

With Shouts of Joy and Praise



2025 Advent-Christmas

Presbytery of San José
sanjosepby.org

Dear Members and Friends of the Presbytery of San José,

A blessed Advent and Christmas season! We enter this sacred season once again with the familiar stories of our Savior's birth, the appearance of the Angel to Mary, the Magnificat, the visit of the Magi, the giving of gifts, the exile of the Holy Family to Egypt, and the rest of the narrative that is summed up with the biblical description: "And the Word became flesh and lived among us." (John 1:14)

This Advent and Christmas, like all previous ones, occur with the tumult and travail of our common humanity. It bears no repeating here because our prayer lists are full with our hopes and dreams for a better world, for health and wholeness, for peace and purpose, for love and joy to reign in every place. All of God's people live in that tension of living on the edges of faith, hope, and love in the midst of our daily experiences of pain and despair. This has been the human story since the beginning of time.

But we also know and trust that even before the beginning of time, the triune God revealed in the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, has been about loving. God is in the business of love. God is love. (1 John 4:8)

So, as we see, experience, and know firsthand the struggles and strife of our personal lives, our ministries, our loved ones, our communities, our nation, our world, strangers and neighbors alike, we also are held in this God who is love.

This is what animates, motivates, and inspires God's people to still light up Christmas trees yet again, to host or to attend another party, to take time and effort to buy and wrap gifts (or have them delivered!), to drive or fly long distances to be with loved ones, to serve in food pantries to offer holiday cheer, to attend a children's cantata and clap even if the musical notes might be a little off, and yes, to prepare and preach/hear that Christmas sermon that tells the same story with a slightly different angle.

In other words, we join our hearts and voices with the Psalmist, whose disquieted and weary soul still leads processions of God's people to the house of the Lord to worship, pray, and praise, "with shouts of joy and praise." (Psalm 42:4) Teaching and ruling elders of the Presbytery of San José have again offered this season's reflections and prayers, based on the Year A lectionary readings. Thank you, dear friends and faithful colleagues. I am grateful to our outgoing Moderator, Libby Boatwright, who conspired with me on this season's theme, and selecting the stained glass window from First Presbyterian Church, Palo Alto, which serves as the cover of this devotional booklet and which beautifully depicts our theme.

May we, likewise, be animated and inspired to live in and with faith, hope, and love in the midst of what we each and all face day in and day out. So that, with shouts of joy and praise in our souls and on our lips, we may worship our precious Savior, and encourage others to do the same.

The Rev. Dr. Neal D. Presa is Executive Presbyter

November 30, 2025 (First Sunday of Advent) Psalm 122

I grew up in a Christian household (my father was a minister). Going to church was a family expectation. In college and graduate school, I maintained a personal spiritual life, but only went to public services on occasion. After completing my higher education, I returned to regular church attendance, a practice I have persisted in.

There would be many reasons to stay home: I could sleep in late, watch pro football games, take a hike, go to the beach. But as enjoyable as these pastimes might be, they would fall short for me. Participating in communal worship keeps me centered, revitalizes me, and gives me ongoing sustenance in a way that those other activities cannot.

On this first Sunday of Advent, and in keeping with the theme “With shouts of joy and praise,” it seems appropriate for the opening entry of this devotional book to focus on worship, the cornerstone of our lives as Christians.

The Westminster Shorter Catechism begins by affirming that humanity’s chief purpose is to glorify God and to enjoy God forever. The primacy of worship is a repeated theme in Scripture, particularly the Psalms. Today’s text, Psalm 122, is one of the Psalms of Ascent, which were thought to have been sung by Israelites as they ascended the road to Jerusalem for major religious festivals. In the first five verses, David rejoices at the prospect of going to the house of God with the people of Israel to worship the Lord. In the final four verses, he prays for the peace, prosperity, and security of Jerusalem and God’s people.

When doing mission statement work at our church a year ago, we considered our core practices: welcoming newcomers, encouraging one another, pursuing spiritual formation, praying, helping the needy, serving the broader community – all laudable endeavors. Even so, we concurred that the worship service was our first priority. Worship is what unites us and draws us closer to God, empowering us to do those other things.

Yet we cannot take our ability to worship for granted. Our unity as God’s people is subject to both external and internal threats. There are societal forces that are unaccommodating or even hostile to what we are doing. Perhaps even a greater danger is the divisions within – over theology, social and political issues, styles of worship, personal conflicts. David’s prayers for the peace of the body are as vital today as ever.

Prayer

Lord, we delight in the opportunities we have to worship together. Help us to love You with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. Guard us against the temptations that would divert us from You. We pray also for the unity of the church. Grant us harmony and wellbeing. Amen.

David C. Burgess is a ruling elder at Westminster Presbyterian Church, San José

Monday, December 1, 2025
Romans 6:1-11 (14)

Jesus entered into the world to overcome evil with good. On a human level the battle between good and evil began in Genesis, in the garden of Eden. God instructed Adam and Eve not to eat the fruit of one tree, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Of course, that is the tree that attracted Eve and Adam the most, especially when the serpent, the evil one, or the tempter, suggested that if they ate from that tree they would be like God, knowing good and evil. The temptation was so strong that they ate. The problem was, once they ate of the fruit of the tree, they no longer knew only good, they added to their knowledge, the awareness of evil.

We have the same temptations surrounding us daily, to indulge in the pleasures of the world or to seek the Lord's help in changing our goals and purposes to his ways. Paul reminds us, that because of the work of Jesus Christ, we have the freedom to choose good over evil. He suggests we turn a blind eye to the temptations that surround us and focus our attention instead on doing good, in thought, in speech, and in action.

Prayer

Jesus, we ask you to open our eyes to the needs of those around us. Fill us with your compassion and help us, by your Holy Spirit, to freely act in kindness and service to others during this season and continuing off into the new year.

The Rev. Edd Breeden is an honorably retired minister and the Presbytery treasurer

Tuesday, December 2, 2025

Genesis 9:1-17

While away in the mountains not long ago, I looked up after dinner and saw a double rainbow stretching across the sky. The colors were so vivid you could see every hue, even the in-between shades that don't always get named. It took my breath away.

The rainbow in Genesis is God's promise painted across the sky, a sign that love will always have the last word. What moves me most is that the covenant isn't just for humanity; it's for *all* living things. God's mercy includes trees and rivers, dolphins and daisies, you and me. Every color, every creature, every bit of creation matters.

In this Advent season, when the world feels storm-tossed and uncertain, we could use a reminder that light still breaks through. The rainbow doesn't erase the rain; it transforms it. It's hope refracted through the tears of the world.

As people of faith, maybe our call is to live like the rainbow itself, a living spectrum of God's promise, reflecting love in all its colors. Even when joy feels hard to find, we keep showing up with shouts, or even whispers, of joy and praise, trusting that beauty is still being born.

Prayer

God of rainbows and radiant light,
when the world feels dim, bend your light toward us again.
Remind us of your covenant that includes all creation.
Help us live as bright reflections of your love,
bold, diverse, and full of promise.
Through Christ, our hope and our joy. Amen.

*The Rev. James Potts is associate pastor of family life
at First Presbyterian Church, Monterey*

Wednesday, December 3, 2025
Isaiah 54:1-10

A couple of weeks ago, I traveled to Maine to visit a friend who had moved there last year. The day after I arrived, we learned that the friend who had helped her with that cross-country move had suddenly passed away. I had anticipated a joyful reunion, yet our plans were overshadowed by shock and sadness.

The following week, I left for a planned weekend with girlfriends. But on the day we arrived, one of them shared heartbreaking marital news. Once again, what I hoped would be a restful and fun time carried the unexpected weight of sorrow. And just a day later, I received word that a family member had been admitted to the ICU.

In the midst of that heaviness, this passage from Isaiah 54 spoke directly to my spirit. God's words reminded me that even when the landscape of our lives shifts without warning—when mountains seem to crumble and the ground beneath us feels unsteady—God's steadfast love does not move. God's covenant of peace is not undone. God's compassion does not withdraw.

“For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed,
but my steadfast love shall not depart from you,
and my covenant of peace shall not be removed,”
says the Lord, who has compassion on you. (Isaiah 54:10)

In the days filled with grief and worry these words became an anchor. They reminded me that God's love remains constant. God's peace is not dependent on our circumstances. And God's compassion meets us when life feels fragile and uncertain—an especially comforting truth in this Advent season of longing and hope.

Prayer

God of steadfast love, thank You for meeting us in both joy and sorrow. When the ground shifts, remind us that Your covenant of peace remains. Help us rest in Your compassion this Advent and trust Your steady presence. Amen.

Elsa Amboy is a ruling elder at Sunnyvale Presbyterian Church

Thursday, December 4, 2025

Acts 1:21-26

What an extraordinary experience it must have been for such a gang of unlikely apostles- tax collectors, fisherman and otherwise unsuspecting individuals hand chosen by an equally unlikely miracle-manifesting Messiah- to unite in “common-passion” alongside with 120 other faithful followers. Wow. I didn’t make it very far in today’s reading before being struck by those two simple words, common and passion, in lieu of our current state of society and the meaning season we celebrate.

My favorite quote of all time is that of Henry David Thoreau, and as I stare at my computer screen this morning while dancing in the dark recesses of writer’s block, I am going to fall back on his wise words. “Simplify, simplify, simplify.” For those of you that know me, you know that I have a horrible habit of over analyzing every word I write and that has only gotten worse as of late, the longer that I stay out of a pulpit. I’ve always loved to write, but for some reason, lately I’m overcomplicating my every paragraph and prayer to the point of absurdity when the message is incredibly simple. That’s often the case when we approach the advent season as pastors. We can easily lose sight of the unifying spirit of the season when exegeting and analyzing scripture and that has never been truer than as of late for me. “Common-passion.” It was what originally brought the apostles together in the Book of Acts and is the root of the simple message that I pray defines your Advent journey this year. “Compassion.” Simple as that; however, we make it so difficult in this world of hunger, homelessness and isolation. Today take a moment to ponder where you are called to join in common-passion with the world and allow that “compassion” to guide your holiday experience.

Prayer

Compassionate God, who as Jesus Christ became one of us, inhabiting our humanity, and dwelling with us, we thank you that you wound with us in a wounded world. You are also, gracious God, the One who restores us and makes us whole. Accompany us this season and in every time, reassuring us that we are anchored in your heart. Amen.

*The Rev. Ryan Althaus is the Presbytery’s hunger advocate and organizing pastor of
Sweaty Sheep, a worshipping community*

Friday, December 5, 2025
Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19

“Where is God?” When political leaders put on the robe of righteousness and declare themselves saviors of the country, and when the disillusioned masses turn to them, pledging loyalty to the people behind the hatred and vitriolic speech, placing their own fear, greed, and self-centeredness over LOVE OF ALL, one wonders, “Where is God?”. Reflecting on Psalm 72, the words jump out at me, a two-sided picture, one side where people ascribe the attributes to a man, unable or unwilling to grasp that Jesus was Jewish, who advocated for the poor, the immigrant, the outcasts of a corrupt political system, the very people that their leader actively attacks; and the flip-side, a song of worship, where God alone brings justice, righteousness, prosperity, peace, and contentment, the very things that the people search and long for, both then and now.

God is here; God has never left our side; God has never left our hearts. I must reach deep inside myself and ask candidly, how have I contributed to the divide, why have I not done more to see all people as my brothers and sisters, including those I disagree with, maybe even vilify, and engage with them? I, too, am scared, scared to move beyond the doors of my safe church, content with the status quo, secretly hoping that the other side fails, too easily falling into the us/them abyss. I am no different and certainly not better than those who I call out. May God have mercy on me.

Prayer

God of justice, righteousness, prosperity, and peace, as we wait patiently for the birth of the Savior during this Advent season, and Jesus’s promised glorious return, give us the strength to take the first step, to be humble and engage the world, embracing your LOVE OF ALL. Amen.

*Tim Parmentier is a commissioned ruling elder
at Trinity Presbyterian Church, San José and incoming Presbytery moderator*

Saturday, December 6, 2025
Isaiah 40:1-11; John 1:19-28

When John the Baptist was asked, “Who are you?” he answered,
“I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness,
‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’”

John was referring to Isaiah 40:3 which reads,
A voice cries out:
“In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord;
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

Advent is a time of preparation. We prepare the way of the Lord in the wilderness of our lives. Sometimes a path through the forest becomes overgrown.

When I lived in Puerto Rico, I watched a rural farmer effortlessly cut his way through the brush with a machete. Overgrown vines, thorn bushes, leafy branches that blocked the path – all cleared out in a few minutes. The farmer made it look easy, but it was still hard work.

As we look forward to celebrating Christ’s arrival at Christmas, are there any thorn bushes, twisted vines, or overhanging branches we need to clear out of our lives? What is blocking the way for Christ to fully enter our hearts? What is keeping Christ’s love from reaching our community? Our world? Are there crooked ways of anger, envy, worry, complacency, or even hatred that need to be cleared from our souls? Bridges that need to be built to unite those of us who live on opposite sides of a chasm?

Prayer

Let us pray: Way-making God, in the desert of our lives, help us to make a way, that you may enter in. Amen.

*The Rev. Deborah Troester is pastor of Santa Teresa Hills Presbyterian Church and
incoming Presbytery vice moderator*

December 7, 2025 (Second Sunday of Advent)
Matthew 3:1-12

It was a prevalent thought in Jesus's day that because someone was an Israelite, they were a part of the chosen people and, thus, had preferential standing with God based on their birth race. Many of the leaders acted like they believed they were above the people and especially better than the people of other nations. John, the Baptist, suggests that is not really the case; one person is not better in God's eyes than another, and leaders of faith should see themselves as servants of those they lead.

The kind of changes John is suggesting and that Jesus taught include things like, being generous with what we have; being fair in our treatment of all people not just those we like; being kind to others and avoiding the opportunities to take advantage of them; speaking things that will be true and helpful; and learning to be content with what we have rather than approaching life from a greedy desire to have what others have.

John is calling, as was Jesus, for people to change from the natural bent toward selfishness and sin, becoming instead people who are selfless and good.

Prayer

Jesus, help us to see the difference between selfish and selfless so that we might make the needed adjustments in our lives. Mold us to be more like you. Amen.

The Rev. Edd Breeden is an honorably retired minister and the Presbytery treasurer

Monday, December 8, 2025

1 Thessalonians 4:1-12

In light of eternity, our time here is short, and therefore precious. Time is opportunity: opportunity to share the grace and love of Jesus. Opportunity to share the message of salvation with those struggling under the curse of sin. In seasons of blessings and struggles, our only constant in life is our relationship with Christ and His love for us. We are to redeem the time we have left and make the most of every opportunity.

We are to walk spiritual journeys with others, leading them to Jesus. How do we do that when they do not read the Bible? They are reading us. They judge Jesus, God, and Christianity by what they see in those who proclaim themselves Christian. We are to walk blameless so others cannot criticize God because of us. Yet, we are also to walk in a way to attract others to Christ.

It is interesting that 1 Thessalonians 4:1-12 conveys a similar message as Ephesians 5:1-21. We are sinners and saints at the same time. Once saved, we are to grow in faith, to be sanctified, to be holy as God is holy. We are to stand out as light in the world in the midst of darkness. Like the star of Bethlehem, we are to lead and guide others to Jesus.

Prayer

Lord Jesus, let your light shine through us that it may lead those who walk in darkness to you. Prepare our hearts for your return. Amen.

*Wayne Shen is a commissioned ruling elder candidate
at El Estero Presbyterian Church, Monterey*

Tuesday, December 9, 2025
Romans 15:14-21

Paul and His Mission

The Apostle Paul was writing to his friends, his “dear family” at the church in Rome restating what he saw as his mission focus. He saw as his priestly duty to go to the Gentiles who had never heard the message of Jesus. As he says in verse 21, “People who have not been told about Him will see, people who have not heard will understand.”

He has great confidence in his message and in his ability to deliver it. Paul acknowledges that the people in the church in Rome are educated believers and are able to minister to one another and learn more about Jesus within their community. As much as I agree that the people who have not heard about Jesus need to hear the message, why then does the church in Rome, and us for that matter, need to continue to hear about the life, teachings and gift of grace from Jesus?

Many of us have been reading scripture and hearing about Jesus for years. However, we are all human and therefore can forget or misremember what we have been taught. How often do we hear scripture we know well and miss the message it holds? Spiritual practices provide connection with Jesus. It is so important that we continue to attend worship in community. Equally important, is that we read scripture to feed our minds and spirits. Most of all, we need to pray and keep connected with Jesus.

Prayer

Jesus our Savior,
Keep us in your ways so that we continue to learn and grow
in our own faith and as a community. AMEN

The Rev. Sharon LeClaire is an at-large teaching elder/minister member

Wednesday, December 10, 2025
Matthew 12:33-37

A Good Tree

As a kid, growing up on an almond farm, Christmas time always meant preparation for planting new trees. When others were chopping down their Christmas trees, my family would be taking advantage of the freezing cold, to plant new trees. We would replace hundreds of old or diseased trees that would no longer produce a good crop. We were replacing all of the bad trees, replacing them with good trees.

In Matthew 12:33 Jesus says, “Make a tree good and its fruit will be good, or make a tree bad and its fruit will be bad, for a tree is recognized by its fruit.” What does Jesus mean by “make a good tree?” Though it might sound strange, all the almond trees we planted, actually started life as peach trees. Long ago, almond farmers found that by grafting an almond tree onto peach roots, they got a better crop, a tastier nut and a better tree. Literally we chose trees that were made good, trees that would be recognized by their good fruit.

As a kid, this lesson always stuck with me. On the trees we planted, you could see a big bump near the bottom of the tree where the graft took place, where the two trees became one. Later on, as the tree grew larger, the graft began to smooth out but never disappear, always showing where the tree was made good.

During Advent—a season of expectation, preparation, and longing—this image becomes especially meaningful. Advent invites us to consider what kind of fruit our lives and words are producing as we wait for Christ. We may have strong foundations: faith traditions, supportive communities, and rhythms of worship. Yet the fruit seen in our words still reveals the condition of our hearts. Advent calls us to allow Christ to graft His life into ours, shaping our inner character so that our speech and actions reflect His coming kingdom. In this season of waiting, we ask Him to make the tree—and the fruit—good.

Prayer

Lord Jesus,

As we enter this Advent season, shape our hearts the way a good graft shapes a tree.

Thank You for the roots of faith and the communities that sustain us, but more than anything, graft Your life into ours so that our words and actions bear good fruit.

Where our hearts are diseased or unproductive, replace what is broken with what is true and life-giving.

Just as a tree shows the mark of where it was made good, let our lives carry the imprint of Your transforming grace.

The Rev. Trevor Van Laar is pastor of Gilroy Presbyterian Church and stated supply of the Presbyterian Church of San Martin

Thursday, December 11, 2025
Ruth 1:6-18

Three women at the end of their ropes. None knowing what the future holds. All feeling the bitterness of death and dislocation. That's where this story starts – shrouded in DEATH. There is no hint of LIFE as Naomi begins her trek back to Judah. Barrenness. Isolation. Broken-heartedness. She expects nothing. She recites by rote that “*the hand of the Lord has turned against me.*” How else can she interpret the loss of husband *and* sons? Put a fork in her – she's done.

Orpah didn't take the easy way out. It had to be difficult closing this chapter. Her husband was her life – this Hebrew man that surpassed the men of Moab. Going home, back to her Moabite family, was a roll of the dice, trying for another shot at love, life and children. She was a gambler.

Ruth had no such ideas. She had taken vows. These vows contained many things alien to her. Some she just had to take at face value before understanding the Hand behind the faith that wrote the vows. She could never leave Naomi. They are part of each other now. She is the essence of devotion.

As Ruth and Naomi step over the border into Judah, a new world awaits. One where there is no more death or crying or pain – at least not for a while. *LIFE grabs them.* Naomi wakes up to HOPE. Ruth wakes up to JOY. Judah holds a promise no other place could. Some 1300 years later, they would know this as Jesus.

Prayer

Lord, for all those struggling this season, show them the promise of Jesus. Amen.

The Rev. Kim Dorr-Tilley is pastor of First Presbyterian Church, Mountain View

Friday, December 12, 2025
Psalm 146:5-10

This scripture reminds me of a popular saying “Hope springs eternal.” My mother was always fond of saying this as I was growing up. I’m pretty sure at the time, I was asking for something that was unlikely to happen. It’s funny when you reflect on your hopes as a youth; a new bike for Christmas or some “cool” game or toy you really “wanted.” Looking back, they seemed more like wishes than true hopes.

It's also interesting that *hope* is such an integral part of our lives, a basic aspect of all people. It comes from within us as a source of motivation or desire to create a different future, a different outcome. Perhaps it is from our desire to control and change things towards our will. Or maybe it is just part of human DNA. Whatever the reason, we all share this quality.

So, it's no surprise that hope is mentioned throughout the Bible and is well integrated into both the Old and New Testaments. As the Psalmist wrote, “Blessed are those whose help is in the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord their God.” Our Creator gave us this capability for hope. For the Israelites as well as us today, basing our hope in the Lord should be the foundation for our lives. It aligns us towards God.

Advent is about *hope*. Jesus’s birth reminds us that we are part of God’s creation, wonderfully formed by the Lord. We are His people, and we belong to Him. Placing *hope* in the Lord moves us toward Him and the promise of everlasting life. So, what are you hoping for this Advent season? How can your life reflect this *hope* in the Lord?

Prayer

Dear Lord and Creator, create hopeful hearts in us as we celebrate the birth of our Savior. Help us remember Your promise and your faithfulness until we return to you. In Christ Jesus, Amen

Dave Heacock is a ruling elder at the Presbyterian Church of Los Gatos and board chair of Urban Works-Santa Cruz, an affiliated non-profit entity

Saturday, December 13, 2025
Psalm 146:5-10, I Samuel 2:1-8, Luke 3:1-18

A clarion call in the middle of the wilderness, a captive in the reign of the Emperor Tiberius Caesar, Governor Pontius Pilate, Herod the tetrarch of Galilee and the priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas- John, son of Zechariah the priest, went into all the country around Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance. Dressed in animal skins and eating wild locusts and honey, he was hardly a representation of a power broker or elite seminarian, nor was he the product of some PR firm promoting the latest leader. No, in Luke 3 his résumé reads the following: disturb the complacent, declare the coming Messiah, and proclaim the truth with the following directives:

Produce fruit in keeping with repentance so that the ax at the root will not
cut down the vine and be thrown into the fire
Give away the second shirt you have to someone in need
Give away the food you don't need to someone who is without
Don't extort money or collect taxes that are unnecessary

With our current taxes, the unrepentant spirit of government officials and agents, the greed with possessions and food and a general attitude of every person for themselves, we need this message of exhortation. But unlike John, we do not wait in expectation. We have already experienced the living Christ. Our problem is we have forgotten that he exists. We've forgotten our baptism with the "Holy Spirit and fire" and have allowed this flame to burn to embers, nearly extinguished. But I believe Christ is ready to "clear the threshing floor" and "burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire." Our sovereign creator has the final judgment and the power to make all things new. My solace is in the words of I Samuel 2: "My heart rejoices in the Lord; in the Lord my horn is lifted high. My mouth boasts over my enemies, for I delight in your deliverance." for the Lord is a God who knows, and by him deeds are weighed." And I'm also comforted by the words of the Psalmist in Psalm 146:

*He (God) upholds the cause of the oppressed and gives food to the hungry
The Lord sets the prisoners free, the Lord gives sight to the blind
The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down, the Lord loves the righteous
The Lord watches over the foreigner, and sustains the fatherless and the widow*

In this Advent season we remember our siblings in immigration battles, our neighbors who are unhoused and hungry, those in war-torn lands and pent up in makeshift detention camps, for those struggling to make ends meet and those who are without parents. I ask God's grace to be poured over them as a baptism of living water. I am thankful for the God who can make a way for a soul in the wilderness in an occupied land, who, like John, chooses to cry out for mercy.

Prayer

Lord, give us the boldness that John had- to cry out for mercy in a land that is parched with indifference. Forgive us for our complacency. Make us instruments of your peace. In your precious name we pray. AMEN

The Rev. Dr. Libby Boatwright is an honorably retired minister and Presbytery moderator

December 14, 2025 (Third Sunday of Advent) Psalm 146:5-10

In this season of Advent, we are reminded to quiet our busy and hectic lives for a time of reflection, contemplation, and the renewed sense of hope that God has promised us.

Consider the affirming words found in Psalm 146: 5-10. If we seek help and guidance from God, our lives will be filled with hope because our hope is in the Lord our God. Only God can perform the wondrous miracles of creating heaven and earth yet He puts equal importance to the humble acts of feeding the hungry, and lifting up those who are weak and alone. With the hope God gives us, let us use that renewed sense of optimism to reach out to others.

Growing up, I learned about sharing what we had with others from my parents. Our home was always a welcoming place for foreign college students away from home for the holidays or Chinese students homesick to hear their native language spoken. My parents taught me empathy and that any abundance we have comes from God and is meant to be shared. So as the Advent season approaches, I am reminded of the warm gatherings at my family's home, sitting around the dinner table and seeing the joy on the faces of those who had no place to call home.

Not only is Advent a time for spiritual reflection, but it is also a time for spiritual action. Let our hearts guide us in seeking out those who are hungry, weak, and alone.

Prayer

Dear God, in a time when it may feel as if we live in darkness, may Advent signal the season of light and hope. In the stillness, move us to share your gift of hope. Amen.

Monday, December 15, 2025

Acts 5:12-16

The Compassion of Christmas

When Jesus appeared to the disciples after His resurrection, he sent them out into the world to preach, teach and heal. In this passage from the Book of Acts, the disciples, now apostles, are healing great numbers of people from Solomon's Porch at the temple in Jerusalem. So many were coming from surrounding villages to be healed that friends and families were laying their loved ones on beds and mats along the streets just to be healed by Peter's shadow as he passed by. Men and women were being added as followers of Jesus in great numbers. The apostles were acting for Jesus with the healing compassion Jesus had shown.

At Christmas time there can be a lot of healing. People who come to worship only once a year can find in the Christmas story a sense of welcome. Many of us visit family whom we rarely see any other time. What can we do to promote compassion and even healing during this time? How can we smooth differences and layers of old hurts? How would the adult Jesus guide us during our celebration of His birth? We can show compassion. We can follow Jesus's example as the healers were in Jerusalem in our Acts story. We can speak and act as the Savior would have us do through compassion.

Prayer

Blessed Jesus,
Thank you for your love and healing. Help us to speak and act as agents of that love and compassion to each other this Christmas. AMEN

The Rev. Sharon LeClaire is an at-large teaching elder/minister member

Tuesday, December 16, 2025
Jude 17-25

Does it feel like we are living in the times when people will seek after what they think is best for themselves? That kind of attitude brings division with it. The attitudes of feeling selfish just lead people to turn from the goodness of God to the greediness of the ways of this world.

When we as followers of Jesus get turned away from our mission, to love as he loved, we demonstrate to those around us that there is really nothing special about Jesus, what he did, and what he taught. Yet we are called to demonstrate his love and forgiveness in the ways we think, speak, and act towards others.

This Christmas season let's stand strong, be mature about our faith, pray in God's Spirit, always remembering and demonstrating God's love. Remember to forgive as God has forgiven you. Make every effort to not be caught up in the pollution that the world finds so comforting.

Prayer

Father in heaven, we look forward to the day we begin our new life with you in eternity. Help us, in the meantime, to live the way you have taught us, so that others might see your love and forgiveness, and find hope in you. Amen.

The Rev. Edd Breeden is an honorably retired minister and the Presbytery treasurer

Wednesday, December 17, 2025

Psalm 42

While parts of the Bible seem inapplicable to current times, the Psalms seem timeless with their songs of hope and praise -- and especially now -- with their laments and desires to be closer to our God.

Psalm 42 leaps off the page -- just like a leaping deer -- with a vivid and heartfelt expression of longing. This Psalm could well have been written today, as we read the latest headlines and wonder, "Where is our God, as we witness our country going through so much turmoil and human suffering? When will we see a change in the attitudes of many of our leaders toward the less fortunate and the downtrodden? Why doesn't God intervene?"

But then the Psalm reminds us that God is with us -- forever and constantly -- even though at times we will forget that and despair. God does have a plan for us, and we should never lose hope or faith in that promise.

But because I am not known for my patience, I inevitably succumb to despair and think, HOW MUCH LONGER MUST WE WAIT? Well, then I try my hardest to be the body and hands and feet of Christ (with thanks to St. Teresa of Avila) and to welcome the stranger, to love my neighbor as myself, and to share the world's goods with my brothers and sisters. If the government can't do it, then we -- as churches and good people always do -- will step up to do what we know is right.

Prayer

Dear Lord, give us patience and humility to see the coming of your kingdom. Help us not to fall into despair, but remember that you are always with us, keeping watch over us and blessing us. And let your peace, which transcends all understanding, guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

Emily Meacham is a ruling elder at the Stone Church at Willow Glen

Thursday, December 18, 2025
Psalm 80:1-8,17-19; 2 Samuel 7:1-7, Galatians 3:23-29

In ancient times, a *paidagogos* was an older household servant of high character who was entrusted to see that a child did not fall into temptation or danger and that the child acquired the qualities essential to true adulthood. He had nothing to do with the actual teaching of the child, for his singular duty was to take the child to and from school in safety and deliver the child to the teacher. Paul noted that this duty was like the function of the law. The law was there to lead a person to Christ. It could not take them into Christ's presence. It was the function of the law to bring a person to Christ by showing him that by himself he was unable to keep the law. This sense of failure and inadequacy led a person to Christ. And once one had come to Christ, they no longer needed the law, for they were now dependent on grace

Paul's thoughts in Galatians hinged on the ancient rite of baptism in the Jewish religion. Baptism required three things: circumcision, sacrificial offering and the baptism itself. The soon-to-be baptized cut hair and nails, and took a baptismal bath where every part of the body had to touch the water. "Fathers of Baptism" received their confession of faith and parts of the law were read, words of encouragement were offered and benedictions pronounced over them welcoming them into the Jewish faith. However, in Christian baptism a person entered into Christ, creating a true union with Christ, no mere outward form and ceremony. The candidate wore a pure white robe symbolic of the new life into which they had entered. As the initiate donned the new white robe, so their life was clothed in Christ.¹

And the result? In the church there is no difference between any of the members. We are all children of the kingdom, inheritors of God's grace and mercy. There are no distinctions of culture, gender, geography, class, slave or free, immigration status, degrees or accolades for we are all one in Christ. Thus Philemon, once a slave, was welcomed into the church, and women like Lydia, Mary Magdalene, and Priscilla were given equal footing in leadership as disciples.

As we await the coming of the Lord, my prayer is we can continue to reestablish our baptismal vows. Let us all destroy the walls that divide us, remembering all of us are in true union with Christ.

Prayer

Lord, we praise you that we are one with you and in you. Forgive us when we are blind to the prejudices around us, the walls that separate us from our baptismal vows: to turn away from sin and renounce evil, proclaim that Jesus is our Lord and Savior, and devote ourselves to the church's teaching and fellowship. May we be clothed in compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience. In your name we pray. AMEN

The Rev. Dr. Libby Boatwright is an honorably retired minister and Presbytery moderator

¹ William Barclay. Letters to the Galatians and Ephesians, Daily Study Bible (Edinburgh: St. Andrews Press, 1972) 33-36.

Friday, December 19, 2025
Galatians 4:1-7

This passage fills me with awe and gratitude in the Advent season. God's elaborate plan for our redemption started with a Promise. To buy time, the Law. And at the most perfect moment, His Son. The plan, meticulously crafted and perfectly executed, opened a path to our adoption as heirs. Like an elaborately planned bank heist straight from a movie, God sprung into motion: His plan to steal us from our bondage to call us His own.

We celebrate this season because of what it represents. The love that God showed to us. Jesus didn't arrive by accident or as a last-minute fix. He came at the right time, into time, to bring us into God's family.

We're reminded that He is the God who moves toward us with patience and purpose. A God who doesn't leave us where we are. A God who calls us his children.

So as we walk through these days leading up to Christmas, we hold onto that simple truth: God came for us. And because of that, we live as people who are loved and people who belong.

Prayer

Help us to remember who we are to you: children, not slaves; loved not forgotten. And as we wait for Christmas, help us to live in gratitude as people who belong to You. Amen.

Saturday, December 20, 2025
John 3:31-36

The apostle John clearly speaks of the greatness of Jesus and the benefits of knowing him. He says that Jesus is excellent above any human value and John is sad when others do not receive and accept the things that Jesus taught.

I wonder, back over my 50 years of ordination, how often I felt sad that others did not believe. Probably not enough. I am not naturally prone to compassion; that is a gift I have had to learn over time. But I have always wanted others to turn to Jesus. I have seen, from my opinion how their lives would be improved by letting God be their guide. The church has not always been a good guide, and I would include myself in that comment. We judge too quickly, we complain too often, we act as if God hasn't changed us at all, and our hope is not as sure as we say.

This Christmas season, speak with the power of the Holy Spirit. Speak God's words and his truth. Proclaim the truth of Jesus to the people with whom you come in contact. Help them to choose to turn towards Jesus, and not away from him, by the way you speak and the way you act.

Prayer

Jesus, fill us with your Spirit, so that our lives will overflow with the fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Help those around us to see your love in the way we live. Amen.

The Rev. Edd Breeden is an honorably retired minister and the Presbytery treasurer

December 21, 2025 (Fourth Sunday of Advent)
Matthew 1:18-25

Joseph is restless and anxious. He has found out that his betrothed, Mary, is pregnant. An honorable man, Joseph wrestles with how best to handle this painful and confusing situation. And then, in a dream, an angel of the Lord appears to him and says, “*Do not be afraid.*”

Those words—“*Do not be afraid*”—are the most repeated command in all of Scripture. Over and over again, God tells God’s people to lay down their fear.

Whatever we are facing—whatever turmoil grips our world, whatever pain, suffering, illness, or loss weighs upon our hearts—God still whispers to us: “*Do not be afraid.*”

It can seem like an impossible command. How can we not be afraid when we are surrounded by distress and uncertainty? And yet, into that very fear, God speaks a greater truth: *Immanuel—God with us.*

This is the Good News of Advent. God is coming to us, born as the baby Jesus, to dwell with us in every circumstance of life. We need not be afraid, for God is closer than our next breath, walking with us through every joy and every sorrow.

As we anticipate the birth of Christ this Advent season, we remember the Hope, Peace, Love, and Joy that Jesus brings into our lives. *Do not be afraid.*

Prayer

Our loving God, thank You that we do not need to be afraid, no matter the circumstances of our lives, for You are Immanuel—God with us. You will never leave us or forsake us. In great thanksgiving, we pray. Amen.

Monday, December 22, 2025

Revelation 22:6-7, 18-20

One of my favorite practices in preparation for a Sunday sermon is to pause and take time to peruse the many, sometimes contradictory attempts to put the inerrant lessons of the spirit into print.

This was my immediate reaction when reading today's passage (or 'warning') from the Book of Revelation and it brought me back to my introductory exegetical classes at Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary. You see, I wasn't born into the Christian tradition; instead, I spawned from a "spiritual not religious," mystic-minded father and a slightly skeptical, self-defined recovering Catholic mother. As such it wasn't a shock to hear my professor speak of the nearly 1,500 translations that humanity holds for our one "Holy book." I had been taught from early on to trust faith as a feeling far before I was ever introduced to Christian scripture. I saw faith as an inexplicable experience, "numinous" as existentialist Rudolf Otto wrote in his quintessential work, *The Idea of the Holy*.

The Advent season is incredibly special in this regard. It is a season of feelings. A season for friendship, family and fellowship all of which depict faith far beyond what the limitations of the linguistic world allow. I love what 2 Corinthians 3:3 writes in this regard. "It is clear that you are a letter from Christ, written not with ink but with the spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts."

As I ponder the warning of Revelation to not add or subtract from the word of God, I can't help but reflect on our 1,500+ attempts at transcribing it and turn back to the existential approach of experiencing it. It's my prayer as we close up this Advent season that we don't forget to stop and take time to lose ourselves and experience the message that God has transcribed on our hearts. Be blessed and trust in the feeling of faith my friends.

Prayer

Loving God, thank you for the gift of faith in Jesus Christ through your Holy Spirit. Enable us to experience that gift in every part of our being and with all of our senses, including our feelings. We live, and move, and have our being in You, Holy One. So, in this Advent and Christmas season, awaken our whole selves to You, and in doing so, help us to embody the gift of faith for all of creation. Amen.

The Rev. Ryan Althaus is the Presbytery's hunger advocate and organizing pastor of Sweaty Sheep, a worshipping community

Tuesday, December 23, 2025
Luke 1:46b-55

We know that, like all of us, Jesus's earthly life began in his mother's womb. And wow! What a mother! The "Magnificat" in this Luke passage reminds us of her strength, vision and revolutionary love.

Mary was a poor, Jewish, woman (3 strikes against her), who lived under the Roman Empire in the midst of injustice, cruelty and violence. But she was no passive wallflower!

Knowing well her humble status, she sings, "The Powerful One has done great things in me!" Mary sings with a faith that I need today.

Amidst people in power trampling the rights of the vulnerable, she sings, "God has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly."

Amidst structures that deny basic human needs like food and medical care, she sings, "God has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty."

Amidst families torn apart and people abducted off the streets, she sings, "God has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts."

Amidst the cruelty and injustice rampant today, I can feel small and helpless, or even avoid the news, ignore the suffering. Or I can meditate on Mary's song, ground my faith in a God who turns the world upside down, and join the revolution.

Prayer

Holy One, may Mary's vision remind us that Christmas is not only about the birth of one child long ago, but also, as Mary knew, about the birthing of a new humanity that practices justice, peace, and revolutionary love. Amen.

*The Rev. Dr. Diana Gibson is an honorably retired minister
and pastor emerita of the First Presbyterian Church, Palo Alto*

Wednesday, December 24 (Christmas Eve)

Isaiah 60:1-6

It is Christmas Eve! I remember the excitement and anticipation I had as a child for receiving presents on Christmas morning. When I grew and matured, and especially after having children, that excitement began to shift from the anticipation of receiving to the anticipation of giving.

God has given us his son. We benefit from the peace, hope, joy and love that Christ brings. As we mature to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, we shift from mere recipients of Christ to the bearer of Christ to others. As verse 3 in our passage points out, God will bring all nations/people to himself through his people. This is the fulfillment to the promise God makes in Genesis 12 to Abram, later to become Abraham, and is made complete through the life, cross and resurrection of Christ.

God still desires to reconcile with all people, and God is using us to do it. We have been great at calling each other to action by serving and being a presence in the world, but we must be careful not to skip a very important step, and that is to go through a process of maturity, lest our actions become superficial. Let's mature through worship, study, prayer and fellowship to become true disciples of our Lord Jesus.

Pastor

Lord, thank you for the gift of your Son. Use us to share this gift with others! Amen.

*The Rev. Jason Barraca is designated pastor
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Thursday, December 25, 2025 (Christmas Day)
John 1:1-14

Today is the day that we wake to the greatest gift ever received, celebrating the birth of the Christ Child and that he brought hope and light into our world.

I didn't grow up in a family of faith. My extended family had their main Christmas gathering on Christmas Eve. On Christmas day as a child I remember feeling like there should be more significance. I craved more meaning or depth. When I came to faith in Jesus in my 30's, I found that this sweeping poetic narrative of the good news filled my God-shaped craving. Blaise Pascal, 17th century mathematician and philosopher described this craving as "an infinite abyss that can be filled only with an infinite and immutable object; in other words by God himself."

Later, as a new-ish Christian attending seminary, I was overcome by these words as I struggled word by word through New Testament Greek. The Word of God met me, reminding me of the wonder that all things came into being through God, and continues today, ever creating. And yet, the Word of God is also human and personal, fully God and fully human, walking into human realities.

In a pilgrimage to Israel and Palestine in 2022, as I walked in Jesus's steps, this verse echoed throughout my soul "And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth."

Prayer

Lord, as we celebrate this holy day and as we seek your light and light for our dim world, may we see the glory of Jesus, the Word made flesh, and find that our steps are guided by the fullness of his grace and truth, grace upon grace. Amen.

*The Rev. Erica Rader is Presbytery stated clerk
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