will bind up the brokenhearted (v. 1), proclaim freedom for those held captive (v. 1), and comfort all who mourn (v. 2).

As we prepare our hearts during this Advent season, the voice of a Savior and Redeemer calls out to us. Jesus has broken the chains that bind us. He has conquered sin and overcome for us what we could not overcome on our own. He not only came into some past age, but continues to come into our hearts right here, right now – proclaiming freedom from whatever holds us captive. Jesus binds up the broken parts of our hearts, replacing that hurt with peace, joy, and love beyond our comprehension. “A broken and contrite heart the Lord will not despise.” (Psalm 51:17). Jesus heals our broken lives. The presence of the Holy Spirit enables us not only to be comforted but empowers us to bring comfort to others in a hurting world. Just as the birth of the Savior brought light to a dark world, Christ born in our hearts causes a rebirth of our own broken hearts. We are raised from darkness and bathed in the light of a never-ending and never-failing love that brings healing to our lives and transforms us into light-bearers within the world. We experience the Lord’s favor both here and now and for all eternity! Praise the Lord!

Prayer: Our Heavenly Father, thank you for healing our broken hearts, freeing us from the chains that bind us, and showering us with your favor. Give us grace to comfort those who mourn, to bind up broken-hearted, and to grow into mighty oaks of righteousness so we can lead others into experiencing your light and love in their lives. Amen.

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THE SONG REMAINS THE SAME

Scripture: Revelation 15:1-8

November 30, 2020

Message:

“Great and marvelous are your deeds, Lord God Almighty. Just and true are your ways, King of the nations. Who will not fear you, Lord, and bring glory to your name? For you alone are holy. All nations will come and worship before you, for your righteous acts have been revealed.”

Revelation 15:3-4

If you look around, you can see that sin and evil exist. Watch the evening news or pick up the daily newspaper. There is story after story that tells of evil in our world today.

The evil today holds us captive like the Israelites were in Egypt. The “Song of Moses” is a song of redemption. God used Moses to redeem His people from bondage in Egypt. Moses led the people out of Egypt to the Promised Land just as Jesus is leading the saints to that Promised Land we call Heaven.

Who purchased this and did the work for us? Jesus, the infant child that we await. We know His works are “marvelous.” It is far beyond our imagination to see the beauty all around us and realize that the One who created all came to us as a tiny baby. He also loved us enough to later take our place on the cross and suffer for us. He is our King.

Many people forgot that, in all of this, He is not just a loving God, but a “just and true” God as well. “Lord God Almighty” reminds us that Jesus truly was and is our Savior, but until He becomes Lord of our life, we are miles apart from Him. We may live in a sinful world, but we do not have to follow its sinful ways. The sin of this world shows how much we need Jesus in our lives. Is He in your life? If not, what is keeping Him out of your life? Do not let another day go by without asking Him into your heart.

Will you pray this prayer with me?

Prayer: Father, in this season of Advent, we celebrate the greatest gift ever given to mankind, the gift of Your Son Jesus Christ. Lord, I want to now give You my sins and accept You as my Lord and Savior. Thank you for dying on that cross so that I can be free. I want to receive the Gift that provides for me, a sinner, a way out of this sinful world someday and into that Heavenly Realm with You. I Love You, Lord. AMEN.

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OBEDIENCE TO GOD, PROMISES, RESTORATION AND PEACE

Scripture: Micah 4

December 1, 2020

Message:

“Come, let’s go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of Jacob’s God, so that he may teach us his ways and we may walk in God’s paths!” Instruction will come from Zion and the LORD’s word from Jerusalem.

MICAH 4:2

As I read from the book of Micah, it tells us what God required of each of us. I place myself in the midst of the text and ask you to do the same. We hear the invitation, over and over again, each Sunday during Worship, at Sunday School, and Bible Study.

Come, let us go up on the mountain of the Lord so that He may teach us and so we can walk the paths with Him. Do we respond or are we too busy to listen? Do we allow our minds to wander from the message? God requires something of us – His people. When we accept Christ as our Savior, He can bring a radical change, a transformation that others can see. There will be those that won’t listen, unwilling to hear God’s word, and at some point, God’s patience will be cut short. God’s word should at times disturb us, so we want to change. We should despise evil. I wonder at times if I am advancing evil or am I trying to advance my own agenda instead of God’s. I want the peace and security God speaks of in the scriptures and know that comes through obedience to His word. We will go through an exile of spirit but finally come to a place of restoration of our soul that means we will have courage and power to overcome our enemies.

We show respect to Jesus Christ by our actions. This song comes to mind: Great is thy faithfulness, morning by morning new mercies I see. All I have needed thy hand hath provided. Great is thy faithfulness, Lord unto me (UMH #140).

How much ruin is in your life? God can restore you. God can and will restore people, churches and communities. I ask a question: “Has God restored you?” If God has restored you, please share your story with others. Here is a breath prayer you can pray: God, please restore me to a right relationship with you.

Prayer: Lord, teach us to listen to your voice. Help us walk with you through the difficulties of these days. Amen.

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ALWAYS ON THE WATCH

Scripture: Luke 21:34-38

December 2, 2020

Message: **Be always on the watch, and pray that you may be able to escape all that is about to happen, and that you may be able to stand before the Son of Man.**

Luke 21:36

But, in keeping with his promise, we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness dwells. So then, Dear Friends, since you are looking forward to this, make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him. Bear in mind that our Lord's patience means salvation...

2 Peter 13-15a

Advent, to me, has always been about preparing for the coming of baby Jesus. However, this week's verses and even the term Advent actually focus on preparing for the return of Jesus, the adult Savior.

As we wait for Christmas, are you concentrating on a birthday for a baby born over 2,000 years ago? Or are your mind and heart centering on an adult Savior who was born to save us and prepare us for a better place?

While we prepare for the season and make room for all those decorations and gifts, are you making room in your life for Our Savior, Jesus Christ?

As we struggle this year with a tiny, unseen virus that has turned our world upside down, isn't it wonderful to know that God's Son is beside us through the struggles of the year? And that He came to take us away from those struggles and into a place where righteousness dwells?

Jesus continues to be with us, waiting on us to ask Him into our hearts, to keep us safe from our current trials and temptations. All the while, He is waiting and helping us prepare for what is yet to come.

Prayer: Thank you for not only sending us baby Jesus but also for sending us your Son the Savior. Help us to not only prepare for the celebration of the birth of Jesus, but also for the salvation and eternal life that He offers. Please continue to guide us through these difficult times. Forgive us when we falter. In the name of Jesus we pray. AMEN.

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PEACE

Scripture: Psalm 85:8-13

December 3, 2020

Message:

I will listen to what God the Lord says; he promises peace to his people, his faithful servants—but let them not turn to folly.

Psalm 85:8 (NIV)

So, my friends, it's the most wonderful time of the year. The hustle and bustle of the Advent rush is upon us. To be honest, this time of year isn't always merry or bright for me. At the beginning of the season I'm excited about all of the fun holiday activities about to unfold. I revel in writing personal messages in Christmas cards. I joyfully decorate the tree at my house with shiny ornaments and tinsel. I love getting my party on at various church, work and family get togethers.

Soon I begin to lose steam. By the fiftieth time I've heard "Jingle Bell Rock" and burnt yet another batch of cookies, I'm officially done. I throw in the towel. I'm totally done with the holiday before it even arrives. Have you ever felt this way about a week before Christmas? How did we get to this frustrated and pitiful state? Psalm 85:8 shares a bit of wisdom to help us with holiday burn out. The Psalmist challenges us to listen carefully to what the Lord is saying, for he speaks peace to the faithful. We are also told not to return to our foolish ways.

So often in the busyness of Advent, we let the seasonal requirements of the world block out the voice of God. We choose to let our lengthy to-do list steal the time that we should be spending with him. If we take a moment to realign our priorities, placing God first, we will discover the peace we truly desire. Instead of running from store to store buying gifts for everyone we've ever met, we can spend that time in scripture study and prayer.

By recommitting ourselves to these spiritual disciplines, we can connect with the only true source of peace. So will you join me and refocus your priorities? It's easier than you think. You start by grabbing a mug of hot chocolate. Then grab your Bible, read it, and talk with God. But don't forget to wait expectantly for His loving response.

Prayer: God of fresh starts, during this sometimes hectic season, help us to recommit ourselves to you and listen for your peaceful voice. Amen.

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THE GIFT

Scripture: Jeremiah 1:4-10

December 4, 2020

Message:

“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart;”

Jeremiah 1:5 (NIV)

Birth. The scriptures are filled with references about special births. Isaac, Moses, Samuel, Jeremiah, John the Baptist, and the greatest birth, Jesus our Lord. I am confident God must have whispered the above scripture each time these people were given life. They were all placed on this earth for a very special time and task.

I was not given the privilege of giving birth but I have shared in the joy as family members and friends waited, anticipated, and dreamed of their baby's future. Will this child grow to look like their mother or dad? What career path will they choose? And finally, what does the future hold for my special child? Babies who are born this year, 2020, have and will enter a very uncertain world. But all of the above babies also entered a dangerous and uncertain world. So, how do we comfort and encourage the new parents of 2020? One way is to go back and read the stories again of the remarkable births and the promises God made to these people. “I will provide what you need to do what I ask. I will be with you.”

God has a special task for each of us. It is up to us listen, follow, and obey God's direction. He formed us in our mothers' wombs and He knew us. And before we were even born, He set us apart to do this special task. How will we respond to God's call this advent as we are reminded of the greatest birth ever? God set the example as He sent His Son for the greatest task on this earth.

Following God's call is the greatest gift we can give in return for the life He has given us.

Prayer: Lord, open my ears that I may hear you call to me and fill my heart with the desire to answer your call. Amen.

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A NEW HEART

Scripture: Ezekiel 36:24-28

December 5, 2020

Message: **I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you. I will remove your stony heart from your body and replace it with a living one.
You will be my people, and I will be your God.**

Ezekiel 36: 26, 28b (CEB)

As I survey the world around me now, I see so much anger and hurt, pain and weariness. Some of us are angry at being perceived or labeled in certain ways, some of us are hurt by many various injustices, some of us are experiencing pain at being confronted by our own flawed humanness, some of us are experiencing pain at having our humanness discounted, and many of us are just so very weary of all of it. Contemplating this devotional, I am cognizant that I am writing from a confusing and sometimes painful present for a time in an unknown future seeking words of hope from the past. And I do find much hope in these promises from the book of Ezekiel. When we feel separated – not only from our brothers and sisters, but also from right relationship with our God – by differences, verse 24 promises that we will be gathered together from different places and brought to fertile ground. When the dust and mess and busyness of the world are clouding and depressing our souls, verses 25-27 offer assurance that we will be sprinkled with water that cleans and refreshes, and our spirits renewed. Not just renewed, but a complete transplant of our hardened and rebellious hearts; replaced with a living, loving heart, and the very spirit of God. And the single greatest promise in this passage appears at the end of verse 28, “...you will be my people, and I will be your God.” Glory! I pray that we remember in the midst of each small or large pain, trial, and struggle, there are always promises of hope and restoration within the word of God.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, thank you for your promises to restore our weary, polluted, hardened hearts with living hearts powered by your spirit. Help us to reflect and project your loving care to all. Amen.

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COMFORT FOR GOD'S PEOPLE

Scripture: Isaiah 40:1-11

December 6, 2020

Message:

A voice of one calling: “In the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain.”

Isaiah 40: 3-4 (NIV)

Just as the people prepared for the first coming of Jesus Christ, we should be doing the same today. In the verse immediately following these, it states that when these things are done, the glory of the Lord will be revealed.

I believe this is a crucial concept for us to understand in this time. Currently and over the course of 2020, there have been several obstacles and challenges that we have faced. For example, we have endured the strike of the world-wide Coronavirus pandemic, the raging wildfires that have burned just under 4 million acres of land in the United States, violent protests, schools shut down, and so much more. Through all of these, the church has stayed strong and helped lead people through these situations.

There are many things we are unsure of during this time, but what we are sure of is that we need to prepare for the coming of the Lord because he will bring us out of peril into paradise. As a Christian, even I find myself in times where I am unsure where to go or what to do, but what I remember is that if we follow our Lord, He will guide us to where we need to go and prepare us for what we need to do.

Prayer:

Heavenly Father, thank you for your guidance in our daily lives. Be with us and continue to guide us through these challenging times. Lord give us the strength to not only find our way through the troubles but to help others along the way. In your all powerful and loving name. Amen.

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BEING A WELCOMING PEOPLE

Scripture: Isaiah 26:7-15

December 7, 2020

Message: We are in the midst of Advent. And still the pandemic rages. Somber times.

(v. 7 – 8) **The way of the just is uprightness; O most upright, You weigh the path of the just.**

Yes, in the way of Your judgments, O Lord, we have waited for You; the desire of our soul is for Your name and for the remembrance of You. (NKJV)

Do you notice that when you feel good about yourself – a decision you made, perhaps, you stand just a little bit taller. When you feel like you are in a good place with God, you are more comfortable in your life? When we let our ego get in the way, we may veer off the path of righteousness – of being in that right relationship with God. When we allow our wants – our ego – to take us away from spending time with God – we consciously or unconsciously turn away from God.

When we realize we have wandered away from God, we may feel off-kilter – out of synch – and then, perhaps ashamed. We seek that lost relationship. We suffer a sense of despair. We seek the comfort of God's presence in our lives. We hunger for God's presence. We yearn for that place of peace. We want to share the comfort we enjoy with others. By spending time with God – in worded or wordless prayer, we find a sense of peace. By turning – or returning – to God, we can find forgiveness. We are made welcome with forgiveness.

(v. 15) **You have increased the nation, O Lord, You have increased the nation; You are glorified; You have expanded all the borders of the land. (NKJV)**

As we prepare to welcome the Christ child in our lives, may we welcome the lost, the least, the traveler and the immigrant. This Advent, may we slow down and think about our relationship with God.

Prayer: Gracious and loving God, we know you are ever with us. May we focus this season on being a welcome people. May we find that close relationship with You that we seek. Amen.

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HOPE WHEN SMOKE GETS IN OUR EYES

Scripture: Psalm 27

December 8, 2020

Message:

The Lord is my light and my salvation. Should I fear anyone? The Lord is a fortress protecting my life. Should I be frightened of anything?

But I have sure faith that I will experience the Lord's goodness in the land of the living! Hope in the Lord! Be strong! Let your heart take courage! Hope in the Lord!

Psalm 27:1-2; 13-14 (CEB)

As a former volunteer firefighter, I know that crawling around a burning building can be very dark and disorienting. You're wearing a heavy air pack on your back and, even with the flames burning around you, the thick smoke makes it nearly impossible to see what obstacles might be in your way. In the "heat of the battle," once you get turned around or disoriented, you can quickly start to feel uncertain, fearful or alone. You always hope that you can find the light from your partner's helmet to guide you or the glow from a window or door to put you back on the right track. That's when you know you're not alone.

God tells us today that He is our light and our salvation! We are not alone with him! When we are in the midst of the fires in our lives, He will protect and comfort us if we put our hopes and our fears in Him. No matter how heavy the burdens we might carry this Advent season, he will be the fortress safeguarding our lives.

Just like the smoke from a fire, life can turn us around, and negative situations can blind us from seeing what, and who, is right in front of us, but God says that we don't have to fear the obstacles in our way. He will save, protect and help us deal with the fires of our lives if we keep our eyes on His light. We need to focus on His saving grace each and every day and let that spirit of the season show in our service to others!

Prayer: Dear Heavenly Father, during this 2nd week of Advent, prepare our hearts to receive the hope of the season. Give us the anticipation of Your light and Your salvation to get us through life's smoke and flames. We ask all of this in Your precious name. Glory to God in the highest! Amen.

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DO NOT BE AFRAID

Scripture: Luke 1:5-17

December 9, 2020

Message:

But the angel said to him: “Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John.”

Luke 1:13

When people see an angel, they usually exhibit signs of great fear. Seeing angels is not a normal occurrence. But this was a very special occasion as God sent the angel to announce the one who would prepare the way for the Messiah. This day was already a very special day for Zechariah; he was lighting the incense in the temple. Because of the great number of priests at that time, generally, a priest was only selected once in their career to perform this important task. The incense was lit two times a day, once in the morning and once in the mid-afternoon. Today was the day Zechariah was selected for the honor of lighting the incense for one of the two lightings. God also selected this same day to surprise Zechariah with an answer to prayer, the prayer for a child conceived by his wife. In addition, God named the child, another rare occurrence. They were rewarded with this special child because they had been righteous before God.

What does this story tell us about God? Nothing is impossible for God. God rewards righteousness. God delivers on His promises. God wanted to prepare the path for His Son, whom He was sending to earth to redeem the world and establish a new covenant with people. God is love, mercy, and forever generous toward us. God likes surprises and is creative in finding ways to surprise us.

Even during this pandemic, we have been surprised at what God is able to do through His people called the church. This year I have noticed the beauty of nature around me, and the creativity of God's handiwork has been astounding. The creativity in reaching people in our communities has been exhibited in a variety of ways. Give thanks to God.

Prayer:

Dear Lord, thank you for the surprises You give to us. Help us to be joyful, righteous and thankful for the many blessings You give to us. Amen.

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SONGS OF JOY

Scripture: Psalm 126

December 10, 2020

Message:

It was said among the nations, “The LORD has done great things for them.” The LORD has done great things for us, and we are filled with joy. Restore our fortunes, LORD, like streams in the Negev. Those who sow with tears will reap with songs of joy. Those who go out weeping, carrying seed to sow, will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with them.

Psalm 126:2b-6 (NIV)

At this time of year, we look forward to losing ourselves a bit in the euphoric setting of lights, desserts, carols, and presents laid out in anticipation and celebration of the birth of the Savior. It is also sometimes hurried and stressful as we desperately try to get tasks completed and attend every cookie walk, concert, nativity, and family gathering. But in those moments, when the evergreen takes over the senses, it is not hard for us to find ourselves like “those who dream.”

Of course, our fortunes are vastly different than the generations who lived in exile in Babylon. Psalm 126 celebrates the triumphant return to Jerusalem from exile in Babylon, rejoicing with those who have returned and beckoning the Lord to bring back the rest of their brethren. The short phrases of Psalm 126 keep the potent meaning of rejoicing and sorrow terribly close: “May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy.”

For all of us, we have had our times of sowing in tears and some of us may still be in the field this Christmas. All of us, though, are soon to be wrapped in the gaze of a baby, bringing love and hope and warmth. Let that image bring peace as we run around collecting bags and moments and, in the light of a tree, let us “. . . come home with songs of joy, carrying [our] sheaves” to welcome Emmanuel.

Prayer: Almighty God, as we hustle in this season, may we be at peace in your smile from the manger. Amen.

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A MARAtHON – NOT A SPRINT

Scripture: Philippians 3:12-16

December 11, 2020

Message: “You find your amusement where you can” was a comment from a friend years ago when being able to buy a ticket to a movie was quite a treat. Back then, we learned to find amusement in small ways. That lesson carried on, I suppose, since I find some small amusements today in needling some (not all) of my friends who are Elders about being perfect. “Have you reached perfection today or are you still going on?” I sometimes ask at (in) opportune times. I often enjoyed this light banter with my friend Paul Stadelman. These discussions usually circled around the long struggle of trying to live up to Christ’s standards. We talked about the journey that may be long for some but very short for others, depending on how much life was left in them when they started that journey.

Most definitely, it is a ‘life-long’ marathon.

Paul the Apostle had been following the teachings of Jesus for at least 25 years when he wrote this letter to the Philippians. There is no question that Paul is one of the more outstanding and hardworking Christians – always reaching out for Christ. Even then, he repeated over and over that he was still in the journey: “Not that I have already obtained it,” “I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet” and one of his favorites, “I press on.”

“All of us, then, who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too, God will make clear to you.” When I heard that my friend Paul Stadelman had passed on to Glory, I smiled and thought: Friend, you finally made it.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, give me strength and patience to run the marathon and to finally reach, in the end, a full understanding of Your grace and love. Through Jesus Christ I pray. Amen.

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WE CAN LIVE A NEW WAY!

Scripture: Habakkuk 3:2-6

December 12, 2020

Message:

O Lord, I have heard of your renown, and I stand in awe, O Lord, of your work. In our own time revive it; in our own time make it known; in wrath may you remember mercy.

Habakkuk 3:2 (NRSV)

The prophet Habakkuk remembers God's reputation as a God who is ready to show compassion but hates injustice and will act against it, a God of light and mercy, of judgment and destruction.

Many years ago, an African American United Methodist District Superintendent showed up at the home of a poor white girl, because he had heard about the promise in her life. That poor white girl was me. I will forever be grateful for The Rev. Dr. Ramsey Bridges who went before me to West Virginia Wesleyan College and helped pave my way. As my family had no means of transportation, he made trips to Buckhannon with me "in tow," to meet with college personnel.

We live in a world today where the promise in the lives of many persons of color and marginalized folk is routinely squashed. We live in a world where both individuals and institutions are more likely to see persons whose color isn't white as persons who have little potential and promise. Habakkuk reminds us that God is watching and looking for acts of justice on the earth.

God is always ready to forgive us and offer us new life, but God wants us to walk in HIS ways, HIS paths. God's eternal paths are filled with Love and Justice for ALL PEOPLE.

Rev. Bridges used his position and caring to help provide opportunity for a marginalized person who had nothing to offer in return, and who surely would have gotten lost in the shuffle of the accepted values of the day.

We are preparing to celebrate the birth of Jesus who came to forgive us of our sins and to make it possible for us to live in a whole new way. In the next few weeks most of us will sing the carol "O Little Town of Bethlehem." In that carol there is a prayer. I invite you to pray that prayer with me.

Prayer: O Holy Child of Bethlehem descend to us we pray. Cast out our sin and enter in. Be born in us today. Amen.

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BLESSING OF QUARANTINE

Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

December 13, 2020

Message: I let this passage roll around my head and heart for a couple of days. Some phrases jumped out—be cheerful, pray all the time. God uses our spirit, soul, and body to keep us fit for the coming of the Master.

This ties in nicely with Advent – waiting, preparing, having patience for what is to be.

When this pandemic first started, I intended to get loads of things done, work on projects I was in the middle of, finally be super-productive! But the stress of it all soon became too much. I was stressed and not resting, praying, or focusing on what is important in my life. I thought this would be over soon and we could get back to being “normal and routine.” Boy, was I wrong!!

Going back to church safely helped me to get back on track in my spiritual life. This is a time that should not be rushed, and we can be cheerful in our own lives, despite the sadness and sickness that surround us. I rekindled the spirit by praying while walking my new puppy, Cooper. I find solace in being alone with my pet, enjoying God’s wonderful sunrises. Family time was important before, but I am now acutely aware of the precious moments we spend with one another and I realize not everyone will have this opportunity.

This quarantine has provided lots of opportunities to take pleasures in the small things in life, give thanks for what we have, pray for others, and wait patiently. I think I might just be getting the hang of this Advent and waiting thing!

Prayer: Precious Lord, thank you for moments of quiet. Thank you for the joy found in the smallest things throughout the day. Thank you for helping my spirit to grow and learn while I wait patiently for your return. Amen.

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THE WHOLE ARMOR OF GOD

Scripture: Ephesians 6:10-18

December 14, 2020

Message:

Finally, my brethren; be strong in the Lord, and in the power of His might. Put on the whole Armor of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places. Wherefore take unto you the whole Armor of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. Stand therefore, having your loins girt about with truth, and having on the breastplate of righteousness; And your feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace. Above all, taking the shield of faith, wherewith ye shall be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God. Pray always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit.

Ephesians 6:10-18 (KJV)

How does this scripture passage speak to you? It screams...Be Prepared. Don't put off obtaining the parts of God's Armor that you need to fight and defeat the devil each day!

We have started the third week of Advent which represents Joy. But we only reach Joy and Peace by first preparing ourselves. As I often read this scripture I keep thinking – Only with prior preparation can I feel assured I will be victorious. Paul tells us in this passage to put on the Whole Armor. He repeats this again and tells us what each part of the Armor is and what it is used for.

What is our Armor?

Truth, Gospel of Peace, Righteousness, Faith, and Salvation. When we have the whole Armor of God, we then only need one weapon – our Sword – the Word of God.

We do not have the ability or strength to carry out daily battles on our own. Through daily devotions and prayer (communication) with God, we enhance our Sword and use God's power to defeat the rulers of darkness. We gain strength thru Christ and know He will keep his promises as we face whatever foes the evil one sends our way. We are then at peace with God. And God is at peace with us.

Prayer:

God, I thank you for all you have done for me. Help me to continually “put on” your whole Armor as I live my life. Give me strength and trust in your promises. Help me to reinforce my Armor each day by reading your Word and proclaiming Your Power over evil. Amen.

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UNIVERSAL RESTORATION

Scripture: Acts 3:17-4:4

December 15, 2020

Message:

The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people: you must listen to everything he tells you. Anyone who does not listen to him will be completely cut off from among his people.

Acts 3:22-23

Resurrection. It was the hot button issue of the day. The Pharisees claimed their souls would pass into an after-life. The Sadducees denied any existence after death. But both agreed that the ideas of a new rising sect of Jews had to be put down. Not only were these Jews proclaiming a donkey-riding Galilean to be the Son of God, they were talking about a new kingdom. Now. The Pharisees and Sadducees thought it all would end when they crucified their leader, Jesus. If He was dead, He couldn't be a problem anymore.

But it got worse. The people claimed He was resurrected. On the Day of Pentecost, the city was set ablaze with fiery tongues and a mighty roaring wind through the power of the Holy Spirit. And now, a confirmed miracle, the healing of a lame man from birth, right in front of the Temple Gate, was stirring the whole city. It was undeniable that some new power was at work.

The healed man entered the Temple Gate himself now, choosing to do so alongside the people that gave him a new life. Everyone else ran up in amazement to see the miracle and its deliverers. Peter asked, "Why do you stare at us as though we did this by our own power or piety?"

Enough was enough. Peter was claiming that Jesus did this. Usually in the gospels, faith associated with healing is centered on the one being healed or a bystander, but here we see it is the healer's faith that brings about the change. Peter wasn't claiming personal power or holiness, he was claiming it was his faith in Jesus' power that brought about change.

The people of the day were so focused on restoring the kingdom of Israel and what the resurrection would look like in the future, they missed the universal restoration and new life rising up in front of them. They were focused on the power in the miracles and not the lives that were changed because of them.

Peter was already at work ushering in the kingdom of God by restoring people here and now. Jesus' witnesses advocated not some theoretical hope for the future but the belief that the first case of the promised resurrection had already occurred. Does your witness restore the lives of others in a personal way?

Prayer: Lord, give us eyes to see your kingdom, ears to hear those in need crying out, and hands to lift people out of their situations into a new way of life. Amen.

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GIFTS OF TIME

Scripture: Malachi 3:16-4:6

December 16, 2020

Message: **"But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings.
You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall."**

Malachi 4:2

I have basically always tried to be a good person. Lending a helping hand, serving where I can, remembering the sick and shut ins and visiting seniors. Several years ago, a friend and I adopted a group of senior citizens that were either alone or did not get out much. We would visit with them on special holidays, take them gifts to enjoy and send them cards throughout the entire year. Each senior would get so excited to hear that we were coming to visit. You could tell that they were because the tone of their voices would change when we would call to let them know what day we would be dropping by. When we arrived at their houses, they would answer the door with the biggest, brightest smiles on their faces. Some would have refreshments for us and others would just enjoy the company. We could tell that the gifts were appreciated but more than that, they appreciated the fact that someone was taking time out of their day to spend some time with them.

What was not realized was that the biggest gift was actually their love and affection for us. Something that started so small and minute grew into something that would last until our next visit. It was not the gifts that they looked forward to, but the time that we spent talking and visiting with them. It will never be known if we helped to extend a life, or even restored life in someone that had given up hope and were just going through the motions of existing, but I would like to think so. Knowing that I was a part of that leaves me with a feeling of being full and satisfied. Paraphrasing John 21:16 "**Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee. He saith unto him, Feed my sheep.**" It also gives me the belief that because of our acts of kindness the Lord will remember this on Judgement Day and I will be one of the calves leaping with joy.

Prayer: Dear Lord, help me to continue trying to be a good person and to remember that I must try to help others, to continue to visit family, friends and lonely people. Amen.

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ADVENT: A SEASON OF FAITHFULNESS

Scripture: Psalm 89:1-4

December 17, 2020

Message:

"I will sing of the Lord's great love forever; with my mouth I will make your faithfulness known through all generations. I will declare that your love stands firm forever, that you have established your faithfulness in heaven itself. You said, 'I have made a covenant with my chosen one, I have sworn to David my servant, 'I will establish your line forever and make your throne firm through all generations.'"

Psalm 89:1-4 (NIV)

After reading these verses, the main idea that jumped out at me was God's faithfulness. I think that Advent highlights God's faithfulness. Bible scholars describe it as God being true to God's word; God is totally trustworthy; His promises are believable. In Advent, we are waiting and preparing for the fulfillment of God's faithfulness which begins with the birth of Jesus.

The word "sing" in verse 1 of Psalm 89 also grabbed my attention. This immediately made me turn to the UM Hymnal. Read through (or sing through) the titles and words of the hymns listed which tell the Advent story of faithfulness.

COME THOU LONG EXPECTED JESUS...(UMH 196), Tell out, my soul, the glories of God's word! Firm is the promise and God's mercy sure. Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord to children's children and forevermore!

GREAT IS THY FAITHFULNESS...(UMH 140), Great is thy faithfulness, O God my Father, there is no shadow of turning with thee; thou changest not, thy compassions, they fail not, as thou hast been, thou forever wilt be, STANDING ON THE PROMISES OF GOD...(UMH 374), Lo how a rose e'er blooming from tender stem hath sprung! Of Jesse's lineage coming, as those of old have sung...(UMH 216)

Prayer: Faithful God, give us trusting hearts to await, in faith, the coming of your promise in Jesus, the Christ child. Amen.

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ANGELS

Scripture: Hebrews 1:5-14

December 18, 2020

Message: Let all the angels worship Him.

During the time of Advent, we hear a lot about Angels. Hark the herald Angels sing; Angels we have heard on high, Angels from the Realm of Glory, and Go tell it on the Mountain. Angels can be described as God's messengers and servants.

In this passage of scripture, it is noted that Jesus is elevated above the Angels. The spiritual journey taken by each of us is a series of steps. We progress on our spiritual journey laying the foundation for the next level of wisdom. As children of God, we all bear the DNA that tells us we belong to God. It is our choice to listen and respond to the DNA buried deep within our souls. Our faith journey is a work in progress. We are to be instruments of faith to those around us, servants to our neighbors, responding to the inner voice within.

Advent is a time of preparation, hope, joy, and love. We are God's messengers called to share the good news. How will you share the good news during this Advent season? God is with us in everything we experience. Take courage and do not fear, God is with you. A little kindness goes a long way. A simple gesture can provide a gateway to an inviting spiritual journey. God uses ordinary people to do extraordinary tasks, you never know how God is using you. Strive for joyful obedience.

Prayer: God of the Universe, cradle all who seek your will today and everyday. Be a constant reminder that you are in every fiber of our being and that we are all connected. Make me an instrument of your will. Amen.

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GOODNESS

Scripture: John 7:40-52

December 19, 2020

Message: **And she gave birth to her first-born Son and wrapped Him in swaddling clothes, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.**

Luke 2:7

Here is where I first met you, Lord; where most of us who grow up in the Church really take notice. In a feed box for farm-animals: You, wrapped in rags, a baby (helpless as any baby), cared for by your parents. And there it dawned on me, Lord, when, while delivering newspapers in the stillness of a late Christmas Eve, I stood before the crude plastic of a manger scene: You are God. You are God come for me. You are God come for all who will allow your great coming. You, the Almighty God, have come as a Baby. And in this first meeting I was not afraid. You came as a baby and I knew that You loved me.

There were hard things to come, Lord, hard things swiftly coming in the reading of your story; these things I slowly received. There were words from your lips revealing a divided and godless heart, words which summoned repentance. There were words as fresh to me as they were to Matthew, calling me to follow you and in that following to bear a cross. There were words which called me to an obedience that no man has a right to elicit from another. But you are not any man. You are God-in-the-flesh. Your claim is right. And it is fearsome.

But, Lord, you came first as a baby. And, so, I know that all that has come and is to come from your hand is good. You humble me because you are good. You break me because you are good. You allow no love for another to stand before or beside my love for you, because you are good.

Prayer: You came as a Baby, Lord, that first I might know your love. And so, in this season, I will receive you, my Lord, as the Shepherds did. As a baby. Come from the love of the Father. When the Shepherds had found you, Lord, they rejoiced and they returned to their lowly calling, new men. Amen.

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AND SO, IT BEGINS

Scripture: Luke 1:26-38

December 20, 2020

Message: After many years of unknowingness, God makes a large entrance. So large that God has to recruit a team from Galilee, to fulfill the prophecy contained in the Hebrew Scriptures. It's a new beginning but also a continuation of the story of God. Just like in Genesis, there was an intermediate period and then God speaks life into existence. God turns chaos into something beautiful. God does this by telling Mary that she is going to give birth to a holy child. And so, it begins.

God chooses Mary to be God's vessel to bring Jesus, the Son of God into this world. Mary is what makes Jesus truly human. By God choosing Mary, God sets in motion the way we will think about Jesus. In this passage, God shows the story of God with us. That there is the God who creates, the God who saves, and the God who sustains.

Because of this passage, it gives birth to trinitarian theology with God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. What this means for us is that Mary helps bring God into human flesh. Mary is helping us understand and see God in a new way. This is no small task and Mary responds by saying, "Here I am...be with me according to your word."

God presents us with huge, life-altering tasks and sometimes super tiny ones. To be a favored one, to be a vessel of God, we must respond with "Here I am." Let us all be like Mary, a vessel used by God to do life-changing work!

Prayer: O God of love and justice, the God who gives us life, allow us the grace to be like Mary. Use us to be vessels of you so we can proclaim you, and not turn away. Allow us the courage and faith to follow after You at all times. We pray this in the name of Christ. Amen.

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MARY'S SONG: THE MAGNIFICAT

Scripture: Luke 1:46b-55

December 21, 2020

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

Luke 1:46b-55

Mary magnifies the Lord, proclaiming His greatness and rejoicing in God the Savior. She sums up God's actions in her own life, which reflect His actions throughout history, for God's plan is radically different from the agenda of human beings.

She is literally shouting for joy at the blessing He is bestowing upon her. 'Blessings' to us usually imply a life of privilege and comfort. However, God has not lauded Mary with an easy task. She has no wealth; she is unmarried and pregnant. Some Favor! God has given her a death sentence. She is baffled but not indignant. Mary praises God for honoring her!

Mary evokes all the promises God has kept concerning his people. She recalls God's redemptive work on earth, feeding the hungry, comforting the lowly, showing mercy to the descendants of Abraham. She trusts Him to bring about marvelous things through this revelation.

This is exactly the time for us to indulge in the unadulterated celebratory joy that we have in the promises that come to us in Jesus Christ. Therefore, no matter how God chooses to bless you, do not be afraid, stand firm in the promises of Christ our King.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, give us peace, patience and a spirit of assurance, now and always. Amen.

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COVENANT

Scripture: Hebrews 8:1-13

December 22, 2020

Message: Covenant! Not a word that comes up very often in conversation. Even in most churches. What comes to mind when you hear the word “covenant?” Most dictionaries will define it as an agreement or contract between two or more parties. In the Old Testament, God has a covenant with people like Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David—and through them, all of God’s people.

If you have not done so already today, pause now to read Hebrews 8:1-13. Notice how many times the word “covenant” is used. When the Bible has a word or phrase repeated this often in a section, it is good for us to pay attention. The author of Hebrews is pointing out two major points in this chapter. First, Jesus is the High Priest (Messiah) superior to any earthly priest. Second, Jesus has established a New Covenant, the old ones are obsolete, the new is not about laws or rules, but about grace and love. Jesus has done for us what we could never do for ourselves.

When Mary and I were married over thirty years ago we stood before God and entered into a covenant to love, honor, and respect each other. When we joined Winfield UMC we again stood before God and entered into a covenant to support the church with our prayers, presence, gifts, service and witness. These are covenants that mean a lot to me. I take them both very seriously. Not because of any laws or rules, but because of the agreement I made standing before God. What a blessing it is for us to live on this side of God’s New Covenant!

Prayer: Lord God, thank you for the gift of your Son who by his sacrifice we are saved. As we prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus, may we remember the New Covenant time we are living in today, one of grace and love. And may we invite those all around us to join us on this wonderful journey. Amen.

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THE GIFT OF GRACE

Scripture: 1 Samuel 2:1-10

December 23, 2020

Message: Before reading Hannah's Prayer, imagine Hannah's life. She was one of Elkanah's two wives; his other wife, Penninah, had children, but Hannah did not. Penninah bullied Hannah, and though Hannah's husband loved her, he did not protect her from this ridicule.

Hannah prayed that God would give her a son. Why was this so important to her? As a childless woman (in her time), she feels unworthy and useless. These feelings are only amplified by Penninah and by the society in which Hannah lives. She is asking for a son, but she is also asking God for restoration.

In chapter 2, Hannah prays about the difference God has made in her life. God has turned her life upside-down. God has changed everything. In her prayer, she says, "The bows of the mighty are broken, but the feeble gird on strength." And "He raises up the poor from the dust; he lifts the needy from the ash heap, to make them sit with princes and inherit a seat of honor."

Hannah cannot do this on her own. The gift of restoration that God has given her was grace. Unearned, and truly a gift. Who or what in your life needs to be restored? Where do you need God's grace? How can you follow in Hannah's footsteps and release to God what is broken? The result of God's grace may not be what we expect, what we ask for, or even what we can imagine, but God is worthy of our trust.

Have you noticed? Do you remember? God turns water into wine, sinners into saints. God uses tax collectors to spread the word of Life throughout the world, and God turns our own hands into God's own. God brings life from death.

Prayer: Creating and sustaining God, in my hands is what I cannot release. Open my heart so that I can release to you what I cannot restore myself. Open my hands with your grace and change my world. In the name of your redeeming son. Amen.

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ON THE FIRST CHRISTMAS

Scripture: Psalm 97

December 24, 2020

Message:

The Lord reigns; let the earth rejoice;

Psalm 97:1a (NKJV)

Often in my life, I have watched someone else manage challenge with an unwavering positive attitude. 2020 has been full of opportunities to wonder “How will we get past this?”

On the First Christmas

For on that first Christmas, the world was in desperate times, too. A census is being conducted in order to raise already high taxes. Murderous, paranoid Herod the Great is king of the Jews. It is winter on Bethlehem's hillsides — and cold. Inside a cave in the town sit a poverty-stricken carpenter and his young wife — far from home, chilled to the bone. She is in labor. Her child will be born in a stable, of all places. Why is it like this? she may have asked.

And then she recalls an echo of the angel's words to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary...." (Luke 1:30)

The Lord still reigns!

Listen for his messages in your daily life. Take a moment to center yourself and say a quick prayer. Just as God was with Mary and Joseph that first Christmas, he is with us today to help us manage even the strongest storms.

Prayer: Dear Lord, help us to remember that you are always with us, in times of celebration and challenge. Help us trust that you will guide us and love us through whatever life brings. Amen.

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THIS LITTLE LIGHT OF MINE

Scripture: John 1:1-14

December 25, 2020

Message:

In Him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world.

JOHN 1:4, 5, 9

TODAY IS CHRISTMAS. It is a day to celebrate, reminisce and make memories with families and friends. We also are nearing the end of another year, another season of life.

However, this year may not hold fond memories. Fear laced with more negative than positive has encompassed the very essence of our being during this year. We have struggled with uncertainties. And differentiating truth from misconceptions is near impossible. We have become spiritually ill in the midst of all the mess. We are meandering souls in this new so called “normal.” We blindly seek that one flicker of light of hope.

Where, when and why, fellow believers, did we think it was okay to forsake God’s Word? Forget God’s promises? These are times we need to “amp” up our ability to connect with God for wisdom, guidance, and direction. Why would God gift us His only son Jesus to sacrificially die if God wasn’t a loving, compassionate God?

We have failed God miserably in our lack of seeking and serving. We have allowed our light to grow dim or even, at times, extinguished. In John 1:5 we are promised that no matter how dark life is, the presence of God is our life-light to dispel the darkness. “The light keeps shining in the dark, and the darkness has NEVER put it out.” Like John, we are called to illuminate that Light to others who dwell in darkness.

I can’t think of any better time than the present to refuel and rekindle our inner lights of God’s reflection. May our lives reflect to others the gifts of peace, hope, joy and everlasting love through faith from God the Father and our Savior Jesus Christ in this most holy season and throughout the coming New year.

Prayer: In this season of our lives where peace and joy and hope seem unattainable, we plead for your mercy, love, protection and deliverance. Strengthen and sustain us when our faith falters. Renew, revive, restore our spirit of light so we can once again be reflections of your message to those who walk in darkness. We thank you, Heavenly Father, giver of all that is good and perfect, for your mercy and grace. And in the name of your precious son, Jesus, we humbly petition and offer this prayer. Amen.

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KEEP WALKING ALONG AND SINGING YOUR SONG

Scripture: Psalm 148

December 26, 2020

Message: I recently read the book Pete the Cat – I Love My White Shoes to my three-year-old son (it's one of his favorites). Pete has new white shoes and Pete loves them so much that he sings a song about them. But then he steps in strawberries, blueberries and mud. The shoes turn red, blue and brown, and yet Pete was happy throughout the entire book no matter what color his shoes were. At the end, the shoes are white again, and the author says, "The moral of Pete's story is: No matter what you step in, keep walking along and singing your song." Coincidentally, it made me think of this scripture. With Psalm 148 in mind, the moral of Pete's story could easily be changed to: "keep walking along, singing your song and Praising the Lord!"

As other devotions have mentioned, 2020 has been a rough year. Some days have been hard, really hard. But scripture like Psalm 148, and stories like Pete's, remind me to Praise the Lord in all circumstances, at all times.

So... what are you praising God for today?

I praise God for the birth of our Savior, the Son of God, the word made flesh. I praise God for family and friends. I even praise God for technology like zoom and facetime so that I can "see" family, friends, and colleagues with the help of my laptop and wifi. And I praise God for silver linings during difficult times.

I wonder if any of your pandemic experiences have led you to praise God? It took some time to realize, but I now praise God for a new friendship that I would not have discovered without the pandemic. I praise God for extra time with family, for learning new ways of being a servant, and for the opportunity to read books again. I praise God for long evening walks around Buckhannon, while enjoying beautiful scenery, a Mayberry-like community, and enlightening conversations with individuals who are deeply loved by me, but even more beloved as children of God.

I take comfort in remembering that even on bad days, God is not only with us, but God is also providing continual blessings and gifts worthy of praise. Yes, sometimes they are hard to see, but they are always there. Remember: "no matter what you step in, keep walking along, singing your song and Praising the Lord!" Thanks be to God.

Prayer: Gracious and Loving God, we give you all praise, all honor and all glory. Thank you for being with us during difficult days and thank you for showing us our blessings even when times are tough. We know you are always there, walking along and singing our songs with us, and we are grateful. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

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TAKE THE OPPORTUNITY

Scripture: Isaiah 61:10-62:3

December 27, 2020

Message:

I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth...yet I will not forget you.

Isaiah 49:6b, 15b (ESV)

I tie these verses into Paul's 2nd letter to the Corinthians, Chapter 5:16-21. In verse 20 he says "Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us." What really takes hold of my soul is that like Isaiah and the Christians in Corinth, God gave me the ministry, made me an ambassador and entrusted me to deliver his message of reconciliation through Jesus Christ.

And guess what? I am not alone; you have the same call! Think of that. Almighty God, the Most High, Creator of all, is giving us a chance, an opportunity in life to achieve and succeed. He's placing his trust in us. That makes it downright personal, and I have to tell you, sometimes daunting. But we can take great comfort in knowing He will never forget us. I am truly thankful for that.

Some opportunities in life we accept and some we let go. Later upon reflection, we are either thankful or regretful for our decision.

This opportunity is too great, too important not to undertake. It replaces the old with the new and death with life. It is an opportunity like no other, not only for its rewards and consequences, but the fact that its origin extends far up into the heavens and comes to rest at the very throne of God.

Prayer: Precious Lord, through your love, grace, and mercy we have seen your great light and been given the greatest of gifts. Empower the Peace of Christ to dwell richly within us, so that in all opportunities you present to us, we will be effective ambassadors of your glorious message of reconciliation. Through Jesus Christ our Lord we pray. Amen.

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THE ESCAPE TO EGYPT

Scripture: Matthew 2:13-18

December 28, 2020

Message:

Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.” Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt.

Matthew 2:13-14 (NRSV)

Egypt – a different culture, a different language, a different “god”. How would they survive? The young couple realized that their child was a special gift from God, the Savior, Emmanuel, and they had no choice but to flee their homeland and seek safety.

For centuries, this difficult decision has been made by many families who have been oppressed in their homeland due to race, culture, religion, and political rule. Most of us are the descendants of those who sought out life in America, hoping that it would be the answer to their needs. One of my best friends in my teen years was the daughter of Polish immigrants who fled their homeland just months before the Nazi invasion. I witnessed this family’s personal struggle with the language, the culture of the West Virginia coal camp, and their religious beliefs.

Today, thousands of refugees are flowing across borders around the world in search of “freedom”. In search of a brighter future, they are risking their own lives. Mary and Joseph took this same risk, aware that King Herod was seeking to kill their child. God was with them in their journey, just as He is with us every moment of the day. As the ancient prophet tells us:

“And the LORD shall guide thee continually, and satisfy thy soul in drought, and make fat thy bones: and thou shalt be like a watered garden, and like a spring of water, whose waters fail not.”

Isaiah 58:11 (KJV)

Prayer: May The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face shine upon you and be gracious unto you; the LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace. Amen.

(Numbers 6:24-26, NIV)

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GO WHERE GOD CALLS

Scripture: Isaiah 49:5-15

December 29, 2020

Message: **I will make you as a light for the nations, that My salvation may reach to the end of the earth.**

Isaiah 49:6b (NASB)

New York City! One of my favorite places to visit and especially at Christmas! The city looks so magical all lit up and Radio City Music Hall Rockette's Christmas spectacular is one of my favorite ways to usher in the season! In 2017 I visited the city December 19-22, but this time it wasn't for pleasure. A group from our church went on a mission trip through New York City Relief. I have been on several mission trips and worked on numerous mission projects with our youth, but nothing affected me the way that this trip did. We spent three days feeding, helping to clothe, find emergency shelter, health care, and just talking to and getting to know our new friends on the street.

The first job that I was given was to pray with everyone who came to the back of the bus to receive socks OR a hygiene kit. They couldn't have both because supplies were low. I first remember feeling very intimidated. What if they don't want me to pray for them, are offended and get angry? I also didn't feel comfortable saying Merry Christmas. Would that be insulting given that I would go home to a very Merry Christmas with family, food, and gifts and most of these people would spend it alone on the street? What I found was how incredibly gracious they all were - for what we were able to give them, for the prayers, and to my shock they would say Merry Christmas to me first! I didn't fully absorb everything until my first shower at home, with full bottles of shampoo, conditioner and shower gels surrounding me...and I broke down crying for how much I take for granted and for the suffering, but gracious, spirits I had just served.

Some have asked why we would go so far away to serve when there are those in our own communities in need? My answer is that we go where God calls us to serve. Isaiah 49:6b says, "I will make you as a light for the nations, that My salvation may reach to the end of the earth." All who served on that trip were blessed to be a light to our new friends, and I now have a new reason to love that city even more!

Prayer: Heavenly and Gracious Father, thank you for the blessing and opportunity to serve you and to be called to be a light to the nations. Whether we serve in our own neighborhoods and communities, state, nation or in other countries, let us always have a willing and eager heart to go where you lead. Give us new opportunities, especially during these seasons of Advent and Christmas, to be your light and to go where we are called. In Christ's Most Precious Name. Amen.

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PROMISES

Scripture: 2 Peter 3:8-13

December 30, 2020

Message: **Do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.**

You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God. We are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness dwells.

Advent is over and we just celebrated God's promise of the Messiah. Advent is always a time of waiting filled with much preparation and anticipation. Are you preparing for and filled with as much anticipation for His Second Coming -- a promise yet to be fulfilled?

In scripture above, Peter shares words of encouragement and instruction as we wait on the fulfillment of that promise. Notice how he addresses believers as "dear friends" (beloved in some translations). I don't know about you, but that causes me to want to pay attention.

Peter begins by saying God's timing is not the same as ours and that He is not slow in keeping His promise but is patient. As much as I would like to see Jesus come soon, I am thankful He is patient because I have family and friends who haven't been saved.

Peter offers instructions on how we should live while looking forward to that day –live holy and godly lives which will help to speed up that day. He finishes this piece of scripture telling all believers that because of God's promise all things will be new and righteousness will reign. What a time that will be!

How are you preparing and anticipating for the fulfillment of the promise of His Second Coming?

Prayer: Dear Heavenly Father, We come to you with hearts full of praise. You shower us daily with your love, mercy and grace. Thank you. We thank you for the gift of your son, Jesus and the promise He will return. While we wait, may your Word continue to encourage and instruct us daily. Please continue to draw all to you, so that none will be lost. In Jesus, holy and precious name, we pray. Amen.

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LIGHT

Scripture: John 8:12-19

December 31, 2020

Message: The Christmas season is noted for displays of light. These displays remind us to celebrate the real reason for the season - Jesus, the light of the world and the light of life.

Two properties of light are transmission and reflection. In following Christ, Christians are to transmit the light of the world and to reflect the light of life. We are to let our light so shine that it brings glory to our Heavenly Father as Jesus demonstrated.

A couple of years ago we bought four solar lights and placed them along our front steps. Recently three of them stopped producing light, even though the sun still shined on them. Now only one light remains to transfer the sun's energy and broadcast it to our steps.

What light is a lamp unto your feet and illumination for your path? The Son's light is still shining. Are you transmitting and reflecting the light of Jesus?

Prayer: Heavenly Father, we thank you for providing light to the children of Israel in the wilderness through the fiery pillar, to the Magi through a star and to the world through Jesus. Gifts at Christmas remind us of the greatest gift of all, your gift of the Christ child, your son, Jesus. He is the light of life. Help us to find and follow that light. In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen.

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MAY GOD BLESS YOU...

Scripture: Numbers 6:22-27

January 1, 2021

Message:

**The LORD said to Moses: The LORD bless you and keep you;
the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you;
the LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace.**
Numbers 6:22, 24-26

We spent many years as the UMYF youth leaders at our church. We used this scripture as our closing prayer. Each person in the circle would say to the person to their right “God Bless You” and say their name. We would always leave a break in the circle for Jesus and then close with the prayer from Numbers. This was how we closed each time we were together.

It was our greatest prayer that each young person who came through this group, grew in their faith walk and in their relationship with Christ. These young people brought many talents and gifts to the group, the church, and community. Through service and scripture, these youth were being prepared to walk with Christ throughout their lives. This was a true blessing to watch them grow and share God’s word.

When the new year begins, how will we all pass along blessings to others? We each have talents and gifts that we can share to help those who are searching. As the youth blessed each other, how can we seek out others to show them the blessings and protections of Christ Jesus?

Moving through the Advent season and beginning the New Year, we hope for you, as we prayed for our youth that God will: bless and protect you, smile on you, be gracious unto you, show His favor toward you, and give you peace.

Prayer: Gracious God, thank you for passing these powerful words down through the ages, so that as Moses and Aaron were blessed so we are blessed each day of our lives. May you continue to bless us and keep us in 2021, as you have for centuries before. Amen.

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WISDOM AND PEACE

Scripture: James 3:13-18

January 2, 2021

Message:

The wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure, then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.

James 3:17-18 (NIV)

An epiphany is a life altering revelation or awakening that only 50% of people have claimed to have experienced. A true epiphany is much greater than ideas or insights. As with epiphanies, eyes are opened to truths or changes that make us new and different persons.

Years ago, while visiting in India, I toured Mahatma Gandhi's final residence. He is most known for fasting from food, but Gandhi once fasted from speaking for about two years. Imagine. Gandhi's non-violent peaceful revolutions altered how we and the world perceive ways to change society forever. He was a major influence on Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. among others. Perhaps his years of silence are what led him to these methods of revolution.

For medical reasons, about twenty years ago speaking became difficult for me. This provided the opportunity to listen instead of speaking, which turned into a personal blessing. Silence and listening have given me a space to see and hear God's voice in my life. Instead of offering advice to others, I silently give them time to think through their words or actions.

I think of the Magi who rode in silence for years seeking answers. Like those travelers on that journey to greet the Christ child, we too can reach an epiphany this year by silencing the distractions which abound in our lives and minds, centering instead on Jesus, His words, His actions, and His example. As they followed that star, the Magi must have wondered about the "how" and the "why" of their journey.

We too are in a season of Epiphany today. Let us make time to ponder our own journey.

Prayer:

Eternal and loving God, Hear our prayer for guidance. Lead us in the path to righteousness, to a time of peace and wisdom. This we pray in Jesus name. Amen.

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CELEBRATING OUR BLESSINGS DURING DIFFICULT TIMES

Scripture: Jeremiah 31:7-14

January 3, 2021

Message: Christmas is a time of tremendous joy as we celebrate the birth of our Savior, Jesus Christ. It is also a time when family and friends gather to enjoy each other and the season. In our family, as I am sure in many families and groups of friends, there is much laughter and reminiscing. For a time, we forget the challenges we are facing and count our many blessings. Christmas is followed by bringing in the new year. This is also a time of celebration and looking forward. It is a time of new beginnings and praying for the future of our families and our world. All of this is good for the soul.

Then, we go back to our ‘normal’ lives. Family and friends leave. We take down our decorations. Those who are alone might feel lonely. Those who struggle with depression might feel it more mightily at this time. There is often a ‘let down’ after times of celebration and joy.

In spite of the melancholy, some of us might be feeling, we need to trust in and reach out to our God. It is important that we pray fully as this is the way home to God. We will be given strength and support during these challenging times. God, in his great mercy, will help us be strong. He will nourish our soul. Let us celebrate again... This is a time to celebrate our faith and how it replenishes us and our world.

Prayer: Dear Lord, thank you for reminding us of your strength and support. During this challenging time in our world, we need you now more than ever. You help us realize the importance of our faith and how it influences us and our experiences. Please help us reach out to others to give them the support you have so freely given to us. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

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THE SUFFERING SERVANT

Scripture: Isaiah 53:4-7

January 4, 2021

Message:

“Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases; yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way, and the Lord has lain on him the iniquity of us all.”

Isaiah 53: 4-7

These verses capture the essence of this passage, and they resonate most deeply with me. I noticed God's people were compared to wandering sheep, which is a comparison that is made numerous times in the Bible.

We are the Lord's wandering sheep because we consistently stray from the path He laid out for us, but He is always beside us, guiding us back time and time again.

God is the caring and patient Shepherd who loves us so much that He is willing to sacrifice for us, even though He knows we will continue straying from His path.

Christ was the final sacrifice to atone for the sins of all the people and all the people that were yet to be, even if they did not believe in Him. His death made possible a future when all that is wrong on Earth will be set right.

There was a lot of debate among Jewish leaders about the meaning of this passage. Some believed that it was a prophet long ago that had been persecuted for his faith. This did not completely add up because the phrasing “upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed,” would not apply to a regular prophet.

Others believed that this passage spoke of the Messiah in the future who would forgive the sins of all people. The Jewish leaders wanted the Messiah to be a triumphant king, not a suffering servant, so this caused conflict. However, the Jewish leaders did not realize the Messiah was above things like wealth and human power because He is the King of Kings and He brings forgiveness to all of us, which is greater than any amount of money.

Prayer:

Dear Lord, to You we lift all our troubles and all our sins. Be our Shepherd, guide us ‘wandering sheep’ to Your path so that we may find salvation in Your name. Your grace is never-ending. Let it envelop us so that we may become Your Disciples and be examples of Your love and acceptance here on Earth. In Your heavenly name we pray. Amen.

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LOVE YOUR ENEMY

Scripture: Luke 6:27-31

January 5, 2021

Message:

**Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you;
Treat people in the same way that you want them to treat you.**

Luke 6:27, 31

My favorite Christmas decorations are the lights. At my house, we do not remove our decorations until after Epiphany. It gives a time to contemplate what it meant for Christ to come into the darkness of our world.

The subtitle for today's scripture in the Common English Version of the Bible is "Behaving as God's Children." When 2020 began last year, who knew that it would be a year like none other in my lifetime? It brought out the best of us and the worst of us (sometimes on the same day within the same person!) As I have struggled through the past year, I have searched for what God really wants of me. Over and over, I have arrived at: to love God and to love my neighbor. But in today's verses, Jesus adds "love your enemy." With a deadly virus, a divisive election year, and a year when we argued whether all children of God matter, being required to love our enemies sometimes feels like God is asking too much.

Jesus told us to "Do to others as you would have them do to you." All major religions have a version of this "Golden Rule," either positively: "do to others," or negatively: "don't do to others what you would not want done to you." In Luke, Jesus gives the blessings and woes and then tells us to love our enemies and do good to those who hate us. Pray for those who mistreat us. Turn the other cheek. The easiest words, that I learned in childhood (Do to others as you would have them do to you) and the hardest that I'm still learning (Love your enemies and pray for those who hate you) are all part of living as God's children.

I have no idea what this coming year will hold for me, my family, the church, or the country. I do know that the light has come into the world and there is no darkness that can hide it. I commit again to living as a child of God. Although not easy for me, when I am loving my enemies and doing good to those who hate me, I am being a child of God and a bearer of light.

Prayer:

Dear Lord, you surround us with all that is good. We welcome your light into our dark lives. May you give us the power to love our neighbors and love our enemies, so that we may see you as you dwell among us in the light. Amen.

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THE CHURCH A MYSTERY, AN EPIPHANY

Scripture: Ephesians 3:1-12

January 6, 2021

Message:

God sent me to reveal the secret plan that had been hidden since the beginning of time by God, who created everything. God's purpose is now to show the rulers and powers in the heavens the many different varieties of his wisdom through the church. This was consistent with the plan he had from the beginning of time that he accomplished through Christ Jesus our Lord.

In Christ we have bold and confident access to God through faith in him.

Ephesians 3:9-12 (CEB)

How does this passage of scripture help me walk with Jesus on Epiphany?

Although we now face political, social, and economic divides as a nation and the entire system looks array, let us be reminded that our primary allegiance is to God. Paul stresses the practice of exercising vigilance and the duty it carries for us as leaders of the church in heaven and here on earth.

Previous verses in this chapter set the stage for the confirmation in verse 6. The Gentiles would be coheirs and parts of the same body, and they would share with the Jews in the promises of God in Jesus Christ.

Paul, at his lowest point in social stature, while imprisoned and chained, found his highest concept of self. Paul's epiphany showed that we should make no distinctions among ourselves because, ultimately, we are of one body, directed towards His will, not our own.

I am humbled to be a servant of the Lord, and as His servant, I must keep His truth and carry out justice according to His ordinances. By meditating on the Word, giving praise in worship, and asking for understanding, we learn from Paul the role and strength of revelation on our own walk as believers. Today we have a shared this epiphany as Christians, through the life of Paul, as to the will of God.

All praise to God!

Prayer:

Most gracious and heavenly Father, we ask during this day of Epiphany that you help us ponder the precious words of Jesus, putting them into our heart, and making them our actions. We thank you for your wonderful gift of love and for the life that we share together through your Son Jesus. Continue to guide us and lead us to become courageous servants, established in truth, as we do your will. Amen.

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Thank You:

- *West Virginia Conference of The United Methodist Church, for giving me this opportunity of service.*
- *Lay Writers, for your time, inspiration, and words of devotion.*
- *Chris Ridgway, for your patience and sharing of your computer skills and efficiency.*
- *Deborah Coble, for your creative guidance and other multiple efforts in making this project a reality.*
- *Anyone else who contributed and helped make this devotional the beautiful project that it is. I apologize for not mentioning you by name.*
- *Bishop Sandra Steiner Ball for your leadership and dedication to the people of this Conference. Your physical embodiment of one of The Original 12 offers hope and inspiration to us all.*
- *To the District Superintendents for all the many hours of your lives dedicated to the spiritual growth and well-being of the churches and people of your districts.*
- *Rich Shaffer for the years that you gave your time, energy, blood and sweat to this Conference, and, for making this project a reality during your terms as Conference Lay Leader.*
- *And to my mentor, leader, and new very good friend, Kristi Wilkerson, WVUMC Conference Lay Leader, for the patience, tutorage, editing, and midnight hours and emails you have given to this devotional and to our friendship.*

Eva Hensley Faulkner