

# *Advent Devotional*

2018

First Congregational Church of Fresno

— and —

Community United Church of Christ



# *Introduction*

This devotional you have in your hands is a collaborative publication of First Congregational Church of Fresno and Community United Church of Christ. Members and clergy of both congregations have contributed heartfelt meditations for you to take with you all season long.

There are three themes that we will follow.

December 2–12 is “Hurry Up and Wait.”

December 13–20 is “Making Room for Hope.”

December 21–25 is “Living Into Joy.”

It is my hope that all of the voices represented in this little book deepen your prayer experience this Advent.

In peace,

Kim Williams  
Editor

## *Contributors*

Thanks to the writers without whom this Advent Devotional would not have been possible.

Rev. Raygan Baker

Lisa Maria Boyles

C. Wayne Brown

Janet Capella

Robin Carlson

Miranda Deis

Rev. Ara Guekguezian

Madeleine Guekguezian

Doug Hoagland

Kymerly Lindsey

Joe Mack

Rev. Dr. Garner Scott Odell

Ken Schoelen

Gayle Thornton

Sally Vogl

Mary Wall

Peter Wall

Christopher Williams

Kimberly Williams



# Hurry Up and Wait

## Sunday, December 2

Written by Rev. Ara Guekguezian,  
Community United Church of Christ  
Jeremiah 33: 14-16

*The days are surely coming...*

Remember when...Nine years old, the Sears, Toys R Us, or Target Christmas catalog would arrive in the mail. I would snatch it immediately from the pile of mail that starts arriving mid-November. I would race up the stairs to my bedroom and start dreaming. What should I hope for in the way of gifts for Christmas? Inspired by the offerings in the catalogue, I would create a wish list. I would pray, then write it down and leave it on my dresser. The secondary hope was that my mom would find it and share it with my dad. And the waiting would commence. The Christmas season would be described in one phrase: Hurry Up and Wait.

Then if things went well (according to God's will), when my bachelor uncle and my bachelor eldest cousin would ask one of my parents about my hopes for Christmas, they would respond with one of the items on my brief but bold wish list.

Unfortunately, my parents had a different understanding of God's will for my life, for I would receive great books and warm clothes on Christmas morn. Thanks be to God that my cousin was closer to God, for on Christmas afternoon we would go to his mother's home for Christmas dinner and I would receive this final gift for Christmas: Hot Wheels!

God's people in Judah at the close of the seventh and beginning of the sixth century, BCE, were very aware of their weakness relative to the increasing power and scope of the Babylonian empire. Their political leadership by the king was flawed, as deals were made with Egypt and unfulfilled. The near future looked grim, not hopeful. Into this place and among these people comes the word of God through the prophet Jeremiah.

The day is surely coming, when a righteous leader will rise up, leading with justice and righteousness. Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. Jeremiah offers a word and deed (literally) of hope in a hopeless and worsening situation. But the word was to hurry up and live righteous lives even during the most difficult moment, waiting hopefully and patiently, for the word of God to be fulfilled.

Prayer: We await patiently for the culmination of our great season of Advent. Even in our present circumstance, O God, we remain hopeful, for we have seen and heard of the advent of our God in the flesh. We endeavor to live faithfully as we wait the fulfillment of the Word that is Jesus. Amen.

## Monday, December 3

Written by Doug Hoagland,  
Community United Church of Christ  
Psalm 122

Mary and Joseph were pilgrims—first to Bethlehem for the birth of Jesus and later to Egypt to save the Christ child from Herod. Advent invites us to be pilgrims on a journey to Christmas—not the Christmas of the shopping malls, but of the humble beginning of a life 2,000 years ago in a stable.

Psalm 122 focuses our attention on another pilgrim—one who came to Jerusalem many years before the birth of Jesus. The occasion was a religious festival where the pilgrim probably sang this psalm. It conveys the pilgrim's joy for the city and is a prayer for the city's welfare.

As we enter into Advent as pilgrims, we can express joy for Fresno. It is a destination for people throughout the world who come seeking safety and a better future for their children. In that way, they are like Mary and Joseph.

We can pray that our city's gifts to them are welcoming neighbors, leaders who value diversity, and a community that remembers that most people carry with them an immigrant's story.

Let us pray that the words of Psalm 122 would be true in our city.

“May there be peace within your walls  
and security within your citadels.”

Please, God, let it be so.

## Tuesday, December 4

Written by Robin Carlson,  
Community United Church of Christ  
Micah 5:2-5a

*And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth;  
and he shall be the one of peace.*

Matthew refers to the prophets of the old testament five times in connection with Jesus's birth and infancy. From Micah we hear, "And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel." As Israel waited, we too, as we do each Advent, must wait again for the birth of Jesus. Our theme this week, "Hurry Up and Wait" is something many of us do. We race our cars past the car in front of us only to find the light has changed to red and we have to wait.

But instead of hurrying through, we need to take this time and reflect on what this child means in our lives especially during this time of Advent. What did we learn from this child? How did he teach us to treat others and to love God? In our world today, there is much unrest and hate towards others. If we are to continue the work of this child, the prince of peace, we must live into his message of loving God with all of our hearts, mind and body, and love our neighbor as ourselves. If we take each moment to see where we can live out that message then we will have the opportunity to see Jesus in those around us, reliving the birth of Jesus and love of God over and over again.

Creator God of abundant love, we thank you for the life of Jesus.  
We are grateful for the ability to be patient and to wait for the birth of  
Jesus. May we live out the ways of Jesus and be thankful for the gift of seeing  
Jesus in those we meet along the way. Amen.

Wednesday, December 5

Written by Joe Mack,  
Community United Church of Christ  
Isaiah 11:1-10

Jesus brings the light and peace to those who  
walk in darkness.

Jesus takes care of the oppressors and restores  
the land to paradise and order.

## Thursday, December 6

Written by Ken Schoelen,  
First Congregational Church of Fresno  
Isaiah 35

*A highway shall be there,  
and it shall be called the Holy Way;  
the unclean shall not travel on it,  
but it shall be for God's people;  
no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray.  
No lion shall be there,  
nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it;  
they shall not be found there,  
but the redeemed shall walk there.*

Isaiah the prophet, Isaiah the person telling of good things to come.

Isaiah wants us to believe the bad in world will stay away if we follow the Holy Way Highway.

I have driven all over California and have yet to see it. Maybe it's a Bible thing and not a highway at all. Will there be a time of no evil, no lions, no tigers and no bears? (oh, my!)

The Holy Highway he speaks of is what you make of everyday life. We're looking for a highway to take us somewhere, but this place that Isaiah talks about doesn't exist anywhere on Earth. There is not a place outside of Heaven that embodies this. Not even Walt Disney could create a place where the I-5, 22, and 91 freeways all lead to that would come close.

Don't let your daily challenges become the your road block, you will do the best you can on the highway you're on, and when the time is right the highway exit to get to this place Isaiah talks about will be there. In the meanwhile, traveler, be filled with joy over the good things you have and navigate the road with God.

## Friday, December 7

Written by Gayle Thornton,  
First Congregational Church of Fresno  
Jeremiah 31:33b

*. . . I will be their God and they will be my people. . .*

### **Waiting**

Winston waited. I forgot. I forgot to go to meet my friend Winston for lunch. He tried to call my home phone, but after yoga instead of going to meet him I went to the grocery store and did a couple of other errands. I was distracted that morning with an HOA project that I would be dealing with later in the afternoon, and. . . I forgot. Winston waited.

Like Winston, God waits. God waits for us. As Meister Eckhart puts it, "God is at home. It is we who have gone out for a walk." God waits. It is we who are distracted—running here and there, doing this and that—unaware of the presence of God—the God who seeks relationship with us and who declared, ". . . I will be their God and they will be my people. . ."

In the hustle and bustle of Christmas, we too often forget about the baby Jesus or trivialize him by putting him in the manger and forgetting him. We are unaware that the Christ Child is not in the manger but lives within each of us and can be seen in the faces of those we encounter.

May our days of Advent and beyond be sprinkled with moments of awareness of  
the presence of God who meets us whenever and  
wherever we are and who delivers into our hearts the Christ child  
so that we might see Christ in everyone. Amen!

# Saturday, December 8

Written by Mary Wall,  
First Congregational Church of Fresno  
Isaiah 42:1-9

I remember as a child excitedly waiting for the arrival of boxes of Christmas gifts from out of state relatives. My mother put them under the tree when they came in early December, and my siblings and I spent countless hours shaking those boxes, speculating what those gifts would be. Oh, the possibilities! Perhaps the latest toy that we wanted, or a huge box of candy. Surely it was something we even better than we imagined. Somehow, opening the gifts on Christmas morning only to find pajamas, other clothing, or homemade crafts items never seemed to compare to the visions that had been dancing in our heads all month.

The Israelites awaited their coming Savior in a similar way. They knew he was coming. They had heard the prophets and speculated for hundreds of years about what he would be like. Surely, he was going to be everything they imagined: a King, a Warrior, a Ruler to get revenge on their enemies. This was the One who would finally bring the justice they had sought for so long. And this Savior was going to bring it in just the way they desired. Or even better. But when Jesus showed up, He did not quite meet their expectations.

In our own lives it is easy to expect God to show up for us in similar ways: heal our sick friends and relatives, help us find the perfect spouse/job/house, or get that parking spot when we are in such a hurry. However, isn't it more often that God gives us the unexpected, which allows us to question, to wonder, or to experience hardship? Why?

This reminds me of a saying I heard as a child, "Our disappointments are God's appointments." Perhaps part of His purpose is to give us the opportunity to be an encouragement to others who experience similar situations. He calls us to be His Face, His Hands, His Ears, His Voice to each other. Let's meet God in the unexpected.

Prayer: Lord, open my eyes to finding you in the unexpected. And by my words and actions, may others experience you.

# Sunday, December 9

Written by Peter Wall,  
First Congregational Church of Fresno  
Malachi 3:1–4

In 1941, during the Second World War, a young American writer was troubled. He later recalled, "I'd been living through the Hitler era in the 1930s, where no matter what anyone did, Hitler kept winning victories, and the only way that I could possibly find life bearable at the time was to convince myself that no matter what he did, he was doomed to defeat in the end. That he couldn't win." That writer channeled his worry and conviction into a story, the first part of which was published in 1942, about an empire that seemed "bound to win, no matter what the forces arrayed against it," except that one farsighted person had recognized that the empire was destined to fall, and had proven it scientifically.

That writer might have been influenced by the traditions of his Jewish parents, which included prophets like Malachi. The book of Malachi probably dates to the fifth century B.C.E. Things were obviously different then, but people still needed to scratch the same itches. Some of them, like Malachi, recognized powerful evils, and yearned for the justice of comeuppance to their purveyors.

The imaginative means to make life bearable in those days did not include enthralling fables of technical control through the mathematical understanding of fundamental patterns in reality, as in the 1940s. Instead, Malachi spoke from an experience of the world as both deeply historical and thoroughly dangerous. The people had forgotten their identity, which was embodied in their prior covenant with God. But who can endure the day when God arrives after that forgetting? God is not a reassuring hug, but a refiner's fire. (A phrase that comes to my mind is "holy hell.") And that purification will result in a return to the righteousness of an earlier time.

In these cynical and unimaginative times, we know that a dreamed up future is no more real than an idealized past. We know that even with the staggering success of our science, or the statistical sophistication of our polling analyses, we cannot predict the future. We also know that every day of human history has been rife with evil and injustice.

But I cannot blame Malachi for coping with a corrupt priesthood by imagining a cataclysmic divine purification and a return to a Golden Age. And I cannot blame Isaac Asimov for coping with Hitler by writing a science fiction epic now known as the Foundation series. They worked with what they had.

Today we need the assurance of hope like countless others have needed it before us. May our meditations in the season of Advent provoke our imaginations. Because that is the incarnation through which God still speaks.

# Monday, December 10

Written by C. Wayne Brown,  
First Congregational Church of Fresno  
Isaiah 49:5-7

## Waiting: Inspiration from Isaiah

Of all activities we are bound together by, besides bodily functions, it is waiting—as common as our blood. No matter what your occupation, status, or location, everyone does it. We wait in long lines for gas, groceries, social security updates, job interviews, and dental appointments; we wait for traffic signals, hotel check-ins, airline boarding, doctors, answer of our 911 call, you name it; it's out of our control. For that we ask for needed patience. There's also dated social engagements, like Christmas, concerts, movie openings, first game of the season, and new beginnings on January first.

We live with little voices of early instruction—"Now, wait your turn, honey," "It won't be long; just be patient," and the countless plethora of platitudes. "All good things come to those who wait."

But do they? Sometimes. My grandfather had his own expression, "Wait's what broke the bridge." At certain times, I think I can say, "Amen, Gramps, Amen," although I'd be surprised if his inspiration came from Isaiah 49, verses 5-7.

In it we hear the voice of a man who believes he was chosen "even before I was born," to be more than a servant, but a light to rescue a nation from slavery, and for his people to be delivered into freedom. Notice as you read this passage from your own Bible, that Isaiah does not say he has to wait for a letter, a dream, a sign, a prophet, telephone call, or an e-mail from God to act. No. His mission is righteous and just, and the reward of freedom for his people awaits.

I have to believe this lesson was folded like a poem from God and tucked into drawers of Dr. Martin Luther King's mind when he decided to lead marches to demand equality and freedom to oppressed, to right the wrongs of indignation of Blacks in the South. It certainly is evident in the letter he wrote to eight clergymen (rabbis, priests, ministers) who warned him of consequences of his leadership and advised him to Wait for freedom and justice. Dr. King's letter is eloquent, polite, poetic, and ripe with power of theologians and theosophers who came before him. In that context, I want to quote him from his letter:

For years now I have heard the word "wait." It rings in the ear of every Negro with a piercing familiarity. This "wait" has almost always meant "never." It has been a tranquilizing thalidomide, relieving the emotional stress for a moment, only to give birth to an ill-formed infant of frustration. We must come to see with the distinguished jurist of yesterday that "justice too long delayed is justice denied." We have waited for more than three hundred and forty years for our God-given and constitutional rights.

Perhaps we've used those primordial whispers to justify the wait for action.

So this season, perhaps we can begin anew by consciously sorting the types of wait we bathe in, ask for the ancient platitudes to vanish, and admit we know what we have been assigned—love, kindness, and compassion for all of God's creation. And we don't have to wait until January 1, 2019.

# Tuesday, December 11

Written by Kim Williams,  
First Congregational Church of Fresno  
Psalm 72:1-14

Take this Psalm:

Give the king your justice, O God,  
and your righteousness to a king's son.

May he judge your people with  
righteousness,

and your poor with justice.

May the mountains yield prosperity for the people,  
and the hills, in righteousness.

May he defend the cause of the poor of the people,  
give deliverance to the needy,  
and crush the oppressor.

May he live while the sun endures,  
and as long as the moon, throughout all  
generations.

May he be like rain that falls on the mown grass,  
like showers that water the earth.

In his days may righteousness flourish  
and peace abound, until the moon is no more.

May he have dominion from sea to sea,

and from the River to the ends of the earth.

May his foes bow down before him,  
and his enemies lick the dust.

May the kings of Tarshish and of the isles  
render him tribute,

may the kings of Sheba and Seba

bring gifts.

May all kings fall down before him,  
all nations give him service.

For he delivers the needy when they call,  
the poor and those who have no  
helper.

He has pity on the weak and the needy,  
and saves the lives of the needy.

From oppression and violence he  
redeems their life;

and precious is their blood in his sight.

Set a timer on your phone, on the stove, find an egg timer, an  
hourglass. What kind of time do you have today? Set it. Slowly read. Sit with it.

Read it again. Run your fingers across the words. The ink is flat, the page smooth, but what can  
you feel? Once read, do the words  
develop texture? Do you feel it in your fingertips? Your gut? Your shoulders? Your heart?

Is it still flat? Why is it flat? Get curious about why it may remain  
one-dimensional. Read it out loud and form your mouth around the words—especially the  
words you don't like. Write in the margins.

Does anything stand out?

Sit with those words and concepts until the timer goes off. Move with them through the day.

Wait with the Lord, wait for the Lord.

# Wednesday, December 12

Written by Lisa Maria Boyles,  
Community United Church of Christ  
Isaiah 40:1-5

*Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.*

Daily life assaults us. Noise bombards our ears. Burning smoke creeps into every crevice. We ache with sorrow and loss.

We reel from a never-ending stream of tragedies, both natural and manmade: obliterating fires, earthquakes, hurricanes, acts of hate, terrorist attacks, mass shootings, and another, and another, and another.

Acts of cruelty, from every level of society, even once sacred, revered places, confound us and break our hearts. How did we get here? Where is God in all of this?

Still your heart, your mind, and listen. God is still with us, even in our Planet's dark hours.

Close your eyes and refocus your mind's eye. Block out all of the noise and listen. Let God's whisper quench your loss, your pain. You -- we -- are not alone.

A drop of water can swell to a trickle. A trickle can gush into a river. Keep room in your soul to allow the flood of hope back in. God is there to fill it up.

We have power when we walk with each other and let God guide us, to heal this broken world, our neighbor's broken soul. Our own.

Let the light of this Advent season into your heart. Remember the promise a baby brought so many years ago, in a lowly stable beneath a star-filled night. God is still with us, even now.

*"... Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken."*

# Making Room for Hope

## Thursday, December 13

Written by Rev. Dr. Garner Scott Odell,  
First Congregational Church of Fresno  
Mark 1:1-3

### **Advent Roads**

The season of Advent is marked by roads. Prepare the way of the Lord, we read in this week's text from Mark. In this present time, the landscape we live in can seem utterly trackless. We may find it difficult to envision by what path Christ could enter this world, and daunting to imagine what road would finally lead to the healing and redemption of creation. Yet this is what Advent invites us to do: to lift our heads, to raise our eyes, to look toward the horizon and dream of the way by which Christ will come to us.

In calling our eyes toward the horizon, Advent does not draw us away from the present or lull us into an avoidance of the world at hand. Advent invites us instead to stand in the thick of this life and open our heart to the road that Christ wants to make, not only for us but also in us and through us. Because when Christ comes, the horizon he appears on is not so distant, after all. The place where he shows up is always in our very midst.

In this Advent week, I pray Christ will give us the courage to envision, to hope for, to dream, and to make ready the road by which he comes to us.

Lately I have spent a lot of time thinking about the roads of my life. I thought of roads I have traveled, the ones already laid down for me: pathways made of concrete, of asphalt, of dirt, of stone. Pathways made of traditions, of the habits of communities, of the patterns of institutions. I thought of roads I have made where there were none. Ways I have made through imagination, through dreaming, through effort and intention. Roads made of words, wood, paper; roads fashioned of longing and of prayer.

I thought of what it takes to make a way, how it is that we create a passage from one place to another within the landscape of the world or of our own inner terrain. How we must discern the materials to use, and the tools; how crucial to learn to navigate, to reckon, to read the lay of the land. How, we sometimes find a path as much by stumbling as by skill. How we may have to tear up a road, make it again in a different direction.

But I think the Advent road is perhaps not like this. That it is not one that we can fashion from our striving and our skill. That when John the Baptist comes over that wilderness horizon, smelling of camel's hair, his lips dripping with honey and with fire, he is pointing toward a way that we can make only by what we give up, what we shed, what we let go of.

What's in your way these days? If you were to imagine your life as a path, a road, what would it look like right now? Is there anything cluttering your way? Is there something you need to let go of in order to prepare the way for the Christ who enters the world in this and every season?

Blessings to you in these Advent days. May you find delights even in the desert spaces, on whatever road you have taken this season.

## December 14

Written by Sally Vogl,  
First Congregational Church of Fresno  
Isaiah 61:1–4

*To give them a garland instead of ashes...*

These verses in Isaiah remind us that the spirit of the Lord is upon us and has anointed us. From this deep well, let us bring good tidings to the afflicted. We focus on these good tidings at advent. But remember, the arrival of each and every day is an opportunity to rise, giving hope, comfort, and praise to those who are brokenhearted or enslaved by sadness or loss.

Like a mighty oak, we can grow skyward. With our roots firmly planted in spirit, we can branch out to embrace our brothers and sisters in Christ. A garland, worn on the head or around the neck, is often formed from branches and leaves in the shape of a circle. The circle begins with God's love for us and continues with our love for others. Let's proclaim the oil of gladness for all, singing a mantle of praise.

# Saturday, December 15

Written by Rev. Raygan Baker,  
First Congregational Church of Fresno  
Luke 4:16-20

When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

*'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me  
to bring good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives  
and recovery of sight to the blind,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.'*

Does this sound familiar? Yes, Jesus read the same prophecy we read yesterday, though he added a line from Isaiah 58:6 too, and he read it from his hometown synagogue in Nazareth. But that's okay, we hear and do many things over and over, especially during Advent. Since we know so little from Jesus' early life, I wonder how well the people of Nazareth knew Jesus, son of Joseph. Was it as well as we think we know Jesus from reading the stories in the Gospel over and over?

If we keep reading, we see that Jesus' homecoming wasn't particularly warm. This is the interaction that leads up to Jesus saying, "No prophet is accepted in their hometown." This reminds me of our familiar saying, "You can't go home again," which I think means that, without hard work and careful intention, we lose our capacity to be surprised by the people, stories, traditions, and seasons that we know so well. I worry about this pretty often, because if we lose this capacity, I think we lose our willingness to catch glimpses of good news, release, recovery, and being set free. But I don't think we ever know our friends, ourselves, our stories, or our traditions so well that they can't catch us by surprise. So, on an even greater scale, we shouldn't expect God to stop surprising us either. The Good News is continually breaking into our world.

So, what new might we discover, if we dared to look for it? Who would surprise you if you tried to learn something new about them? How would you surprise yourself if you weren't held back by past failures? If you're watching for it, where might you find the Good News?

# Sunday, December 16

Written by Janet Capella,  
Community United Church of Christ  
Luke 3: 7-16

*“John the Baptist stands in the Jordan River...I baptize you with water...He is coming, to baptize you with the Holy Spirit,”...people ask, “What must we do?” He replied, “If anyone has two tunics, share with those who have none, the one with more to eat must do the same and tax collectors asked, “Exact not more than your rate.” Soldiers asked, He replied “No intimidation! No extortion! Be content with your pay!”*

*Prophet Isaiah 3: 3-5 A “voice cries in the wilderness... prepare the way of the Lord, every valley shall be filled, every mountain and hill laid low...”*

We ask expectant questions, respond by giving love and doing acts of kindness and generosity. Willingness brings faith. My childhood home, community, churches, even camping in the mountains was merciful and safe. Stained glass windows illustrated Jesus' prayers, kind people taught Sunday School, served meals. Mountain travel took us exploring, talking of God's sacred land, animals, American Indians lived in valleys and hills for millennia. Biblical people rebelled against empires, generations protested oppression, democracies negotiated and legislated changes in civil injustice, labor issues and curtailed world wars. God's and Jesus' call us to serve those in need, forgotten, and oppressed.

Church life is faith, prayer, sacraments, worship and waking up to cries for social justice in our communities (i.e. Martin Luther King Jr., refugees, homeless, farm workers, gay rights). In my 20's, early 1970's, following divorce, with a college degree and experience with protest issues, I moved to Jerome, Arizona. My 5 year old daughter stayed in Fresno with her dad and new family; my heart broke, chaos and confusion brought me to my knees. Jesus surprised me! I went to a church and an was invited to teach Sunday School, the children loved me and my heart opened to healing. I trusted God! Next, I was offered a paid teacher job, troubled teens who were also separated from their families. God moved me forward and Jesus met me at the altar! I moved further into Faith! Prayer cleared, my mind and heart, knew I needed to return home to be a single mom to my daughter, back in my family and church circle.

Look Up! Ask, “What does the Lord require?” Listen and seek guidance, choose from any number of paths, an open place will appear. Faith and witness to Christ's lessons all carry strength to live honestly, find our gifts and go in peace. Transformation takes courage—repair our lives, seek changes for our family, join a cause to serve our broken world. Scripture guides us with John and Jesus, Holy Water/Holy Spirit bursts open our hearts, and gratitude opens our arms. Help refugees, they cry for peace when leaving their homes, (amidst the largest world refugee movements in world's history), homeless people lost on the streets have limited hope of help. Righteousness awakens our hearts, What must we do? Faith groups and secular gifts share—God's connectors in the world. Care! Jesus folks! Open our hearts to recreate all things new.

# Monday, December 17

Written by Kymberly Lindsey,

First Congregational Church of Fresno

Isaiah 52:7-10

I was initially caught off guard, when asked to write a devotional. I had never written such a thing and was put off by my ignorance. But Kim was reassuring and sent me on my way, with 2 days to complete my task. So, I read the passage, "How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace..." I was struck by a picture, not of an adult but a baby. How beautiful and untainted are the feet of an infant. Then, I couldn't think of anything else (it was 3AM).

So, tonight, I decided to just write what came to my mind after I had a bit of sleep. I never allow myself to delve into a project without some semblance of knowledge. I pray that you do not think me a biblical scholar, far from it. My ignorance is vast, yet my willingness to learn and understand is never sated. I therefore did a bit of research. Isaiah lived in a time of political turmoil in Jerusalem, yet was moved and touched by God to minister. This is as important today as it was during his time.

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I've been cleaning my house, readying it for the holidays and a visit from my mother. I've been de-cluttering and dusting and vacuuming (no, I'm not available to hire) and generally just getting my house in order.

In the midst of all this frenetic cleaning, a realization came to mind. I was not only readying my house for my mom and the holidays, I was ridding it of the clutter, the non-essentials (Windows 95 software, really?). In doing so, I was making ready a place for good, for peace, for hope, for the bounty, which is God's love.

The messenger of peace lives within me. His presence should be given clean shelter. God lives, God reigns! My voice gives rise to this truth. In exultation I give voice to the joy of knowing God lives and gave forth his only begotten for our salvation. I am witness to the glory of God and am awed.

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## Isaiah 52:7-10 Revisited

*Beautiful are the feet of the messenger that trod upon the mountain, speaker of peace,  
bringer of good news, salvation.*

*The Lord our God doth reign.*

*Be heard o' multitude of man, nations of every hue;*

*Lift up thy voices; SING in exultation and with joy!*

*For the Lord of all nations grants salvation.*

*See with eyes bared open to this truth...*

*The Lord our Christ, does live!*

Prayer: Lord God make me worthy of your glory. Give my voice wings that it may rise above the noise in telling of His coming. Amen

## Tuesday, December 18

Written by Rev. Ara Guekguezian,  
Community United Church of Christ  
Isaiah 9:1-7

*“For a child has been born for us,”*

The birth of a child, any child, brings a spark of hope. The birth of the heir to the throne, the ruler, starts a fire of hope in an entire people. This poem of Isaiah sings of this hope in the birth of the heir to the throne of David. It underscores the Promise of the Davidic covenant for a despondent people. “But there will be no gloom for those who were in anguish.” The Prophet has my attention.

Every winter, as the nights lengthen, the light shining from this great word brightens my world. The lights of the Church shine brighter through the month of December. More evening activity, especially more special worship throughout the season of Advent.

Life is sweeter in just hearing these words, before any one of them is fulfilled. All the bad things are destroyed, consumed by fire. And every good thing will be ushered in with the new ruler, once the ruler grows into the role. Power, Justice, Peace Forever! For a moment it is all good.

Christmas allows us an extended moment of relief for the ordinary stresses of our lives. As we celebrate the fulfillment of this promise during the extended season of Advent, our trust in the new Promise of the end of the age with the return of Jesus is strengthened.

Prayer: It has been awhile, O God of the Covenant.

There are moments when our hope ebbs, when the promise seems false. The gloom settles in, because the reality before gives rise to anguish. May the Spirit renew in us trust in the Promise of the new age ushered in by the birth of Jesus.

Amen.

# Wednesday, December 19

Written by Kimberly Williams,  
First Congregational Church of Fresno  
Luke 1:39-45

*When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leapt in her womb.*

Anyone who has ever had a baby human growing inside of them knows that once the baby starts kicking and moving around, there's no turning that sensation off. It's not like turning down the volume on the TV or changing out of a scratchy sweater. That baby in there will be felt whenever there is movement—sometimes the cross-belly rippling movement of what feels like a full yoga session in the uterus, other times it's a little flutter that rests somewhere in between indigestion and first-date butterflies. Then there are times when it's the strained, sick-with-worry awareness of a lack of movement, which is even more unbearable than a heel to the rib. All of it is noted, noticed, overthought about.

I can tell you one thing after carrying three babies of my own—I never once felt any of them leap in my womb. Lots of hiccups and elbows, zero leaping. In this story, Mary enters Elizabeth's home and greets her. Both women are pregnant, carrying little bundles of revolutionary joy—Elizabeth is the mother of John the Baptist. As soon as Elizabeth hears Mary's voice, baby prophet John recognizes the presence of baby messiah Jesus, and he leaps. This is huge. This is even shocking to someone who has conceived a baby well past her time and is familiar with God's surprise blessings. This child in her womb is ecstatic, the Lord is here! In this room! The awareness that often comes along with holding life in one's belly is on high alert and Elizabeth immediately understands.

There is such beauty in these two women in this moment, belly to belly. The connection they have is unlike any other. Both trusted the Lord when the stakes were high. They see each other, not just two moms-to-be exchanging stories about sciatic nerve pain at night (which is a powerful connection on its own!), but as women who believed—who believe!—and who are deeply blessed.

Lord, thank you for the leaping joy that comes with  
feeling your presence! Amen.

## Thursday, December 20

Written by Christopher Williams,  
First Congregational Church of Fresno  
Luke 1:67-80

Parents have goals and expectations of their children. From the moment they are born we see children as unfinished pieces of work that need nurturing and direction and we receive a great sense of pride with their accomplishments. There exists a story that after Michelangelo had carved the statue of David he was asked how he was able to craft such a masterpiece, to which he replied "The sculpture was already complete within the marble, all I did was chip away the edges".

What we have to remember is that what we want for our children and what they do may not always be one in the same. God has a "dog in this fight" as well. In the story of John the Baptist, his father Zechariah was singing a song of praise during John's circumcision (which is apparently a thing people did in those times). During this song Zechariah spells out God's plan to have John become the prophet "Most High" and prepare the way for the coming of the Lord and preach salvation and forgiveness to the masses. That's a pretty tall order to be sung at an infant having their foreskin removed.

Zechariah had the advantage of being informed about John's future by not just any old angel but the Archangel Gabriel himself. Most of us are not as lucky as Zechariah. We will blindly guide our children, try to get them interested in careers we want for them (astronaut/doctor for mine), and hope for the best. Just remember that your plans and God's plans may differ. After all, they can't all be astronaut/doctors.

# Living Into Joy

## Friday, December 21

Written by Madeleine Guekguezian,  
Wesley United Methodist Church  
John 1:1-8

John opens his gospel in exaltation of the coming of Christ—the living Word that has always been and was a part of God and God them-self. With him comes a life that gives light to all humankind and cannot be overcome by the darkness. Reflect on what this means for the world. More than a good turn or a period of happiness, Christ brings to us the power of God's love in its totality which both gives and sustains life and light. What else could this be but joy?

The Word becomes flesh, and that singular incarnation is not a scarce resource, a limited commodity that must be purchased and only the worthy can afford. It brings life to all things, unconditionally. Could there be any greater joy? And John, in bearing witness to the truth and life of Christ, gives us a model for living as testament to the joy of a world in which God and the Word are with us. We are not the light, but God calls all of us to reflect it to our neighbors. As we approach the celebration of the birth of Jesus, take time to pray and reflect upon the joy of the season and the gifts that God has given you to testify to the light, to live the joy of God with us.

# Saturday, December 22

Written by Kimberly Williams,  
First Congregational Church of Fresno  
John 1:9-18

*The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.*

Where do you keep your Christmas decorations? We store ours for 11 months of the year in the garage. Our garage is organized exactly the way you'd imagine two adults with ADHD would have it organized. Best intentions in January, the boxes clearly labeled and stacked together. By June one box has been ripped open because one of us (not pointing fingers, but it wasn't me) didn't read the label and it *\*wasn't\** filled with whatever it was that was being searched for. The tape is not reapplied. By November your guess is as good as mine about where everything went. We found the light up village, but where did the twinkle lights go? *Ah, they're on the shelf with the chlorine for the hot tub—of course. That makes sense.*

"Hey babe! I found the lights! And, funnily enough, that dog harness we couldn't find last April!"

We will have to wait for nightfall to enjoy the display. All afternoon is spent on a ladder with kids running around sugared up with hot cocoa, one of us hanging the lights, the other offering "helpful" commentary from the ground.

I dunno, maybe you know exactly where everything is and this isn't helpful for you at all. But it's exactly this dash through utter disorganization and chaos that makes the lights seem so vibrant when we finally see them lit up. The lights have been here all along in the garage, but who could know we would have such a display based on the contents of ripped cardboard boxes that have been haphazardly stashed away?

*He was in the world, and the world came into being through him;  
yet the world did not know him.*

Our light display is a good reminder that in this season while we anticipate the birth of Christ, God has always been here. Obscured by our own chaos, *no one has ever seen God*, yet still here with us in the mess.

When Jesus is born, a true light is shone. Not the kind that gets turned off at dawn and on at dusk thanks to a photocell sensor, but light that stays, reaches everyone. Is isn't merely seasonal, rather it is always available for guidance, clarity, or sometimes it's there for us to just sit back and marvel at.

# Sunday, December 23

Written by Miranda Deis (age 13),  
First Congregational Church of Fresno  
Luke 1:46-55

*He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,  
and lifted up the lowly;  
he has filled the hungry with good things,  
and sent the rich away empty.*

## Call to Action

You should love and respect your neighbor regardless of how much money they have, their skin color, where they live or who they love. If money and titles were not the most important thing to God they shouldn't be the most important things in your life either.

Instead of a prayer, I want you to be a mirror to reflect God's plan by putting it into action. On this day, two days before you celebrate the birth of Jesus I want you to get out in your community and show the disadvantaged people some love, show them that you care and that they matter.

# Monday, December 24

Written by Peter Wall,  
First Congregational Church of Fresno  
Luke 2:8–14

I never understood how it could be that God “sent” his son. Sending is done from a distance. But God is supposed to be everywhere, always. “Am I a God near by, says the Lord, and not a God far off? Who can hide in secret places so that I cannot see them? says the Lord. Do I not fill heaven and earth? says the Lord.” (Jer. 23:23–24.) Or, as it is put so evocatively in the Quran, “We created the human being, and We know what his soul whispers to him. We are nearer to him than his jugular vein.” (50:16.) If anything, God must be immediate and intimate.

If you share my concern about “sending” and “distance,” then you will be rewarded by a close but imaginative reading of the passage today from Luke.

First, there are shepherds in fields—not one shepherd, and not one field, but shepherds in fields. Without warning their multiplicity in those fields is met with a surrounding but singular angel of the Lord, which, despite being in fields, neither sings nor shouts, but merely speaks to them the news of a savior. Their presence is immediate and intimate.

(I think of Elijah, standing on the mountain, hearing God not in a wind, or an earthquake, or a fire, but a “still small voice.” Or “a sound of sheer silence,” as the New Revised Standard Version puts it. Closer, perhaps, than the thrum of his own jugular.)

The shepherds in their fields receive the news of a savior and suddenly there is a multitude of the heavenly host. The intimacy and immediacy of these angels tells a story in itself. It is not so much an arrival after a journey from afar as it is a revelation of alreadyness—they are messengers from what already fills the fields, with all of heaven and earth.

And as this season of Advent comes to a close, we should also notice that the shepherds in the fields were not waiting for God, or for the news of a savior. They were watching over their flocks in the night. Peering into a murky darkness. And the glorious good news was already there, surrounding them. Closer, maybe, than their own jugulars.

## Tuesday, December 25

Written by Rev. Raygan Baker,  
First Congregational Church of Fresno  
Luke 4:16-20

*Mary treasured these things in her heart.*

The Advent calendars have counted down, the carols have been sung, the candles have been lit and extinguished. The baby was born, and the presents (which took hours to shop for and wrap), have finally been opened (in a matter of seconds). So, what did you get? Was it what you wanted? If so, was it as wonderful as fulfilling as you thought it would be? If not, was the countdown a bust? In short, did it work? Did your traditions live up to your memories of them? Did you ever really buy that that baby was a greater gift than everything else on your wishlist? Was whatever you hoped for, longed for, or watched for throughout Advent, even with guarded suspicions, as good as it was promised?

Personally, my favorite part of Christmas is late in the evening of Christmas Day. At least for me and my family, there's nothing left to do. No more gifts to give or receive, no more big meals to prepare for, and in fact, leftovers will take care of the next several meals. Even more, whatever was left undone in the preparation for the season will now have to be left undone. For some, Christmas Eve feels like the big celebration, and by late on Christmas Day, it is over; but for me, it's my best chance during the whole season to find silence. And I find that silence to be pregnant with an ineffable hope.

Whether your deepest longings and desires were fulfilled or not, Christmas worked. God came to us in the most intimate way, in a body. God longed so deeply to be near us, that God removed every barrier between the Creator and the created people. This is our "Good news of great joy."

However your Christmas Holiday has gone to this point, can you find a time and a place to treasure these things in your heart? I find that this is often best experienced in silence, while being mindful of your body. Sit comfortably, breath deeply and intentionally, and don't worry about where your thoughts wander, just point yourself toward what you treasure.

## Merry Christmas.



**Community United Church of Christ**  
5550 N. Fresno St.  
Fresno, CA 93710  
[www.communityucc-fresno.org](http://www.communityucc-fresno.org)  
Rev. Ara Guekuezian

**First Congregational Church  
of Fresno**  
2131 N Van Ness Boulevard  
Fresno, CA 93704  
[www.bigredchurch.org](http://www.bigredchurch.org)  
Rev. Raygan Baker