

*

Navigating our Salvation



Paris Presbyterian Church

Advent 2019

Welcome to the Advent Journey!

In the Western secular calendar, the New Year begins on January 1st. You may observe the start of that new calendar with a late night of celebration and a mini fresh start to your life, with new goals and personal disciplines.

In contrast, the Christian year starts on December 1st with the first day of the season of Advent. We start the year with the words of the prophets of the Old Testament, anticipating the new era that would begin with the coming of Jesus. We're often shocked to find that the New Testament readings of the season do not dwell with the meek and mild infant Jesus in the manger, but instead point us forward to the *second* advent (or, "arrival") of Jesus at the end of our current era.

Since this is the *beginning* of the church year, many of our habits of this season are similar to the secular habits of the New Year. The challenging Scripture readings and reflections in this booklet ask us to start anew on the journey of faith. They ask us to consider where God has been on our journey up to this point and where God will lead us, through Jesus and the Holy Spirit, into the future.

All the way, we keep our attention focused on the way God's *grace* (a fancy theological word for God's "free and unmerited favor") is at work in our life. All of our own work of discipleship is a *response* to what God is already doing in and through our lives!

Our Advent season has four weeks, and so there are four waystations on our journey together.

A Pending Invitation – We consider the beginning of our walk with Jesus. It doesn't start with our decision to follow, but with God's gracious invitation to start the journey. Christian tradition calls this *Prevenient Grace*.

A Tangible Hope – Having received God's invitation, we repent (or "turn around") and embark on the walk of faith. We leave former

things behind, place our trust in God and are granted assurance that we are a child of God. Tradition calls this *Justifying Grace*.

A Desert in Bloom – Now that our lives are pointed in the right direction, we start walking! We take baby steps at first, falling down often. But as we grow in faith, we are able to follow Jesus through dangerous conditions and on uncertain roads. This is known as *Sanctifying Grace*.

Between Heaven and Hell – The final destination of our journey takes us by surprise. We do not know the day or hour when we will find ourselves at the throne of Jesus, when God will bring the work of our redemption and the redemption of the world to a close. For now, we keep this final day of salvation in mind as we place our lives into God's hands. The final destination on our journey is *Glorifying Grace*.

Where are you now on this journey? Where have you come from? Where are you going? This season asks us to consider these questions as we navigate our own walk of faith so that we might help others find their way as well.

Joel Peterson, Director of Outreach
and the Worship Committee

Making a List

The habit has been engrained in us since childhood: making a Christmas list. Maybe we wrote letters to Santa, asking for some of the toys we'd been seeing in advertisements. As we grew up, we addressed our Christmas Lists to our parents. In adulthood, we spend more time making sure the heating bill is paid in cold December. Even still, we have wants and desires (who doesn't?) and we find ways to treat ourselves.

List-making in this season is a good habit, but while the voices around us are pressuring us to make lists of *things* that we *want*. It's well and good for us to come before Almighty God asking to *receive*, as long as we remember the kinds of gifts that God gives. God is not our personal blessing vending machine!

The gifts that God gives are attested throughout the New Testament. Remember how one of God's messengers told Mary what she'd be receiving for Christmas?

“The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God.” (Luke 1:35)

Mary is promised the gifts of the Holy Spirit's arrival, the power of God, and a child through whom she others will be blessed.

Advent List #1: What would you like to *receive* from God as you complete this Advent journey of reading, prayer, and reflection?

If you have your list of things to receive, great! But if you really want to take this season seriously, we also should consider what Jesus needs to *take* from us so that we might be able to complete this journey.

Imagine Advent as a backpacking trip. Everything you need for your journey has to be carried on your back. As you're packing, you have your tent, sleeping bag, food supplies, first aid kit, and a

couple heavy bricks laid out on your bed. As you assemble your bag and test it out, you recognize that it's *way too heavy*. What do you do? Well, the answer is obvious. You take out the heavy bricks that are weighing you down.

That example may seem absolutely ridiculous, but guess what? Many of us are preparing for this Advent journey with bags loaded with things that are just as useless and burdening as a bag of bricks.

Left to our own devices, our bags are packed with sin, habits, distractions, guilt, and even some well-intentioned (even spiritual!) tasks that are going to prevent us from completing this journey.

Paul reminds us in Philippians 2:

Jesus “emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in human likeness, and being found in human form.

Even Jesus had to lighten his load of the burden of glory for a time so that he could make God's presence known to us!

Another challenging text of this season reminds us:

“You know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night.” (1 Thes. 5:2)

Not only can we expect the coming of Jesus to come unexpectedly, you can bet there are things that *aren't* coming with us into glory. Things God needs to remove from our lives so that we can spend eternity in God's Kingdom.

As the saying goes, “you'll never see a U-Haul behind a hearse.”

So if you dare, make a second list.

Advent List #2: What sins, habits, resentments, tasks, and guilt do you need God to remove from your heart and life this season so you can complete this journey unencumbered by unnecessary weight?

Suggested Pattern for Daily Prayer

Breath Prayer: Notice your breathing. Breathe in the breath of God and breathe out the sins, worries, and hurts of the day. Slow your breath. Breathing in, say to yourself, “Come.” Exhaling, breathe out, “Lord Jesus.”

Opening Scripture: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being...And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.” (John 1)

Prayer of Thanksgiving: Conversationally, pray to God, giving thanks for the blessings of the particular day.

Prayer of Confession: Give to God the sins of omission (things you forgot to do), commission (things you shouldn’t have done), and mistakes that the evil one wants to hold over you. Be specific in your prayer! Ask God for forgiveness and receive God’s word of Grace for yourself.

Scripture Reading: Read the *full* Scripture reference printed at the beginning of each devotional (yes, this will require you to get your Bible out!). Perhaps use the form of *lectio divina* to read through the passage four times: read (listen for a key word or phrase), reflect (what is God saying through that word?), respond (what will I do in response to that word?), and rest (bask in the silence of having experienced God’s grace).

Devotional Reflection: Having, hopefully, already spent some time dwelling on the text, now read the devotional for that day.

Other Devotional Acts: Conclude by reciting the Apostles’ or Nicene Creed, praying the Lord’s Prayer, and singing or reflecting on a favorite hymn. *Of the Father’s Love Begotten* is a great (and ancient!) Advent hymn to learn this month!

Week One

A Pending Invitation



“I was glad when they said to me, ‘Let us go to the house of the Lord!’”

– Psalm 122

December 1

Matthew 24:36–44

Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.

Today we are invited to begin an exciting journey; a journey of preparation as we await the coming of the Christ child.

Our preparation for Christmas usually includes baking a variety of cookies, shopping for the perfect gifts for our loved ones, wrapping them in fancy paper and placing them neatly under the beautifully decorated tree.

Unfortunately, these are not the type of preparations Jesus is calling us to make as we read our passage in the Gospel of Matthew today. While the season of Advent is about waiting for the birth of Christ, it is also about waiting and preparing for Christ's *second* coming.

In our reading today, Jesus gives a rather stern warning about the consequences of being unprepared for the coming of the Son of Man.

In the days of Noah, people were going about their business without a care in the world only to be swept away in a flood. Jesus says it will be the same way when the Son of Man comes, and woe to those who are unprepared.

That's a pretty sobering thought.

The other sobering thought in this Advent season is that the preparations Jesus is talking about have nothing to do with cookies, presents and trees.

Rather, it has everything to do with the state of your heart. It has everything to do with your relationship with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Our God is a God of second chances, but there will come a time when there will not be another chance; there will be a time when it's too late. Don't wait. Prepare your heart today by giving your life to Christ – your *whole* life.

Lord Jesus, as I begin my Advent journey, may You be my greatest desire and my number one priority. May others see You through my words and actions. Let my preparations for this Advent season begin in my heart. Amen.

Pastor Tina Hosler

Sunday, December 1st
First Sunday of Advent

Scripture Texts in Worship

Isaiah 2:1–5

Romans 13:11–14

Sermon Notes

December 2

Romans 6:1–11

Just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too will walk in newness of life.

Do you remember your baptism? What age were you? Growing up in the Baptist church, Baptism was a *big* deal—we're talking full immersion—and it was not done until you reached what was called the age of accountability. For me that was thirteen. I *remember* being dressed in white, walking down into the water, and being laid back until my head was completely under water. I felt joy and excitement mixed with confusion and indecision. What just happened? What does this mean? What am I supposed to do now?

Today's reading gives us a wonderful explanation. In baptism, we are united with Christ forever. We are given a new life—a life free from the fear of sin and death. Look again at verse 6, "For we know that our old self was crucified with...that we should no longer be slaves to sin." Instead of fearing God and seeing him as our punisher, Jesus set us free to live in relationship with God.

I grew up terrified of God, afraid of being punished, worried about judgment day, scared that I would be a lost cause. We will never be a lost cause! God is always there waiting for us to reach out to him. We may abandon him or walk away or blame him for what goes wrong in our lives; but all it takes is one prayer asking for forgiveness and we are reconciled.

As we prepare to celebrate the birth of Christ, think about your own rebirth. Renew and revitalize your relationship with God. Spend time with him in scripture and prayer. Be open to his voice and his guidance. See where he leads you.

God, thank you for your unconditional love and for sending your son to free me from sin and death. Help me to live in relationship with you. Amen.

Stephanie Visnic

December 3

Hebrews 11

Faith is the reality of what we hope for, the proof of what we do not see. The elders in the past were approved because they showed faith.

We've entered this first week of our Advent journeys back at the beginning of faith. We've received an invitation from God through his Son Jesus Christ to leave other things behind to "follow him." Our pride and sense of self-significance often convinces us that this is a solitary journey. We fool ourselves into thinking that it's us against the world, that me and Jesus are on this journey through the wilderness of sin and death together. This is the faith of our early discipleship, the faith of us making a personal decision to follow Jesus Christ through whatever lies ahead of us.

Eventually though, we recognize that we can't do this faith thing alone. We need more than just the spiritual presence of Jesus in our lives! We need our brothers and sisters in Christ. You wouldn't go on a backpacking trip without a few partners, would you? If you get injured, you need someone to go search for help and someone to stay beside you! The same is true for our journeys of faith. We need each other on this path of discipleship. There are also people in our lives who need *us* and our witness.

But even this kind of thinking is too small for today's Scripture! The writer of Hebrews reminds us about Noah, Abraham, Jacob, Sarah, Rahab, and countless others! When we remember their stories, their faith (and even their redemption from failures), they surround us on our own Advent journeys. Our mothers and fathers have paved the way for us and our children and grandchildren will follow in our steps. Thanks be to God!

God, thank you for sending others to accompany us through the difficult road ahead. Give us the strength to run this race with perseverance until we reach its completion. Amen.

Joel Peterson

December 4

Isaiah 54:1–10

*Do not fear, for you will not be ashamed;
You will forget the shame of your youth.*

Put aside the shame, disgrace, and humiliation and expand your space so that what was once broken will be made fruitful and gain strength in God's promise. Put aside the idea of being disappointed and know that God Himself will do things no one on earth can do. God knows we feel forsaken. He gave space for us to feel this way but He never truly left our side.

How easy it is to forget God is with us all the time? We tend to acknowledge the need for Him when something major is happening in our lives, when we have fear, or when we want something. However, when we pray and nothing happens (at least in the way we were thinking it would) we feel abandoned and left behind by God.

Have you ever felt this way? You pray so passionately about a situation knowing that He is the only one that can possibly make it any better and it doesn't go the way we had planned.

We as humans believe our way is the best way and so therefore God must have not heard us praying or maybe He decided not to honor our request. He gives us space and time to calm ourselves and realize we are loved and not left. He doesn't want to see us suffer and have pain. He wants us to reach out to Him during these times and find the hope He has to offer.

We should also not forget that He wants to hear from us when things are going well or just okay. We need God's love each and every moment of every day whether we are happy, sad, fearful, or just plain content.

*Lord, please help us to see Your loving light in all of our situations
and praise You for all of the blessings You have bestowed upon us.
Amen.*

Stacy Riggs

December 5

Acts 1:12–17, 21–26

“Lord, you know everyone’s heart. Show us which of these two you have chosen to take over this apostolic ministry.”

Do One Thing

Joseph, also known as Barsabbas (Justus) and Matthias were members of a group of 120 followers of Jesus Christ at the time of Christ’s crucifixion. They both were associated with Christ’s Ministry, which lasted three years, but they were not part of the 12 disciples. With the death of Judas, the group wanted to continue with 12 disciples. The group prayed and contemplated their choices – the lot went to Matthias. The 12 disciples then became known as the Apostles. They accepted an Invitation.

How do you accept invitations? We have an average attendance on Sunday mornings of 130 people between the 8:45 Service and 11:00 Service. How many of those 130 do something in the name of Christ by serving God in some way? How long are you willing to be involved with both the Church and those believers in Christ before you are willing to step out and become truly involved?

How could the Paris Presbyterian Church benefit from your being more involved? Several years ago our Church started the “One Thing” idea where everyone was encouraged to do something new in the workings of the Church. There have been some very good things that have evolved from that idea. What is your “One Thing”? Could we extend that to “Two Things”?!!

Once you are moved with an idea or project, do not neglect the invitation. Follow through with the idea until God blesses the work.

Lord, may I be willing to accept your invitation when You call. May I be reading your word in the Bible and may You show me how to be involved. In Jesus name I pray. Amen.

Kelly Ward

December 6

Acts 13:16–25

“Standing up, Paul motioned with his hand and said....”

Stage fright.

It’s an affliction of being human. In a high school speech class when my task was to give a three-minute talk, I wrote what I wanted to say and worked to memorize it. Confident, I volunteered to speak early in the lineup. But when I stood before my classmates I froze. I couldn’t remember my exact speech, so I ad-libbed.

That was a mistake. After I sat down, the teacher said, “Did you realize you spoke for eleven minutes?” I realize now that I froze and outtalked my time frame because I was so nervous. And why was I so nervous? Simply put, I didn’t know what I was talking about. I had picked a topic that only “sounded good.” I hadn’t lived it. Hadn’t really understood it. Hadn’t made it part of my life.

But when the Apostle Paul stood two thousand years ago at the synagogue in Pisidian Antioch (in modern-day Turkey), he did know what he was talking about. He believed it. He lived it. He held total confidence in it.

Though Paul had no doubt addressed crowds many times before, his message at the synagogue in Pisidian Antioch was the first one recorded for history.

What Paul did and said in his ministry changed the course of world history. The Good News he shared is still changing the course of world history. The only difference is that you and I are the ones who are asked now to stand up—wherever we are—and help tell God’s amazing story. Every day is a good time to share that story, but Advent is one of the best times.

We can follow Paul’s lead in how we share God’s story. First he stood up. He accepted an opportunity to share his faith. He knew

God was pointing to him and saying, “Don’t be afraid.” Second, he “motioned with his hand.” I wonder if he raised his hand as if to say, “Please, folks, this is about God, not me.”

Then Paul told God’s story: God promised a Savior for all the world. God sent that Savior, and his name was Jesus. But everyone did not accept Jesus. So Jesus died so that we might see the power of God. God raised Jesus from death—so the whole world can see God’s glory and know that God’s promise is everlasting.

That message is beautiful, full of grace and utterly life changing—whether we tell it before a congregation or at the bus stop waiting for the kids.

Holy God, you gave Paul courage to stand up in Pisidian Antioch. I ask your strength and courage to stand up in faith where I am too. Amen.

Susan Spencer-Smith

December 7

Isaiah 40:1–11

*“A voice of one calling; In the desert prepare the way for the Lord;
make straight in the Wilderness a highway for our God.”*

This reminds me of the opening song in the movie from the 60's: Godspell.

As the disciples are coming together, they sing, “Prepare Ye the Way of the Lord.”

Isn't that what we're doing during this Advent Season? As we prepare for Christmas, we are preparing our hearts, our homes, our very lives for the coming of the birth of our Lord.

We do the same thing as we learn about God from a young age. We prepare a way for the Lord to reach out and connect with us, a way to get to know the Creator of the world, the author and perfecter of our faith.

We do this through scripture, through prayer, through Sunday School stories and sermons.

We learn this as we experience his love and provision every day as we grow in our faith.

As we face joy, disappointment, heartache and every other emotion and experience in human life, we prepare a way to strengthen our faith in God.

Lord, as we come into this Advent Season, help us to prepare our hearts, minds and souls to receive you into our very lives. Amen.

Bobby Jones

Week Two

A Tangible Hope



“Let the mountains bear prosperity for the people, and the hills, in righteousness! May he defend the cause of the poor of the people, give deliverance to the children of the needy, and crush the oppressor!”

– Psalm 72

December 8

Matthew 3:1–12

Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near.

In today's reading, John the Baptist is calling us to prepare for Christ's arrival. The word for "prepare" in the Greek refers to an ancient custom of preparing the way for a king's arrival.

Everything had to be perfect along the king's path; there couldn't be debris along the road and there couldn't be potholes. In other words, the path had to be smooth and free of stumbling blocks.

John the Baptist uses that same word to tell us to prepare for the coming of Christ. His challenge to us is more about a spiritual preparation; making sure there are no stumbling blocks in our lives that would hinder the full acceptance of Jesus.

In order to clear out the stumbling blocks in our lives, 2 things are required: confession and repentance. It's funny how we use those 2 words interchangeably when they each have distinct meanings.

Let's start with confession. Confession is admitting that you've done something wrong. Unfortunately, many of our personal prayers of confession go something like this: "Lord, forgive me if there is any sin in my life." C'mon – you can do better than that! You haven't actually admitted to anything there. We need to be very specific in our confession. I know what you're thinking: God already knows what I've done wrong. That is very true, but God wants to know that *you know* what you've done wrong, so be specific in your confessions.

Having confessed your sins does *not* mean that repentance has taken place. Confession is admitting your sins and repentance is being sorry enough to stop doing it!

Repentance literally means to turn back or to change, so when you truly repent you don't make the same dumb mistake over and over.

Granted, it doesn't mean we won't make *other* dumb mistakes, but it does mean we will actually turn from our sins!

Take some time today to sit before the Lord in a time of sincere confession and repentance.

Lord, reveal to me the things you want me to change. Grant me courage and strength to make the changes. Amen.

Pastor Tina Hosler

Sunday, December 8th
Second Sunday of Advent

Scripture Texts in Worship

Isaiah 11:1–10

Romans 15:4–13

Sermon Notes

December 9

1 Thessalonians 4:1–12

You know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus...

God defends the causes of the poor, gives deliverance to the children of the needy, and crushes the oppressor. Pretty lofty goals in my opinion, but what about us?

This passage confirms that God is deeply concerned with our daily walk, with how we live the Christian Life. Our lives are to be lived in such a way as to gain the respect of outsiders in this cold and dark world.

We are exhorted to shun sexual immorality and to behave honorably in that area. We are tasked with leading a quiet life, to mind our own business, and to work with our hands so as not to be dependent on others.

It is indeed a lofty goal for us as well to shun sexual sin in a world that promotes it as an entitlement. In addition, keeping our own concerns quiet while loving and encouraging others just does not feel natural to us. Yet, we are called to do these things on a daily basis because God cares for us that deeply.

No part of this self-control and our loving actions toward others gains us our redemption! That price was already paid! This is a sincere response to the gift that we have already received. And no, it is not fun and goes against what our culture would tell us. Yet, it is the way God chose for his children. This is how we get ready for the appearance of Christ!

Heavenly Father. Your goals are lofty for the world and for us. We could not do these things that are asked of us if it were not for the power of your Holy Spirit working in us. Give us both the tools and the desire to do this holy work!. Amen.

Gary Baughman

December 10

Romans 15:14–21

I feel confident about you, my brothers and sisters, that you are full of goodness, knowledge, and able to instruct one another.

Paul gives encouragement to those who have a strong faith in God. Paul knows he has taught the Roman Christians well and that they have a solid foundation of faith. They are good, generous, and righteous people. Now it's time to take what they have learned and teach others.

How strong is your faith? Perhaps you read scripture and pray to God daily or maybe you talk with Him from time to time. We are all on our own faith journey and there is no better journey than the one you are in!

God is with you right now, reaching out to you, ready to guide your path to the next event on your journey. When we establish that connection with God, we most certainly want others to have that same feeling. We want to share the news of the Bible and tell people what God has done for us. So, why isn't it that easy?

Think back to a time when you had a strong feeling that God was doing something specifically for you. How did you feel? Did you want to tell someone immediately about this incredible experience?

No matter where you are on your journey, there have been moments where you felt God had a hand in a situation. Think about the influence you could have on several generations to come by reaching out, sharing that story, and leading just one soul to God. You have the opportunity to lead a person to Christ by sharing your knowledge, isn't that worth it?

Lord, thank You for working in our lives, we pray that You will help us find the courage to share Your love with those who need it most. Amen.

Stacy Riggs

December 11

Matthew 12:33–37

But I tell you that everyone will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken.

Stop! Think before you speak. Did you know that God holds us accountable for careless words?

A friend of mine owned a local dress shop which I often patronized. I went in her shop recently and found my friend very upset. She said to me, “You won’t believe what I just said. A lady that I know was just here. I said to her that I had found the perfect dress for her. I knew it would fit her. It was as big as a barn.” My friend was horrified that she had spoken such careless words without thinking. Once harsh words are spoken you cannot take them back. The lady turned around and walked out of the store, no doubt in tears. We can hurt someone deeply with the words we speak, and often it is unintentional on our part.

Matthew 12:34 teaches us that “out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks.” If we permit wrong thoughts to dwell in our hearts, we will ultimately speak them. Whatever is hidden in our hearts will sooner or later be expressed openly through our mouths. Through every stage of our life, we need to make a commitment to love with our words and to build confidence in others. Every word we speak can be a brick to build with or a bulldozer to destroy.

Remember, words are seeds; they are containers for power. They carry creative or destructive power and they produce a good harvest or a bad harvest in your life and in the lives of those you love. We are accountable to God for our words.

Our Heavenly Father: I humbly bow before you and ask for Your guidance in speaking only kind words that show love. Teach me to think before I speak. In Jesus Name, Amen.

Peggy Strain

December 12

Isaiah 2:1–5

Nation will not fight against nation and neither will they learn war anymore.

What does "The end of war" mean to you?

I am reminded of the iconic picture taken on V-J Day in 1945 in Times Square of a sailor kissing a nurse.

To me it represents the joy of knowing war is over. We can have that same joy knowing that God wins the final battle. By trusting God, we can live in the present with our minds on eternity, knowing that our God reigns.

Isaiah gives us an amazing picture of what that looks like. God will be highest, all people will be drawn to Him and there will be no more war.

As the mother of a serviceman who has been in theaters of war in Iraq and Afghanistan and who is now deployed to Bahrain away from his family and friends, I continually pray for his safety and well-being.

I look forward to the day when all war will cease!

Lord Jesus, as we await your coming, we pray for peace in the world and peace for our souls. May we lift you higher so others will be drawn to you. You are the Lord of miracles and worthy of worship so we praise you for what is to come. We pray in your Holy Name. Amen

Aggie Wilttrout

December 13

2 Peter 3:8–13

The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness

One of the first memories I have of church was seeing pamphlets addressing the fear of Y2K. The world sure seemed like it was ending when the Twin Towers fell on 9/11. And as an impressionable youngster, I was convinced that the world would end on December 21 2012, as the “prophecies” had foretold.

Every generation faces their own fear of the future. I can’t imagine what it would have been like to grow up during the Depression, World War II, or the Cold War, for example. Each generation of human beings has had to face conditions that have caused them to question God’s apparent inactivity, or at the very least, slowness in answering the cries of the people of God. We look up to the heavens and ask, “how long, O Lord?”

The confident hope of God’s people is contained in our daily reading. God is not slow in responding our pleas to finally make all things new (Isa 43:18). God wishes for *all* to come to repentance.

Had God answered the prayers of the church in Peter’s day in the way that they wanted, our own existence would be nothing but an idea in the far recesses of God’s mind, a potentiality that would never be explored.

Thank God that God is patient with creation! God wants us and future generations yet unborn to glorify the Lord Jesus. For now, we wait with expectation, knowing that God *will* fulfill the promises of long ago. God *will* continually bring newness into the world. And it all starts with the hope we have now of a newborn baby, whose birth we remember every year.

God, we are anxious and afraid, but you are faithful. Come, Lord Jesus! Make haste to help us! But also continue to do the patient work of bringing us all into your Kingdom. Amen.

Joel Peterson

December 14

1 Samuel 2

But Samuel was ministering before the Lord—a boy wearing a linen ephod.

What happens when we dedicate our children to the Lord?

When one recent Sunday we celebrated the birth of a child to members of the congregation, I was moved by the family's obvious joy and gratitude to God.

Likewise, when Samuel was born, at a dark time in Israel's history, his mother gave him a name meaning "Because I asked the Lord for him." When he was only three years old, she took him to the house of the Lord and gave him back to God.

But Hannah did more than hand over her precious child. She dedicated him to God and to God's service. "So now I give him to the Lord, for his whole life will be given over to the Lord." He would never return home but would grow up in the Lord's house under the watchful eye of the high priest Eli.

At Samuel's dedication service Hannah prayed, beginning, "My heart rejoices in the Lord; in the Lord my horn (strength) is lifted high." Her prayer extols God's power and God's justice.

But in nearly the next breath we read, "Eli's sons were wicked men..." What in the world could link Hannah's praise to the bald statement that the two sons of Eli "have no regard for the Lord"?

As we read on. Eli's sons, Hophni and Phinehas, are found sinful in thought and action. They refuse to repent when Eli confronts them. Meanwhile, the child dedicated to God "worshiped the Lord, and "ministered before the Lord," and "continued to grow in stature and favor with the Lord and with men."

Samuel ministered so dutifully that he became "a boy wearing a linen ephod." An ephod was worn by the high priest. It was made

of yellow, blue, purple and red yarns and ornamented with onyx and gold. Picture a child wearing such a priestly garment!

While Samuel carried out grown-up responsibilities, Hophni and Phinehas kept sinning until God vowed that the two men would die on the same day, adding, "I will raise up for myself a faithful priest, who will do according to what is in my heart and mind."

As we know, Samuel was that faithful servant of God.

And it's a sample of what happens when we dedicate, not only our lives, but the lives of our children, to the Lord.

Merciful and just God, thank you for our children, who are really yours. Guide and protect them, and in your grace give families wisdom to dedicate children to you. Amen.

Susan Spencer-Smith



Week Three

A Desert in Bloom

“My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant...His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.”

– Luke 1



December 15

Matthew 11:2–11

What did you go out into the desert to see?

A reed swayed by the wind?

John the Baptist was quite a character. He was no ordinary-looking guy, and probably turned the heads of everyone passing by. Can't you just hear them: "Did you see that guy? What in the world is he wearing?" People had never seen the likes of someone like him, so they went out to the desert just to check him out.

In our passage today, Jesus is asking the crowd a rhetorical question when he asks them what they went out into the desert to see. When Jesus asks if they went to see a reed swayed by the wind, He was basically asking if they went out to see some wishy-washy preacher.

A "reed swayed by the wind" suggests a fickle person; someone whose judgment and decisions are caught in the winds of public opinion. John was no such person. He preached the gospel without excuse.

He stood up for the truth of the gospel even though it ultimately cost him his life.

John the Baptist was the last in the line of the great prophets and the first to point to the arrival of the Messiah. John had a calling to live up to, and he took it very seriously. His whole mission in life was to prepare the way for Jesus. He is trying to convey the message that following Jesus is the only thing that matters in life.

It's not a coincidence that this passage comes up so close to Christmas. We are challenged to pause in the midst of our holiday preparations to reflect on the reason for the season.

If Jesus were invited to your house for Christmas, He wouldn't care about the state of your house. He would care about the state of your heart.

Take some time today to reflect: Are you a reed being swayed by the wind of consumerism or are you the voice of one calling in the desert: prepare the way of the Lord?

*Lord Jesus, may my preparations this season begin with me.
Change my heart, O God. Amen.*

Pastor Tina Hosler

Sunday, December 15th
Third Sunday of Advent

Scripture Texts in Worship

Isaiah 35:1–10

James 5:7–10

Sermon Notes

December 16

Acts 5:12–16

Now many signs and wonders were done among the people through the apostles.

In the book of Acts, believers came to the apostles despite the risk of persecution. Crowds gathered bringing their sick and tormented to be healed, wishing to get close enough that Peter's shadow might fall on them. This was God's power at work!

What does physical healing look like? If someone has knee surgery, they will have a healing incision on their leg, be using a cane, and then walking on their own. Someone with cancer may have surgery, chemo with loss of their hair or radiation. They may finally be told the disease is gone. They get their energy back and return to normal activities. We celebrate with them!

Now, what happens when someone's spiritual health is in trouble? We can all relate to times our spiritual health has suffered. Maybe we are too busy for God, maybe we think we are not good enough, maybe we just aren't interested anymore or any multitude of sins. All of these are pushed by the father of lies. How can we get our spiritual health back on track? Who is our spiritual physician?

Like the person with knee issues or battling cancer, we need help!

In Luke 5:30, Jesus is criticized by the Pharisees for sharing a meal with tax collectors and sinners. In verses 31 and 32 he tells them "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick." Since we are all sinners, Christ gave his life for all of us so we can be forgiven. Just like going to a medical doctor for a physical healing, we need to go to the one who can give us inner healing.

Jesus, we have committed to this journey of following you, but there is still sin in our life. By your Spirit, continue the work of full healing in our life. Thank you for your constant forgiveness. Amen.

Karen Cowan

December 17

Jude 17–25

Be merciful to those who doubt; save others by snatching them from the fire; to others show mercy, mixed with fear—hating even the clothing stained by corrupted flesh.

As children we doubt. We doubt because we don't know any better. But as we grow in age and experience, we trust more and more because we see that God is in control and he works things out for his good will.

Jude talks of the 'Last Times', the last days, Jude says there will be scoffers, doubter; people who don't know where they are or what they are facing. But Jude tell us to build ourselves up in our faith and pray. So we will know where we are, what we are and whose we are.

And how do we do that? We spend time in God's word. Fellowship with other Christians. Serve God's church. Worship the Lord and be of service to others. And he tells us to have mercy on those who doubt. Not to look down on them or avoid them. Not to give up on them. But to try to snatch them from 'the flames'; from certain judgment. Try to teach them, try to encourage them.

For as scripture tells us, there will be more rejoicing over the one that was saved than over the many that didn't need to be saved. But Jude calls us to again show them mercy mixed with fear. Lest they drag us down with them, we have to try to lift them up without letting them corrupt us with their doubts. Thereby bringing a lost lamb back to the fold.

God, we admit that we have much in common with those who doubt. We aren't sure of everything, but we know for sure that you have snatched us from the fire. Help us to share that work of mercy with others.

Bobby Jones

December 18

Matthew 8:28–34

“What do you want with us, Son of God?” they shouted. ‘Have you come here to torture us before the appointed time?’”

Satan has stolen the lives of two men in our reading, taken them from their families, cut them off from the community and driven them to violence. When Jesus arrives, the possessed men address him as the “Son of God,” because Satan knows that Jesus is God.

Jesus cast the demons out of the men and into the pigs, causing the pigs to run into the lake and die. The men tending the herd of pigs ran into town to tell the townspeople what happened. When Jesus arrived, the townspeople asked Jesus to leave instead of welcoming him. They feared Jesus’ supernatural power, a power they had never seen before. Their concern was more about the loss of the pigs than about the deliverance of the demon-possessed men.

This passage makes me think about the old saying, “Keep your friends close, by your enemies even closer.” However, how do we keep the enemy of God and enemy of everything good, close enough to keep an eye on his schemes without letting him in? Our enemy Satan comes to steal and destroy as he did to the two men in the passage. Satan will do anything to see us fail God, hurt the people we love, and even ruin our own lives.

We must always keep watch for Satan as he will take every opportunity to enter our lives and demonize us.

As Christians and believers let us not fear Satan and let us walk in the light and live according to God’s truth and not Satan’s lies.

Heavenly Father we pray that you would surround us, protect us, and guide us. Father, we accept your grace, salvation and love. We thank you for all that you do.

Patty Noah

December 19

Galatians 3:23–29

If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.

As we remember Christ's birth and await the promise of His return, we are reminded we become heirs to the promise of Abraham through faith: the promise of peace and salvation, eternal holiness with the Lord and our Savior Jesus Christ.

Little children sit on Santa's lap asking for the newest toy and your spouse/teenager/parents ask for tools, books, clothes and the latest gadgets. But remember that the greatest give has been given. This great gift is available to all races, nations, genders, social or economic statuses. We cannot be too rich or too poor. Too black or too white. Too foreign or too American. And there is no layaway, no credit card debt, no guilt or disappointment.

No one shall ever be excluded from the family of God if there is faith in Christ Jesus. No matter where you stand; no matter what you think of yourself; no matter what another might say – Jesus gifts you with the promise of belonging. Of family. Of purpose. Of life.

You belong to Christ, who came into the world and yet was rejected by the world he loved. You belong to Christ who shed his blood, and died an innocent death on the cross. You belong to Christ who will return and gather all who are justified by grace and sanctified by faith. There you will gather with the children of God and together you will feast in the Kingdom of God, forever.

Giving God, by your grace we are your children. Help us to experience the gift of belonging. Thank you for the promise of life eternal in your family. Bless us this season and always. Amen.

Pastor Tara Fanton

December 20

Galatians 4:1–7

So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God.

According to Galatians 4, with the birth of Christ, we are no longer slaves, but the heirs of our own estates or our own lives. God gave us this great gift and made us his sons and daughters. He also made us his heirs. That is a gift. but it can also be a burden if we do not use the gift the way that God intended it.

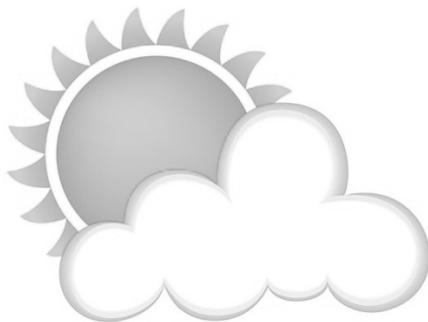
Anyone who owns property knows that if it is not cared for, it will return to its wild state with weeds, brambles, and garbage thrown about. So, it is with us if we do not care for our inheritance.

We think up a million excuses to justify our inactions. We are too busy; the kids have soccer games; our boss demands our time; we're too tired; or we need to clean the house. Our excuses could fill a book, yet we find time for the activities we really *want* to do.

So how do we keep our estate ready for God? Each day we should set aside a time to spend with Him. Our calendars reflect our true priorities. "But I don't have time," you argue. Pick a time to give to God. Skip the news (there is never anything good on it anyway); read the Bible in the bathtub; or get up a half hour early and read and pray before the day gets hectic. Read the Bible each night as a family. (When your kids tell you none of their friends read the Bible tell them, "God knows that. He also knows that you do.") How about when you're in your car stuck in traffic? Instead of yelling at the person who cut in front of you, talk to Jesus. Tell Him about your day. God made us heirs of his estate. We need to be good stewards of it.

Dear God, Please, forgive us when we neglect you for other activities. We know you have given us more than we need. Thank you for freeing us and giving us the gift of your son.

Barb LaPosta

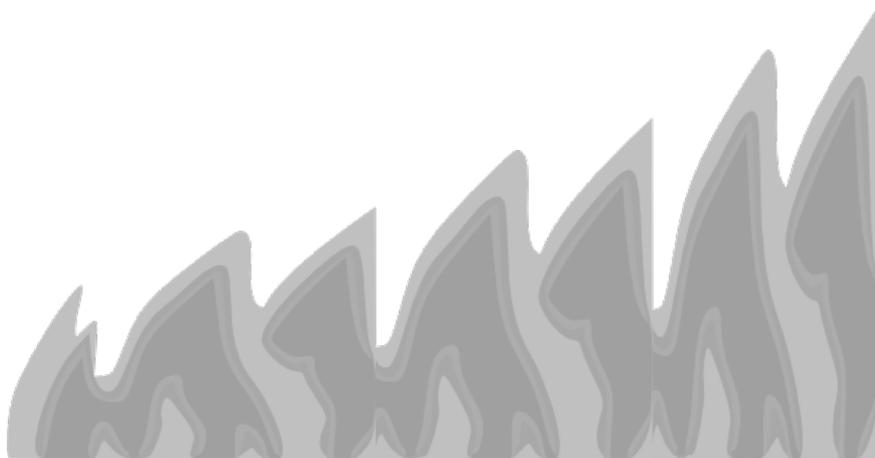


Week Four

Between Heaven and Hell

“I waited patiently for the Lord; he inclined to me and heard my cry. He drew me up from the pit of destruction, out of the miry bog, and set my feet upon a rock, making my steps secure.”

– Psalm 40



December 21

Revelation 21:1–8

See, the home of God is among mortals.

How many times have we heard that God will make us new? How about the earth and heaven will pass away? The lyrics of a song come to mind, “No More Night” by David Phelps: “earth and heaven shall soon pass away— it’s not a dream, God will make all things new that day.”

Did you ever stop to think about what that might look like and why it is happening in the first place? Looking into this passage, God sent an angel to John so that he could tell us what it represents and why it must happen.

In the previous passage, we learn Satan and unbelievers have been cast into the lake of fire. Verse 1 states the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. The “sea” here is a reference from the book of Revelation representing the evil and wickedness of mankind and the nations. In the new heaven, there is no remembrance of the agony and suffering from earth. There is also no death, mourning, or crying for the believers. In verse 4, God will wipe the tears of Christians showing the passing of all of these things. God will declare “It is done” a direct parallel of “It is finished” after the ultimate sacrifice on the cross.

We are all made new through our belief in the Lord our God. It is the same as the day we accept Him as our Savior. He erases our sin and makes us new then and on the day the first earth and heaven disappear a new heaven will begin allowing His believers to walk with Him. What a glorious day it will be!

Heavenly Father, we thank you for bringing us comfort in our agonies on earth and are even more thankful for your promise of a new life with you. Amen.

Stacy Riggs

December 22

Revelation 1:4–8

“I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “who is and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty.

The book of Revelation is not the book we generally turn to in order to read the Christmas story, but our passage today certainly tells the whole story of Jesus.

As we read this letter which is addressed to “the seven churches,” we may think the message is for specific churches “back in the day,” but that is not the case.

The word “seven” represents a complete whole, so the seven churches represents all the churches everywhere for all time. Yes, that includes us. This message is as relevant for us today as it was to the original hearers. And what a message it is!

This letter is a revelation *of Jesus by Jesus*. When Jesus calls himself the Alpha and Omega (the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet), Jesus is saying that He is the beginning and ending of all things, even humanity. So, what does it mean that God is the beginning of us and the ending of us? Let’s break it down and make it personal.

To say that God is the beginning of you means that God created you and has a plan for you. God doesn’t do anything by accident, so God created you because there is something He wants you to do that no one else can. (That’s pretty powerful, wouldn’t you say?)

To say that God is the ending of you means that one day you will return to God to give an account of your life and what you did with that life.

Now, here’s the kicker: since Jesus is the beginning and Jesus is the end, who do you suppose *must be* in the middle? That’s right

– Jesus! Jesus is the Alpha and the Omega of your life, and He wants to be your priority in-between.

Today’s passage reminds us that our salvation is the whole reason Jesus came in the first place: “To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood...to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen,” and Amen!

Lord Jesus, thank you for choosing me. I choose you. Help me to make you a priority in my daily life, and may I never forget the reason you came to earth in the first place: to save me. Amen.

Pastor Tina Hosler

Sunday, December 22nd
Fourth Sunday of Advent

Scripture Texts in Worship

Isaiah 7:10–16

Romans 1:1–7

Sermon Notes

December 23

Revelation 1:9–20

Do not be afraid... I have the keys of Death and of Hades.

The end of our Advent journey leaves us in a slightly uncomfortable position, grappling with the realities of the realm of God (heaven) and the realm of the dead (Hades/Hell). This week, we'd much rather be considering *only* the meek and mild child in the manger. How precious! It *is* sweet to hold a newborn baby, especially the newborn savior of the world. And yet, many of the readings of this season remind us of the profound (and even terrifying) significance of Jesus' birth for the earth and the realms above and below us.

Tomorrow night we will be celebrating the birth of the one who tore through the curtain between heaven and earth to come down to us, bringing the embodied presence of God with him. We begin again the story that will hit another breaking point on Easter morning as we declare "he is risen indeed!" And don't you forget, he brings the dead bodies out of the ground with him.

In our life of faith, we find ourselves in a *liminal* space. A place between heaven and hell, the powers of God and life on the one hand and sin and death on the other. Sometimes the grave seems more powerful to us: a new diagnosis, a loved one on hospice, a loss to suicide, or a life broken by sin. Other times God's power is on full display: a crowd gathered to hear the Christmas story, the birth of a new baby, the baptism of someone new to the faith. We find ourselves with feet on solid ground, looking up, hoping to escape the power of what lies below. From John of Patmos we are given assurance: our Lord has the keys to death. Those in captive to sin will be released! Those in captive to death will emerge victorious. Spoiler alert: in the end, JESUS WINS.

God, with eyes toward heaven, we give thanks for your power at work in our lives and world. Free us from whatever holds us in bondage. Vanquish our eternal foe. Amen. Joel Peterson

December 24

Titus 2:11–14

“For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people.”

It is the day before Christmas and many of us sit just hours away from the anticipated ripped wrappings and torn boxes, hot chocolate and candy canes. Santa and toys, gift cards and garland. It is a time full of smiles and children’s laughter. Rich smells and full bellies. Families return home and households are full again. What could be better? What more could we want for Christmas?

Titus is a young man who was raised up under Paul to preach and teach, leading communities to a fuller understanding of Jesus and the grace brought through Him. Titus had a great challenge to teach those in the church to be holy in every possible way (vv. 2–10). Because we are the recipients of God’s grace and salvation, Paul says (v. 11), we should reflect the character and engage in the behaviors taught in verses 2–10.

In the midst of a broken world, especially in the hustle and bustle of the Christmas season, it is so easy to lose track of the character of God, the character we are to emulate. It is easy to buy into the selfish desires of the world. So what more could we want for Christmas? – That we shall express the love of Christ who offers his salvation to the all people.

May our greatest gift be sharing Christ the Savior. May our lives prove worthy of the gospel. May we gather together this Christmas Eve and tell the story of Christ’s humble birth, as we wait with blessed hope for the appearing of the glory of Jesus!

God of salvation, may I see and experience Your grace this Christmas. Help me to share Your Truth, and may lives be changed this holiday. May Your grace and salvation come to all people. In the name of Christ, the Savior I pray, Amen.

Pastor Tara Fanton

Of the Father's love begotten
ere the worlds began to be,
he is Alpha and Omega,
he the Source, the Ending he,
of the things that are, that have been,
and that future years shall see,
evermore and evermore!

Aurelius Prudentius





Contributors:

Gary Baughman
Karen Cowan
Pastor Tara Fanton
Pastor Tina Hosler
Bobby Jones
Barb LaPosta
Patty Noah
Joel Peterson

Stacy Riggs
Susan Spencer-Smith
Peggy Strain
Stephanie Visnic
Kelly Ward
Aggie Wilttrout

Front Cover: Stacy Riggs

Paris Presbyterian Church
127 Steubenville Pike
Burgettstown, PA 15021
(724) 729-3450
www.pariseco.net

A Member of the Evangelical Covenant Order of Presbyterians
(ECO), Rivers of Life Presbytery

Led by the Holy Spirit, the mission of **Paris Presbyterian Church** is
to answer God's call to be His faithful people by:
*Reaching out to others through mission, care, and comfort.
Sharing Jesus' message of love & salvation in worship & service.
Nurturing the faith and life of His children.*