

ADVENT AND CHRISTMAS AT FRONT STREET UMC

DECEMBER 16

A Service of Lessons & Carols

10:45 a.m. Sanctuary

No 8:45 a.m. worship service

9:00 a.m. Aldersgate Service worships as usual

DECEMBER 24

A Christmas Eve Service for Children

5:00 p.m. Sanctuary

A service especially for children and by children - including music from our children and Praise Band, dancing angels, and the opportunity for children to participate in the retelling of the Christmas story

Candlelight Communion Service

8:00 p.m. Sanctuary

DECEMBER 30

9:00 a.m. Aldersgate Worship with
Breakfast

11:00 a.m. Wesley Covenant Combined
Worship in the Sanctuary

No 8:45 a.m. worship service



Advent Devotions



MISSION OPPORTUNITIES

TREES OF LOVE - Share Christ locally, regionally or internationally by taking an ornament from our Trees of Love and purchasing and returning the item(s) listed on the back:

- ⇒ Take an ornament from our **Tree of Hope** and support **Our Sisters' House**.
- ⇒ Take a bucket ornament from the **Tree of Life** and encourage those rebuilding their lives after Hurricane Florence.
- ⇒ Take an star decoration from the **Tree of Joy** and purchase hats or gloves for infants, children and youth in Armenia through Project AGAPE.

Please return all items (unwrapped) to the trees by Wednesday, December 19. Visit www.frontstreetumc.org/features for additional information about each of the Trees of Love.

ANGEL TREE DELIVERY—Beginning December 2, deliver gifts to the children of parents who are incarcerated and help make Christmas special for these families. Gifts and contact information for each family is provided.

Front Street United Methodist Church

2018

Front Street United Methodist Church
136 S. Church St.,
PO Box 2597,
Burlington, NC 27216
www.frontstreetumc.org
336.227.6263

ADVENT 2018

December can quickly turn into the busiest season of the year. Between Thanksgiving and Christmas a flurry of activity sweeps us away and is over just as quickly. Family plans must be arranged, gifts must be bought, goodies must be baked, and somehow the bills still have to be paid. In the midst of this we share brief moments of anticipation that soon hallowed family traditions will be celebrated, hearts will be full, and perhaps if there's any time left over, we acknowledge that Jesus — God with us — was born in the most humble and unassuming way.

Advent means, most simply, “arrival.” During Advent, the church slows down to reflect on a much deeper reality than charitable tax write-offs, Christmas trees, Black Friday sales, and sentimental music. We pause to celebrate the arrival of Jesus Christ, God's word become flesh, and his coming again in glory. We proclaim that salvation does not come from general goodwill or surviving the holiday rush of American consumer culture. Salvation comes from Jesus Christ alone.

Advent invites us to halt the endless bustle of what this season can become to reflect on the miracle of Christmas, and to watch for the ways that Jesus continues to meet us in the mundane, the unsavory, and the improbable just as he did by coming into the world in the womb of a young Mary in a dirty cave-turned-stable outside of rural Bethlehem.

Today we see division and darkness in many places, and some of it touches our own communities and families. But, as John's Gospel reminds us, “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness does not extinguish the light,” (John 1:5). Despite what we see happening around us and what we face when we look at ourselves, the miracle we rejoice over in the birth and triumph of Jesus is the light of salvation that is still shining in the darkness today.

We could say, then, that Advent is the rediscovery of how to live as a patient people in an impatient world. It is our prayer that this collection of devotions would be a source of renewal for you this Advent season, so that we may live patiently assured that God's salvation has come near to us in Jesus Christ.

– Rev. Patrick Murphy

FINDING JOY IS OUR WORK

Read Luke 21:25-36

As I reflect on this passage from Luke and our entrance into the season of Advent and a new year in the church, there are three messages that stand out.

The first is that life is filled with chaos, both our own and that in the world around us. The chaos can and should be acknowledged, but we cannot allow it to paralyze us, however overwhelming it may be. God deals with chaos throughout the Scriptures, and in Jesus's words here in Luke, he promises always to be with us, and not to be weighed down by the world's grief.

The second message is one of certainty and patience. We can rest secure in the world's truths — a tree will first bloom and then bear fruit, an adult must first be a child, Jesus will come again — but if we're not grounded in patience we'll find ourselves struggling. Moving from first bloom to harvest would seemingly take forever if we pulled up a chair to sit and watch. Children wish to become adults much too soon. Generation after generation crows that the end is near instead of humbly walking Jesus' path. We need to understand and accept that all good things will come to pass in God's time.

The third message is to concentrate on what's important. It's easy to get distracted and lose our focus as we move through our daily routines. God can quickly become an afterthought when we're absorbed in planning dinner, paying bills, exercising, entertaining ourselves, and juggling endless commitments. We must actively choose to put God front and center in our lives every day.

We are God's children, and God wants us to have a joy-filled life. The message found in Luke is that finding joy is simple but not easy in our complicated world. Joy is a choice. Recognizing what we can control, remaining patient, and striving to live like Jesus with hearts centered on doing God's will is our work.

Prayer: Dear Lord, help us to find peace, patience, and focus during this Advent season. Amen.

- Doug Hargrove

THE FIRST GIFT OF CHRISTMAS

Read Luke 20:1-20

I have found that many times my most meaningful gifts are given when the receiver least expects them. That's what happened to the shepherds on the hillside outside of Bethlehem. It wasn't Christmas. There was no Christmas. But the God of surprises had been planning something since before time began. It was unexpected and it was huge!

On that night so long ago, the hillside outside of Bethlehem became a thin place between heaven and earth; an announcement was made by heaven's messengers — the first Christmas had come! The Lord of all Creation was proclaiming that He was going to be in relationship with human beings in a brand new way. That new way was to be found wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. The unexpected first gift was there.

One of my favorite Christmas stories is Richard Evans', *The Christmas Box*. At the end of the story, Rick finally understands the first gift of Christmas. Listen:

"It came to my heart. The first gift of Christmas was ... love. A parent's pure love ..., manifested by a Father's love for all His children, as he sacrificed that which He loved most and sent His Son to earth."

For God loved the world so much that he gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.

At Christmas we join those shepherds of 2000 years ago; we join the poor, bishops, and everyone in between, as we receive once again The First Gift of Christmas. You will undoubtedly receive many wonderful gifts this year; but, I invite you to receive anew the first gift of Christmas – the gift of your heavenly Father's love as found in the babe named Jesus.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, we give you thanks that unto us was born in the city of David our Savior, who is Christ the Lord. Amen.

- Pastor Ross

PROMISES KEPT

Read Luke 1:68-79

Zechariah and Elizabeth were righteous before God, but they had no children, and both of them were getting on in years. Zechariah had long served as a priest in Judea but nothing of his vocation had prepared him and Elizabeth for the news the angel Gabriel brought to them: that Elizabeth would conceive a son in her advanced age to be called John, who would prepare the way of Israel's messiah.

"How will I know that this is so?" he asked. Gabriel assured him that these things would indeed happen and told Zechariah that he would be unable to speak until the day they did.

When the time came Elizabeth delivered the child, and Zechariah spoke again, naming the child John. Then Zechariah breaks out into song. He offers his praise that God had remembered the covenant which God had made with Abraham, and that God would indeed bring holiness and righteousness into the world through the dawn of salvation the messiah will bring.

Waiting is not a popular activity. For some, waiting is an awful desert between where we are and where we want to go. Biblical characters like Zechariah, Elizabeth, and Mary live to see God's promises kept, but we sometimes forget they represent generations of Israel's longing for God's promises to be fulfilled.

Zechariah's song brings those longings into his present. Despite it all he continues to trust in what God has planned for his son John in the story of salvation.

The season of Advent teaches us that waiting moves us from something to something *more*. The secret of waiting is faith that a seed has already been planted, that God has already begun growing something we can celebrate now. May God give us the patience to wait with faith!

Prayer: Gracious Lord, thank you for Jesus, our Savior, whom you sent to save us as you promised. Help us this Advent season to prepare our hearts for His coming. Give light to us who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death and guide our feet into the way of peace. Amen.

- Tom Steele

COMMON GROUND

Read Isaiah 2:1-5

Mountains are beautiful, especially from a distance. We have hiked Pilot Mountain several times, both myself and my husband together, and then as a family once the kids were old enough to (mostly) enjoy the experience.

I wonder how many of us are stuck in life appreciating the mountains from a distance, but not quite ready to climb them. How much do I miss by just seeing it all from afar? Deep into the mountain you see the intricate details she offers, the rock formations, leaves so bright they almost look fluorescent, the sound of birds chirping with their neighbors, the smell of pine needles, the gentle breeze that is sometimes so chilly it takes your breath away for a moment.

Oh, but those mountains, they are not always so inspiring! Mountains are full of rocky, rough terrain, spider webs conveniently spun between trees at forehead level, and always the chance of running across unwelcome reptiles along the trail.

Yet, so many significant events happened on mountains throughout the Bible: The Ark rested on a mountain; often Jesus went up to a mountain to pray; Abraham offered his son on a mountain; and then this vision from Isaiah from atop Mount Zion, a vision of swords and spears becoming the tools of agriculture, food, life, and peace.

Mountains prove to be both beautiful and yet full of challenges, but they are the place where we find the God who speaks awe and majesty into our hearts, and who meets us in Jesus with this vision of peace. Perhaps your mountains are too many and the summit has not been worth the pain and sacrifice, yet, there is common ground in the mountain.

We get to experience the majesty, awe, pain, death, worry, anxiety, hurt, loneliness, compassion, love and injustice that comes with seeing the mountain, journeying through, celebrating the summit, and then traveling back down. Breathe deeply. God stands ready to offer His presence and peace to us all. That is what Advent is about.

Prayer: God, thank you for both literal and figurative mountains. Help us to see Your hand in the beauty of the mountains and know Your presence when the mountains feel overwhelming. Keep us in community with one another so that no one journeys alone. Teach us Your ways, so that we may walk in Your path. Amen.

- Candice Garner

PREPARING THE WAY

Read Luke 3:1-6

The word of God came to John the Baptist as he proclaimed a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. John, raggedy and prophetic, set the stage for the coming of Jesus and his announcement of God's kingdom.

Advent is a time that we prepare our hearts and minds for the coming of the Christ child in rural Bethlehem. Our churches prepare for the season through music, worship, and lighting the Advent Wreath each Sunday as we wait and anticipate Jesus' birth. Families prepare by decorating trees, buying, wrapping and giving gifts, making an Advent Wreath and sharing in family devotions together.

Advent also reminds us that we need a Savior. The gift of the Christ child is what Christmas is all about: God's greatest gift to the world. But it becomes our responsibility to receive, welcome, accept, and celebrate that gift.

There is a story of a family who were expecting their second child around the Christmas season. They anxiously checked and rechecked that they had everything ready for the arrival of their baby, as well as making sure they were ready for Christmas. As they looked around the finished nursery, they turned to their first born child and asked him; "Can you think of anything we missed?" The little boy, who was excited about the arrival of a baby brother, thought for a moment and said: "What about a name?"

During this Advent Season in the midst of preparing the way let us remember: "At the name of Jesus, every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord."

Prayer: God, thank you for giving us the special gift of your Son, Jesus Christ. Help us to let Jesus shine in our lives and share with others the true celebration of Christmas. Amen.

- Cynthia Powell

VARIATIONS ON A THEME OF TURNING

Read Luke 1:39-55

If the Gospel of Luke were a musical, Mary's song might be the main theme on which the rest of the story offers variations. In this beautiful passage, Mary spontaneously breaks out into her own kind of psalm after sharing a special visit with her relative Elizabeth, who is pregnant with the child who will become John the Baptist.

"My soul magnifies the Lord," she begins, "and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant." But Mary doesn't only sing for the fearful blessedness of her calling. She also articulates God's vision of salvation through the life in her womb, the incarnate one, Jesus the Christ. Through Jesus God plans a fresh unfolding of mercy that will scatter the proud and cast the powerful from their thrones, while lifting up the lowly, feeding the hungry, bringing wholeness to what is broken, and remembering what has been lost. That's no small order, but Mary senses in Israel's history and in her moment that the world is about to turn.

One of my favorite hymns this time of year is "Canticle of the Turning," which paraphrases Mary's song and sings of God's mercy turning the world upside down (or is it right-side up?) through her child. Indeed, Jesus's entire life will be bound up in turnings: fishermen into disciples, shunned women into apostles, the sick to health, isolation into community, sin into wholeness. The Christ child is the dawn to which we draw near that will fulfill all of humanity's longings.

As we move toward the nativity of Jesus, I wonder where you see the world turning amid its hurts? Where is God's taking hold of you and others? Where is Jesus breaking into the world and upending the world's ills right under our noses?

Prayer: God of the turning, shape our imaginations in new ways this Advent season. Give us hope to live your future of mercy and justice until it becomes our reality. Amen.

- Pastor Patrick

PLANS

Read II Samuel 7:1-11,

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Have you ever conceived a really good plan to accomplish something that needed to be done? It may have been a good plan initially, accomplishing the goal while being economically feasible. Yet, once it was completed, you felt there was something lacking, that there wasn't that sense of accomplishment or pride in the work.

David had plans to build a temple for the Ark of God. David had accomplished many things — consolidating the monarchy, overcoming his enemies, bringing peace to Israel. He was enjoying the afterglow of a job well done. Seeing all that he had, David observed that God was still living in a tent. He then decided to build a temple for God. This seemed like a good plan, but God had a different plan for David. Nathan, God's prophet, nipped David's plans in the bud.

God planned to build not a physical house but a royal lineage without end. From David onward, even though David's successors would be unsuccessful, the promise follows his lineage to Jesus, God's greatest promise and gift to us.

We often come up with good plans, but they may not be God's plans. God's plans provide us with a never ending hope of a life with Jesus — the manifestation of God's plan for God's people, and the eternal hope that we celebrate in Advent as we await the coming of Jesus in our midst.

Prayer: Eternal God, thank you for making plans that lead us to Jesus. Remind us that our plans may not be your plans. Send someone to be a Nathan to us, so that we may live the full life you intend for your people. Amen.

- JoAnn Barbour

GETTING RIGHT WITH GOD

Read Romans 1:1-7

The letter we know as “Romans” was written by Paul as he was finishing his third missionary journey and preparing to visit the Christian community there for the first time. Throughout his writing, Paul masterfully works themes of God's righteousness and how the grace of Jesus Christ covers sin so that no measure of unrighteousness would keep us from God's embrace. Paul reminds us that we are called to belong to Jesus, believe in Him and obey Him, and receive grace and peace from Him and our Heavenly Father.

It is appropriate at this time of year to be reminded of Jesus's humanness — that He was born in the flesh into King David's family line, while at the same time revealing himself to be the only Son of God through his life and death, but especially through his resurrection from the dead by the power of the Holy Spirit.

During Advent, as we approach Christmas and gift giving, let this scripture remind us of the most precious gift we could ever receive: Jesus Christ, and that our faith in Him frees us from sin and returns us to a right relationship with God.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, help us to be grateful for our many blessings and for the many gifts you have given us, and most of all for the gift of Jesus. Thank you for the Christmas season to remind us of these gifts and blessings, and help us to use them to make the world a better and more loving place. Amen.

- David Hedgecock

TEACH ME, GOD

Read Psalm 25:1-10

As we read Psalm 25 we are overhearing a prayer that King David prayed to God. I think it is important to note that this psalm appears shortly after another of David's prayers, in which he speaks of walking through the valley of the shadow of death. David is in the midst of going through difficult times in his life. While we may not feel like our life is falling apart, most of us have felt lost in our walk with God or our life in general. Reading this Psalm several times pointed me to David's repeated requests for God to teach him and guide him. He confesses that he was and is a sinner, as we all are, but asks God not to remember his rebellious ways but instead to remember him with love.

Psalm 25 tells us that first we must be willing to admit that sometimes we are in a hard situation because of our own sin and wrongdoing. Instead of offering excuses we should own up to what we have done wrong, small or large, because God is merciful and loving and willing to instruct sinners who seek Him. Second, we must be willing to be taught. David asks over and over for God to teach him, to guide him. Once we start thinking we have it all figured out is when we become lost. David begins the Psalm by lifting up his soul to God — not just a prayer, but his soul, his entire being. Are we willing to turn our entire being over to God? To continually ask God to teach us his ways? If we ask him with pure hearts to guide us, surely he will.

As we continue to move through this Advent season, let us be reminded of God's relationship with King David and Israel, a relationship filled with grace, sin, longing, and the hopeful promise of a future centered in God's mercy and presence.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, I confess that I have sinned, but I ask that you remember me with love and not as a sinner. I do not know what plans You have in store for me, but with an open heart I ask that You guide me. I lift my soul to you so that I may do Your work. In Jesus' name. Amen.

- Capri Cizek

PREPARE TO CHANGE

Read James 5:7-10

The book of James provides us with a framework for how to live our lives in the grace of Jesus Christ. The theme of living our faith in imitation of Jesus echoes from start to finish.

Today, it seems like people have very little patience, whether it is with each other or with the various circumstances facing our world today. Jesus taught us to have patience with each other like God, our heavenly father, has with us. When we read our Bible, we should be mindful of the many stories of God's patience and forgiveness that have empowered the Church to live what it believes over many centuries. Likewise, God continues to be patient with us today. He never turns away and is always there for us.

However, we seem unable to show similar compassion and caring to those around us. We are so caught up in our own comfort-zones and self-centeredness that we fail to see the opportunities God provides to help and serve those around us — even here at Front Street!

As we consider Jesus and other examples of faithfulness, let's slow down, take a breath, and remember what Advent is all about. It is a time of preparation. This Advent season, let's prepare ourselves for a change. Let's look for opportunities to put God and others first. We need to remember that it's not about what we SAY we believe because what we DO says it all! This year, let's prepare to live the faith we profess.

Prayer: Father God, thank you for sending your son to teach us and be an example for us. This Advent season, help me to see with your eyes. Let me see the opportunities to serve around me. Most importantly, place a desire in my heart to take action and help. Amen.

- Carol Sineath

SEEKING REASSURANCE IN TIMES OF UNCERTAINTY

Read Matthew 11:2-11

Have you ever set out on a path and fully invested yourself in it, be it a career opportunity, a move to a new town, beginning a new life with someone or growing a family? Joy, anticipation and expectation often override uncertainties and doubts until you reach a stumbling block, whether it is monetary, health-related or otherwise.

When this happens, we may question our original decision. It is like being on a wilderness hike without a compass, using only the North Star to guide you back to your car. As more time passes, would you begin to wonder if you were truly following the right star? Would you need signs of reassurance that you were on the right path?

John the Baptist's life was not going as expected. John was in a wilderness of his own — imprisoned physically and spiritually. He had met the Messiah, whose coming he preached about. Jesus, gentle and compassionate, was not the 'fire and brimstone' ruler he expected. And so John sends his disciples to Jesus to ask if he truly was the Messiah to reaffirm they were all following the right path.

What emotions drive John's questions? Fear? Feeling forsaken and uncertain? Frustration? These are emotions we can all experience when life surprises us. Faith is trust in the face of uncertainty. It helps us move from a place of doubt and questions like, 'Why' and 'What now?', to a place of acceptance.

This Advent season, do not stay in a state of doubt. Pray. Seek answers like John. Look and listen for the Messiah. Where is Jesus at work in this world and your life today? Will it be where you expect to find Him or a surprise? May you be blessed and find reassurance in your faith during this season of hope, joy and anticipation.

Prayer: During this season of waiting and anticipation, help us, Lord, when we feel imprisoned by insecurities, disappointments, sadness and news of evil at work in the world today to know that you are always with us, giving us endurance and strength. We are never forsaken. Help us to be the disciples we are called to be, spreading your Good News to everyone, even the most neglected in our society. Thank you for sending Your Son, for Your blessings and the promise of a life everlasting. Thy will be done. Amen.

- Emily Conner

ABUNDANTLY LOVE ONE ANOTHER

Read 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

Advent is a time to rejoice in God's most perfect gift. Through our life journey, we encounter many people who touch our lives and share our life experiences in some way. Our healthiest relationships give us encouragement, joy, love, and guidance. As Christians, we are not only reminded to celebrate God and his many blessings, but also our shared faith in Jesus Christ. As the Body of Christ — the Church — we have an intimate connectedness with one another through our relationship with Christ. Paul writes to the Thessalonian church to assure them of the peace and love that is theirs through Christ. He is urging them to abundantly love one another, and not just when it conveniences them.

During this Advent season and throughout the year, take time to connect and embrace others, to pray for and encourage others, to praise God and labor for others, and to collectively pursue to be more like Christ. Be intentional in the ways you bless others this season and enjoy the blessing of those God has put in your life, as we all seek to be more pure of heart and love others deeply. God has given us the ultimate gift of love, His Son, Jesus. What act or words of love will you share with others?

Prayer: Father, thank you for the gift of your Son, Jesus. He is your precious gift of love for us. We pray our actions and words towards others glorify and are pleasing to you. May we open our hearts and truly love one another as you love us. In your name we pray. Amen.

- Marlee Beckom

CELEBRATING GOD'S PRESENCE

Read Zephaniah 3:14-20

This passage of scripture ends the book of Zephaniah and is a dramatic reversal of the divine judgement for the sins of Israel described in its earlier verses. It reveals that the arrival of God's presence to the Israelites brings celebration and joy and opens the door to a new future, just as the birth of Christ does several centuries later for all the world.

Verse 14 says "Sing, O daughter of Zion" and verse 17 tells us that even the Lord "will joy over thee with singing." These two verses particularly resonate with me because I can think of no better way to joyfully celebrate God's presence and the birth of Christ than through music and singing, which is so meaningful in our worship this time of year. Whether it is in the intricate harmonies in "Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming," the brilliance and magnificence of Handel's "Messiah," or the exultant and declarative "Joy to the World," the sacred music of the Advent season serves to lift us up and gives us a sense of excited anticipation as we await our Savior's birth.

May we all offer up songs of praise to God for the gift of his Son Jesus Christ and the hope of a renewed spirit.

Prayer: Holy Father, as we prepare to celebrate the birth of your Son, put a song in our heart so that we might experience anew the excitement and joyfulness of the Advent season. Amen.

- Bob Bearden

HOW WILL YOU EXPRESS YOUR GRATITUDE?

Read Hebrews 10:5-10

Jesus lived his entire life in complete faithful obedience to God, the writer of Hebrews tells us. He came into the world to show us what God's heart really desires from us, that is, to do God's will and live out God's purposes in imitation of Jesus our savior.

It is so easy to become bogged down in the rituals of worship, the busyness of the holiday season, and the mundane ups and downs of overly-scheduled lives. No matter where we find ourselves, we need to be reminded that God is not keeping score. God does not value one person more than another. Jesus has come into the world and lived in complete obedience to God so that we can, like Jesus, participate with God in making the world whole again, and do it on an equal playing field.

It is our turn to do our best on a daily basis to express our gratitude through our interactions with others. That might be as simple as a friendly smile to a stranger, lending help to a neighbor, or serving the least of our sisters and brothers in our community. God wants us to do more than just think about doing things, but to actually help, serve and impact the lives of others because that is what Jesus came to do. God doesn't expect perfection, thankfully, but rather the offering of ourselves to Jesus's call.

How can you express your gratitude and serve today?

Prayer: Thank you Lord for living your perfect life and thank you for your gift of forgiveness. Please us help to strive to be an inspiration to others through our obedience to You. Amen.

- Margaret Pardue

RESTORE US, O GOD

Read Psalm 80:1-7

Psalm 80 is a prayer for revival and restoration on Israel's behalf. It is most likely written by Asaph, one of David's chief musicians, during a time when the people had experienced total destruction and war. The psalmist knows that God is the only hope for salvation and he pleads for the "Shepherd of Israel," enthroned in heaven with the cherubs, to come and save them. How long will God be angry and not hear the people's prayers? How long will the people cry many tears, be mocked by their enemies, and not be restored? The psalmist pours out his deepest emotions on behalf of God's children.

I love that God knows our feelings and thoughts. I love that God knows us better than we know ourselves, and still loves us unconditionally. The Psalms were written to express honest and heartfelt emotions: sorrow, doubt, fear, thanksgiving and joy. Psalm 80 is a cry for restoration and change of heart that God alone can provide. In our world today we witness similar destruction, war, and sorrow, believing that only God is mighty to change and transform. As Christians we cling to His promises for salvation and a future in Christ Jesus.

God sent His Son to be with us, to restore us, and to provide the hope of salvation that is so desperately needed today. In the midst of the world's chaos and confusion heed the words of the psalmist and pray continually, "Restore us, God Almighty."

Prayer: Jesus, make your face shine on us, that we may be humbled, forgiven, restored, and hopeful each day. May the joys and blessings of this Advent season open our hearts to your beauty all around, even in the chaos of our world. In the name of our precious Savior. Amen.

- Betty Huneycutt

PURSUING CHRISTLIKENESS

Read Philippians 1:3-11

While imprisoned later in his ministry, Paul wrote a "thank you" letter to the Christians in the Roman colony of Philippi, one of the first churches he founded. He thanks this healthy, faithful church for all of its members who have continued to live out their lives with a growing commitment of service to others. Those Christ-centered lives brought Paul great joy, even as he was no longer free to model this love of others.

In our daily lives, we so often become imprisoned by our hectic schedules, by worry regarding physical illness, by personal economic problems, or even by societal addictions. These preoccupations, like chains, prevent us from reaching out because we are unable to be with others and understand their needs, much less minister to those needs.

In this Advent season of living toward Christ's coming, I thank God for you, the faithful members of Front Street UMC, as you unchain me and remind me of the patient practice of those familiar virtues practiced by both Paul and Jesus.

Spiritual progress requires effort!

I thank God in all my remembrance of you...of your knowledge and discernment in wise actions to benefit others.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, remind us that we are all humble partakers of grace as we develop partnerships in the gospel. May a fellowship of Christlikeness be our aim...grace to you and peace from God. Amen.

- Kathy Roberson

PROPHETS AND PREPARATION

Read Micah 5:2-5a

When we think of Old Testament prophecy, many times it conjures images of "gloom and doom." God sends a prophet to warn the people of their evil ways and generally delivers an "or else" statement. God also has an uncanny habit of selecting an underdog to carry out his plans. In our passage, God is picking the lowly town of Bethlehem in Ephrathah to be the birthplace of the coming Messiah. Bethlehem reminds me of where I grew up. I was raised in one of these "fly-speck" towns; no traffic lights, just a cross-road burg. But this burg was the birthplace of A.B. Graham, the founder of the 4-H Clubs of America. I keep harkening back to Nathaniel's sneering comment from John 1:43-46, "Nazareth, can anything good come from there?" The same could be said of Bethlehem.

In this passage from Micah we are told to get prepared for the coming of the Messiah, who will protect his flock by the power of the Lord his God. We will then live in peace and security while our Messiah, our Lord and Savior's grace and mercy spreads to the very ends of the earth.

This prophetic message is one of preparation, charging us to get our minds and hearts pointed in the right direction; to get our priorities in line, and our focus where it should be. As we go through this Advent season, let us remember that if God can use 'the little town of Bethlehem' he can also use us! Gloria in excelsis Deo - Glory to God in the highest.

Prayer: Heavenly Father; we ask that the peace, love, and joy of this holy season be with us throughout the year. Amen.

- Steve Cecil

THE FAITH OF PAUL AND ASIA BIBI

Read Philippians 4:4-7

As I have gotten older and paid more attention to Scripture, Paul's letters are truly reassuring and comforting, a source of calm in a sometimes topsy-turvy life. We all struggle with adversity, the fear of the unknown, and difficult circumstances. Whether it is job loss or change, financial or health issues, even loss of family and friends, God is there. Early Christians, especially Paul, faced persecution and death on a daily basis, but the love of Christ provided them the peace they needed to continue their monumental task of spreading the Word.

Unfortunately, we need to be reminded at times that this type of persecution still occurs today, and is evident in the case of Asia Bibi. Asia, a Christian from Pakistan was jailed and condemned to death in 2010 for blasphemy, stemming from an argument with two Muslim women, in which she refused to renounce the faith of Jesus Christ. She spent the next eight years in solitary confinement.

Asia's story brought her country's Christian population together and drew attention from around the world. Her release sparked violence and protests in Pakistan, including demands for her life and the lives of the judges who ordered her release.

Asia Bibi's faith and perseverance in the face of near certain death reminds us that while we thankfully don't face death for loving Christ, we have struggles and hardships every day. Knowing that Christ is near and we can cast our concerns on His broad shoulders should be the deepest and surest comfort we have.

As we celebrate the coming of Jesus into our world, and look to his coming again, let us rest in the peace of God that surpasses all understanding, rejoicing that we have a savior who is with us always.

Prayer: Gracious heavenly Father, help us to remember in times of struggle that you answer all our calls and assuage our concerns. Help us to have the faith of Paul of old and Asia Bibi of new. In your name we pray, Amen.

- Chris Huneycutt