Advent 2026 Daily Devotional

THE GOD OF PEACE & HOPE HAS COME

JOHN 1:14



NOVEMBER 29 – DECEMBER 25

2026

Ministers of Word and Sacrament, ruling elders, members and friends from across the Presbytery of San José offer reflections and prayers shaped by the Daily Lectionary for Advent (Year B).

The Presbytery of San José serves the counties of Santa Clara, Santa Cruz and Monterey, California.

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Cover: Stained glass window, Bonny Doon Presbyterian Church

ADVENT 2026 DAILY DEVOTIONAL

Contents

DATE	SCRIPTURE	AUTHOR	PAGE
●○○○ FIRST WEEK OF ADVENT			
Sun., Nov. 29	*Mark 13:24–37*	Wayne Shen	5
Mon., Nov. 30	*Micah 4:1–5*	Kim Dorr-Tilley	6
Tues., Dec. 1	*Psalm 79*	Jason Barraca	7
Wed., Dec. 2	*Psalm 79; Luke 21:34–38*	Emily Meacham & Yoko Barraca	8–10
Thurs., Dec. 3	*Hosea 6:1–6*	Chrystopher Sahgal	11
Fri., Dec. 4	*Jeremiah 1:4–10*	Veronica Toyomi Ota	12
Sat., Dec. 5	*Ezekiel 36:24–28*	Vincent Arishvara	13
●●○○ SECOND WEEK OF ADVENT			
Sun., Dec. 6	*2 Peter 3:8–15a*	Colin Richardson	14
Mon., Dec. 7	*Psalm 27*	Neal Presa	15
Tues., Dec. 8	*Acts 11:1–18*	Andy Wong	16
Wed., Dec. 9	*Matthew 1:23; Song of Songs 6:3*	Dan Hoffman	17
Thurs., Dec. 10	*Psalm 126*	Libby Boatwright	18
Fri., Dec. 11	*Philippians 3:12–16*	Jim Lewis	19
Sat., Dec. 12	*Matthew 21:28–32*	Colin Richardson	20
●●●○ THIRD WEEK OF ADVENT			
Sun., Dec. 13	*Luke 1:46–55*	Erica Rader	21–22
Mon., Dec. 14	*Psalm 125*	Grace Kaori Suzuki	23
Tues., Dec. 15	*Psalm 125*	David Burgess	24
Wed., Dec. 16	*Malachi 3:16–4:6*	Mark Peake	25
Thurs., Dec. 17	*Psalm 89:1–4*	Joe Sohn	26
Fri., Dec. 18	*2 Samuel 6:12–19*	Colin Richardson	27
Sat., Dec. 19	*John 7:40–52*	Annanda Barclay	28
●●●● FOURTH WEEK OF ADVENT			
Sun., Dec. 20	*Luke 1:26–38*	Colin Richardson	29
Mon., Dec. 21	*Luke 1:46b–55*	Neneth Ross	30
Tues., Dec. 22	*Luke 1:46–55*	Lynn Viale	31
Wed., Dec. 23	*Luke 1:46–55; John 1:14*	Tim Parmentier	32
●●●● ✦ CHRISTMAS EVE & CHRISTMAS DAY			
Thurs., Dec. 24	*Isaiah 9:2–7*	Deborah Troester	33
Fri., Dec. 25	*John 1:1–14*	Neal Presa	34–35

A WORD FROM THE EXECUTIVE PRESBYTER

Introduction

The God of Peace & Hope Has Come

Dear Members, Friends, and Partners of the Presbytery of San José,

Greetings to you in the love of God, the grace of Jesus Christ, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit!

For almost ten years, I spent countless hours with both of our sons as they traveled the road of Scouting – the first few years as a Cub Scout, with all those belt loops, learning how to fish or tie a knot, and, of course, the annual Pinewood Derby competition involving wood-carved racing cars. Cub Scouts culminated with the Arrow of Light award. Then, they graduated to Boy Scouts, which involved a bit more difficult trials, learning leadership skills, facing the gauntlet of interviews of a panel of adult leaders to pass from one rank to the other. And that culminated in the sought-after Eagle Scout badge, one of the only validations of skills and grit that carry over on your résumé or LinkedIn profile from youth to adulthood and still matter. Both sets of the Scouting journey involved camping. I didn't know I liked camping until I took our sons camping with their Troop. Pitching a tent, sleeping under the stars, cooking eggs early in the morning, helping one another to succeed in fulfillment of a life skill towards a rank advancement. Of course, it wasn't all perfectly executed. There were the rainy, muddy, freezing cold nights. And then there was the time of one of our Scouts who overpacked as if he was going on a yearlong camping trip, to the point that the rest of the Troop had to help carry his oversized duffel bags on a canoe. Oh, and there's the time that these Scouts-in-training tried to make spaghetti and meatballs using our Le Creuset Dutch oven, leaving it over a fire while they played tag in the woods, and burning the pasta and our poor Dutch oven.

I remember those experiences like it was yesterday because at the time and even as I recount those moments, there's great joy. There was joy in those experiences and working together. And even after the fact, remembering brings joy to my memory and heart that I got the chance to experience that with our sons – each and both of them – and guide other boys to also become Eagle Scouts. My best buddy, who himself is an Eagle Scout, wisely observed on the occasion of his 45th birthday: "Joy is being fully present." Let that sink in. Be present as you read that. Joy is being fully present. The 20th-century Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar put it this way: "The glory of God is [humanity] fully alive."

The Gospel according to John put it just right: "The Word became flesh and lived among us." In other translations, it's rendered: "The Word became flesh and tabernacled among us/pitched his tent among us/stayed in the neighborhood."

We find it hard to be fully present in any given moment. It's hard to do so. Yes, there are emails, social media, family to take care of, the hum of the medical equipment in the background, trouble and travail that hover and linger – all these occupy our attention. There's also the fact that to be fully present might make us mad, or sad, or elicit some emotion or memory that is traumatic. Being fully present at a Thanksgiving or Christmas party when you don't want to be with a family member becomes an impossible burden to bear. We're only human after all.

What we celebrate in Advent and Christmas is that the God of the universe chose to become human, and didn't escape being human and all the stuff that goes with being human. Instead, that Word-made-flesh chose to live among us, to be among us, to be fully present at the family drama where politics and religion are debated (or not). The Word-made-flesh chooses each time to be in the divorce courtroom, in the drug rehab facility, in the ICE detention center. The Word-made-flesh intentionally lies down on the cold sidewalk, the fatigued soldier, the trafficked victim and her trafficker. Rich and poor, young and old, the Word-made-flesh is fully present with each of us, all of us, every one of us. The Word-made-flesh fully remembers our words, the experiences we encounter. The Word-made-flesh was present, even watching those spaghetti and meatballs burn over the campfire.

Joy is being fully present. That is why Christ is our Living Joy. This Advent, let us rejoice and be present with the One who is present among us.

These devotional reflections and prayers come to you from teaching elders, ruling elders, commissioned ruling elders, and staff of the Presbytery of San José. The Scripture texts are from the Daily Lectionary (Year B). And our cover art is a stained glass window from the Bonny Doon Presbyterian Church. The dove holding an olive branch is reminiscent of both the figure of the Holy Spirit like a dove descending upon Jesus at his baptism, the Prince of Peace, as well as the bird carrying first evidence of foliage, indicating to Noah that the great flood subsided (Genesis 8:11). In both cases, the God of hope and peace has come, is here, and will be fully present. And we get to be a part of it all.

In Advent Joy,

The Rev. Dr. Prof. Neal D. Presa
Executive Presbyter, Presbytery of San José

●○○○ FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Sunday, November 29

Mark 13:24–37

I have always been fascinated by the sun. Its mass is able to contain 1.3 million Earths. Its gravity holds the entire solar system together. It is a nuclear furnace with a core temperature of 27 million degrees. It is 94.5 million miles from Earth. Yet sunlight is able to reach us in eight minutes. We cannot keep looking at the sun without going blind. We cannot approach it without burning up. If the sun is so awesome, how much more so is the God who created all the suns? Our God is way beyond our ability to comprehend.

God revealed Himself to us through the Word of God and by the Word becoming flesh. Jesus is the Son of God, greater than all the suns of God. When Jesus comes again, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars of heaven will fall, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. We wait to witness that amazing day.

PRAYER

Almighty God, by your Spirit in us, help us to seek you, know you, fear you, and love you. Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

— Dr. Wayne Shen is a Commissioned Ruling Elder at El Estero Presbyterian Church in Monterey.

●○○○ WEEK 1 OF ADVENT

Monday, November 30

Micah 4:1–5

Writing with prophetic knowledge of a very real catastrophe looming on the horizon for Israel and Judah, Micah turns his thoughts to peace and hope – God's peace and hope. From the vantage point of what God intended for and from His people whom He ushered into this land by the power of His hand, Micah begins with deep lament over how far God's people have fallen. How could they ever pull themselves out of this mire? How could they ever draw close to God and one another again? Having practiced war for so long, can they even remember peace, much less inhabit it?

These verses from chapter 4 begin with something only GOD can do… move a mountain. God will raise up God's mountain in such a way that it will beckon to all with an invitation: "COME." God picks up what was broken, ignored, trampled and offers a fresh start – grace upon grace.

After the time of despair and devastation, God starts anew. The Almighty will again "teach us His ways so that we may walk in His paths." We will learn and we will walk. Slowly but with intentionality.

We will take weapons of war and hammer them into tools of cultivation. We will practice war no more. God's people will be ushered again into a new possibility – life without fear.

PRAYER

Come! Come into this reality! PEACE. May the HOPE of the risen Christ once again heal our souls and settle us under our own vines and fig trees. Amen.

— The Rev. Kim Dorr-Tilley is Pastor of First Presbyterian Church of Mountain View.

●○○○ WEEK 1 OF ADVENT

Tuesday, December 1

Psalm 79

In today's psalm, verses 7–8 really stood out to me. The psalmist is seeking to remain accountable to God. This is while the psalmist is seeking justice from God as well. Their people just experienced invasion, the defiling of the temple and the slaughter of family and friends. They are clearly the victims, yet there is still a desire to get right with God. This psalm teaches us that in our pursuit of justice, we must remain accountable to God.

In times of war, armies tend to label their enemy with some kind of name that dehumanizes them. It makes it easier for them to kill. In recent years, with the increasing polarization of our society and even in the church, I see this same thing happening. If you turn on any cable news talk show, they are seeking to vitriolically destroy their opposition and label them in ways that make them less than human. Unfortunately, I have seen this type of discourse even among Christians (both liberal and conservative). We can't let that be us. We must remember this psalm. We cannot allow worldly ideologies to shape our view of our fellow humans. We must heed the command of Jesus to love our enemies. Yes, call for justice. At the same time, be humble, be righteous and see the image of God in all people.

PRAYER

Lord, shape us to be people who love justice, who are humble and who love all people just like Jesus did. In his name we pray. Amen.

— The Rev. Jason Barraca is Designated Pastor of Lincoln Avenue Presbyterian Church in Salinas.

●○○○ WEEK 1 OF ADVENT

Wednesday, December 2

Psalm 79

Psalm 79 rages against "the nations that have destroyed us," but like Pogo, I feel Americans had met the enemy, and it has been us.

However, the recent election returns were so much better than I even hoped for. It was like Christmas coming in November!

And hallelujah for the "firsts" in diversity – first Black female governor (Georgia), first Native American female governor (New Mexico), first Muslim senator, first openly gay senator … the list goes on.

It also joyfully reminded me of the Delicious Lunch Club – a group of very diverse friends who came together years ago when we worked at a start-up in Sunnyvale.

Since the start-up did not provide lunch and was not near any restaurants, lunch was either brought from home or just junk food from the break room.

That all changed when Rayyan, a Muslim who had studied to be an imam, joined the company. When he saw the lunch situation, he said, "Girlfriend, you have got to be kidding me. We are going out to lunch!" So the Delicious Lunch Club set off each day for Thai, Malaysian, Pakistani, Indian, even a Kurdish place on Murphy.

The group included several Muslims, a Sikh, several Hindus, a Buddhist, a Hispanic Catholic woman, an openly gay man, a Jewish man, a Black man, an atheist, and me – a Southern White Presbyterian woman.

No subject was off-limits in our discussions. We talked about religion a lot – Rayyan introduced us to the concept of "the People of the Book." We discovered that we had so much more in common than not.

So, Christmas came early for me this year – and I'm so proud of my country. But all this diversity in our government just means that America has finally caught up with my blessed Delicious Lunch Club!

PRAYER

Gracious God, you made us in our beautiful diversity and to be in community with each other. In Jesus' birth and being among us, he dignifies our humanity in all its beauty. Help us as a church, community, nation, and world to embody and live how Jesus would have us celebrate one another. Amen.

— Emily Hallman Moak Meacham is a Ruling Elder at Stone Church of Willow Glen.

●○○○ WEEK 1 OF ADVENT

Wednesday, December 2

Luke 21:34–38

This is the season when we feel we need to do "more"—buy more gifts, put up more decorations, send out more Christmas cards, prepare more food… These actions may come from good intentions, but at times in the process we lose our focus.

It is interesting that in today's passage, Jesus names three things that keep us from being watchful: carousing, drunkenness, and the anxieties of life. Depending on the translation, the first word can be translated as surfeiting or dissipation, suggesting that there is overindulgence to the point of self-destruction. On the other hand, worrying about not having enough keeps us from enjoying the moment.

Let us echo the prayer from Proverbs 30:7–9 to remember that Jesus is enough.

PRAYER

"Two things I ask of you; deny them not to me before I die: Remove far from me falsehood and lying; give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with the food that is needful for me, lest I be full and deny you and say, 'Who is the Lord?' or lest I be poor and steal and profane the name of my God." (ESV) Amen.

— Yoko Barraca is a member of Lincoln Avenue Presbyterian Church in Salinas.

●○○○ WEEK 1 OF ADVENT

Thursday, December 3

Hosea 6:1–6

In Hosea 6:6: “For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings.”

God has always pursued us first. After Adam and Eve’s disobedience in Genesis 3, it is God who comes looking for them and clothes them. Grace comes before our response.

In Jesus, we see that mercy embodied. He quoted this very scripture when he ate with sinners (Matthew 9:13), seeking to make people whole and restore their relationship with the Father. Then he went to the cross, becoming the mercy we needed. By his Spirit, he now changes our hearts so that thankfulness and obedience flow from his love, not from our effort.

If we claim to know God but show little of Christ’s mercy, something may be wrong with our understanding. So we ask: where am I quicker to judge than to show mercy?

PRAYER

Heavenly Father, thank you for your grace and for sending your Son to dwell among us. By your Spirit, transform our hearts, that we may not only speak of your love but live it as Jesus did. Amen.

— Chrystopher Sahgal is a Commissioned Ruling Elder at First Presbyterian Church of Santa Clara.

●○○○ WEEK 1 OF ADVENT

Friday, December 4

Jeremiah 1:4–10

I've tried to keep up with exercise throughout my pregnancy. Sometimes I go on YouTube and search "pregnancy workout" videos. Halfway through a 20-minute Pilates video, the instructor paused for a water break and included a quote from Maureen Hawkins on the screen. It read, "Before you were conceived, I wanted you. Before you were born, I loved you. Before you were an hour, I would die for you. This is the miracle of life," which reminded me of the beautiful call of Jeremiah, in which God tells him, "Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you" (Jer. 1:5a).

Pregnancy has opened up a new perspective on this text, as I now have an idea of what it means to deeply love my child before they're even born. My experience is helping me to more deeply appreciate God's mothering love, as I come to understand a new form of love developing within myself as my child grows within my womb.

PRAYER

Heavenly Mother, what a gift it is that you knew us before we were formed in the womb, and that out of your great love, you brought us into the world with our own consecrated callings to be who you've created us to be. Thank you also for the motherly love we've received from others – may that be from biological mothers, given and chosen aunties, teachers, pastors, fathers, friends, and even strangers who have helped nurture and raise us with love.

— The Rev. Veronica Toyomi Ota is Peacemaking and Justice Minister at the Presbytery of San José and Organizing Pastor/Evangelist of The Good Growth Garden.

●○○○ WEEK 1 OF ADVENT

Saturday, December 5

Ezekiel 36:24–28

As an artist, I work with different mediums, including painting, sculpting, drawing, and gluing. Believe me, nothing is more frustrating than discovering dried-up paint, hardened clay, or a paintbrush stiff with dried paint, especially when I am in the creative zone!

Artists love materials that are pliable, smooth, and moldable, responding to their creative touch.

Our hearts can be like those dried-up materials—hardened by bitterness, disappointment, fear, and stubbornness. We become resistant to God's touch.

Yet Ezekiel 36:26 offers a beautiful promise: God will replace our hearts of stone with hearts of flesh. The Hebrew word *basar* describes flesh as living, tender, and responsive.

This is the hope of Christmas: the God of peace and hope has come, not merely to visit us, but to transform us from within. Through Christ, God brings reconciliation and peace, and through His Spirit, He makes our hardened hearts new.

Unlike artists who discard dried-up materials, God never gives up on us. His Spirit alone can soften our hearts and make us responsive to His love.

PRAYER

Lord, soften our hearts through Your Spirit. Shape us into instruments of Your peace and hope. Amen.

— The Rev. Dr. Vincent Arishvara is Pastor of Trinity Presbyterian Church in San José.

●●○○ SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Sunday, December 6

2 Peter 3:8–15a

I have never been naturally patient. When something takes longer than I think it should, my first question is usually why it can't just be faster. That's a big part of why I was never very good at cooking or anything artistic; I always wanted to rush the process. But bread needs time to rise. Paint needs time to dry. No matter how much I wanted it to, it just couldn't go any faster.

Patience isn't something I was born with. I've had to learn it, mostly by waiting for things I wanted right now. Slowly, I've noticed something. The best things in my life were rarely rushed. Friendships deepened over years, not weeks. Skills came after plenty of bad first attempts. There is a beauty in the resilience of waiting, and so much of what is good is built in the waiting itself.

The early church knew this impatience well. Believers were asking why Jesus hadn't returned yet. Peter answers that with the Lord, one day is like a thousand years. God is not slow, he writes, but patient, not wanting anyone to be lost.

So we wait for "new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home." It's quite a promise: a world where goodness isn't just visiting but lives there for good.

Waiting isn't wasted time. Peter even calls the Lord's patience "salvation." This Advent, we trust that God is building something beautiful, even when we can't see why it can't happen faster. Good things come to those who wait.

PRAYER

God of every season, you are never late and never in a hurry. Teach us to wait with trust, and to see your patience as grace. Build in us a home where righteousness lives. Amen.

— Colin Richardson is Communications and Executive Support Associate at the Presbytery of San José.

●●○○ WEEK 2 OF ADVENT

Monday, December 7

Psalm 27

Just as “Amazing Grace” and “How Great Thou Art” are the go-to hymns for many funeral services and hospital visits, Psalm 27 ranks way up there with Psalm 23 (“The Lord is my shepherd…”) as favorite Scripture texts for funerals, prayer vigils, and any of life’s crucible moments when we need the Lord’s wisdom, guidance, and comforting care. Which means every single day.

Psalm 27 is one of those versatile verses that is straightforward in its interpretation and what it is calling from us. From the opening verses, “The Lord is my light and salvation, whom shall I fear?” The implication is: God shines the way forward when it seems dark and bleak. God saves us from sin, death, brokenness, and evil. God saves me from myself. And if God can do that, if God can take the biggest, scariest boogeyman/monster, then fear ought not be our companion. The reverse implication is also straightforwardly clear: we do get scared, we strain to see what the future holds, we grow impatient when God doesn’t act quickly enough. The rest of Psalm 27 is a litany of petitions from the heart to the Lord, almost as if the Psalmist is convincing oneself of these truths. It’s the Lord speaking to the Psalmist. Be gracious, seek God’s face, teach me your way, behold the beauty of the Lord. Wait for the Lord, be strong, and take courage.

And if we still didn’t internalize it, if we still didn’t get it, Psalm 27 says it again: “wait for the Lord.”

PRAYER

When we grow impatient, tired, and scared, come to us, gracious God, in a way that only you can. You are our light; you are our salvation. Enfold us in your heart, so that we may experience and behold your goodness and love, even when we find it hard to find you. Help us, God of hope and peace, to wait for you, for there is no other with whom we would rather be. Amen.

— The Rev. Dr. Prof. Neal D. Presa is Executive Presbyter of the Presbytery of San José.

●●○○ WEEK 2 OF ADVENT

Tuesday, December 8

Acts 11:1–18

The story in Acts 11 of the sheet descending with animals of all kinds is a familiar one to us. Peter's refusal to eat any unclean or profane meat is met with God's rebuke: "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." But what of the sheet?

When Lindsay and I were married (twenty years ago!), our reception was in a large tent in the woods of upstate New York. It was a chilly evening, so people huddled in the tent to stay warm. There was really nowhere else to go; we were all in it together. The evening was joyful and celebratory, but as with any such occasion there were some mishaps and some uncomfortable moments: the aunt who had a little too much to drink, previous family disagreements surfacing in shouting matches, the divorced ex-couples who still aren't talking to each other, and the guests who don't know anyone. The tent was big enough for everyone, but there was no escaping the realities of disagreements, wounds, and history.

When we hear of God's call to Peter to include the Gentiles in the big tent of the Body of Christ, we imagine it is a joyous, smooth, easy transition for all. We may overlook that being in the same tent does not mean our differences disappear or that we are called to sweep them under the rug in order to maintain peace. Especially in the wake of the midterm elections, we are called to acknowledge our differences even as we look forward to working together. As we await the coming of the God of Hope and Peace, we remember that in order to expand our tent and intentionally include people not like ourselves, we cannot demonize, dehumanize, or minimize the other. If the tent is big enough for us, we are called to make it big enough for all.

PRAYER

God of the wide tent, you make room for all of us, differences and all. When things get uncomfortable, keep us from walking out or sweeping it under the rug. Help us make the tent big enough for everyone. Amen.

— The Rev. Andy Wong is Co-Pastor of Foothill Community Presbyterian Church in San José.

●●○○ WEEK 2 OF ADVENT

Wednesday, December 9

Matthew 1:23; Song of Songs 6:3

"The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" (which means "God with us"). —Matthew 1:23
I am my Beloved's and my Beloved is mine. —Song of Songs 6:3

In Christmas God goes to great lengths to enter the human condition just to BE with US!

And here's the truth:
God declares not just in words but in action that:
God wants to be with me, yes me!
Beloved wants to be with me!

Repeat this a few times:
Beloved wants to be with me!

Meditate on this truth.
Let this sink in.
Let it change your being—your entire being.
You are loved this much.

No need to strive…to be good enough.
No need to stress…Beloved's got your back.
Rest in this truth.

PRAYER

Thank you, O Beloved, that you want to be with ME!
You proved it in that first Christmas, and you prove it time and again as we experience you in our daily lives. Again, thank you that you want to be with ME!
Amen.

— The Rev. Dan Hoffman is Pastor of Westview Presbyterian Church in Watsonville.

●●○○ WEEK 2 OF ADVENT

Thursday, December 10

Psalm 126

Eugene Peterson once said of Psalm 126: “Joy is not a requirement of Christian discipleship, it is a consequence. It is not what we have to acquire in order to experience life in Christ; it is what comes to us when we are walking in the way of faith and obedience.”

As the pilgrims climbed the hills leading to the holy city of Jerusalem for the festivals of Pentecost, Tabernacles and Passover, they would sing what we now call Psalms of Ascent: fifteen songs that bound them together in faith as they obediently navigated the often difficult roads to the temple. In this particular psalm they are reminded of the years of Babylonian exile away from their beloved city, and how now the dream had come true. They were free to return, “one happy people,” and the envy of the surrounding nations. But the difficult times were not over, for when they saw the city in ruins, reality set in. Once the gleaming capital, Jerusalem was in a heap of rubble – unprotected, torn walls, houses destroyed. There is a shift in tone from celebration to urgent prayer: “Restore our fortunes, O Lord! Like streams in the Negev.” Streams in the Negev meant that the arid desert would be filled by flash floods from distant rains, a life-giving surge of divine grace. And then the psalm offers a final reminder of God’s devotion to His people. “Those who sow in tears, shall reap with shouts of joy.” God would not forget his children. Even in the toughest of times, the weeping farmer spreading his seed shall come home with shouts of joy, bearing sheaves from the harvest.

In our often confusing and divisive times, it would seem that we don’t see God at work. We witness instead a nation at war with itself, with sharp dividing lines, tearing down what was once benevolent and trading it for weapons of destruction and war. So it’s hard to feel the joy. But perhaps it’s time to look beyond the desert and know that “rivers of living water” (John 7:38–39) will come. In our walk of faith and obedience, we will find lasting joy. My prayer for all of us in this Advent season is to not be discouraged but as Christians live “as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing,” and find joy in God’s coming to earth as a little child.

PRAYER

Creator God, we praise you that we can walk in obedience with you and find joy in the hard places. That the seeds of hope and resilience will spring forth into a harvest of faith and we will joyfully find our way back to you in all circumstances. Thank you for the gift of your Son Jesus in this season of light. Amen.

— The Rev. Dr. Libby Boatwright is a Teaching Elder member at-large, honorably retired.

●●○○ WEEK 2 OF ADVENT

Friday, December 11

Philippians 3:12–16

Advent arrives while so much remains unfinished: the shopping, the decorating, the Christmas cards we confidently purchased in October. At church, we prepare to celebrate Christ's coming—after, of course, checking the calendar for committee meetings.

Into our busy preparations, Paul offers a refreshing admission: he has not arrived either. Here is an apostle acknowledging that he is still a work in progress. There is hope for those of us whose most consistent spiritual discipline this December is checking things off a list.

Yet Paul presses on because Christ has already taken hold of him. Grace comes first. Before we make progress, meet expectations, or organize the perfect Christmas, we belong to Christ.

That is good Presbyterian news. God's love does not depend on our efficiency, our accomplishments, or even our ability to locate last year's Advent wreath.

Paul's call to leave the past behind does not mean ignoring grief or pretending our mistakes never happened. It means trusting that God still has work for us to do. Neither our failures nor our finest moments are the end of our story.

This Advent, our next faithful step may be small: offering forgiveness, visiting someone who is lonely, sharing generously, or listening patiently—even when someone suggests another meeting.

We await the One who meets us in our unfinished lives. Held by grace, we can move forward in hope.

PRAYER

Faithful God, meet us in our unfinished lives. Give us patience with our unfinished selves, courage for the next faithful step, and enough humor to travel lightly. Help us release what holds us back. As we await Christ's coming, deepen our hope, make our love more generous, and prepare our hearts to welcome him. Amen.

— Jim Lewis is a Ruling Elder at Westminster Presbyterian Church in San José.

●●○○ WEEK 2 OF ADVENT

Saturday, December 12

Matthew 21:28–32

During my college years, I remember starting a semester off by reading the syllabus and going straight to the grading breakdown. Somewhere near the bottom was “Attendance,” usually 10 to 15 percent. For someone who always worried about GPA, that line felt like a gift: points just for being in the room.

But as the semester dragged on, those points didn’t feel so automatic. Early mornings, long weeks that slowed in the final stretch. Being there day in and day out was harder than it looked.

Jesus tells of a father who asks his two sons to work in the vineyard. The first says no, then changes his mind and goes. The second says, “I will, sir,” and never shows up. One had the right words; the other had the right feet.

Jesus’ closing words touch on this deeply: tax collectors and prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of the religious leaders. The people everyone had already graded, the ones who looked like failures, were the ones who were granted early admission.

They say showing up is half the battle. With God, it may be even more than that. So before we evaluate our performance this Advent, maybe we simply acknowledge our presence. God sees who shows up, even late, even after declining the invitation.

PRAYER

Gracious God, thank you for meeting us where we are. When our words run ahead of our actions, turn us around. Help us simply show up for you and for one another. Amen.

— Colin Richardson is Communications and Executive Support Associate at the Presbytery of San José.

●●●○ THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Sunday, December 13

Luke 1:46–55

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

“Mary, did you know?” asks that popular Advent song. I want to reply, “Yes! Mary knew. Read the Gospel of Luke!” With apologies to those who love the melody of the song, it feels a bit mansplaining-ish as the lyrics recount what Jesus will accomplish and ask Mary, the mother of Jesus, if she knew. We find that Luke 1:46b–55 captures some of what Mary knew, and what she passed down to the gospel writer Luke, who then passed it down to us.

This song of Mary is often known as the “Magnificat.” This name comes from the first word of its Latin translation, meaning “magnifies” or “exalts.” You might be familiar with these lyrics set to music by classical and sacred composers. Let’s pay attention to the powerful words. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer describes it, Mary sings a “hard, strong, inexorable song about collapsing thrones and humbled lords of this world, about the power of God and the powerlessness of humankind. These are the tones of the women prophets of the Old Testament that now come to life in Mary’s mouth.”

The Word made flesh in Mary’s womb and the joyful proclamation of the gospel comes to life first in Mary’s mouth. As you read through this passage, how do you receive this embodiment of joy and hope expressed by Mary? Pause and let the joy and hope fill you up. Following Mary’s lead, how would you exalt God for what God has done for you? Mary’s song demonstrated that her own experience of God’s presence will flow beyond her act of obedience and will be manifested in God’s mercy and justice for the oppressed, lowly, and hungry. How are you called to carry this song of Mary’s into the places of hurt and injustice in our community today?

PRAYER

God of embodied grace, we thank you for the gift of your Son Jesus and for the way that joy of that gift received transforms us body and soul. Lord, may we surrender to your will for our lives and may we see how your mercy can flow through us when we follow and stay connected to Jesus. Grant us fresh joy as we approach the celebration of Jesus' birth into our world. We pray in the name of Jesus, God-within-us. Amen.

— The Rev. Erica Rader is Associate Pastor of the Presbyterian Church of Los Gatos.

●●●○ WEEK 3 OF ADVENT

Monday, December 14

Psalm 125

Did you know that Advent is the time in the liturgical calendar when Christians begin the new church year? And it is interesting to note that, unlike the more celebratory way we ring in the new calendar year, the church calendar begins with waiting and preparing. Instead of beginning our year with "Look, Jesus Christ was born, let's celebrate!" we begin with waiting and preparing for his birth, the One who is coming into the world and our lives.

This is meaningful because the season of Advent can become a yearly reminder that God is taking the initiative, and we are called to respond, not the other way around. God sets the agenda; we are called not just to wait for it to be revealed, but to prepare for it. This is how we begin, and live, the life of faith. And it requires just that – faith – and a trust in God who will see all things through.

Psalm 125 is one of today's daily lectionary readings that teaches about those who trust in God standing ever firm. It reminds us that God is ever-present and surrounds the people of God. It speaks of the faith of the people who believe that God's justice will ultimately prevail and how the "wicked rod" will not remain, no matter how strong it seems; and their faith and trust in God will see them through everything.

Even as we await and prepare to celebrate the coming Christ this Advent, and truly believe that Christ came to give us hope and show us peace as God enfleshed, it doesn't take much to know that God's work in our world is far from finished. So let us not be discouraged, but rather continuously wait and prepare, trusting that God always takes initiative, will help us stand firm, and promises to always be with us. Let us also walk with faith that God's justice will ultimately prevail, no matter how things look now – and that this God will see us all the way through, all the way to the end.

PRAYER

Ever-present God, thank you for the reminder of Advent: that you are always taking the initiative to do your work in our world, and we are first called to respond by waiting and preparing. Help us to trust you and have faith that no matter how things seem, your justice will ultimately prevail and that you will see us all through. Amen.

— The Rev. Dr. Grace Kaori Suzuki is Stated Clerk of the Presbytery of San José.

●●●○ WEEK 3 OF ADVENT

Tuesday, December 15

Psalm 125

Millennium Tower opened in San Francisco in 2009. A 58-story luxury residential skyscraper, it received numerous awards and was sold out within a few years. But the building had a flaw. The concrete piles that supported it only went 80 feet deep into dense sand rather than extending all the way to the bedrock, 200 feet below the surface.

Over the coming years, the massive high-rise began to sink and lean, up to 2 inches at the base and 29 inches at the roofline. Controversy erupted. Lawsuits commenced. Ultimately, a $120 million repair project successfully anchored the sinking corner of the building to the bedrock. The tower has been declared stable and safe, although it still leans.

We try to build our lives on what seems like solid ground—degrees, careers, investments, relationships, and health. While valuable, these things can shift, fade, or fail. If we trust in them alone, we can begin to sink and tilt, just like the Millennium Tower.

Psalm 125 tells us, "Those who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion, which cannot be moved but abides forever." In an unpredictable and sometimes unruly world, God is the only source of true strength and permanent protection.

We don't have to give up working and planning for the future. God calls us to use our abilities, time, and resources responsibly. But we must remember that our core identity and final hope rest in God, not in fleeting accomplishments. While worldly conditions can fluctuate and unsettle us, we find our ultimate stability in God.

PRAYER

God, help us to place our confidence in You, leaving our worries at Your feet. Help us to grow closer to You and rely more on You each day. Thank you for being our firm foundation. Amen.

— David C. Burgess is a Ruling Elder at Westminster Presbyterian Church in San José.

●●●○ WEEK 3 OF ADVENT

Wednesday, December 16

Malachi 3:16–4:6

Most of us find it deeply comforting to be remembered. Someone recalls your name, remembers a kindness, or asks about a struggle you mentioned months ago. It reminds us that our lives are not insignificant, that our lives have real gravity.

Malachi spoke to people who wondered whether their faithfulness mattered. In a world where injustice prospered and the arrogant seemed to flourish, they wondered whether God was paying attention.

In the middle of that wondering comes this image: God listens. A book of remembrance is written, and the faithful are not forgotten. This is the message of Advent as well.

But remembrance is only the beginning. Malachi promises that "the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings."

What a beautiful image for a people of Advent! Centuries later, John's Gospel announces that "the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us." God doesn't simply remember us from a distance. God comes to share our lives.

Advent reminds us that hope is more than wishful thinking. It is rooted in the promise of a God who remembers, who draws near, and who is at work healing our broken world.

PRAYER

God of promise, awaken in us the hope of your coming and make us instruments of your peace. Amen.

— The Rev. Mark Peake is Senior Pastor of First Presbyterian Church of Monterey.

●●●○ WEEK 3 OF ADVENT

Thursday, December 17

Psalm 89:1–4

Psalm 89 begins with praise and worship: “I will sing of your love, O Lord, forever. With my mouth I will proclaim your faithfulness to all generations.” However, it ends with a lament: “How long, O Lord? How long will your wrath burn like fire?” Most scholars agree that this psalm was written after the destruction of Jerusalem by King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. The fall of Jerusalem was a seismic event for the Jews. To them, it felt as if the world had ended.

The Psalmist recalls the covenant God had made with David: “I have sworn to my servant David: I will establish your descendants forever and build your throne for all generations.”

But now, it seems like God has renounced his covenant with David. God has “removed the scepter from David’s hand and hurled his throne to the ground.” The City of David lies in ruins. There is a huge gap between God’s promise and reality. “Lord, where is your love of old, which by your faithfulness you swore to David?” We expect an answer, but Psalm 89 ends without a resolution. It’s like a European movie that ends without closure.

However, Psalm 89 presupposes a listening God. A God who hears both praise and lament. So the Psalmist pleads with God to remember his covenant with David.

We know that God heard and remembered. His promise to David has been fulfilled in Jesus Christ, the Son of David.

Though Jesus came, he did not bring full closure. God’s kingdom is not fully here yet. Like the Psalmist, we wonder when God will fulfill his promise of universal shalom. When we look at the chaotic world, it does not seem like God is in control. We also see a gap between God’s promise and our reality.

But we are to live by faith, not by sight. Hebrews says that faith is evidence of things not seen. At the least, we can believe that God still hears our prayers and laments. Because we know of his unchanging character, we can ask God to remember his new covenant and trust that our faithful God is working to restore the whole cosmos. If we can believe that God is at work in our world, we will be able to join God in God’s work.

PRAYER

Our loving and faithful God, help us to live by faith, not by sight. Amen.

— The Rev. Joe Sohn is Pastor of Cornerstone Church of Silicon Valley.

●●●○ WEEK 3 OF ADVENT

Friday, December 18

2 Samuel 6:12–19

Growing up, I used to watch the original *Footloose* movie on repeat. In a small town where the pastor has all but criminalized dancing, Ren stands before the town council and flips through his Bible until he lands on King David, who "danced before the Lord with all his might."

It always stuck with me; I couldn't fathom how there wasn't something spiritual about being that present, that alive in your own body.

In 2 Samuel, the ark of God, the sign of God's presence, is finally coming home to Jerusalem. David doesn't wait for the celebration to be dignified. In a simple linen ephod, he leaps and dances through the street while trumpets blare and the whole city shouts.

Michal watches from a window and despises him in her heart. It's striking how joy can stir up anger, especially joy that is free, unpolished and unashamed.

David's dancing isn't a performance, but rather a response. God has come near, and his whole body says so. Scripture is full of this: Miriam with her tambourine, psalms calling us to praise with dancing, a God who took on flesh.

As Christmas draws near, maybe we're invited to let our joy be a little less tidy, fully present to the God who is coming close.

PRAYER

God of joy, you made us body and soul. Free us from worrying how we look, and teach us to rejoice in your presence with all our might. Amen.

— Colin Richardson is Communications and Executive Support Associate at the Presbytery of San José.

●●●○ WEEK 3 OF ADVENT

Saturday, December 19

John 7:40–52

In a council ready to condemn, Nicodemus asks a simple question: “Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing, does it?” It is definitely not bold. But his point of order did not need to be.

Nicodemus first came to Jesus cautiously and exclusively by night. Here he offers only a point of fairness. Yet even that takes courage, and his colleagues mock him for it.

His faith grows slowly. By the end of John’s Gospel, he will carry about a hundred pounds of spices to honor Jesus’ body. Light grows in him gradually, like dawn.

Advent honors that kind of everyday, cautious, yet steadfast faith too. Not everyone arrives at the manger with the shepherds’ certainty. Some of us come haltingly, asking questions, taking small risks for justice and truth. God receives these small yet meaningful steps of faithfulness also.

Where might you speak a word of fairness this week in the midst of peer pressure? Perhaps in a meeting, a family conversation, a mostly friendly debate among friends? Peace is built from such small courage. I hope this Advent you find yours.

PRAYER

God of light, strengthen our timid faith. Give us courage to speak for justice and to give others a fair hearing. Let your dawn rise in us, through Christ, the Light of the world. Amen.

— The Rev. Annanda Barclay is Associate Pastor of Sunnyvale Presbyterian Church.

FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Sunday, December 20

Luke 1:26–38

Few stories, in Scripture or anywhere else, compare to Mary's encounter with the angel.

When I think about fear, it usually comes from two places: a threat in front of me and the unknown ahead of me. Usually, I can talk myself down. Look at the facts. Play it out. What's the worst that could happen?

Mary had no such comfort. The threat was real. She was engaged but not married, and under the law a betrothed woman found pregnant could face disgrace, even stoning. And the unknown? How could anyone begin to imagine carrying the Son of God? There was no reference point, nothing to help her make sense of it.

Yet Gabriel greets her as "highly favored": a young woman from Nazareth, a town no one expected much from. God chose someone ordinary for the most extraordinary thing.

And what's most stunning is the immediacy of her response. "I am the Lord's servant. May your word to me be fulfilled." She agreed not because the fear was gone, but because she trusted the One who called her. That is faith in its deepest sense.

On this last Sunday of Advent, God still chooses ordinary people. May we answer, like Mary, with trust.

PRAYER

Faithful God, when the fear is real and the way ahead is unknown, give us Mary's courage. Make us ready to say yes to you, and make room in us for Christ. Amen.

— Colin Richardson is Communications and Executive Support Associate at the Presbytery of San José.

WEEK 4 OF ADVENT

Monday, December 21

Luke 1:46b–55

In 2008, I returned to the Philippines for the first time since immigrating in 1985. Seeing barefoot children begging for food was heartbreaking. It reminded me of my childhood.

My parents had nine children, eight of whom they raised while struggling with poverty. My oldest sibling was raised by our maternal grandparents in hopes of giving her a brighter future. Unable to find steady work, my father left for Saudi Arabia to work as a truck driver and support our family. Meanwhile, my mother stayed behind, selling food at a roadside stand to help make ends meet. In those days, staying connected across continents wasn't easy. I remember our family gathering around the dinner table, listening to cassette tapes my father had recorded, just to hear his voice.

Through my uncle's help and the generosity of churches, our family eventually immigrated to America, where we found new opportunities and hope.

Today, some assume I have never struggled. But they don't know my story. How often do we judge others without knowing theirs?

Mary's song reminds us that God sees the hungry, humble, and overlooked. I experienced God's peace and hope through the compassion of others.

This Advent, may we look beyond appearances, listen to one another's stories, and become instruments of God's peace and hope.

PRAYER

Gracious God, thank you for the people who have shown us your love through their generosity and compassion. Forgive us when we judge others without knowing their stories. Open our eyes to those who struggle, and help us become instruments of your peace and hope. Amen.

— The Rev. Neneth Ross is Associate Pastor of Westminster Presbyterian Church in San José.

WEEK 4 OF ADVENT

Tuesday, December 22

Luke 1:46–55

Trusting God in uncertainty

Mary responds to an uncertain future with a song of praise. Unmarried and pregnant, she does not know what lies ahead, yet she chooses to trust the God who has called her. Her song reminds us that faith does not mean having all the answers. It means trusting God as we take the next step.

A vision of love and justice

Mary's song moves beyond her own experience to what is often called "The Great Reversal": a world turned upside down by God's love and justice. She praises the God who sees the lowly, lifts the forgotten, fills the hungry, and challenges the powerful.

Living Mary's song this Advent

Can we sing Mary's song today? Can we trust in a loving God to care for us through life's difficult and challenging times? Even in hard times, can we reach beyond ourselves to be God's hands and heart in a world longing for hope?

During this season of Advent, let's remember Mary, her trust in God, and her vision of a world where love and justice reign. May her song become our song too.

PRAYER

Loving God, help us follow Mary's example and praise you even in hard times. Help us look beyond ourselves to a hurting world and become your loving presence. Amen.

— Lynn Viale is a Ruling Elder at Gilroy Presbyterian Church and a past Moderator of the Presbytery of San José.

WEEK 4 OF ADVENT

Wednesday, December 23

Luke 1:46–55; John 1:14

Rejoice, my friends, rejoice! The God of Peace and Hope has come to us, not by grandiose announcement or royal decree, but by a poor, humble, young woman, Mary, faithful to her God, our God, fully human, unsure of why she has been chosen to be so blessed. We are all Mary, all chosen by God to share His love with our entire community, nation, and world, unsure why we were chosen and blessed to be so, and knowing that we too rejoice in Him. He has "...lifted up the humble. Filled the hungry with good things" (Luke 1:52–53), us, with His wisdom and love. "We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14), knowing that this child born over 2,000 years ago, the Messiah, is our Way to eternal life, our only Hope. We are humbled, undeserving, thankful, and grateful. Celebrating His birth and waiting patiently and expectantly for His return. Peace and Hope, and especially Grace, from God, to us. We are blessed. Rejoice, our Savior comes! Rejoice, my friends, rejoice!

PRAYER

God of peace and hope, you chose a humble young woman to carry your Son, and you still choose us. Fill our hungry hearts with your grace, and as we wait, teach us to rejoice. Amen.

— Tim Parmentier is a Commissioned Ruling Elder at Trinity Presbyterian Church in San José and Moderator of the Presbytery of San José.

●●●● ✦ CHRISTMAS EVE

Thursday, December 24

Isaiah 9:2–7

As a child, I loved the Christmas Eve candlelight service. There was something magical about how the church lit up bit by bit as we passed the flame down the pew, lighting each other's candles, until the whole church blazed with light. But the moment I loved the best was the beginning of the service. All the lights were turned out. The sanctuary was pitch black. Pastor Dwayne, a tall, bearded man in a black robe, walked solemnly down the aisle, carrying a large candle that shed a small pool of light in the darkness. As he walked, he recited the words of Isaiah 9:2, "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness – on them light has shined."

Jesus did not come into a warm, well-lit house, but rather to a dark, dingy stable. In the Northern Hemisphere at least, He comes at the darkest time of year. He is with us in our darkest moments, whether we perceive Him or not.

PRAYER

Jesus, help us to welcome you once again into our lives. Help us remember that you still dwell among us, bringing Light into our darkness. Amen.

— The Rev. Deborah Troester is Pastor of Santa Teresa Hills Presbyterian Church and Vice Moderator of the Presbytery of San José.

CHRISTMAS DAY

Friday, December 25

John 1:1–14

It's been almost a quarter of a century since I pastored my first church. I was a new pastor, a new husband, a new parent, and a new homeowner, all in one year. The second Christmas of that pastorate (which lasted over 11 years), I decided to do a sermon series on John 1:1. Not John 1:1–14, but John 1:1, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." It was a sermon series in 10 parts focused on just that verse. We parsed, and spliced, and diced that verse inside and out, every preposition, every phrase, its history, its etymology, its cultural context, its theological meanings. We looked at its connection to Genesis 1:1, "In the beginning, God created…" We looked at Logos and Gnosticism and Hellenistic philosophy and how the Gospel writers connected that context to the God-man, Jesus the Christ, as the enfleshed Word, the embodied Logos. He is not an abstract life force which the Greeks and their poets/philosophers/sages attributed the universe. Here was the Creator of the universe, born of Mary, taking up the vulnerable state of being human in every way. Yes, we looked at that as a congregation. Those were probably the first six sermons of that 10-part series.

But what got everyone interested was the profundity of highlighting one word, putting emphasis on one word and how that makes a whole lot of difference. Try it. You can teach and preach and construct a whole reflection by simply doing this:

and **THE** Word was God (emphasizing only the Word was divine, as compared to others)
and the **WORD** was God (emphasizing the particular character of the Word)
and the Word **WAS** God (emphasizing the time and context when that testimony came)
and the Word was **GOD** (emphasizing God as both subject/object/agent/result)

Try reading the above and slightly raise your voice as you read the boldface/all caps.

You see what happens? The meaning changes depending on how you emphasize words.

It works well with John 3:16: "For God so loved the world." Try emphasizing any of those words. Any Bible study, personal devotion, sermon, or Sunday School lesson can be crafted by one single verse and simply highlighting one more, changing your vocal cadence, or typing a word to emphasize (or de-emphasize) it. Those who study communication theory say that 70% of communication happens by the non-verbals; that is, we communicate more by how we say things (facial expressions, body movements, vocal tone) than what is actually said. All you have to do is go to the Christmas or New Year's gathering you are heading to, and try saying "Merry Christmas" but with a drone voice and with arms crossed. The words

are the same, "Merry Christmas," but the drone voice and crossed arms communicate something else.

But what if we had a situation where in every instance, we had what was said and how it was said matching all the time? The "what" and the "how" as the same. What if, when someone said "Merry Christmas," the speaker communicated those words fully as "merry" in both the tone, the body language, and in the inner spirit of the speaker. That is, "Merry Christmas" just exuded from the speaker, as if "Merry Christmas" sweated out of the person. What if, no matter how this person emphasized this word or that word, "**MERRY** Christmas" or "Merry **CHRISTMAS**" or "**MERRY CHRISTMAS**" that this person demonstrated that meaning in everything, in every way, internally and externally, privately and publicly.

Words do matter. And so does the One who is called Word…Word from the beginning, Word in the beginning, Word who was God, Word who was with God, Word who is God. And yes, the Word who became flesh and lived among us, full of grace and truth. That Word's name is Jesus the Christ.

Merry Christmas!

PRAYER

Gracious Word, Jesus Christ, we praise you! You have spoken life and light into existence. Make manifest your life and light in our own lives, in our homes, in our workplaces, in our relationships, in our communities, churches, and world. Fill us with your Word. Help us to trust you, to speak and embody your truth and love, so that the world may know that you have come and are here. Amen.

— The Rev. Dr. Prof. Neal D. Presa is Executive Presbyter of the Presbytery of San José.