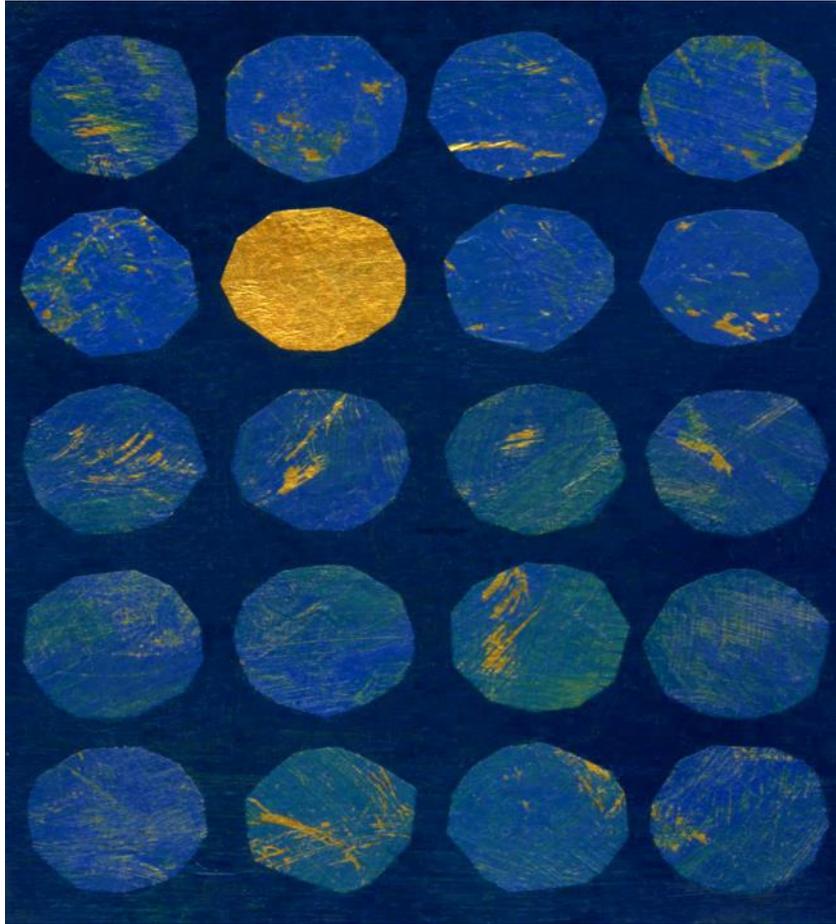


Advent Devotional



ADVENT 2017
IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Season of Advent

What is Advent?

“Advent” means “coming” or “arrival.” During the season of Advent, we celebrate Christ’s coming into the world and watch with expectant hope for his coming again. The four weeks of Advent present an opportunity for communal discernment and personal examination, as the church prepares to celebrate the nativity of the Lord. During this time, we look with hope for Christ’s return and for the full realization of God’s vision for the world—a vision of justice and righteousness, a vision of hope, peace, joy, and love.

During this season, Idlewild will explore the theme of longing. Some of us in this season long for loved ones who are not with us; some of us long for healing and wholeness; some of us long for justice and truth. Even in our longing, we remember the promises of the prophets. We hold onto the hope of Jesus’s birth. We look forward to the day that all things will be made new.

What will you find in this booklet?

In these pages, you will find a reflection and a prayer for each day written by a member of our faith community. These reflections are based on the Advent readings found in the lectionary. In addition, you will find an activity for each day taken from the Idlewild Advent calendar. Each week as we light a new candle on the Advent wreath, we remember the hope, peace, joy, and love that come to us through the impossibly good news that God took on flesh and dwelled among us, showing us divine love in human form.

My prayer is that God will use these words to encourage and guide us as a community over these weeks. Though the days grow shorter and the darkness seems to envelop us, may these reflections offered by our brothers and sisters in faith remind us to look for the light that is Emmanuel, “God with us.”

May the peace of Christ be with you this Advent season.

Rebekah Abel Lamar
Advent 2017



The First Week of Advent

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 3 – SATURDAY, DECEMBER 9

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 3

Read: Isaiah 2:1–4

When will we ever learn? Is the answer blowing in the wind? Our modern prophets, the folk/rock song writers Pete Seeger and Bob Dylan, keep reminding us of what Isaiah said before the day of our Lord, Jesus. Why, since we have the teaching and example of Jesus, can't we do better than the Israelites of old? The slaves of the American South got it when they sang: "Gonna lay down my sword and shield, down by the riverside." Is it only those without political power who live the life of God's Kingdom on earth? Upon reading Isaiah 2:1-4 my first thought was of this African American spiritual which set the text to music. Then I thought of the protest songs I knew in my youth, and I felt a surge of anger.

Anger at what? The inhumanity of man, I think.

Having recently viewed the TV documentary series on the Vietnam War produced by Ken Burns, the feelings I experienced in 1969–71 came back to me. Yes, I thought of going to Canada. I was not brave enough for that and, back then, didn't know half of the lies our government was telling. Ultimately, I am glad that I "did my duty." Fortunately, I served as a medical officer and was not faced with decisions of whether to kill or not. I refused to carry a side arm as my little personal protest, but then I was rarely in a place of danger. Maybe you could say I beat my side arm into needle and syringe.

Reading this scripture again, I saw what I missed the first time. . . the mountain! I think the mountain is the teaching of humanity by the Jewish laws and by Christ's admonishments and example. We must go to the mountain if we are ever to 'study war no more' and, while there listening to God, maybe we *should* study *past wars* to avoid making the same mistakes and to learn how to 'love one another right now.'

Prayer: Creator God, thank you for providing us with the mountain top, and especially for Jesus Christ who teaches us how to be true children of God. Thank you for your grace. May it strengthen us to always work to bring Your Kingdom to earth. Please teach even those with great political power to follow Christ's example. Forgive us when we falter and lead us back to the mountain.

James E. Levernier is a retired pediatrician, former Lt. US Navy. He is currently an elder, serving on the Ghana Clean Water Mission Committee, the McMerton Garden Committee, and is a tutor/reader at Idlewild Elementary School.



Advent Calendar Activity: Come to the Wholeness Service at 4 or take time to remember those who grieve.

MONDAY, DECEMBER 4

Read: Mark 13:32–37

Beware, keep alert. Be on the watch. Keep awake. I say to you all: keep awake. The Gospel of Mark exhorts us, through the words of Christ, to be alert to the coming of the Son of Man four times in this short passage.

Writing about the commandment to watchfulness is both a pleasure and a challenge. The pleasure is simple: it comes from allowing my mind to wander. Stubbornly, though, my mind continually drifts to the relevance of watchfulness to the various complex social issues of our day. For instance, it is impossible for me to escape thoughts of social consciousness, namely racial and social justice, when reading this passage and its directive to be vigilant in the face of uncertainty. The challenge of this passage comes from the same thoughts. Frankly, this passage has little care for the contemporary social issues my mind insists on wandering toward. Rather, it exhorts us to watch for and anticipate the coming of Christ, as we do intentionally in this Advent season. It encourages us to have hope.

Do you find it more and more difficult to read Scripture without your thoughts wandering to a modern issue or personal concern? I know this is true for me. I unreasonably fixate on negative and sometimes depressing world events and forget or ignore the larger context. This is, I believe, my own failure to be on the watch for the work of Christ and the Spirit in the world. Doing so is not as effortless as merely thinking happy thoughts. Instead, the exhortation of this passage focuses us both inwardly and outwardly on the hope that comes by faith.

In this season of Advent, we wait and we watch. We are awake to and we hope for the coming of the Christ. So beware of negativity and hate. Keep alert to the unceasing love of God. Be on the watch for the helpers, the women and men doing the work of the Lord, through whose work we see the hand of God. And keep awake, for Christ is indeed transforming our world.

Prayer: Lord, we are awake. May we always be awake to the presence of Christ, and may he never find us asleep when he comes. Amen.

Jeremy Sykes is an immigration attorney. He joined Idlewild with his wife, Jenna, and their twins, Eden and Reid, in 2015.



Advent Calendar Activity: Hold the door open for someone.

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 5

Read: 1 Corinthians 1:3–9 *God Keeps Faith*

What a beautiful and consoling testament of Hope! What God promises we can trust, so let not your heart be shaken.

Has he not promised He will keep in trust that which we have committed unto Him (2 Tim. 1:12)?

Has He not promised that whosoever believeth in Him shall have everlasting life (John 3:16)?

Has He not promised to be with us until the very end (Matt. 28:20)?

Has He not promised to wipe away all tears from our eyes (Rev. 7:19)?

Has He not promised to come again (John 14:2)?

Has He not promised to lift our burden and give us rest (Matt. 11:28)?

Has He not promised a “peace that surpasses understanding” (Phil. 4:7)?

Yes, God keeps faith, unlike a fluctuating stock market, a fickle repairman, an unreliable political system, or appliances designed to break down just as they go out of warranty.

Yes, God keeps faith, unlike those who make promises but never keep them, who had no ability or intention of keeping them.

Even if God seems slow and we get impatient, His promises never fail and He keeps faith. Wait and you will be rewarded. Wait for God’s time, i.e., the right time which is always on time. Wait and you will see. As Solomon said (1 Kings 8:56), “Not a word of His promises has ever failed.” Nor will they ever fail because He is God and God keeps faith. This God who keeps faith, is our God, and He will be our guide even unto death (Psalm 48:14).

Such assurance is the basis for peace and rest—tranquility even within the chaos. God keeps faith. How solid this footing. How firm this foundation. On this you can rely. Believe it: God keeps faith.

Prayer: Yes, yes; oh, my God, yes; what Thou hast promised, I believe...what Thou hast given, I receive. Amen.

Ben Bledsoe *is a retired Baptist minister, Methodist hospice chaplain, and Tennessee State prison chaplain who now lives at Trezevant Episcopal Homes with his wife, Susan Heron.*



Advent Calendar Activity: Lend a friend your favorite book or movie.

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 6

Read: 1 Thessalonians 3:11–13

In today's Scripture Paul gives us a message of hope as well as a challenge. He had visited Thessalonica preaching in the synagogue to both Jews and Gentiles. Thessalonica was a bustling seaport, the largest city in Macedonia. He won many converts, but was driven out by opposition. In this selection Paul is expressing thanksgiving, hope and ends with a prayer. He declares his gratitude and joy for his converts, accenting love and holiness.

During the Advent season it is especially appreciated because Paul says "may the Lord make you increase and overflow in love to one another and towards all," As we look expectantly toward the birth of our Savior, these words remind us that His coming means the fulfillment of lives of love, peace, service to others, joy and hope.

Prayer: Gracious God as we experience the Advent season of awaiting and hope, spur us on to daily "increasing our love to all." May these days remind us to live as your disciples, serving others in thanksgiving and joy.

Carol Jones, a member of Idlewild since 1955, has served as a deacon and elder, and as a teacher of 5 year olds and adults. She is a lifetime member of Presbyterian Women. She and husband, Henry, have three children, six grandchildren and three great grandchildren.



Advent Calendar Activity: Tell someone your favorite thing about church.

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 7

Read: Psalm 126

I dread Christmas.

At some point, we all probably have or will mutter this.

Hope, Peace, Joy and Love—the four candles of the Advent wreath. But, where are the candles of Loss and Grief? The approach of Christmas is a season of expectation—and, sometimes, it's an expectation of an empty chair at the “festive” table—otherwise bedecked with glorious food and surrounded by loving family and friends. But the void is palpable—bereft of a dear friend's familiar mischievous smile and cutting joke, of an aging parent whose once razor sharp mind is now unable to remember a child's name, of a teen's youthful promise aborted by the scourge of drugs and violence. Indeed, the advance of Christmas can cause us to “go out weeping.”

Advent, traditionally represented by those original four candles, also, though, provides us with extended stages of grief—unique to our faith. Knowing God is knowing Hope—a tantalizing, if, sometimes, faint, light that illuminates the promise of a deep, personal Peace—only possible by trusting in the Holy Spirit. Only from that spiritual sense of Peace, can we allow ourselves to be truly vulnerable—open to (perhaps, quiet) “shouts of Joy”—as we celebrate truly Divine work through the shared prayers and the kindness of God's people—including of those around us we often have taken for granted. And, here, we find Love. And, here we find the One for whom we're waiting.

O God, I often cry out to you—in profound loss and seemingly unbearable grief. Sometimes, it's in anger. This is your world. You are its Sovereign. Why do you allow such sadness? In almost desperation, I hope that your Spirit will bring me the peace for which you are the only source—and that I find sincere joy through the love of your people.

Prayer: May I, during this Advent, remember that your Son sacrificially taught us that out of loss can come a joy that knows no bounds. Thank you, God. Amen.

Rick Baker is a ruling elder currently serving as chair of the Christian Formation Ministry Unit.



Advent Calendar Activity: Spend time with friends or family unplugged.

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 8

Read: Isaiah 11:1–9

This passage from Isaiah reminds us just how desperately we needed Jesus to arrive and that we still need him. If we look around, there are countless examples of people judging other people based on their appearances or something they have heard. These judgements serve to further divide us, preventing us from achieving the peace and unity that Christ promises us.

When I sat down to write this devotional, I promised myself that I wouldn't talk about work or my students. However, this passage in Isaiah reminds me so much of the reasons that I choose to do what I do— that I couldn't avoid it.

Teach for America brought me to Memphis in 2012. If you had told me then that, six years later, I would still be in Memphis at my placement school, I think I would have laughed you out of the room. Yet, here I am.

In our current climate, it has gotten increasingly more difficult for me to explain to my students why the world is the way it is. They don't understand why there is so much hatred in the world or why people are so ready to discount them because of what they look like and things they have heard about them. They are burdened by the injustices they feel every day. They yearn for someone to bridge the separations they are keenly aware of.

When I think about my kids, these last four verses bring me great comfort. Our Savior is so good that he can bring together wolf and lamb, calf and lion, child and viper. Surely His grace and righteousness can keep humans together even as we seek to draw lines of division among ourselves, old and young, liberal and conservative, white and black. I can only hope that someday my students will be able to experience this unity that Christ promises.

In this season of Advent, we should be focusing not only on the impending birth of Jesus but also on living in the way that adult Jesus calls us to live.

Prayer: Lord, as we move through this season of Advent, help us to remember not only the joy your arrival brought us but also the peace and unity you promise us in your kingdom. Remind us to slow our judgement and seek your righteousness as we look to serve those around us. Amen.

Gabriella Nelson has been a member of Idlewild for almost five years and was recently asked to serve as a deacon.



Advent Calendar Activity: Pick up litter.

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 9

Read: John 3:16–21

As I write in this time of autumn, I remember a cold morning when I was 11 and having hot chocolate with my father before dawn. We were about to set out on a non-shooting hunt for quail with Blackie and Fritz, our English cocker spaniel and dachshund. They loved being out in the large and wide-open field with its tall, yellow grass. It wasn't long until they flushed out a large covey not very far from where we stood.

As I rode home, I had a deep sense of joy that I think was derived from the elements of that morning—the lights and hot chocolate in the kitchen, riding in our station wagon with the dogs, getting out of the car and plunging into the field, and finally the serene ride home.

When I think of the mid-section of the third chapter of John's Gospel, I know that it has always been the very essence of our Christian faith. Jesus tells us of God's love and how he was sent to save us from death.

This gives me great comfort, similar to what I felt that day when I was eleven years old. May that light which came to live on earth give us joyous hope this Advent season.

Prayer: Dear God, I ask that the Light which came into the world fill our lives throughout the coming days. In His name, Amen.

George Eubanks is a lifelong Memphian, a former deacon and happy to have been a member of Idlewild for ten years.



Advent Calendar Activity: Share a funny story or video with a friend.



The Second Week of Advent

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 10 – SATURDAY, DECEMBER 16

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 10

Read: Psalm 85:8–13

What does it mean to fear God?

Verses 8 and 9 of this Psalm speak to my/our responsibilities—listening to God, turning to God, fearing God. Verses 10-13 speak to what will spring from my/our doing that—steadfast love, righteousness and peace, a fruitful land. It is beautiful language which comforts me. But I keep coming back to trying to understand what fear of God means. The Bible has many descriptions of why I should fear God – power that smites. I grew up in a church that emphasized such power and fear.

Yet the role model I have for fatherly love and fear comes from my childhood home life. My dad was a WWII veteran who lost the lower part of one leg in the war. He and my mother were married after the war. My dad suffered a serious injury, but one could not ask for a kinder or more supportive father. He never lifted a hand against any of us (well, maybe my two younger brothers got spanked every now and then). I did not fear my dad in the sense that I thought he would hurt me, but I did in the sense that I might do something I shouldn't, and would disappoint him, and he would be ashamed of me.

It was a little different with my mother—she knew exactly what we were up to! She wasn't much of a spanker either, but she let us know when we were in the wrong. One of our transgressions during the Christmas season was to find the tin of caramel fudge which Granny, our father's mother, made for us. Our parents hid it so there would be at least some left for them. My mother was a loving Christian woman, and made the season come alive for us. We always had an Advent calendar, and would open the little doors to see what was inside—usually a Bible verse. On Christmas Eve, we read the birth story from Luke, and admired the Nativity scene on the mantelpiece, which had an empty manger for baby Jesus. Shame on us if we did not, on Christmas morning, first notice the baby in the manger before looking for our presents!

Prayer: The older I get, the more grateful I become for these lovely teachers. Thank you, thank you, Lord, for, like them, knowing my self-centered heart and loving me anyway.

Minna Glenn is a 30+ year member of Idlewild, a two-time deacon and a regular volunteer at More Than a Meal and McMerton Garden.



Advent Calendar Activity: Bring a friend to church or make a new friend at church.

MONDAY, DECEMBER 11

Read: Mark 1:1–8

The concise Gospel of Mark—it can be read in one sitting—first introduces us to John the Baptist. With his cloak of camel's hair and diet of locusts and wild honey, John's a counter-culturalist for sure, practicing his faith well outside the temple. His religious significance, however, goes much deeper than that of a contrarian. Mark tell us John is: (1) a prophet in the tradition of Isaiah, (2) a leader proclaiming repentance and the forgiveness of sins through baptism, and (3) a messenger foretelling the coming of one who will baptize not with water but with the Holy Spirit.

Looking beyond his own celebrity, John foresees that he will assume a fourth role—that of a follower. He accepts this readily. He's been listening, not only to the prophetic voices of the Old Testament but also to what he hears from God in his prayers and meditations.

In contrast, there are Jesus' disciples. As Mark tells us, they continually fail the listening tests. They regard Jesus more as a supernatural miracle worker than as a real live human being like themselves whom God anointed as holy. They give up on Jesus' parables dismissing them as nonsense. Jesus' admonition that they can expect to suffer for spreading the good news is hard for them to take. They wonder about the power of forgiveness as Jesus forgives their obtuseness. He teaches that the way to live is by forgiving others—basis of renewal, hope, and reconciliation.

Beginning anew. Listening. For me these are the central themes of Advent, a season of expectation, contemplation, and reassessment. "Who do you say I am?" Jesus asks in Mark's gospel. I think about and pray over this question often, especially when Advent rolls around. As a follower without any pat answers, I say, "I'm working on that, Jesus, and I'm listening."

Prayer: Eternal God, You have called us to go forth on a journey of discipleship. Too often, however, we hasten to step out in faith without listening. As the busy-ness of the season threatens to overwhelm us, help us slow down and hold fast to the priorities of our faith. Help us take on the risks of change and new challenges, as we follow the disciples' call, knowing You travel with us. Amen

Jim Cole is a long-time member of the Idlewild congregation, having served as deacon, elder, and clerk of session. He has been active in both the church's adult education and music programs. He is a convener in the Stephen Class as well as Wednesday Morning Studies and sings in the Idlewild choir.



Advent Calendar Activity: Find a reason to laugh today.

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 12

Read: 2 Peter 3:14–19

Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish; and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation. ... Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen. (2 Peter 3:14, 18)

Peter wrote to a group of Christians who were discouraged that Jesus had not returned as they had expected. They had looked for peace and goodwill, but had seen persecution and fear. Many of us look forward to Christmas as a time of happy reunions with family and friends, a time to forget our usual worries, to relax and enjoy ourselves. But Jesus doesn't always come with sunny skies and roses and lollipops.

Some of my happiest memories of childhood were Christmases spent at my grandparents' home with my parents and brother, aunts, uncles and cousins. In my memory, all those Christmas days were sunny and bright. I cherish those memories, but I also remember a Christmas many years later, gathered at the home of one of my cousins. The day was gloomy and gray, with dirty remnants of a recent snow piled at the road side. A beloved aunt had died; now the cousins were the oldest generation.

We gathered and wished each other "Merry Christmas," but we weren't very merry. Even the youngest children were subdued. We ate turkey and left early. Some days later, reflecting on that day, I wrote this poem:

Prayer for a sad Christmas: God, you sent your son, and you keep on sending Him.
Sometimes we don't recognize him when everything is turkey and dressing, games and gifts.
Maybe it takes a sad Christmas to drag us back to what it's all about.
So we thank you for each other,
For memories that link us and futures that bind us together.
Be with us in the hard, lonely, painful times.
Prince of Peace, bring us peace even now. Amen.

Mary Edith Walker is a second-time member of Idlewild, having returned a year ago after sojourns in St. Louis and Oxford. She is especially interested in adult Bible study and leads a Thursday morning class.



Advent Calendar Activity: Tell someone your favorite thing about Jesus.

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 13

Read: John 3:22–30

John 3:28 "...I am not the Messiah, but I have been sent ahead of him"

Advent is a time of preparation. The birth of a baby is very special; ask any new parent. By modern standards, Joseph and Mary are woefully unprepared—no well-appointed nursery, no books telling them how to "parent."

In "Journey of the Magi," T.S. Elliott, who describes his heritage as Calvinistic, gives an account of the birth of the Christ child as told by the Magi.

"Finding the place, it was (you may say) satisfactory.
...All this was a long time ago, ...
...were we led all that way for
Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly,
We had evidence and no doubt...
...this Birth was
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death."

Preparation needs to be immediate. "People, look east. The time is near...."

Prayer: "Angels announce with shouts of mirth/Christ who brings new life to earth./Set every peak and valley humming/With the word, the Lord is coming./People, look east and sing today: Love the Lord is on the way." Amen.

Carole Branyan, a retired teacher from White Station High School, former deacon and elder, member of Worship and Music Committee, is a member of the Faith and Function Class..



Advent Calendar Activity: Come to an Advent service and lunch.

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 14

Read: Isaiah 40:1-11

Isaiah 40:1-11 is a strong reminder to me that God's love is constant and unwavering. In a world seemingly filled with hatred, violence, lies, and constant inconsistencies, God's love stands strong and unchanged. This is reflected especially in verses 6-8. "All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever."

I find comfort in this when I meditate and pray. The process of meditation and prayer is a way of removing all the negativity, pain, and stress that build up from the struggles of our daily lives. To really feel God's love and see God in the world, one must search. Prayer and meditation give us strength to continue this search every day. Verses 3-5 say, "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God... Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed..." To me, "prepare the way of the Lord" means to prepare oneself to receive God's love and glory. In this prayerful preparation, I always find that God's love is constant and strong. No matter what troubles and pain life may bring, I can always find comfort in meditation and prayer, in communion with God.

Prayer: Dear God, continue to remind us of your presence in our daily lives. Show us your love and let us take comfort in it. Keep us strong in our continued search for you. May we find in you a holy place where pain and suffering fall away and love takes their place. Amen

Will Presley is a lifelong Idlewild member, QUEST/BASIC alumnus, native Midtowner, musician, teacher, and avid NaCoMe attendee.



*Advent Calendar Activity: Sponsor stocking or cozy kit for MTAM**

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 15

Read: Matthew 11:2–15

As I read this scripture, the words that kept popping out at me were expectation and hope. Of course! This is an Advent scripture! But we also read here that John was questioning: is this Jesus really the one everyone was expecting? John, locked in his cell, knew of the actions of Jesus, yet was still uncertain that Jesus was the one he and others thought was coming. Helping the blind to see? Helping the lame walk? Helping the wretched?

Sometimes we too become so confined within our minds that we do not see God right there before us. We are so sure of one outcome that when there is another we are thrown off balance. We are, to paraphrase a song that came into my mind as I read the scripture, "Looking for God, in all the wrong places." (Yes, I know the rest of the song does not fit, but that line itself would not leave my mind!) We are unprepared for the unexpected. "Where is God?" we ask.

But this scripture tells us God is always there, even in the midst of our blindness, even when we have imprisoned ourselves by wrong expectations. We need only open our eyes. And then another song floats into my head. "Open my eyes that I may see glimpses of hope thou hast for me." Ah yes, there is that other Advent word, hope. Our only expectation need be that we recognize that God is with us, working, comforting, opening our eyes to new things. With God in the midst of us, there is always hope.

Prayer: May I live each day with the words of the hymn printed upon my heart.

"Open my eyes that I may see, glimpses of hope thou hast for me.

Place in my hands the wonderful key that shall unclasp and set me free.

Silently now I wait for thee, ready my God, thy will to see.

Open my eyes; illumine me, Spirit divine!"

Cherry Falls teaches at St. Mary's Episcopal School. She has been a member at Idlewild for over 40 years and has served as a deacon and an elder. She is a regular at the 8:30 service and More Than a Meal.



Advent Calendar Activity: Forgive someone. Repeat.

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 16

Read: 1 Thessalonians 5:1–11

When I first read this passage, the words that immediately caught my attention were destruction, pains, darkness, and night—all words that aren't very positive, and might be a little discouraging. But reading through the text a second time brought out the hope and promise of Paul's letter to the Thessalonians. Paul reminds them that when Jesus returns, it will not be on a prescribed date at a set time. Rather, it is not a date we can predict but something that will surprise us. However, I am not one who likes surprises or being caught off guard.

My planner has details of classes, meetings, upcoming due dates, birthdays, and more. Paul is telling the Thessalonians to ignore all of this—they (and we) should not expect to know when Jesus will return. There is something beautiful in this surprise; it is a promise and guarantee that we can rely and trust on, regardless of when it will come. There is peace in God's word, and Paul reassures us and the Thessalonians of this in his writing.

This excitement and hope that Paul reminds the Thessalonians of is also present in this season of Advent as we anticipate the birth of Christ. For me, it is easy to get caught up in the rush of the season and become distracted, especially as final exams for my classes approach and my planner fills with travel plans over winter break, errands, and more.

This passage reminds me of the peace of this season, helping to inspire calm in a time span I sometimes find to be tumultuous. This experience is not unique to just one individual—we must encourage each other and use each other as a support network, reminds Paul. For me, this support takes the form of my parents and family, close friends, our UKirk group at Rhodes, and in my church community. Additionally, we must strive to continue to live our lives in the light, peace, and grace of God, and to support others as they do the same.

Prayer: Lord, help me to remember the peace and hope of your promises. Remind me to live my life in your light, and to support others in your light as well. Amen.

Ryal Mitchell is a junior majoring in chemistry at Rhodes College, where she is the president of Rhodes UKirk. Ryal is from Lawrence, Kansas and hopes to attend nursing school after graduating from Rhodes.



Advent Calendar Activity: Recognize the good in someone.



The Third Week of Advent

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 17 – SATURDAY, DECEMBER 23

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 17

Read: 1 Thessalonians 5:12–28

Paul's words are very inspirational in this letter to the Thessalonians as he gives them guidance about how to work together as a church and how to behave toward each other. His words urge all of us to set high standards for our behavior toward each other. We are to be patient with one another, to promote peace, to encourage and help others, to "seek to do good" to all, to "rejoice always," to "pray without ceasing" and to "give thanks in all circumstances." Unfortunately, I often fall short of these standards.

Advent is a good time to refocus my behavior based on Paul's words and to strive to revive these principles in my life. The "giving thanks" portion of his words to the Thessalonians reminded me of some reading I have been doing over the past year. In my reading I learned that you can alter your attitude, enrich your relationships and even improve your health by concentrating on being grateful for blessings that surround you.

In every situation, no matter how awful, there is a way to look at the circumstances and find nuggets of goodness. To notice these by writing them down, relating them to someone or by thanking God in prayer is both a way of giving thanks in all circumstances and rejoicing always. Hopefully following this practice will encourage me to be more kind, patient, encouraging, and helpful and to cultivate an atmosphere of peace around me. I challenge you to try it too. Find the moments of gratitude during each day, pay attention to them, remember them and take them to the Lord in prayer. Hopefully we all will find our Advent season enriched and more meaningful by applying some of Paul's advice to our current routines.

Prayer: Lord, as we seek to give thanks in all circumstances, help us to find continual rejoicing as we notice the many blessings you bestow on us. Surround us with your peace; and strengthen us to be patient, helpful and good to all around us. Amen.

Dawn Kvande has been an Idlewild member since 2006. She is the wife of Thor and mother of Claire, 17 and Thomas, 14. She currently serves on the Christian Formation and Youth Ministry committees, occasionally helps serve Communion at the 8:30 service and volunteers regularly with the Idlewild Backpack Program.



Advent Calendar Activity: Visit someone who is lonely—take poinsettia.

MONDAY, DECEMBER 18

Read: Luke 1:67–80

Christmas is a season that often leaves us feeling like we are singing the song of stress rather than the song of our Savior. We often do not feel the mercy of God redeeming us from our stress because we do not take a step back from our calendars and kitchens to allow this mercy in. While surrounding ourselves with family and immersing ourselves in our to-do lists are meaningful to us and others, they do nothing to relieve us from our stress. They do nothing to redeem us, like only God can.

When we read the words of Luke in Zachariah's Song, we are reminded that we are on the path of peace even in our hectic times. We are reminded to measure our time by our walk with God and not always by the check marks on our shopping list. We are reminded of the abundance of tender mercy from our God which alleviates the stress of Christmas, a time that should be dedicated to joyful celebration of our salvation. We need this reminder now more than ever.

Prayer: God, even when I do not want to forgive my ancestors, you do. Help me do so, too. Even when I feel it is impossible to forgive my enemies, you know all things are possible through you. Help me do so, too. Even when I don't know how I could possibly be seen as prophetic, you see me. Help me do so, too. Even when I do not think the sun will rise, you know it will. Help me do so, too. Even during this Christmas season, during the busiest of times, help me do these things, and so many more, which are only possible through you. Amen.

Dannon Adell Eubanks is a junior at the University of Memphis studying youth services and psychology. She is the Children's Church Continued teacher at Idlewild and serves as an intern and the Vice President of UKirk Ministries.



Advent Calendar Activity: Leave notes of encouragement on someone's car.

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 19

Read: John 1:1–5

Sloane was barely 12 weeks old, and Meghan had just finished her first day of post-partum employment. Heading to bed in the sleep-deprived fog that typifies parenthood's first season, we noticed that our thermostat was registering a blank screen; a quick furnace inspection confirmed that we would be without heat for the night. Our first home was drafty and cool under normal circumstances, but local weathermen warned of single-digit temps that night, a rarity in Charlotte.

As new parents charged with protecting this baby girl, we naturally panicked. Should we get a hotel? Should we try to stay with our neighbors (it was after 11:00 on Monday night)? How many layers of clothes can you safely fit onto a three-month-old? However, our initial frenzy gave way to a more measured response—turn off the water to prevent frozen pipes, drag a mattress into the living room, and build a fire.

The four of us—our dog Roux included—cuddled on the mattress in front of the fireplace and endured a fitful night's sleep. The fire's light danced across the dark room, providing sustaining heat and the comfort of knowing that our family would be safe. So long as we tended to it, that light would not be overcome by the cold and the darkness.

This story came to mind while reading the passage in John depicting Jesus as the Word, God's counterpart, and the Light chosen to save the world. Without the fire's light that night, darkness would have triumphed in our home. Beyond the comfort that the fire provided, I was overwhelmed by a profound sense of gratitude for my family, our home, and our safety. I was also struck by the realization that our temporary inconvenience was a nightly reality for many and felt moved to find ways to share our light with those in need.

Prayer: I pray that we will continue to seek Jesus' light and that we never fail to appreciate the abundance of our blessings. More importantly, I pray that we will spread His sustaining, comforting light throughout our community to stem the darkness that, for so many of our neighbors, feels colder and bleaker now than at any other time of the year.

Ben Clark joined Idlewild in 2017. He is Dad to Sloane (4), Mae Wheaton (2), and Baby Clark #3 (due May 2018), and Meghan is his better half. Ben actively participates in More Than a Meal and Children's Church Continued (C3).



Advent Calendar Activity: Thank a staff member.

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 20

Read: John 1:10–18

Many of us have strained or nonexistent relationships with our families of origin—parents, siblings, and, sometimes, extended family members. Physical or emotional abuse, neglect, mental illness, addiction, and unwillingness to accept those who identify as LGBTQ may lead to reluctant estrangement from beloved family members or necessitate self-protective withdrawal from unsafe relatives. Whatever the causes of our broken relationships, we often feel the resulting pain and loneliness most acutely around the holidays.

One healthy way to cope with this pain and loneliness is to create for ourselves families of choice—people who accept us, love us, and share themselves with us in ways that go far beyond simple friendship. The level of emotional vulnerability required to form such relationships can be uncomfortable and even scary at times, but I am grateful for those who have accepted my invitation to become brothers, sisters, and parents of choice. Knowing how difficult it can be to ask, I have been honored to be invited into others' families of choice, too.

The majestic imagery of Word and Light that opens the first chapter of the Gospel of John often leaves us awestruck, but verses 10-18 reveal to me a deeper, more meaningful truth that brings tears to my eyes when I ponder it. This passage begins with the loneliness and pain of one rejected by his own people, but out of that brokenness, God works the miracle of salvation through Jesus Christ. It is no coincidence that this story is told in the language of family, for the good news of the gospel is that *God is building a family of choice, and Jesus is our invitation to join God's family.*

God yearns for us as a parent yearns for a child, and in Jesus Christ we are made children of God. In relationship with God, we receive grace upon grace and know truth. To people wounded by the imperfections and failures of human relationships, the perfect love of God and God's gift of Jesus Christ are good news, indeed.

Prayer: God, thank you for my family of choice; for love and grace freely given, both human and divine; and for the gift of salvation through Jesus Christ. Embolden me to offer love and acceptance to your children who suffer the pain and loneliness of broken relationships.

Jason Wolfkill may be best known at Idlewild as "Margaret Burnett's husband" or "Kate's dad," but has been a member for over 15 years.



Advent Calendar Activity: Share your favorite Bible story with a friend.

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 21

Read: Jude 17–25

"...these are the [things] which divide you."

When I first read the text, those were the only words I could see. During these last several months I have been increasingly uneasy and focused on the divisions surrounding us. For me America has always been the exemplar for democracy in the world and a place where all are welcome. But today, our political system seems mired in dysfunction, failing as a model for others and as a mechanism to provide for the needs of those who live here within our borders.

In August the American Psychological Association released a survey showing that the state of the US is currently the number one source of stress for our citizens, even greater than money as an issue. 63% of polled Americans say "the present day is the worst period in history that they can remember." Our world had been unsettled, and I have been unsettled.

But in this passage Jude moves us on from that point, stressing that we can't allow ourselves to be filled with angst but rather must try to live the life that Jesus taught, being merciful and open to others and staying grounded in the knowledge that God's peace will reign. What this says to me is that I need to spend less time worrying and more time trying to help those who are in need, more time trying to spread mercy, and more time trying to foster peace, all while trusting God. Jude asks us to persevere as we seek to live the life that Jesus commanded.

St. Francis' prayer gives us help navigating our current waters.

*Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.
Where there is hatred, let me bring love. Where there is offense, let me bring pardon.
Where there is discord, let me bring union. Where there is error, let me bring truth. Where
there is doubt, let me bring faith. Where there is despair, let me bring hope. Where there is
darkness, let me bring your light. Where there is sadness, let me bring joy.*

Prayer: O Master, let me not seek so much to be consoled as to console, to be understood as to understand, to be loved as to love, for it is in giving that we receive, it is in pardoning that we are pardoned, and it is in dying that we are raised to eternal life.

Blanche Deaderick with her husband Mike, has been with Idlewild since 1969. She has taught Sunday School, helped develop the Christ Care program, and is a ruling elder.



Advent Calendar Activity: Do something in service of someone else.

MIFA Family Service day is a great way to help!

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 22

Read: Luke 1:39–56

In these late years of my life, I love the Christmas season with all its busyness, commercialism, noise, and, yes, more than ever. This cacophony of music and art and excited voices is so very human.

Mary had a very human reaction too. She wanted to talk to someone she trusted about what was happening to her. She wanted verification that she was responding to God. So she did what many of us would do—perhaps have done—she hurried to a relative who might understand. Elizabeth was also going through an unusual pregnancy. Just the right person. Mary went “with haste.”

When have you turned urgently, maybe even a little desperately, for assurance that you’ve done the right thing? I certainly have. Would we really like living in Tennessee after a lifetime in the North? Who did I think I was, believing I could achieve a Master’s Degree at forty-four with four children and a full-time job? There was no way I could be a minister’s wife. (A lifetime Methodist, I couldn’t even spell Presbyterian!) I suspect we all run “with haste” to people we love and admire.

Elizabeth was wonderful. Her acceptance, her own physical reaction, her calm, solid faith, so reassured Mary that Mary said, “My soul magnifies the Lord...” and we have THE MAGNIFICAT. Even if those words were more simply said by the very young Mary, they are timeless. They’re the result of two women of faith—one mature,—one a girl—turning to each other and finding strength. So did we all need each other, in our own families and within our church family here at Idlewild.

So what does today’s Scripture have to do with my opening comments about loving the mess and madness of “Christmas rush”? Our cultural celebration has become a symbol of God coming to our flawed humanity. Was it ever a “Silent Night”? I doubt it. Maybe for the shepherds, but probably not in that inn or town. Into the mess and madness of tax time in Bethlehem a baby was born. Grace entered our violent, fear-filled world. And grace was enough. So we celebrate—noisily, tastelessly, hastily, in our very human way. But grace still comes! We see it, as did Elizabeth and Mary, when we count on each other in faith and love. We see it and we are profoundly grateful.

Prayer: We pray for many things, God: for forgiveness, for courage, for strength, for health, for love, for peace. Help us also to give to others understanding, compassion, joyous laughter, love, and forgiveness. Always, always, especially during Advent, we are grateful for the ultimate gift of grace in Jesus Christ.

Lois Strock taught in public and private high schools and a community college for over thirty years. She also taught Sunday School at Idlewild for seven years. Lois and Dr. Henry Strock, minister at Idlewild from 1975-1991, have four children, nine grandchildren, and five great grandchildren



Advent Calendar Activity. Compliment a parent on how well-behaved their child is.

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 23

Read: Isaiah 9:2-7

Writing this essay for the devotional, I cannot remember such darkness in the world in my lifetime:

We are bombarded with horrific and frightening news of our earth being ravished by flood and fire, threats of volcanic eruptions, and earthquakes. Many of these phenomena are a result of our poor stewardship of mother earth.

People are being starved and tortured by their leaders. We have devastating violence perpetrated in the name of religion. We have an increase in incivility among ourselves that causes us to berate and even physically attack one another because we do not agree. We have men of power abusing that power with impunity. We are driven by greed for more money and more possessions. We threaten war rather than seeking peaceful solutions.

If ever there was a time for us to remember that child born unto us, the Prince of Peace, who taught us to love one another and to do unto others as we would have them do unto us, it is now. With our disillusionment overwhelming us, more than ever we need to take joy in our family, our faith community, our community at large, our God; to love one another, appreciate each and every day, and to uphold our lives with justice and with righteousness.

Prayer: Dear God, May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in thy sight, oh Lord, my strength and my redeemer. Teach us to live in peace, without envy of others or meanness in our spirit. Help us to practice kindness to all and to recognize where a special kindness is needed. Amen

Toni Baer is a retired physical therapist, married to Richard, and mother of two grown daughters, and grandmother to a new grandson, born in November. She has been a member of Idlewild since 2005, a deacon, a Congregational Care Ministry Unit Chair, past chairman of the Adopt-a-School tutoring program and a baptismal buddy.



Advent Calendar Activity: Tell someone why they are special to you.



The Fourth Week of Advent

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 24



Advent Calendar Activity: Come to Christmas Eve Worship

11:00 a.m. Family Friendly Service with Communion

5:00 p.m. Lessons and Carols

11:00 p.m. Youth-led Communion Service

CHRISTMAS EVE

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 24

Read: Luke 2: 1-21 (The Birth of Jesus)

God decided to provide a simple account of the humble birth of Jesus. The Son of God came into this world like you and I did! I believe we are each so valuable to God that He brought Jesus into our world so that we might be transformed from mortal to eternal life. The angels proclaimed to shepherds the news of the joyous birth and encouraged them to go to Bethlehem and see for themselves. The shepherds believe, glorify God and share their wondrous story. Mary ponders. Could this be true? Could her baby be King Jesus born into the House of David during a Roman census?

The shepherds were filled with joy, surprise and wonder at the angels' announcement that he is Savior, Lord and Christ. This baby Jesus is deliverer, master and anointed king amongst people of humble stature and means. These shepherds simply believed! That is all God asks of each of us. Be amazed, be joyous, glorify God and share the good news.

In today's terminology, the story of Jesus went viral back in Bethlehem. Each Advent we are reminded of the old, old story of Jesus and his love. We only need quietly look and listen for opportunities to share God's love, justice and peace with those we meet in our daily lives. As we sing those songs of Jesus, let's remember how simple and glorious that story truly is.

Prayer: Dear God, help us to appreciate more fully your simple love for humankind. Let us seek to find and deliver justice in our lives daily. Make of us instruments of your peace, finely-tuned singing:

*Angels we have heard on high,
Sweetly singing o'er the plains.
And the mountains in reply,
Echoing their joyous strains.
Gloria in excelsis Deo.
Gloria in excelsis Deo.
Amen*

George Ensminger was baptized at Idlewild and has been in Idlewild's choir since 1963. He is a Rhodes graduate who worked in mental health, sales and recruitment with Federal Express.





CHRISTMAS DAY

MONDAY, DECEMBER 25

Read: John 1:1-14

"In the beginning was ..." The manger? A tired and sacred young couple looking for a place to stay the night? A present under the tree?

No, "In the beginning was *the Word*...and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."

The day that we have long awaited for is here. We think of Christmas as the end of all the waiting, all the anticipation. Now we can pack up all the ornaments and life can get back to its normal routine!

But wait...suppose Christmas is not just a day. Suppose Christmas is a permanent change that enters our world, affecting all we do? Suppose the coming of Christ was a part of God's plan all along? Suppose Christmas becomes a day for us to begin a whole new way of understanding the world, each other, and ourselves?

I love the way Howard Thurman, one of Martin Luther King's mentors put it:

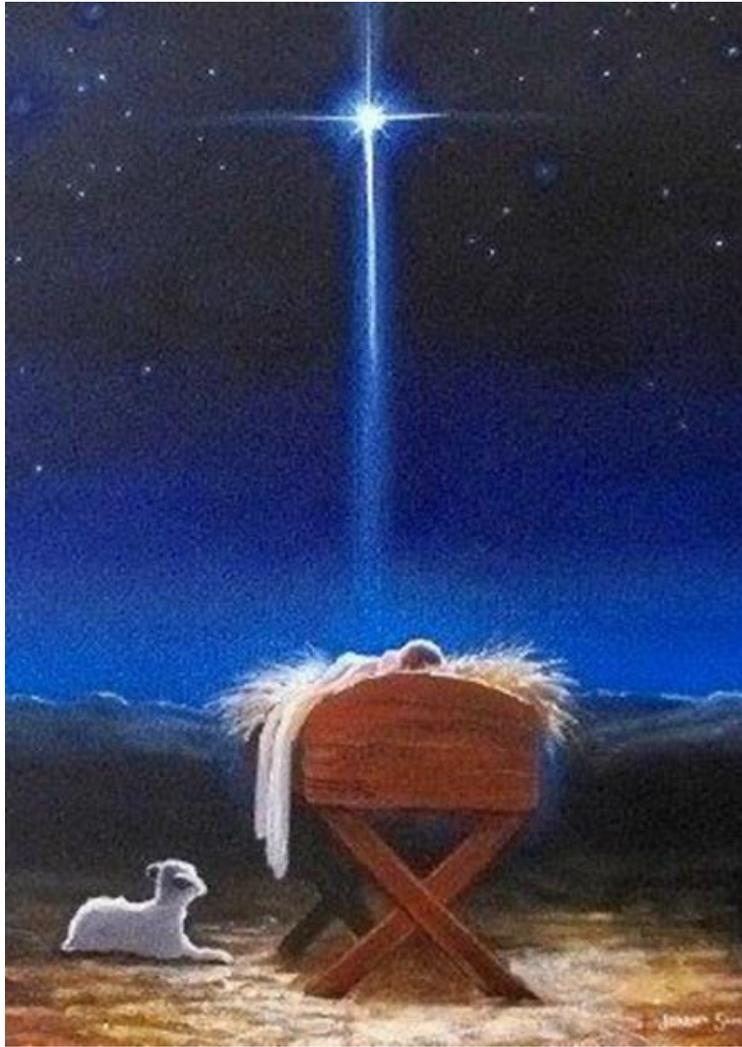
*When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and the princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flocks,
The work of Christmas begins:
To find the lost,
To Heal the broken,
To feed the hungry,
To release the prisoner,
To rebuild the nations,
To bring peace among brothers,
To make music in the heart.*

Christmas day is the arrival date for a gift that must be opened up and put to use if it is to make any difference at all. It began with God at the beginning of time, but it begins with us today—God's peace-filled, compassionate Spirit born within each one of us.

What a wonderful gift. You and I are the delivery system. Merry Christmas! And may God bless us all, everyone!

Steve Montgomery, Pastor







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