



2024 ADVENT DEVOTIONAL

WRITTEN BY AND FOR THE CHURCH FAMILY OF
FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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It's okay to feel the feelings.

Have you heard people say: I'm all up in my feels? It means they are emotional. The Advent season can bring a gamut of emotions out in us. Christmas marketing is about exuberant joy, extravagant gifts, and décor galore. And I dare say we all would love to feel that way. But reality is different for each of us.

Hurricane Helene damaged some of our homes. We have displaced families or those who are living with tarps over their heads. Christmas is going to feel a little different this year.

For some of us, we have lost loved ones adding to the list of those we remember with melancholy this time of year.

For some, finances are an ever-anxiety-inducing stressor.

For others, brokenness exists among family and friends and the disfunction makes the season harder.

Some are living with health concerns that scare them or take a little piece of their loved one away day by day.

Marriages are pressured to put on a happy face for their children when all they feel inside is misery and heartbreak.

And most of us try to sweep all these feelings under the rug as we put on the happy façade and walk through this commercial season of Christmas.

Let's not. Let's just not.

Friends, it's ok to feel your feelings. It's ok to be less than perfect. It's ok if you struggle in marriage, overspend to a fault, fear your loved one's demise, have tough conflicts with others, feel displaced, sad, lonely, broken, angry, or just done. This is actually what Christmas is about. **Good news!**

God saw our world. For centuries he watched our personal struggles sending prophets to help. But more was needed. And he planned the arrival of God With Us – Jesus – on a dark night in a crowded yet lonely town amid a household of animals and to modest parents.

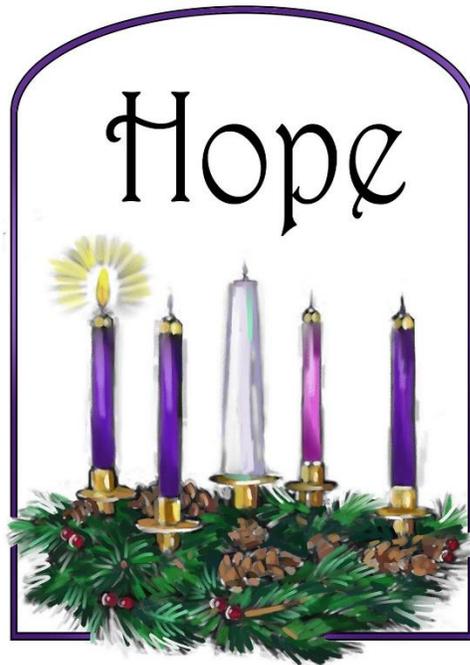
God embraced our “feels” and responded with love. God still embraces our feelings and responds in love. That is good news.

So, tell God what's going on with you. He can handle all your emotions, don't shy away or try to be proper. Feel the feels and let him hold you and walk with you and show you the Good News made flesh just for you.

Hope, peace, joy, and love will come. It may not replace the other feelings, but it can coincide with whatever else is on your plate. And that is good news!

December 1st

First Sunday in Advent



On the first Sunday in Advent, we light the first candle of our Advent Wreath. This candle can be labeled “Prepare,” “Expectation,” “Prophecy,” or “Hope” reminding us to prepare our hearts as we await the Savior expectantly and full of hope for what he will bring (as God promised and prophets foretold) – both as he did as a babe and when he comes again.

Behold I bring you good news of great joy!

Jesus came into this world, sent by our Father, to turn this world upside down. The least became the greatest in the eyes of Christ and the last came first. This was good news for the poor, outcast, marginalized, widowed, orphaned, diseased, disabled, possessed, and broken.

Behold I bring you good news of great joy!

And Jesus will come again and that’s good news too because we are all still broken and in need of our Savior. Live today like Jesus will return tomorrow. Now that’s Good News!

Behold I bring you good news of great joy!

Prayer: Lord God, we praise you for being Light in our darkness and for providing hope amid our trials. Thank you for your Good News! In Jesus’ name, Amen.

Monday, December 2nd

As with much of Bible prophecy, Advent (“coming”) has TWO realities: one was the first coming of Jesus, and the other is his Second coming. Our culture loves the history of a babe in a manger. The promise of a coming King, not so much!

Since the body of believers has such a glorious promise in both comings, we can bask in the twin realities of a Savior born to redeem us AND a King coming to reign over us!

Perhaps the most well-known hymn on the coming promise is Isacc Watts’ *Joy to the World, the Lord is Come!* (Psalm 98:4-9)

Maybe the oldest hymn we know about the incarnation (“God in flesh”) is *Of the Father’s Love Begotten*, which reaches back to creation and forward to the final victory.

The question has been asked “Why bother with Advent, when we have such beloved Christmas carols to sing?” Good question. There is no moral judgement if we minimize Advent and skip directly to Christmas, but there is a loss of profound theology that actually magnifies the significance of Christmas. We also lose focus on a major message of Christmas: that there is a Savior who will make us fit to be His subjects in a perfect and eternal world to come.

Glory be to God—we can join in the celebration of BOTH realities:

- 1) the long wait for the promised Messiah as the ultimate Sovereign, and
- 2) The fulfillment of God’s promise to send a personal Savior.

- Steve Skinner

Prayer: Lord God, we thank you for the Christ in the form of a babe as well as for the Christ yet to return. Make us worthy. In Jesus’ name, Amen.



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Tuesday, December 3rd

Pin Curls and a Black and White World.

I grew up in the early 1950's with three brothers. Our parents were schoolteachers, and my Daddy also worked two part-time jobs to take care of our family. We ate home cooked family meals with vegetables we grew in our garden. We spent time with our widowed grandmothers. There were no instant color photos, ours were black and white which took time to get developed. My colored memories were locked tight in my head and retrieved when I looked at the photos. Photos were a carefully planned event. We wore our best clothes, smiled big, and I had even slept the night before on my tediously made pin curls to style my straight hair.

Christmas was made special with handmade treasures to eat, see, and share. We received a few gifts from family and Santa, but our time spent together was my favorite gift to each other. The fresh cedar tree was cut in the woods and adorned with pride and the crinkled tinsel we saved each year. The story of Jesus' birth was shared and revered as the reason for the season, not months of commercials to wear the world down. When you look at the world through the eyes of a child, filled with hope and wonder, it is such a wonderful place. If you look intently, you can see the signs God arranged just for you. As you see through a heart filled with love at these things, they may bring songs to mind, of scriptures and memories bursting forth in colors inspired by the creator of it all. Praise God in all that you do, bask in the peace He provides for you and grow in His love and wisdom.

- Donna Holmes

Prayer: Lord God, thank you for black and white moments that are in full color in our hearts and minds. We praise you for the simple gifts of extravagant love. In Jesus' name, Amen.



Wednesday, December 4th

Strengthening the Generational Bond

But the steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear him, and his righteousness to children's children.

- Psalm 103:17

Akers, my grandson, loves Minecraft. I, on the other hand don't understand all the games. After reading a book by David Lasman, I learned ideas on how senior citizens can connect with their grandchildren. He says, "by sharing stories, embracing technology, engaging in shared interests, and learning from each other, grandparents can forge deep connections with their grandchildren. These bonds go beyond just passing on wisdom; they build a bridge between generations, fostering love, understanding, and enduring sense of family unity."

I've always wanted to share my love of God's word with Akers so last Christmas I gave him the Holy Bible for Minecrafters. He loved it. The book depicts the beautiful stories in the Bible using the "Lego looking" Minecraft characters. Just Bridging the Gap. Merry Christmas, love Grammie Rebecca and Akers Wise.

- Rebecca Wise

Prayer: Lord God, bless our efforts as we try to connect and share your love with other generations. May we reflect your hope for brighter tomorrows. In Jesus' name, Amen.



Thursday, December 5th

The Work of Christmas

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

- Howard Thurman
(1899-1981)

Howard Thurman's "The Work of Christmas" suggests that there's much more to Christmas than a month or two of celebrating. Instead, we are called to embody the Good News of Christmas 365 days out of the year . . . indeed to work in such a way that the world sees the Good News of Christmas in who we are and how we serve others. What a tremendous challenge . . . what a wonderful calling.

Prayer: Loving, merciful God: we thank you for calling us to be instruments of your love in the world. We pray that you will send your Spirit to work in us and through us so that we can share the Good News of Christmas every day of every year. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

- Donna Thompson



Christmas Ornament: Rise and Shine - Clark Little Photography

Friday, December 6th

My dad's mother passed away when I was in my 30s. My grandfather had already passed so their possessions and home were sold to pay for my grandmother's care. This is the grandmother whose house I went to after school, and she would fix me grits for an afternoon snack.

She made cakes for a living and would always be baking for someone when we were there, whether it was during the week or on Sundays. She made the best pound cakes. My sisters, cousin, and I would always slam the doors so the pound cake would fall (that's how we liked it) so she wouldn't give that to her customer. She always kept that one for us. I think she knew what we were doing and was prepared to bake another one. We only thought we were getting away with something.

This is also the grandmother that made my wedding cake. Three center cakes over a fountain with six smaller cakes coming off of the main layer. It was quite substantial as you can imagine. It was my wedding gift from my grandparents.

The only thing I had left of her were my memories which were slowly fading over time. Several years ago, I made the comment to my stepmom that I didn't have anything that belonged to my grandmother. I remembered thinking that I would have loved to have a small rocking chair (a child's rocking chair) that my grandparents had my whole entire childhood just as something to remember them by. That following year at Christmas, my dad and stepmom gave me a casserole dish with a lid that belonged to my grandmother as part of my Christmas gift. I knew immediately where it had come from. The lid has a chip in it but I don't care. Still the best gift I've ever received. I use it all the time and every single time I do, I think of her. Helps to bring back some of those fading memories.

Christmas isn't about the decorations (if you've seen my house, you know we are Christmas people!), the food, the presents, the Christmas music (which I start playing October 1st). It's about the birth of Jesus. It's about how we can be together as a family because of him. It's about having that family around you all the time whether those people are still with us or if they are with him.

- Lea Jones

Prayer: Lord God, thank you for those who have loved us so well. Help us to be that person for others. In Jesus' name, Amen.



Saturday, December 7th

My grandma grew up during the great depression. As a little girl her family didn't have much money and one year her parents barely had enough to afford what they needed to live. That Christmas, they were not able to afford any presents for the children. On Christmas morning, my grandma went outside and on the front step, she found a put and take. (A put and take is similar to a top spinner.) She had no idea where it came from or who had left it. That very moment changed not only her Christmas, but her whole perspective on life. She kept the toy her entire life and it has now been passed down to me.

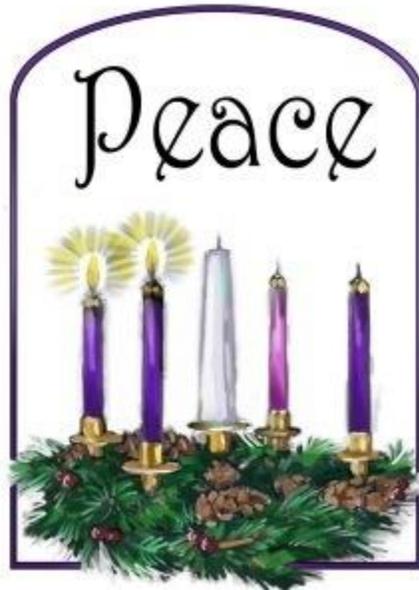
My Grandma loved Christmas more than anyone I know. Every year, we would sit down and talk about the story of how she found the put and take. With her being gone, I now share the story with my friends and family while we are gathered around the tree. When I share this story, it reminds me of what it means to be a good Samaritan, to care for your neighbor, and love one another as God loves us. It doesn't need to be a large thing or a large act. The small things can have a larger impact than ever thought possible. All this story took was a little put and take, made of wood, that can fit inside the palm of your hand.

- Jade Green

Prayer: Lord God, thank for treasures big and small. In Jesus' name, Amen.



December 8th
Second Sunday in Advent



The second week of Advent, we light the first purple candle of hope and then we light our second purple candle. The “Peace” candle can also be called the “Bethlehem” candle. Both allude to the quiet and calm night that Jesus was born.

Behold I bring you good news of great joy!

I can’t imagine it was quiet with a chicken, rooster, goat, sheep, cow, or donkey around. And I don’t envision it being calm if a baby is being born and then shepherds come visit. But the feeling of peace pervaded because of the wonder and significance of this baby – the Son of God.

Behold I bring you good news of great joy!

Still today, we can experience this peace in the midst of chaos. Christ will come again and we will live eternal life with him – eternal peace with no more death, grief, or pain.

Behold I bring you good news of great joy!

Prayer: Lord God, we praise you for the glimpses of peace we have here on earth and we welcome the eternal peace available to us through you. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

Monday, December 9th

I've told this story countless times before, but it is a go to when I think about peace.

My grandparents were missionaries in Brazil most of their lives. Granddaddy and Grandmama travelled by horseback to those early churches in their ministry. They would ride for hours and days, staying in homes as needed to get to their newly planted churches. They had been gone for days and they were so ready to be home. Granddaddy loved to preach about this one ride home.

As they were riding they saw a dark cloud forming up ahead, so they set their walking horses at a slow trot.

Moving forward the cloud got closer and they started to feel the wind pick up and drops of rain begin to fall. Urging the horses into a cantor, they set their faces toward home praying for safe passage.

Inevitably, the storm caught them – the wind whipping around them, thunder and lightning raging, and the rain pummeling them from all angles. Granddaddy tells how he looked up through the chaos and he could see the lights of their village ahead and they pushed their horses into a galloping frenzy amid the storm. They were almost home. Hope blazed like a beacon before them giving the courage and strength to press on through the maelstrom surrounding them. And that, Granddaddy said, is peace.

“Peace is going at a gallop in the midst of storms.”

Whatever we face, God's peace is available. It doesn't mean we have the answers, but it means we trust the One who does know the answers.

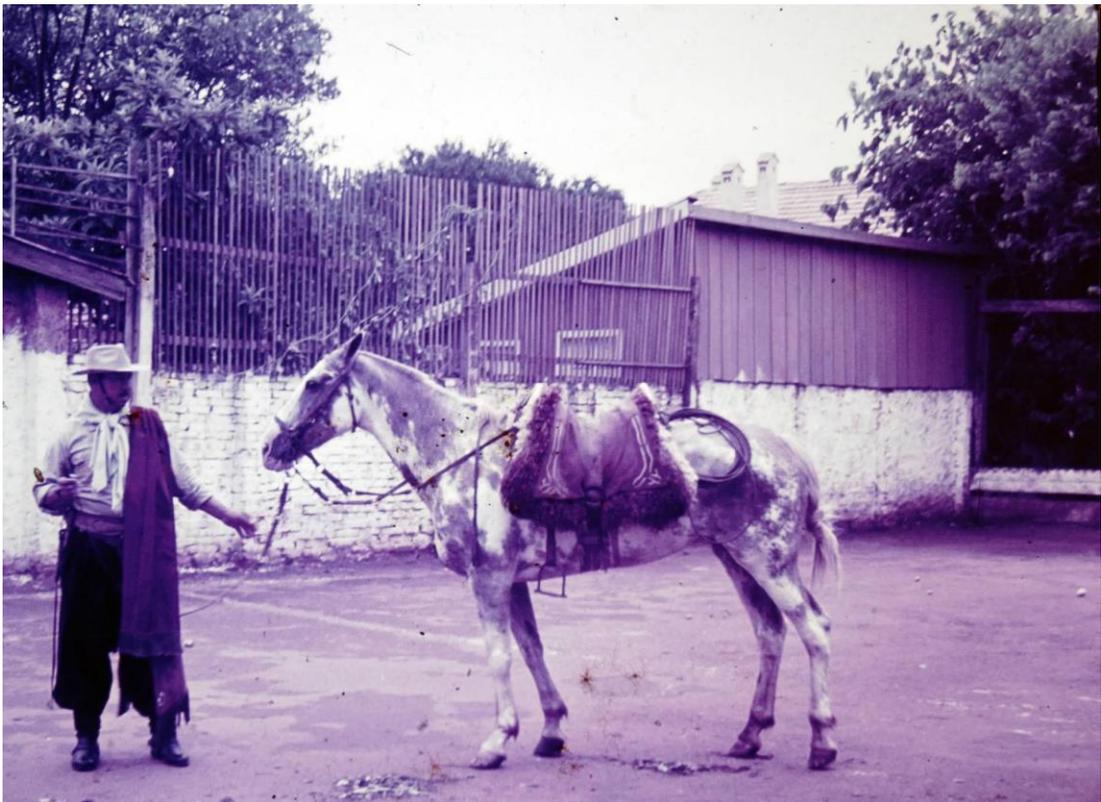
This Christmas, look for the light in the middle of whatever storms you face or have faced. Look for God and I bet you'll find him. God is good! All the time. If you have doubts, that's okay. God is always at work, even when we can't see it. Just wait! It's like waiting for Christmas morning as a child. We just can't wait to see the surprise God has prepared for us!

- Elise Collins

Prayer: Lord God, fill us with anticipation of your glory and with peace in the meantime. In Jesus' name, Amen.



Above: Grandmama and three of her boys wearing stars on their heads for the Christmas pageant. My dad is on the far left. Circa early 1950s in Brazil.
Below: a typical Gaucho or cowboy from southern Brazil.



Tuesday, December 10th

OVERCOMING HARDSHIPS

I lost the love of my life in May 1997 when he was killed as a result of falling from the roof of our house in Virginia. I had to reinvent myself. Fortunately, I had strong support from family and friends and had not felt the need for external group support.... until . . . December was on the horizon.

December had always been a special month for us: we got engaged in December; our first child was born in December; and we enjoyed December as a month of celebrating Christmas big-time, both religious and secular. Christmas decorations, including a beautiful handmade nativity scene, went up on December 1. So, when the local Hospice Society offered a special seminar on “How to Get Through the Holidays”, I decided I should attend. At the time of my husband’s death, I had never asked “why”; maybe I would get an answer at this seminar.

We were quickly divided into small groups, and I was the only one in my group who had lost a spouse. All the others had lost adult children. One woman’s young adult son had gone nightclubbing, there had been an attempted carjacking which he fought and was shot to death. A man had lost his son, who was married with several children, to cancer. And then there was the man who stated the following:

I’ve been a strong Methodist all my life. And now I am so angry at God I can’t even go to church. My son, a husband, a father, a contributing member to society, was killed in a car wreck with a drunk who wasn’t even hurt. How could God do this?

On and on he ranted, until I said,

Don’t be mad at God. God was the first one to cry that day. Unfortunately, your son and that drunk both made decisions that put them in the same place at the same time that day. Maybe God tried to give them a message. But don’t be mad at God.

I know it is okay to be mad at God sometimes, but for this time and purpose I was trying to get through to a man who was suffering terribly. He gave me a strange look and got very quiet.

Shortly thereafter we were directed back to the large group. As we moved in that direction, the man who was mad at God caught up with me and said very quietly, “You

have a lot of faith, don't you?" And my reply was that I had had to have faith to get through what I had endured. He simply nodded.

I never went back to another such session. I kept on reinventing myself, creating a life without the love of my life. I truly feel I was sent to that session to speak to that troubled man. I hope my comments helped him. They certainly helped me!

– Sunni Bond

Prayer: Lord God, loss hurts unimaginably and doubts and anger creep in. Grief is a process. Let us know you are walking with us every step of the way. Don't ever let us go. In Jesus' name, Amen.



Wednesday, December 11th

It's Fruitcake Time!

Some like them. Some don't. Everyone in my family did. My mother carried on the tradition of baking fruitcakes early every December as her mother, Miss Zettie, had done. Nobody even tried to make a fruitcake better than Miss Zettie's. Miss Zettie had special techniques. The most important one required her homemade muscadine wine. About four weeks before Christmas, Grandmother Zettie would bake her fruitcakes. When they cooled off, she would promptly douse them with her wine, wrap them up, and place them in the kitchen closet. My uncles teased her about soaking the cakes in wine, saying that she'd better watch it, or the preacher was going to come in one day and catch her! My grandparents were very conservative ARPs, except for the wine-soaked fruitcakes. My uncles were rascals!

I myself think that Grandmother was wise to let her fruitcakes rest peacefully in the wine for a month before they were consumed. Their "marination" made all the difference in their flavor. It's kind of like us Christians, taking time to soak in God's Word, to spend time with Him in meditation, prayer, and worship, not just on Sunday. Spending time with God helps us grow as Christians. In His presence we can focus, find guidance, grow in faith, find comfort, renew strength, give thanks, listen for His words of wisdom, and seek his will.

Be still and know that I am God.

- Psalm 46:10

- Nancy Wilson

Prayer: Lord God, help us to find moments of stillness and peace this season so that we can soak up your spirit. In Jesus' name, Amen.



SWASTHI'S RECIPES

Thursday, December 12th

Don't Look Back

Do you wake up in the middle of the night thinking about things from the past? Do you think about things you wish you'd done differently? Do you replay scenarios of times when you did something that you should have avoided? Do you think about people who have hurt you, even though you've done all you can to make amends? Do you identify sins that you wish you had not committed? Does that kind of thinking consume the time you should be sleeping? I am sure we'd be amazed to add up all the lost sleep due to 'looking back'. We never mean to sin, but we sin. Sometimes we follow the crowd and just tell ourselves, "Oh, it's just this one time, it will be ok."

If your mistake is with someone on earth, talk with them and apologize. If you know your mistake is something God sees as a sin, go to Him and ask for forgiveness. God loves you and He will forgive if you ask for forgiveness. There is an important fact to remember though. Don't make the same mistake twice. God wants us to learn from our mistakes and move forward. Don't waste valuable time looking back and degrading yourself about something that has already happened. Move forward with a cleansed soul knowing our Lord and Savior died for our sins.

We are grateful that God always thinks about us. He carries us even when we don't think about what we are doing. Our mistakes, whether purposeful or unintentional, are always before God in His watchful eye. We are all sinners. How can we turn our backs on someone who loves us even when we make mistakes? Unconditional love comes from God. Seeking God's grace is always available to us. "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness." – 1 John 1:9 Confessing our sins is not just about stating our faults, but sincerely asking for God's mercy.

As we enter our Christmas season remember God's love tells us not to look back, look ahead. God looks after us, he is ever present in our lives, he loves us! After all, he gave his son to wash away our sins. "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." John 3:16

- Joyce Brown

Prayer: Lord God, you forgive our sins when we ask. Help us forgive and forget as well. This Christmas, let us seek reconciliation and healing and peace. In Jesus' name, Amen.



Friday, December 13th

Mary Chose Faith, Not Fear

The angel answered her,

“The Holy Spirit will come to you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore, the holy child developing inside you will be called the Son of God.”

- Luke 1:35

Can you imagine Mary's utter surprise when she was approached by the angel Gabriel telling her that she had been selected by God to be the mother of Jesus Christ who would be given the throne of King David and reign forever as the king of Jacob's people? What?! Here she was a young girl, not yet married to Joseph to whom she was betrothed. What would he say? What would her parents say? The neighbors? What if Joseph wouldn't marry her now? However, Mary's faith overcame her fear, and she answered calmly, "May it be to me as you have said." Mary calmly accepted God's request delivered by Gabriel. There was no drama. To Mary, God's son Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world, was born, conceived by the Holy Ghost. Mary had willingly obeyed God and stepped out in faith. Mary's faith changed the world! It's not likely that an angel will appear before us with a request from God, but let's slow down, spend time with God, and listen for His voice during the busy Christmas season.

- Nancy Wilson

Prayer: Lord God, grant us the courage and faith of Mary when you call us to obedience. In Jesus' name, Amen.



Mary and Gabriel – Nativity 2018

Saturday, December 14th

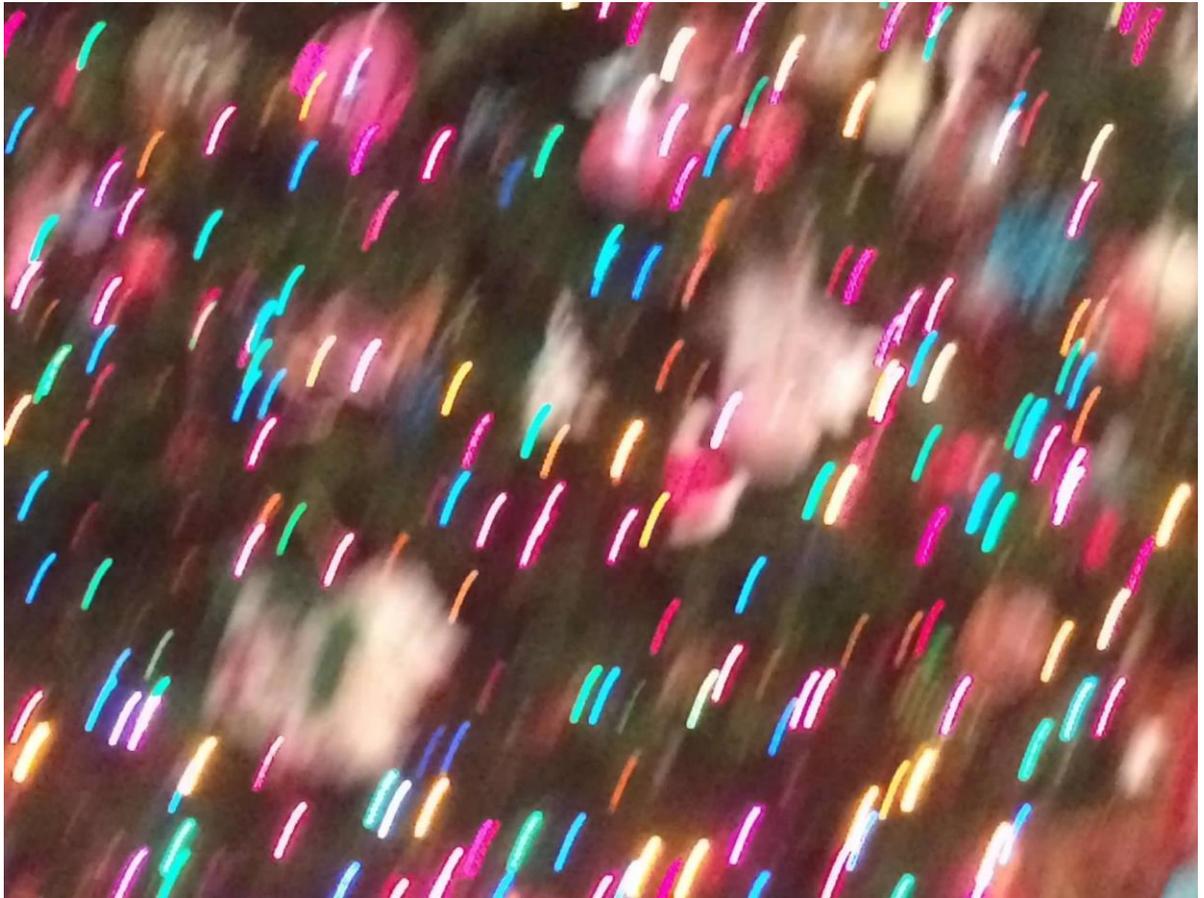
Christmas Eve was my favorite time of the year as a child. It is the place right at the end of a long hike up a mountainside before you crest the summit. It is the moment right before the spectacular view comes into sight. Christmas Eve follows the busy season of planning, shopping, and social events. Our family had a routine on Christmas Eve. We started the day by taking care of any last-minute grocery shopping for Christmas. Then, my mom would work on dishes for our Christmas meal the next day. We would wrap any remaining gifts. Then, our lifelong friends would come over for a cozy evening of fellowship and soup. The children were allowed to open one present, which only teased our heightened anticipation for Santa the next day. Once everyone left for the evening, we would turn off all of the lights but the Christmas tree and play Christmas music while watching the lights shimmer.

Now, Christmas Eve looks different as a pastor. I am no longer able to spend it with my brothers and parents. Even my sons are with their grandparents. Now, my Christmas Eve centers around leading worship and seeing the smiling faces of all of the children, young and old. But I have managed to hold on to one precious moment from years gone by. At the end of all of my pastoral duties, Christie and I head home, warm up a little soup, turn on Christmas music, and turn off all of the lights except the Christmas tree. Then we sit and watch the lights shimmer.

This time is the most comforting peace of the whole year. We reflect on the busyness over the year, the struggles, and the laughter. We remember the moments of exhaustion, anxiety, and hopes. All building to that one moment, when we see that God has blessed us yet again with another night to celebrate the greatest gift we have ever received, Jesus Christ. The world seems to hum and glow as those lights shimmer. It does a heart good to soak it in and know that God is still good, all the time.

- Kyle Hite

Prayer: Lord God, thank you for meaningful moments with you. In Jesus' name, Amen.



December 15th
Third Sunday in Advent



The third week of Advent, we light the first purple candle for hope, the second purple candle for peace, and the third purple candle, which can also be pink. This candle is known as the “Joy” candle or as “Mary’s candle. Some even label it the “Shepherd’s” Candle.

Behold I bring you good news of great joy!

The shepherds feel indescribable joy when serenaded by the angels and later when they encounter the tiny babe in the manger. Mary feels that still, quiet joy in her heart as she holds her tiny gift from God and looks on as others peer at her son in wonder and amazement. Her heart is full.

Behold I bring you good news of great joy!

Today, we too can experience exuberant joy like the shepherds as we see the many blessings in our lives! Just as valuable and meaningful, though, is the still, quiet joy of pondering beauty, love, and grace shared with us each day by our precious Lord.

Behold I bring you good news of great joy!

Prayer: Lord God, joy comes from you, and you share it with us in abundance. Thank you, Lord, for lifting us up to experience bliss like no other. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

Monday, December 16th

Christmas is one of my favorite times of year! But it is also a season when I feel melancholy and guilty. Why?

For all the beauty, excitement, and hubbub, there is also loss and grief – loved ones gone too soon, memories of how things used to be and aren't anymore, reminders of how we wish things were.

And the guilt? With every purchase I make in excitement for someone I love, I feel remorse for spending the money and for the many others who won't be getting gifts and may not even have loving homes. My heart beats beyond my people and thinks of broken families, children who suffer daily, unhappy adults desperately trying to do their best, but never seeming to get ahead.

So, I pondered and prayed: Lord, do you want me to feel guilt? Do you want my joy to be squelched? Is this your message?

Yes and no. God wants us to feel for others – otherwise we wouldn't show compassion. God wants us to feel for others without it usurping our joy, but rather to share our joy! God wants us to do for others in need, but it's okay for us to do for our own people too. God wants us to treasure our loved ones no longer with us, to remember fondly times past, and to appreciate our present while striving for a better future, but he doesn't want this to incapacitate us with grief. No, he wants us to feel bolstered to feel joy in the moment, right now. Joy that inexplicably stirs inside, slowly bubbling up, and frothing over uncontrollably. Kind of like laughter so hearty, you may tinkle yourself a bit.

Joy can come amid grief, because of good memories from the past, and in hopes of a better future or a better me. A good cry can be cathartic, making more room for joy to take hold. So, remember your own Uncle Sammys, Grandmamas, Cates, and Bills and thank God for the joy they brought. Think about the merriment of Christmases past and thank God for the joys or hardships that shaped you along the way. Think about what's ahead and thank God for whatever may come because he will be with you every step of the way, he loves you, and he wants to delight you with joy.

*. . . His favor is for a lifetime. Weeping may tarry for the night,
but joy comes in the morning.*

- Psalm 30:5b

Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer.

- Romans 12:12

*The LORD your God is with you,
the Mighty Warrior who saves.
He will take great delight in you;
in his love he will no longer rebuke you,
but will rejoice over you with singing.”*

- Zephaniah 3:17

Prayer: Lord God, surprise us with joy. In Jesus' name, Amen.

- Elise Collins



Tuesday, December 17th

Bob and I have three adult children and their families, two of whom live in Charleston and one who lives in San Diego, CA. We have rarely been together with the latter and his family at Christmas. In 2022, we were in Charleston at our son, Spence's, house where we usually gathered at Christmas to have as many of the family together as possible. Two days before Christmas, we had had a busy day, and Bob and I had left the kitchen where everybody seems always to congregate and found a quiet room to relax and read. Something made me look up, and there standing in the doorway were my son, Cooper from California, his wife, and our two grandchildren. I thought I was dreaming or seeing things. When I realized they were really there, I rushed to them with much hugging and tears of joy! Everybody else in the family knew they were coming but had kept it secret from us. What a wonderful surprise! However, the joy was not over. Two days later, on Christmas night, our oldest grandson proposed on bended knee to his girlfriend in front of the whole family. She said yes! What a joyous Christmas! God is good—all the time.

- Ann Spears Roddey

Prayer: Lord God, thank you for beautiful surprises that make our hearts overflow with joy. In Jesus' name, Amen.



Wednesday, December 18th

In 2020 Rick and I were looking for a place to move to make a permanent home when I retired. I used to come to the lake many years ago and always enjoyed when we made a trip downtown to the Bootery and the other shops. Convincing Rick to move to a small town was not really that hard but I knew for him it would be an adjustment. We made an appointment with an agent to view several homes in the area. We looked in Abbeville but none of the homes felt right. We checked out a few homes in Greenwood but none of them were a fit. We finally drove up Grace Street and the first buildings we saw when we hit Cambridge were two churches. Rick was so excited when he realized one of them was a Presbyterian church and he was a lifelong Presbyterian. He took that as a sign. Then we parked in the church lot to walk across the street to see the yellow brick house when Rick saw a Marine Corp flag on a gray car on the lot. Sitting in that car was Oscar, his daily Bible devotional in process. Rick introduced himself and Oscar made us both feel so welcome, we took that as a sign. We finally crossed the street with our two little dogs and walked in the house and it was love at first sight. The dogs ran from room to room like it was their new home, and we took that as another sign. We had found our home.

Now the only problem we found was that we were in the middle of covid, places were closed, and we needed to start a life in a new town where we knew no one except Oscar. We also had another issue; I had been diagnosed with breast cancer and would need surgery and what else we didn't know at that point. Regardless, we made an offer, it was accepted, and we closed on June 15. We parked our moving truck in the church parking lot and dragged our belongings across the street and moved in that day, at least enough to spend the night. We were able to get comfortable in the house and my first surgery was on July 15. God blessed me and we had caught the cancer so early that I did not need additional treatments but would require additional surgery and recovery time. We were able to make friends and started going to 1st Pres when the doors opened.

We always wondered why God brought us here and what he had in store for us, we knew there had to be a reason. I believe it was to make our home conveniently across from the church so that we could be of service in any way possible. We met Michelle Barksdale who blessed us and managed to get me involved in so many of her projects and then a few of my own. We feel so blessed to have found our home and our church home and family in such a blessed place. I retired this year and love my new hometown and all of the wonderful friends we are making understanding that God brought us here for a reason or many reasons and can't wait to see what is around the corner, what the future holds for us at First Presbyterian. We feel so blessed and thankful.

- Janice and Rick May

Prayer: Lord God, we don't always know the why behind our circumstances in life, but we are grateful for all you do for us. In Jesus' name, Amen.



Janice and Michelle are partners in lots of church projects!!!

Thursday, December 19th



Christmas Cantatas and Cakes

Ahh – I have such fond and lovely memories from my childhood of so many wonderful Christmas scents and sounds. Our family lived across the street from our Baptist Church, and every year, for at least twenty years, my parents hosted a reception for the choir members after their annual Christmas Cantata.

One beautiful sound I vividly remember is the duet sung by our minister and his wife of “O Holy Night.” This song is still one of my very favorites. It became a tradition for them to perform it every year. The choir worked so hard on all their pieces, and their hours of practice showed as they performed.

I do believe the choir members looked as forward to the reception as much as our family did. My Mama was a phenomenal cook, and she entertained with such ease and elegance. My sister, Debra, and I always pitched in to help with the preparations. My Daddy’s job was to help make the delicious chicken salad by putting the cooked chicken into the hand grinder and churning it through. He also used the electric knife to trim the bread that would become the most delicious chicken salad tea sandwiches you ever tasted. All the food was fabulous, and the choir members always jokingly said they were happy to do a Cantata anytime!

The grand finale of the reception, and one of the reasons everyone always loved coming, was the beautifully sliced assortment of homemade cakes that my Mama lovingly and expertly made from scratch. Guests were treated to German Chocolate, Japanese Fruit, Chocolate, Lemon, Pound, Fruitcake, Caramel, Fresh Coconut, and Red Velvet cakes. To this day, I can see her baking layers and layers of cakes to be assembled and covered with the most delicious icings and glazes. The smell in her kitchen was heavenly. I can still close my eyes and be taken right back to those scrumptious sights and smells. Here again, my Daddy assisted a little. His job was to drain the fresh coconut and then crack it open to scrape out the meat to grate for the fresh coconut cake icing.

My sister and I both acquired our Mother’s love for cooking and entertaining, but we don’t even come close to her magic with those cakes! After we were grown and married, she made TWO of each kind of cake, so she could divide one of each kind to give Debra and me. We’d share these delectable samples with friends and neighbors at Christmas. It didn’t take long for the recipients to realize what deliciousness they received, and they anxiously awaited our treat every year! I recently saw a plaque that

said, “Baking is a gift of Heart,” and I couldn’t agree more. These cakes were definitely gifts from my Mama’s heart!

What a wonderful treasure these cakes were, and the most beautiful thing was that my Mama so readily and generously shared these labors of love! She taught me such a beautiful lesson of putting your heart and soul into something and then sharing with others. She and Daddy so willingly did for others, and they received far more by giving than receiving. I challenge each of you to follow this example during this Christmas season. See how many lives you can brighten by offering a stranger a smile, sending a card to a relative, friend or shut-in, dropping money into the Salvation Army kettle more times than not, taking food to the Food Bank, giving someone an unexpected small gift, calling or visiting someone who may be lonely, inviting someone to go to lunch or have dinner at your home - the opportunities are endless for spreading cheer to others. You don’t have to have receptions after Cantatas or give away lots of delectable homemade cakes to let His light shine through you this holiday season!

“Christmas is the spirit of giving without a thought of getting. It is happiness because we see joy in people. It is forgetting self and finding time for others. It’s discarding the meaningless and stressing the true values.” - Thomas S. Monson

- Martha Ann Davis

Prayer: Lord God, fill our hearts with an overwhelming desire to do for others. May they see you in each of our acts. In Jesus’ name, Amen.



Friday, December 20th

Think of a time when you felt overflowing, giddy joy. Your body wanted to wiggle like a happy dog or do a fist pump or maybe you clapped. A wide smile crept across your face almost uncontainable (autocorrect says I made this word up, but I really like it, so I'm leaving it). Your voice may have gone up an octave with a squeal of exuberance. You may even have felt warm, happy tears streaming from your face. Joy is a full body experience.

Now think about when you have felt this way. I have to say, many Christmases have held this for me. So did seeing Christopher walk out of the airport terminal after deployment. And I will never forget the joy of seeing and holding each of my babies for the first time and so many times sense. Puppies make me giddy. Christmas lights make me ecstatic.

Joy is a gift from God. He is the good father and wants joy for each of us. Let him show you where you can find joy this season. It may be in the unlikeliest of places or in the most expected. I can't wait!

Remember, when we love each other, sorrows are divided and joy is multiplied. Yes please!

- Elise Collins

Prayer: Lord God, show us joy! In Jesus' name, Amen.



Saturday, December 21st

Forrest Gump: “My momma always said, ‘Life was like a box of chocolates. You never know what you’re gonna get!’ “

Our December Wedding

On December 21st Frank and I plan to celebrate our 50th wedding anniversary. We were married at my historic home church, Ninety Six Presbyterian, which was an intimate, simple, and lovely Southern setting for a December wedding. To us, Christmas was a spiritual but magical time to get married.

One weekend in November of 1974, we met in Ninety Six with my minister for premarital counseling. To our dismay the minister had very little good to say about married life. About all he offered was that sometimes it was useful to “tune each other out!” To be fair, the minister’s daughter at the time was going through a bad divorce and he, obviously, was very depressed about it. But we were 25 and 22, very excited about our wedding plans...and that was not at all what we expected to hear!

Frank and I had hoped to have Communion at our wedding. After the premarital counseling session had not gone well, Mama did not want to push the minister about Communion, so she came up with a compromise. She called 1st Presbyterian Church of Greenwood and arranged for the Associate Minister, John Connelly, to give us Communion the day *before* our wedding.

When that day arrived, my parents accompanied us and surprised us with a lovely, small pewter chalice and tray to use for Communion. On the tray was engraved “Each for the other and both for God.” This is what my maternal grandmother, Etta Blake, had engraved on a gold watch for my grandfather, Joel Patterson, when they had married.

John cordially guided us to the chapel and explained that the church secretaries had already cut on the heat and that he had the elements prepared. He seemed genuinely excited for us! McLees Chapel was perfect for Christmas and John took his time and gave us a most meaningful Communion experience to build a marriage upon.

We’ll never know if my daddy (a hopeless romantic) had a “discussion” with the 96 Presbyterian Church minister prior to our wedding, but much to our surprise, the minister gave us a lovely and memorable ceremony! And after 50 years of a blessed marriage, we must confess...that sometimes (not intentionally) we do, indeed, tune each other out! Funny how that came “home to roost!”

Prayer:

Lord,

We thank you for our church. We thank you that we have grown from our worship experiences here, through Bible studies, and the deep friendships we have forged. We thank you for this Advent season when we have the opportunity to go deeper in our relationship with you. We thank you for the Baby Jesus who came to show us the way. Enable us to follow Jesus through Advent, Christmas, and throughout all of our years. Amen.

- Penny Cannon



December 22nd
Fourth Sunday in Advent



The fourth week of Advent is the Sunday before Christmas. We light the first purple candle of hope, the second purple candle of peace, the third purple (or pink) candle of joy, and the last purple candle. This candle is known as either the “Love” candle or the “Angel’s” candle.

Behold I bring you good news of great joy!

God loved us so much he sent his son to live on earth in the flesh! Jesus felt emotions and he experienced tiredness, hunger, and so much more. That’s love! And the angels sang about it – a big choir in the sky celebrating Jesus!

Behold I bring you good news of great joy!

Even today, we can feel God’s love from the act of sharing his son with us to guide us and show us what God’s love looks like. Jesus modelled for us how we should love others – all others- with grace and without condemnation.

Behold I bring you good news of great joy!

Prayer: Lord God, you are love. Fill us to overflowing with your love, so that we may pour it out to all your people. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

Monday, December 23rd

As I look back over my many Christmases, I am often brought to tears as I see God's love was ever present in my life. I've spent many of the holidays in the hospital over the years and many back-to-back. As someone who loves Christmas this would often depress me. But I'm reminded of the amazing people who God placed in my life to show his love - the transport attendant that went out of his way to show me the huge Christmas tree in the lobby hospital at Emory, the nurse that gave me a sip of Diet Coke knowing I was going to throw it up anyway on my birthday after surgery, the therapists in the nursing home who brought a small Christmas tree and ornaments in my room for me to decorate as part of my therapy. God has surrounded me with love and support of people that I needed at that time.

Deuteronomy 31:8 states:

The LORD himself goes before you and will be with you;
he will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid;
do not be discouraged."

God never left me in the most important time of my life, blessing me in the season of the year of the birth of Jesus.

- Michelle Barksdale

Prayer: Lord God, when we are in difficult seasons of life, you never leave us. Thank you for showing us your love through your angels on earth. Use us to be those angels for others. In Jesus' name, Amen.



Fir-Tree by Leonid Afremov

Tuesday, December 24th

Christmas Eve

Luke 2

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to their own town to register.

So, Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

"Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests."

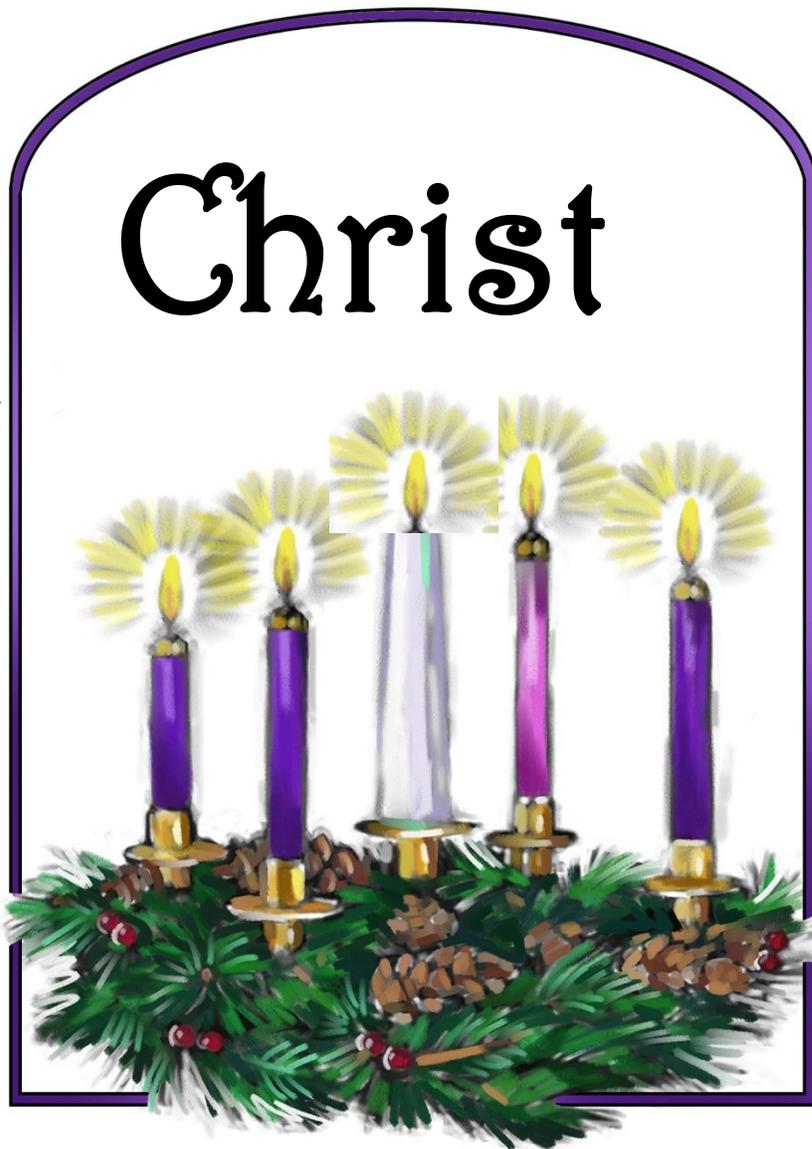
When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about."

So, they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.



Christmas Eve 2021

Wednesday, December 25th
Christmas Day



Then I saw “a new heaven and a new earth,” for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. ‘He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.’”

- Revelation 21:1-4



Luke 2:10

I
bring you
good news
of great joy
that will be
for all the people.