



CHRISTIAN CHURCH IN OHIO

D I S C I P L E S O F C H R I S T

A covenant network of congregations in mission:

*We are the Body of Christ gifted and called in covenant together as Disciples of Christ
to be centers of transformation on the new mission frontier of our own communities*



2017 Advent Devotional
Presented by Ohio Disciples Outreach

First Day of Advent Sunday, December 3rd

Scripture

Mark 13:32 'But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.'

It seems that Advent starts at the end of Jesus' ministry as we begin to anticipate his birth. In this passage (Mark 13: 24 – 37) Jesus is talking about the fact that only God knows when the end will come, and not even the Son knows. So, instead of spending our time trying to guess or decipher when the end of the world will happen, we are cautioned to Watch (be Awake!). And this is what Advent leads us toward, a time of Watching and waiting to prepare ourselves to welcome the Christ child when he is born, and in so doing, we begin to anticipate the coming of Christ into the world and ready ourselves to follow Jesus.

To Watch, I believe, is to be quiet and open ourselves to the coming of Christ into our lives and thus the world. Each year we come to the time of expectation when we once again start at the end and find the beginning as Christ is born again into the world. This time of anticipation helps us to take stock of our own lives and wrestle with the whole idea of a love that truly surrounds us and leads us to new beginnings just as Advent becomes a new beginning each year.

We are not called to perfection but faithfulness and trust. Jesus shows us a trust in the goodness of God that knows unconditional love and mercy and does not need to know the exact time of the end for the end of all things lies in the heart of God which is pure love freely given leading us ever into God's presence. Advent begins the journey to the presence of God in a manger where all are welcome.

Prayer:

Gracious and loving God, thank you for the gift of Jesus and the love we experience in his life and ministry. Help us to follow Jesus from the manger to the world and let us be filled with the grace of his presence in our lives. Amen.

Rev. Harry Bolen

Chair of Ohio Disciple Outreach, Member of the Ohio Disciples Regional Church Council, Member of the Ohio Disciples Spiritual Life Committee, Regional Elder, retired.

Monday, December 4th

Scripture

Please Read Isaiah 64:1-9

Many years ago, when sadly, my family was going through a divorce. At Christmas time I had my two younger children make masks of their faces out of gauze strips and plaster. It was a messy and time consuming process. But somehow I got it into my head that it would be good for my kids. My son didn't seem to get much out of it, but my younger daughter did.

After their masks had dried I said a prayer with them and asked them to come up with a name for the mask and then to paint it in a manner that the name suggested. My son named his "Ravenclaw," and proceeded to paint it yellow with a big red "R" on one cheek. Yes, all my kids are Harry Potter Geeks. But my daughter named hers "Autumn Sun." The design she painted was very elaborate for an 8 year old, with a tree with fall leaves, grass and a bright sun. And I will never forget the poem she wrote the next day. I have cleaned up the misspellings she had.

I am a brown leaf,
Try hard to turn green again.
I will be alright.
God is watching over me.

Truly God worked through the clay that we used that day to help provide healing not just for my daughter during that Christmas season. But it also was the best Christmas present I received that year to know that my young daughter, despite the pain of the divorce knew that God was indeed watching over her.

Prayer:

God are the Potter and we are the clay. May each of us open ourselves up fully to allow you to mold our lives. And during this Christmas season may we be especially open to molding our lives in a manner that shares the wonder of the Christ child. Amen.

Rev. Janice Burns-Watson

St. Paul United Church of Christ

Member of the Ohio Regional Council, Ohio Disciples Outreach, and the Visioning Team

Tuesday, December 5th

Scripture

Please Read Isaiah 64:1-9

How often have we prayed a prayer like Isaiah's? *"O that you would tear open the heavens and come down..."* Lord, just come down and do your thing and make all the things we have done stop. We just need them to stop. I'm talking about things like hunger and homelessness; being vilified by those who oppose us and vilifying those who oppose us; racism, homophobia, xenophobia; gun violence; rape culture; the broadening socioeconomic gap just to name a few. How often, because of these issues and countless others like them, have we prayed a prayer like Isaiah's—just show up God, and make it all stop.

Isaiah's prayer, like ours that echo his, is filled with frustration, anger, pain, and fear. It is filled with the plea and longing for things to be made right. It is a cry for God to be God—show up, and create order out of chaos like God did in the beginning.

Yet the full take away from this text hasn't fully come, not until we get to verse eight, when Isaiah reminds us, *"Yet, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand."*

I am reminded in this Advent season, of all the broken lives and communities at home and abroad. Advent, for me, becomes then a time to be still despite all the chaos of the world, and take account of the brokenness. And then to remind myself Advent is also a time to give the brokenness to God, and look forward to the time when the Potter will once again make all things new.

This Advent, as we prepare our hearts and homes to receive the Christ child, we would do well to remember God has already entered time, space and human existence. God has torn open the heavens and is remaking our world the way a potter starts with a lump of clay and creates a beautiful vessel. God is being God. And no matter the chaos, it is good. May we partner with the Potter to bring healing and wholeness to a broken and fragmented world.

Prayer:

Creator God, in this season of hope, help us to be still, and know you are close. Help us to give you our brokenness, and know you can and will make us whole. Amen.

Rev. Jonathan Rumburg

First Christian Church, Stow

Ohio Disciples Outreach Team Member, Coordinator of the Ohio Delegations to Chile, Advance Conference Faculty Member

Wednesday, December 6th

Trust in God's Promises

Scripture

Please Read Mark 13:24-37, 1 Corinthians 1:4

Advent is about preparing for the coming of Christ. In a few weeks Advent will shift to the coming of Christ in a manger in Bethlehem. Advent also begins with preparing and waiting for Christ to come again.

When we are alert we see things and notice things that we wouldn't otherwise notice. We are meant to be Advent people. Waiting and Watching. Waiting for Christ to come around the corner, and be manifest in ways we wouldn't even dare to imagine.

Even in the distress and distractions of our imperfect times on earth we can count on God entering our lives and restoring us making us new and holy, set apart for God's work – blessing, serving, and praising. Where there is joy there is God's presence.

God's grace has a purpose. To lead people to thank Him, worship Him and glorify Him. When we are the church together with Christ as our focus and influence all things that we may encounter in a loving relationship with others, many will glorify God.

Ohio Disciples are on the move through **mission** trips to the Gulf Coast, Chile, East Coast, Texas, California, Indiana and were ever needed. The Christmas special offering goes to our own Region to support the Ohio Regional Church Ministries. **Together as a Region we are able to minister in ways and in places none of us could reach alone.**

May God give us courage to always let our light shine for His glory. Let the peace of Christ be with you.

Mary Beth Cascio

Ohio Disciples Outreach

First Christian Church Wadsworth

Thursday, December 7th

Scripture

Please Read Mark 13:24-37

When you hear the word apocalypse, what images are brought to mind?

For the Ghostbusters, it looked like “Fire and brimstone coming down from the skies. Rivers and seas boiling. Forty years of darkness. Earthquakes, volcanoes... The dead rising from the grave. Human sacrifice, dogs and cats living together – mass hysteria!”

For the author of the Gospel of Mark “apocalypse,” the revealing of the mystery of God, conjured images of suffering, darkened celestial bodies, and a cumulous carriage for the anointed one of God.

Likewise, the authors of Isaiah, Daniel, Joel, and Zechariah each had their own visions of what apocalypse meant to them. And whether those inspired images were cats and dogs or skies falling or rivers rising, they each had in common a powerful message of abiding hope. These images of the immanent eschaton, the very end of the world, all contain a message of hope because each of them end the same way, with the arguable exception of Ghostbusters. God wins.

Apocalyptic literature within scripture may contain some of the most depressing and scary imagery that you can find. A mash up of Stephen King, Franz Kafka, and Sylvia Plath set on a cosmic stage. But if you keep reading you find the Walt Disney ending. Those authors didn't know the hour, day, or year of when that good ending of the full realization of God's Realm would occur. They didn't know how bad it would get before it did, and for most of them it did get pretty bad. But, they knew the end of the story. God wins.

So when you hear the word apocalypse, what thoughts, emotions, images do you bring to mind? When you think of the end of the world or when you dwell on each mornings little apocalypse occupied by headlines of horror surpassing seven headed demons and ever vigilant seraphim, do you dwell in despair? Or do you remember where your hope lies? Do you choose to live as though the Victorious Christ of these apocalyptic images will again be triumphant in our own lives? Though we may face our own share of world ending trials this eventful season, remember that we, as well, know how the story ends. God wins!

Rev. Christopher Stark

First Christian Church, Niles

Adult Conference, Creation Care, and Advance Conference Faculty

Friday, December 8th

Scripture

Please Read 1 Corinthians 1:3-9

Advent comes at the time of year, when there is less daylight, and there is more darkness than light. We celebrate the birth of Christ during this season, and Christ provides the much-needed light in our lives.

In 1 Corinthians 1 verses 3-9, Paul tells us of God's free gift of grace. That grace is salvation given to us through Christ. Receiving this gift gives us peace. In the world today, there is so much noise, confusion, stress and pressure. Many give up the search for this gift believing it is not to be found; but true peace of heart and mind is a gift given to us through our faith in Christ.

During the time that Paul authored this chapter, Corinth was a busy trade center between east and west, and was a cultural hub. Much like today, wealth was a mark of pride for the Corinthians, but right from the beginning of Paul's letter, he stresses that the people need spiritual unity and a Christlike character. There was division, and people were slipping back into an immoral lifestyle. The Corinthian community had everything they needed to live the Christian life, to witness for Christ, and to stand up to the paganism and immoral lifestyle.

The entire letter is focused on steering the church back to the revelation it had already received. The same revelation of Jesus Christ that we look to during this Advent season, and in every season. The trials, struggles, difficulties and failures, aren't the end of the story. We need to count it all joy through those times, because if you have faith in the living Christ, you are and will be saved.

Paul's plea to the Corinthians in these verses, and throughout the letter, echoes the cry of restoration in Psalm 80. Let your face shine, as people brought together through God's grace, we wait for God's light to shine during this Advent season.

Pastor Robert L. Faulkner, Sr.

Third Christian Church- Warren, Ohio
Ohio Disciples Outreach Committee

Saturday, December 9th More Than Enough

Scripture

Please Read 1 Corinthians 1: 3-9

“Therefore, you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed.” 1 Corinthians 1:8 (NIV)

A while ago, a cable service provider ran a marketing campaign that asked the question, “Who doesn’t want more?” The ads featured people who declined raises and even turned down extra presents at their birthday parties because they simply did not want “more.”

However, as the season of Advent approaches, we often find ourselves looking for and expecting “more” – more hope, more peace, more joy and more love. And when we are constantly being bombarded with news stories that depict the devastation caused by natural disasters and recount stories of senseless acts of violence, not to mention the uncertainties of an increasingly unstable political environment, it is hard not to want or even plead for “more” – more compassion, more faith and more wisdom.

But because we have Jesus, we already have more than enough. We have already received every gift that we need in order to persevere through the hardships and challenges of life. The Apostle Paul wrote, *“Just think—you don’t need a thing, you’ve got it all! All God’s gifts are right in front of you as you wait expectantly for our Master Jesus to arrive on the scene for the Finale. And not only that, but God himself is right alongside to keep you steady and on track until things are all wrapped up by Jesus”* (1 Corinthians 1:7-8, MSG).

During the season of Advent, we pause to remember how Jesus came to earth as a babe, wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger. We pause to remember why Jesus came, because we desperately needed a Savior – we needed “more” than we could accomplish on our own. And we pause to remember that just as Jesus came then, He has promised to come again.

As we wait with expectation and anticipation for Jesus to return, let us do so armed with the knowledge that the Lord’s promises are true, which means we have the assurance that we will have more than enough hope, peace, joy and love to sustain us until that day comes.

Rev. Heidi L. Barham

Ledgewood Christian Church in Novelty, Ohio

Sunday, December 10th

Scripture

Please Read Isaiah 64:1-9

Who has not experience the emotions Isaiah expresses in this short prayer. His homeland has been laid waste by enemy armies. God has been slow to act or invisible in acting. As Isaiah WAITS for God to do something, anything, to help God's people survive we can hear his frustration in his prayer. Oh, that God would do the great actions God has done in the past: floods to remove God's people's enemies as at the Red Sea; ground opening up to swallow up those who would do harm; fire from heaven coming to consume; etc.

From ages past no one has heard,
no ear has perceived,
no eye has seen any God besides you,
who works for those who wait for him.. (Isaiah 64: 4)

Waiting is hard and we too live in difficult times. Financial insecurity, leaders threatening nuclear destruction, those who claim superiority due to color, race, sex, orientation, etc. Oh that God would show God's self. Do something BIG that we all might know you are present.

Verse 9 ends with a plea for God to forgive and remember that we ARE God's People. So we wait! As we wait, let us keep watch not just for something BIG but for the little everyday blessings that too often go unnoticed. In the process, be a little blessing to others. Give to a charity, buy the person's meal behind you at McDonalds, or just practice extra ordinary curtesy when out and about on the road.

Prayer:

*God who lives with us and in us and through us,
Forgive us in our desire to have you prove yourself in BIG ways. Guide us to see the enumerable little ways you live in and through us each day. Open our eyes this Advent Season to your presence.
Amen*

Rev. Stephen Bentley
Regional Associate Pastor
Christian Church in Ohio

Monday, December 11th

Scripture

Please Read Psalm 85

During Lent, God's people enter into a time of reflection and sorrowfully remember Christ's passion, his suffering and death. Advent, however, is a time of reflecting in joyous anticipation of God's promise of salvation soon to be materialized in Bethlehem.

"You have forgiven your people's sins and pardoned all their wrongs," (Psalm 85:2).

God's love will soon be displayed in a most unlikely place; in a stable! Jesus will be born, in humbleness, but to the sounds of angels singing and shepherds worshipping in awe. Advent is a time to remember that the darkness of sin in our lives, will be replaced by the Light of Christ. During those four Sundays, those four weeks before Christmas, we prepare to receive God's greatest gift to the world; the gift of Salvation, a free gift of love!

And we, the people of God, contemplate, prepare, rejoice, reflect because we are so thankful for God's display of Grace. During Advent, as we anticipate Christ's birth, we take every opportunity to share this gift with others; to share our faith, to share our hope and share His love.

As I write this meditation, I can't help but think what type of Advent the people in Puerto Rico will have this year. I have cried seeing the devastation caused by Hurricane Maria all over the Island. It saddens me because that is the land where I was born. That is the land my siblings, my parents, grandparents and so many other relatives were born. I hear stories of people that have totally lost all their possession. Their lives were turned upside down in just a few hours. I have cried and I am heartbroken. And then I think of the large amount of believers in Puerto Rico whose faith has not shattered and the words in Psalm 85:9 bring me hope: "

"Surely He is ready to save those who honor Him and His saving presence will remain in our land."

Will Advent be as special this year in the Island? Will Christmas come to Puerto Rico in the midst of chaos and pain?

Jesus came to heal a broken world, to release the chains of sin, to turn sorrow into joy. His Advent is all about "good news," (Mark 1:1).

The day after the hurricane, there was an eerie feeling of despair everywhere in Puerto Rico. It was like waking up to a bitter cold, wintry day, where grey clouds cover the sky and it seems to never end. There was crying, wailing, desperate people looking for their love ones and trying to salvage something, anything of their possessions. And then there were those thanking God for keeping them alive. There were about sixteen people that perished, and when you see the ruins and devastation and destruction this hurricane caused, that number is a remarkable thing, a miracle in itself! People, all people in every city, gathered to pray.

Continued on the next page

Monday, December 11th continued

Hurricane Maria blew off rooftops, all telephone towers, destroyed water plants, ripped and carried away homes, destroyed precious possessions, scraped every leave from the trees, giving the awry impression that we are not in a tropical island anymore, where you would expect to see green, tall palm trees swaying to the rhythm of the wind, where fruit trees flourish and produce delicious fruit. Instead, we see a desolate vision of overturned vehicles, destroyed cars piled on top of each other and huge pieces of cement and fallen trees blocking the streets. Home furnishings, like beds and sofas, that once supplied comfort and warmth, are now torn to shreds and sprawled all over the roads. Other debris and clutter similar to a junk yard, now decorate this Island. The lights went out in Puerto Rico, but not in the heart of the believers.

Advent will be celebrated in Puerto Rico because God's light still shines there. Hurricane Maria may have taken all fruit from the farmlands, it may have drowned over 3000 to 5000 chickens; it may have carried away much cattle and horses, destroyed bridges, making some towns unreachable; it may have done extreme damage, but it did not blow away the faith from God's people. In Puerto Rico, His church of all denominations, have united in prayer and are helping each other; neighbors helping neighbors in a sign of unity and love. God's light still shines in Puerto Rico through its people. Because it is not the palm trees and the beautiful weather that make up the beauty of the Island; it is its people.

Here in the States, I see the stores already displaying Christmas trees, and soon they will be beautifully decorated with glitter, blinking lights and Christmas ornaments. Christmas carols will be sung over loud speakers, serenating the shoppers. Usually people, including myself, will be making our Christmas list, checking it twice, and will be shopping for those special gifts. More than likely the majority of people will be planning meals, parties with families, church programs and office celebrations. It is a joyous time of anticipation. All this happens in many cities of the world at this time of year.

In many other places, but not in Puerto Rico, nor Mexico, nor the Virgin Islands, nor in the other small Islands that were demolished by natural disasters. I count my blessings.

Thinking these thoughts brings tears to my eyes again. And then I asked myself, "does this mean that Advent and Christmas will not be a happy time?" Well, my answer to me is, "if you think that the parties, the fancy decorations and celebrations is what this is all about, then, yes, it will not be a happy time." It is so comforting to know that Advent and Christmas is not about all those things. It is about realizing that God loves the world so much that He gave us a free, beautiful and precious gift. It is the gift of Salvation through Jesus Christ. Nothing will taint or diminish that gift!

Perhaps in Puerto Rico we won't see the Christmas lights sprung all over the homes or the large Christmas trees in the plazas, perhaps the food and water will still be scarce, perhaps they still will have to cook outdoors, but God's light of hope, peace and love will continue to shine there. They are a resilient people, courageous and filled with great faith.

Yes, Advent will be celebrated in Puerto Rico and I know God's light will shine this Christmas in the Island more beautifully than ever! Why? Because,

"You, Lord, are mighty and do wonderful things!" (Psalm 86:10).

Rev. Crucita Marrero

Misión Cristiana El Faro – Discípulos de Cristo in Lorain, Ohio.

Tuesday, December 12th

Scripture

Psalm 80:19 *Restore us, O Lord God Almighty; make your face shine upon us, that we may be saved.*

I drove to work this morning in a dense fog. No, not the usual fog in my head, but real, heavy, soupy fog. I was fortunate enough on the commute to follow behind another vehicle; not too closely of course, but I certainly wanted to ensure that I kept it in my line of sight. It made seeing ahead much easier, and I was much more confident as I traveled along. By the time I had to turn away from the vehicle, the sun began to shine, and the fog burned away.

I couldn't help but think, as I drove along, that our spiritual lives are certainly similar to this morning's commute. As long as we keep our eyes on something other than ourselves - call it God, or Yahweh, or any number of other names - we will stay the course. It's when we lose sight, and try to find our own way that things get dicey. Amidst crazy schedules, financial stressors, holiday obligations it is important to keep our eyes on the One that guides us and leads the way. It is easy to get off track.

My prayer for you is that you find someone to travel with along this crazy journey of life.

Rev. Mary Jo Bray

First Christian Church, Sylvania

CYF Week 2 Director

Wednesday, December 13th

Comfort, comfort my people in Puerto Rico

Scripture

Isaiah 40:1-2 “Comfort, comfort my people! says your God. Speak compassionately to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her necessary service has ended, that her penalty has been paid, and that she has received from the LORD’s hand double for all her sins.”

The 2017 Atlantic hurricane season began on June 1st, 2017 and ended November 30th, 2017. On September 2017 the small island of Puerto Rico in the Caribbean was hit by the worst hurricane of its history. With sustained winds of 155 mph at landfall — a strong Category 4 storm and nearly a Category 5 — Maria was so powerful that it disabled radar weather stations and cell towers across Puerto Rico, leaving an information vacuum in which officials could only speculate about property damage, injuries or deaths. All the electrical power and water supply was lost and experts estimated that recovery could take months and possibly years. An island already submerged in an economic crisis with a debt of approximately \$74 billion had experienced a storm of unimaginable proportions. But as God’s prophet was to speak words of comfort to God’s people in Jerusalem, Puerto Rico needed to hear words of comfort. The people of Puerto Rico are also God’s people. Devastation had struck this little island that is part of a great nation just like Jerusalem was part of a great nation. Many in this great nation had no idea this little island was a part of them, but as news spread nationally and internationally people in the great nation quickly learned of their fellow American citizen’s distress and call for help. Comfort and help arrived from this great nation but sadly this great nation’s leader lacked empathy and words of comfort for the people of Puerto Rico. But God always has words of comfort for people in distress and in harm’s way. In Isaiah 40:1 God says “Comfort, comfort my people” And in verse 11; “Like a shepherd, God will tend the flock; God will gather lambs in God’s arms and lift them onto God’s lap.” We are thankful for the hurricane relief response to the people of Puerto Rico from all God’s people.

In this advent season let us be comforted by God and pray for our brothers and sisters in Puerto Rico.

Every valley will be raised up, and every mountain and hill will be flattened. Uneven ground will become level, and rough terrain a valley plain. The Lord’s glory will appear, and all humanity will see it together; the Lord’s mouth has commanded it.”

Rev. Enrique Ocasio

Gender Road Christian Church, Canal Winchester
Christian Church Foundation

Thursday, December 14th

Scripture

Please Read 2 Peter 3: 8 – 15a

Advent is the time of year when those of us professing a relationship with GOD spend time in meditation about his birth, stage reenactments of his birth and offer sermons from the gospels of his coming into this world. Mark 1 tells of John the Baptist preparing the way for the coming of Jesus.

If the one who promises life and life more abundantly returned to earth during this advent season what would be his view of the world today? Who would he hold accountable for the many social injustices experienced by some of his people: mass killings, incarcerations, poverty, homelessness, divisiveness and deliberate politics that create unrest and fear nationally and internationally. Would he continue to be patient with us not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance? (2 Peter 3:9 NIV)

During this season we should all put a spotlight on ourselves, look for and at the social injustices we contribute too in thought and deed, question if we are really our brothers/sisters keeper, and ask ourselves if GOD returned to earth during this advent season, would we be ready to join him in his kingdom?

Anne C. Sowell

Co-Chair

Anti-Racism Commission

Friday, December 15th

Scripture: 2 Peter 3: 8 – 15a

There are times when I'm not patient. And some days I think God moves TOO SLOW! Waiting is not an easy thing to do and in times of stress can be almost painful.

There have been times in my life recently when waiting on God has seemed so hard. I wanted to know the answers NOW. I would cry and argue with God, but somehow God always found a way to remind me that the timing I wanted wasn't the best thing for us. God's timing was better and I needed to wait and learn in the waiting time. There were lessons I needed to experience in the wait that would impact the future God was calling me into.

There are things we, as individual Christians, and as the church need to learn as we wait for Jesus. We aren't ready for God to finish the story by any chance and we're not really ready for Christmas. We need to stop and listen to God's teachings today! Today has a great deal to offer us that we miss when we're busy trying to tell God what to do.

My Grandson came to visit me recently and he lives very much in this moment with a vague understanding of future and past. But not much concrete need for an understanding of their importance. He laughs completely freely, he enjoys his food with delight, he plays with blocks as if they are a brand new experience, and he takes every moment as a new adventure. He lives each moment completely.

There's a huge lesson there is we're willing to learn it. Live now. Enjoy now. Embrace the now and know the Holy in and of the now. Let God be about the future.

Prayer:

Oh, God! Help us let go. Help us know you in the now. Open our hearts and minds to you in the now. Amen

Rev. Heather S Schimmel

First Christian Church, Wauseon

Regional Church Council, Anti-Racism and Reconciliation

Saturday, December 16th

The Coming of Christ Gives Hope

Scripture:

Please Read Isaiah 40: 1-11

The more things change, the more they stay the same. A statement made often in the book of Ecclesiastes, "There is nothing new under the sun." We are living in a time of social upheaval, some of it caused by natural disasters, some caused by human beings in high places. There remains uncertainty about national healthcare. Will we actually go to war with North Korea? Hurricanes have caused devastation in Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands, Florida, and Texas. Portions of California have been burned to the ground by wildfires.

Millions of people have lost homes, businesses, jobs, family members; they have literally lost everything that made their lives meaningful. Rebuilding is happening, but the Christmas season will be difficult for most of them. Who will give them hope? Who will give them encouragement?

The same emotions were experienced by Jews living under Roman rule. The Jews experienced uncertainty, injustice, high taxes, terror, frustration, discrimination, all facets of sinful oppression. No Jewish human being could be depended upon to help the Jewish nation get free from Roman oppression. Jewish leaders believed that the time was right to expect the coming of the Christ. They didn't know how, they didn't know exactly when, but they believed that their God would deliver them because the oppression was so evil. Jewish leaders hoped that God would send the Christ and deliver the Jews from the Romans like God had sent Moses to deliver their ancestors from slavery in Egypt. They spread their hope to the Jewish masses who joined them in hopeful expectation. Jesus Christ was born!

Christ has come, died, risen again, and ascended into heaven. However, the Holy Spirit is here now and we still hope and anticipate, as we prepare to celebrate the birth of our Savior, that God will show once again how much God loves us. God will show once again that Jesus didn't die in vain. We hope and expect that God will deliver those of us who are suffering at this time in the history of the human race. As we look forward to the celebration of his birth, let us not grow weary of looking to Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith. He died so that we would be delivered from our sins and manifestations of sin in an evil world. Dr. Robert Schuller is known for a saying, "Tough times never last. Tough people do." Let us hang tough in our faith in God. God will make things better. There is light at the end of the tunnel. Just make sure that your soul is anchored in Jesus.

Rev. Dr. Eric Brown

Woodland Christian Church, Columbus

Commission on Ministry, Anti-Racism / Pro-Reconciliation Commission, Regional Investigative Task Force

Sunday, December 17th

Scripture: Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

This passage from Second Isaiah is written to people who have watched their world collapse around them. Great Israel, the very chosen ones of God, have been conquered by the evil Babylonians. They have been forced into exile, at least the lucky ones. The unlucky ones have had to stay in Jerusalem and see their former holy places desecrated. There is only a memory of the greatness of days gone by. And in the midst of this seeming doom and gloom, the prophet of YHWH dares to proclaim the 'year of the Lord's favor.' The prophet says, that even in the midst of their terrible circumstances, there is good news for the oppressed, the broken hearted can be healed, and the prisoners will find release. The prophet even goes on to suggest that instead of ashes, the people of God will be wearing garlands and their oil will be of gladness instead of mourning.

I don't know where you have found yourselves over these last few months, and in many ways through much of 2017, but I know as the season of welcoming the Christ Child approaches, I NEED TO HEAR THESE WORDS. So much of our corporate story, as a world, nation, and even as church, seems to be so full of doom and gloom. To believe in the midst of that the Goodness of God remains and that God can turn our mourning into dancing is at the heart of the Christmas story and the core of what it means to follow the Risen Christ. On this third Sunday of Advent, Gaudete Sunday, may we find the hope to say, "Rejoice in the Lord always, again I say, rejoice."

Rev. Kevin Phipps

First Christian Church, Bowling Green
Commission on the Ministry

Monday, December 18th

Scripture

Please Read 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

“Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”

What does this really mean? Are we supposed to always go around with a smile on our face, pray every waking moment, and be happy with every situation? Impossible right? Can you honestly say that you rejoice always, pray without ceasing, and give thanks in everything? Joy and happiness are not something that you can turn “on” and “off” like a light switch. We all have our bad days and moments where being upbeat and joyful are the last things on our minds. However, these three commands are directed to the church regarding our public worship. Our corporate worship should be filled with joy, prayer, and thanksgiving. But in order to do this together in worship we must be able to apply them individually. We have to begin to develop these attributes and habits, perfect or not, to move toward the mark. That mark being to abide in Him and become like Him... “this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.”

Prayer:

Dear Lord, satisfy me in the morning with Your loving kindness, that I may sing for joy and be glad all my days. Amen

Candis Wilson

First United Christian Church, Xenia, OH
Vice Moderator, Christian Church in Ohio

Tuesday, December 19th Conspire with Me

Scripture

Please Read Luke 1:46-55

In 2006, a small group of pastors gathered to conspire against Christmas. Actually, they were resisting the Western idea of Christmas where we worship the day, adore the gift-giving, and glorify the season and its trappings. Thus began the mission of *The Advent Conspiracy* (adventconspiracy.org) an adventure in conspiratorial worship and significant giving with an eye and heart prophetic economics, justice and a genuine encounter with the incarnate Christ. There must be a better to reflect and observe God's self-investment in human flesh.

The program is to embrace the simplicity of Christmas by **worshipping fully, spending less, giving more, and loving all**. In her 2015 article, *How We Forgot the Poverty of Christmas*, Katelyn Beaty said this movement “rightly draws the holiday away from ourselves, onto God and others...to add big ideas—generosity and justice—to God's Big Idea.” God's Big Idea is the incarnation but Beaty suggests, “It's like we don't trust the Incarnation to sell itself. And maybe that's our problem. The trick about the Incarnation—God becoming [human]... is that it can't be sold, scheduled, or enjoyed in the way a glass of eggnog or a new gadget can. It refuses to bend to the rules of the market. It can only be beheld.”²

In today's passage from the Gospel, Mary is overwhelmed and overjoyed by the gift growing within her, God's very presence dwelling within her body. Whatever your personal theology of the incarnation, one cannot avoid its implications for human culture, economic justice, and individual lives. The mystery of this enfleshing moment has deep implications for how we relate to God and one another. When the Lord comes near teenage girls sing of justice and the grey values we live by are revealed by the light of heaven.

Are you hungry for good things (vs. 53) this Christmas? Then conspire with me against Christmas that we might deepen our encounter of the Incarnate God made known through the child in whom kings fear, sages worship, and the poor rejoice. How can you and yours conspire for a true celebration of Christmas this year? Amen.

Pastor Tom Stephenson

First Christian Church, Wilmington

Moderator of the Christian Church in Ohio

Wednesday, December 20th Joyful Optimism

This is my favorite time of the year. From Thanksgiving to the season of Advent you can usually see a twinkle in my eye, a smile on my face and a song on my lips. For me this feeling of joy comes almost every year and transcends age and circumstances. 2017 has been a challenging year filled with uncertainties not just for me but for the country. I can't help but wonder if I will have adequate health care coverage after I retire. I watch CNN and wonder if a war with North Korea is inevitable? There are mass killings, wildfires and hurricanes, global warming; these are uncertain times in which we live. As we prepare to celebrate the birth of our Savior how can we not be optimistic? We have only to believe in his saving grace and trust him in the practical matters of life. I will put away the worries and uncertainties at least for a season.

Mary was chosen to give birth to our Savior and her circumstances were unusual to say the least. I am sure she had real concerns and faced uncertainty in her time. What am I going to tell Joseph? "Where can I have this baby"? But rather than worrying about people's perception of her and how she was going to cope, Mary sang her song of praise "My Soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, my spirit rejoices for the Almighty has done great things for me and Holy is his name". Mary magnified the Lord, and proclaimed his greatness even in the midst of her disgrace and uncertainty.

We too can be joyfully optimistic because God has never failed to deliver on his promises. God cannot lie; he is all powerful and able to do all that he has promised. In the best or the worst of times, God is ever faithful. He delivers on his promises and is worthy of our total praise. Let us rejoice and magnify the Lord.

Prayer:

Heavenly Father, you are in charge of everything that will happen in my life today—the good and the bad, the positive and the negative. I banish uncertainty and surrender my will to you so that you can lead the way. Amen.

Gena Stone-Phillips

Co President, Ohio Women's Ministries

Thursday, December 21st

Scripture

Please Read Luke 1:46b-55

From time to time, we fall into the anxiety of what Christmas present we're going to give to our friends/family. We get to a point sometimes that this is the only thing we think about. As Christians we are called to turn our attention from the worries of the holidays and rejoice for what they stand. We are called to a time of celebration, not a time of worrying what scent to have in our home or what decorations need to be prepared. The holidays should never be a burden, but rather a time of joy and laughter.

This holiday season, I challenge you to find the joy in being with the people that you love. Realize that preparations don't have to be perfect and that the time we get to laugh and fellowship with each other is the ultimate goal.

Prayer:

Our Father, as we continue to find the joy and laughter this advent season, help us to realize more and more your presence with us through other people. Amen.

Lucas Lerma

CYF Commission Chair

Friday, December 22nd

Scripture

Please Read Isaiah 61:1-4

What does this have to do with Christmas? There aren't even any shepherds, or angel proclamations. There are no stars or inns. There are no virgins or miraculous birth or dreams or nativity scenes or jingle bells or carols. There is not a single reindeer! Not. One.

None of the things that we celebrate at Christmas are in this text from Isaiah!

And yet this is perhaps my favorite advent scripture. Even without any reindeer.

What makes this text one of my favorites? How does it connect with the birth of Jesus? This, my friends, is the good news. This is why Christmas matters. This is what Jesus came to earth to do. This scroll from Isaiah is what Jesus unrolls in the temple in Luke 4:17-21.

Christmas is so joyous because it is the celebration of the birth of Jesus. We celebrate that birth because of the life and ministry that Jesus led. *This* is that ministry.

Had Jesus been the Messiah that some people had hoped for, some sort of a military conqueror, we would not celebrate Christmas. Had Jesus been the Savior by being a legalistic religious scholar, strictly interpreting human understanding of holy texts, we would not celebrate Christmas.

Instead, we have Emmanuel. God with us. We have a Christ who comes to bring good news to the oppressed. We have a Jesus who binds up the broken hearted. We have a God who comes to earth to bring liberty to captives and release to prisoners.

This humble yet radical ministry had humble but radical beginnings, and as we celebrate that beginning on Christmas morning, may we be mindful of the kind of God we are celebrating – the Christ who comes to bring good news to the oppressed. Emmanuel. God with us.

Prayer:

Emmanuel,

God with us, revealed in us – we are eternally grateful for your presence in our lives. We celebrate the beginning of this presence when we celebrate Christmas. We celebrate the humble and radical ministry that you brought and continue to bring into the world through Jesus the Christ. It is in his name we pray, Amen.

Rev. Alan Dicken

Carthage Christian Church, Cincinnati

Regional Church Council, Ohio Delegation to Chile

Saturday December 23rd

Scripture

Luke 1:46-55

Mary's Song of Praise

"And Mary said, "My soul does magnify the Lord,

And my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior.

For he has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden: for, behold, from now on all generations shall call me blessed.

For he that is mighty has done to me great things; and holy is his name.

And his mercy is on them that fear him from generation to generation.

He has showed strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.

He has put down the mighty from their seats, and exalted them of low degree.

He has filled the hungry with good things; and the rich he has sent empty away.

He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy;

As he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham, and to his seed forever."

What joy, Mary is experiencing as she sings her song of praise "My Soul does magnify the Lord", she has come to realize that GOD has chosen her for a purpose and because of it, for generations she shall be called blessed. There is a song that comes to my mind "Use Me Lord", some of the lyrics go "USE MY HANDS, USE MY FEET, USE MY VOICE, LORD I WON'T MIND UNTIL YOU USE ME UP."

When we allow the Lord to use us for his purpose, then we will be able to sing our own song. During this advent season, please take a moment and seek God's purpose in your life and when he reveals it to you, then please write the lyrics to your song. I pray that as you are used by GOD, that generations may also call you blessed.

Prayer:

GOD, as we sing with Mary, please reveal in us our GODLY purpose so that we will be able to sing our own song of PRAISE, and may we also be able to sing, "My soul does magnify the Lord." AMEN.

Rev. Thomas Barnes

Kemper Road Christian Church, Forest Park

Regional Church Council, Anti-Racism Commission, Lilly Grant Committee

Sunday, December 24th

Christmas Eve

Scripture

Please Read Luke 1:26-38

Today we light the last candle in Advent. We look with anticipation for God's Gift. But how are we to respond to such a good given gift? Before we accept such a priceless gift perhaps we should see about the cost and our proper response.

Scripture is full of stories of those who received gifts from God but there was often a cost and the response to the gift was not always one of appreciate.

In the Exodus story, we have God's gift of LIFE as the "Angel of Death" PASSED OVER the Hebrew. The cost was spending 40 years wondering in the wilderness and we know there was much grumbling.

Isaiah shares the story of how God cleansed him (red hot coal on the lips, OUCH! Thankfully it was in a dream). Isaiah's response to this gift was: "Here am I, send me." Centuries later, a young Jewish women would respond in a similar fashion. The Angel Gabriel announces to Mary that she will conceive and have a son and she will name him Jesus. Mary's response: "Here I am, the servant of the Lord . . ." We too often romanticize this time in Mary's life but in reality, it could not have been easy. Being a pregnant unmarried woman in this time certainly would send tongues wagging at a minimum. The penalty could be death. What would Joseph say? "Here I am, the servant of the Lord!"

As tonight, we ring in the Good News of "God with us", we would do well look at how we will respond. Accepting God's great gift is never easy. It requires sacrifice and a reordering of priorities. It means opening ourselves up to the many peoples God loves but society shuns.

Here I am Lord, Is it I Lord?
I have heard You calling in the night.
I will go Lord, if You lead me.
I will hold Your people in my heart. (James Kilbane)

Prayer:

Holy God,

Today we stand at the precipice of receiving once again your great gift of Jesus our Christ, guide our response that experience this gift to the fullest. "Here am I, Use me!"

Amen

Rev. Steve Bentley
Regional Associate Minister
Christian Church in Ohio

Monday, December 25th Christmas Day

Scripture

Please Read Luke 1: 46b – 55

In a sense, because of the cycle of the Julian calendar, the opening two lines of Wendell Berry's 6th poem in the 1987 Sabbath poems collection, "Remembering that it happened once, we cannot turn away the thought..." were fulfilled this year.

Yesterday, my day began and ended in worship, remembering that God came into this world in the form of a baby, named Jesus by his mother.

Berry describes the birth with these words, "...the Child bedded in straw, the mother kneeling over Him, the husband standing in belief he scarcely can believe, in light that lights them from no source we see...."

Like those earliest visitors to the stall where Mary gave birth, I could not turn away.

The mother of Jesus, upon learning she would give birth to God's son, responds with incredibly beautiful words, what the Church has named, "Mary's Song." In her song, Mary describes what Jesus' birth will mean: through his strength, he scatters the proud in the thoughts of their hearts; he has brought down the powerful from their seats of power, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry, and sent the rich away empty; and he has helped his people remember his mercy.

Mary's Song describes her understanding of what Jesus' birth means to the world. Berry uses these words to describe the moment of Jesus' birth, as one might have experienced it, standing at the open stall door, "...We stand with one hand on the door, looking into another world, that is our world, the pale daylight coming just as before...our white frozen breath hanging in front of us; and we are here as we have never been before, sighted as not before, our place Holy, although we knew it not."

"Remembering that it happened once, we cannot turn away the thought...."

May your remembering this Christmas Day enable you to experience more hope than despair; more peace than fear; more joy than sorrow; more love than hate; more light than darkness.

Blessings to all this Christmas Day.

Rev. John M. Richardson
Interim Regional Minister
Christian Church in Ohio

From all who make up the Ohio Disciples Outreach Team,
we hope and pray that this year's Advent Devotionals have been a
blessing to you. We extend a heartfelt thanks to all who contributed.
And we wish each of you the Merriest of Christmas'
and the Happiest of New Years. God Bless.



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