

Advent 2025: At the Movies

Luke 2: 11-12

***Your savior is born today in
David's city. He is Christ the Lord.
This is a sign for you: you will find
a newborn baby wrapped snugly
and lying in a manger.***

Christmas Eve at Shady Grove

4:00 Family Friendly Worship

5:30 Contemporary Worship

7:30 Traditional Worship

11:00 Traditional Worship

All services include candlelight and communion. Activity bags and glowsticks available for children. Nursery at 4:00, 5:30, and 7:00.

A Christmas Carol *Advent Small Group*

Join on Tuesdays in December afrom 6:00-7:30 pm or participate in the women's Bible study at 1:00 pm for an Advent study based on the classic story of *A Christmas Carol*. Contact Mary Elder to RSVP and for details.

Tuesday, December 2

Tuesday, December 9

Tuesday, December 16

For more information or to get connected to these events, contact MaryElder@ShadyGroveUMC.org!

A Muppet Christmas Carol December 5, 6-8 pm

Christmas Market
December 6, 9 am- 2 pm

Parent's Night Out
December 12 5:30-9 pm

Sheltering Arms Caroling
December 14 1:00 pm

**Christmas Concert &
Birthday Party for Jesus**
Helping Hands gifts due
December 14, 4pm

Service of Loss and Light
December 18, 6:30 pm

All Ages Caroling
December 21, 1-3 pm

In the devotions ahead, you will reflections from members of Shady Grove, prayers, scripture, as well as photos from last Christmas and the past year in the life of our congregation.

Our wish is that these reflections remind you that Christmas does not need to look like a Hallmark movie, and that God's love at work will burst through even when we don't have the perfect tree, best presents, or right words.

As you read, reflect on your own memories of holidays past, and where you sense the "true meaning" for the season amid the imperfections. We are so blessed to be Church together here and around the world. And God is at work among us, loving us and leading us towards Christ's redemptive love regardless of how big or small our hearts may feel, whether we feel the angels guiding us or just have to trust that God is there.



December 1: Welcome Home, by Tracy Traylor Fabricant

The kindergarten classroom is a very unique place. For some, it's the very first time that they've been away from mom, dad, and their home filled with pets, siblings, and toys and it is a bit difficult assimilating to all of the new rules and structure which classrooms thrive on. For others, they are seasoned students, having been at day care since they were 12 weeks old and know the drill and fall in line easily. Others may have just had a year or two of half day preschool and might need a little hand holding, but have been to "school" before.

No matter what their past experience has been, as a kindergarten teacher, you become all things to them when they walk through your classroom door. You're a mom or dad (many times I've been called that by someone other than my 2 children!), you're a nurse, you're a judge (this most often happens on the playground!), you're a dietitian, and of course, you're a teacher of many, many things—anywhere from academics to social skills to hygiene, all the things get covered during that kindergarten year in the kindergarten classroom!

Kindergarten teachers set the tone for how the rest of "big school" will be thought of in these little ones. It can be a very positive, exciting experience or it can be a tremendous, toilsome burden. In my classroom, during the months of August and September, I spend a good majority of my time creating a community, a family, and a place in which everyone feels like they belong. By the time September is over, if I've done my job well and created this community, all of the children have learned names, learned the backgrounds of others, and made friends that may last throughout their public-school years and beyond. This has really been a treat with the creation of Facebook and friend connections, as I've watched my kindergartners grow up and be at the graduation parties of each other, and even sometimes in the wedding party of their tablemate from Room C-5 at Pinchbeck Elementary.

With all of this being said, by October, I stop saying, "Good Morning," as the children walk into the classroom and begin saying, "Welcome Home!" At first, it is shocking for them to hear. They respond in different ways — "What? Mrs. Fabricant, this is NOT my house" —said with an eye roll. They may say, "This is a classroom, not a home." Some say, "You're so silly, Mrs. Fabricant." However, by the end of the year, they have learned that I'm not giving up, I keep saying it, and they start to say things back to me, like, "Thanks! What are we going to do today?" or "Hi! Guess what happened to me last night!" or "Hello, Mrs. Fabricant, Can I run to the library and then come back

home?” They begin to understand what we’ve created, what we have with each other, and they realize just how valuable our relationship, our community, our ‘family’ actually is.

This summer, Pastor Darcey led us in a six-week study about The Lord’s Prayer. During the first part of the study, she focused on the opening of the prayer when we say, “Our Father.” In that part of the prayer she talked about, “Our *Father*”. She discussed that it is a statement about to which family we belong, which family we are included in, and of course, it is the family of God. We use *our* Father, and not *my* Father because we are all a family. “Our *Father*” is a statement about which family we belong to—we are included in the family of God, just as kindergartners who are in a class together are in a class family.

So, as I write this, I have been thinking about how I want to begin my Advent Season and what I want to focus on during this season. I am thinking about how it all began in that stable, in the manger, because there was no room. I think about the Innkeeper who did not turn them away, but instead offered all he had left, and said, “Welcome.” I think about the shepherds who came to visit Joseph and Mary, who said to them, “Welcome.” I think about the Wise Men who came to offer gifts in essence saying, “Welcome,” to the baby. And I think about Jesus, coming to us as a newborn baby and being welcomed by so many. God sent him to us in order to show us how to live, to show us how to love, to show us how to serve, and so much more. I think Advent is a time that is really about God, *our Father*, the Father of *our* family, saying to us all, ‘Welcome Home.’

God, thank you for being the loving parent who always makes room for us and welcomes us home. Amen.



December 2: Hope, by Doug Dwyer

2 Corinthians 5: 16-21

The ultimate Christian hope is for us to be accepted into heaven for our service and love of God over our entire life here on earth. However, there are additional hopes that we have. There is our hope for a better life for ourselves and family. Hope for our children to have a successful future and life ahead for themselves. Our hope for the world to find peace in a troubled situation of power and greed.

Ultimately, we as Christians desire for the prevenient grace of God to work on the hearts and minds of people around the world so that everyone can find a way to serve God and love other people less fortunate. We hope that a positive future will one day overcome the negative and there will come a lot more happiness in the world in which we are citizens. The Advent season, and Hope Candle, remind us that these hopes are not futile, and we cannot give up that spark of hope.

God, thank you for keeping your promises to us, for delivering us, and guiding us in the pain and despair we often face. Help me to have hope and serve you to make a better future for everyone, knowing that you are at work in and around us already, and that we are invited to join in your work for hope for the world. Amen.



December 3: Is Your Hope God's Plan?, By Buz Edwards

Proverbs 19:21 CEB

Many plans are in a person's mind, but the Lord's purpose will succeed.

I love old movies. So, when I saw *It's a Wonderful Life* listed as one of Shady Grove's chosen Advent Movies I had to watch it again. I've seen it more times than I can remember but when I queued it up, I realized something. It's one of those movies that I rarely see the beginning because I always come upon it while I'm channel surfing and tune it in after its started.

I watched the opening scenes where young George Bailey's hopes and dreams for his future are revealed along with some of his forgotten accomplishments. I could not help but think of my own hopes as a child and as a young man entering the work force. I remember well wondering what my life's accomplishments would be as the realities of working for a living became apparent. What would I be remembered for, if anything? Would the things I've done in this life ever mean anything? It was not until I accepted Jesus as my Lord and Savior that I realized God measures our accomplishments and successes much differently than we do.

As George contemplated suicide, his angel showed him how his life had affected so many people and changed the world around him for the better. I have never been so fortunate to have my own angel open my eyes to see the world as God sees it. But I have, from time to time, been offered glimpses by friends and family that love me. Moments in my life, many forgotten, where something I said or did had a positive impact on someone's life. God will judge each of us based on how we have loved our neighbor. It's our worldly accomplishments and victories that ultimately will be forgotten.

Heavenly Father, thank you for the Hope Christmas brings us, help us to see the world as you see it and help us to love our neighbor as you love us.

Amen

December 4: The Hope, by Bobbie Sue Tunstall

2 Corinthians 4:17-18 NIV

For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.

All throughout my adolescence, I can recall my mom saying to me, “Things have a way of working themselves out.” Most of the situations I worried about were trivial, some certainly more serious. But I believe in her own way, she was encouraging me to hold fast to hope, and trust in the way God would work these situations out. In times of uncertainty, where do we place our hope? As Mary and Joseph made their journey to Bethlehem, I can imagine there must have been some times that they felt uncertain—times of weakness, hardship and even fear. However, it’s evident, by their walking so closely with God, their hope was firmly in what they could not see. And hope is the anticipation that God is working even if we can’t see it. May you be blessed this Advent season as you place your trust in The Hope of salvation, that is Christ our Savior.

God, Grant us the hope that comes from trusting you. Amen.



December 5: The Paradox of Hope, by William Wentzien

Jeremiah 33:14–15 NIV

The days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will fulfill the good promise I made... I will make a righteous Branch sprout from David's line; he will do what is just and right in the land.

Hope has always been one of the more challenging aspects of the Advent season for me. In our modern usage, hope often feels uncertain—something we say when we're not quite sure. "I hope Bob submitted that report." "I hope Jane called that client." "I hope I turned off the coffee pot." As a manager, I've even said, "Hope is the first step on the road to disappointment."

However, the hope we celebrate in Advent is very different. The Bible's definition of hope isn't "wishful thinking". The New Testament language is one of joyful expectation. We don't just hope Christ will come again, we know He will. So why do we still use the word "hope" instead of something stronger? It is there because of its ambiguity. Hope shows that the story is never ending. Every year we Hope in our Christmas story and in the 2000+ years since its origin, each year yields a new understanding in our relationship with our Creator. Like a much anticipated gift, we hope in what this year will bring in our deepening relationship with Him. The bit of unknown is what makes this so exciting.

Hope and faith are also deeply connected. Faith believes God's promises; hope looks forward to their fulfillment. This brings us to the meaning of Hope in the Old Testament, that usage speaks more to trust. We trust that God will fulfill his promises for relationship with us—queue the birth of Christ. I believe that without hope, we cannot truly have peace, joy, or love—and without peace, joy, and love, our hope cannot stand. Hope anchors peace because it trusts God's control. It fuels joy because we know His promises are sure. And it nurtures love because we rest in His redemption.

Lord, teach us to hope as You intended—not with uncertainty, but with joyful expectation. Strengthen our faith to trust in Your promises, and let our hope anchor our peace, fuel our joy, and deepen our love as we await Your coming. Amen.

December 6: Charlie Brown Trees, by Robert Grotjohn

Isaiah 53:1-2

My favorite Christmas movie may be the 1965 television special, *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, with its jazzy score and the dazzling revitalization of the raggedy little Christmas tree through the redemptive unity of the children who had earlier laughed at Charlie Brown's choice. That raggedy tree recalls to me when my wife and I were a young married couple.

We lived in a small apartment with one, then two children. There wasn't lot of room for a Christmas tree, and there wasn't a lot of money to buy one. Our son had cut a Christmas tree out of green construction paper and decorated it at his preschool, so we taped it to the wall and placed our presents next to the wall beneath the tree. A few years later, we got fancier and made a skinny pyramid from used cardboard boxes, wrapped it in Christmas paper, decorated it with various small toys, and topped it with a pinwheel. That was our very special Christmas tree. There was none other in the world like it. It was the best tree ever.

By the time we became grandparents, we could afford to get a tree, but we didn't. We had returned from several years living abroad in the spring, moving to the same city as our son so that we could be close to our grandchildren. It was 2020, the first summer of COVID-19, so we bubbled together with our son and his family. In our bubble, we often watched the children, inventing different activities to share with them. We made an even more glorious cardboard-and-wrapping-paper tree than the one we had made with their father and auntie so many years before. This time, though, we got even fancier with some sparkly tinsel garlands, tiny shiny ornaments, little blinking lights, and a bright silver star. That was then the best Christmas tree ever.

I am not sure how this is an Advent meditation, but, like Charlie Brown and his friends, our family came together to turn what little resembled a Christmas tree into something that looked pretty good to us. We took the humblest of materials and made them better, and that is what God has done for us by being born in humble surroundings and rising for our salvation. We are redeemed. Glory to the new-born King.

Glory to God! Amen.

December 7: How the Grinch Stole Christmas but Received Peace, by Matthew Franklin

In *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, the Grinch leads a life of solitude but for his dog, Max. While the company of a dog can heal many wounds, it unfortunately is not a substitute for the life-giving community of other people. The Grinch has spent years watching the Whos from afar and has come to the conclusion that if he takes away every wreath, every package, and every crumb of celebration, the Whos' joy will collapse. He believes peace is fragile—easily stolen and easily broken—just as his was as a child. Yet, when Christmas morning comes, the Whos gather anyway. They clasp hands. They sing. Their peace is not rooted in possessions or perfection. It's rooted in who they are together.

Advent invites us into that same kind of peace. Not a peace that denies hardship or insists everything is fine, but a peace that persists even when the world feels stripped bare. God's peace doesn't depend on circumstances aligning; it rises from the deep truth that Love is already here, already among us, and already binding us together.

It is this kind of peace, the stubborn, grounded, lived peace, which softens hearts. The Grinch isn't transformed by fear, shame, or another hurling Bible verses and "Christian-ese" at him. His heart changes when he sees a community embodying peace in the face of loss. Their song becomes a witness. Their steadiness becomes a message. Their unity becomes an invitation.

The world still needs that kind of witness. Advent peace is not passive—it's something we practice. In a culture that prizes winning, consuming, and shouting the loudest, people will know us by our actions of peace. Our neighbors will know us by the ways we choose compassion over retaliation, presence over perfection, justice over comfort, and community over isolation. We choose peace not because of the material things we have, but in spite of them.

God of steady and stubborn peace, help us live the kind of love that softens hearts. Make our lives a song that invites others into our joyous peace. Amen.



December 8: Oops, Missed a Page, By Barry Burkholder

Isaiah 26:3 NRSV

Those of steadfast mind you keep in peace—a peace because they trust in you.

It happened over seventy years ago. I was about three at the time, and I must admit that I barely remember it. I had a part in a church's Christmas program. The church was another church on our three-point charge. I was sitting on my mother's lap and "reading" a children's book, *The Night Before Christmas*. Actually, I had heard my mother read it so many times that I knew the words and I knew which words went with each page. My role was to "read" the words and turn the pages at the appropriate times. I was doing my part and everything was going well when my little fingers accidentally gripped two pages and when I saw the wrong picture appear in my little book, I in a clear, distinct, and forceful voice said "Oops, missed a page!" and proceeded to listen to the sound of the entire congregation's laughter.

The other day, I was shopping in Walmart. As I looked around, I saw shelves and shelves, rows and rows, entire buildings packed full of decorations, wrapping paper and bows, tree ornaments, candy and cookies, and most anything else that had to do with Christmas. It occurred to me that somehow, somewhere along the way, we as a society have indeed missed a page. With all of the Christmas "stuff" there was hardly anything there that had anything to do with Christ. Over the years—perhaps decades—Christmas has taken on a whole new meaning for many in our culture.

Now please don't get me wrong; there is warmth in Scrooge's enlightenment. There is joy—even glee—in Santa Claus. And certainly, there is a certain glow to be felt in in most of the Hallmark movies. But let's be careful not to miss a page and neglect to remember that *Christmas* begins with Christ.

Dear Lord, throughout the busyness of this season, keep me mindful of the peace that comes from focusing on you. As I prepare for the arrival of Christmas, help me to be a witness for your love and grace. In Jesus' name, Amen.

December 9: A Changed Heart, by Katie Krickovic

Ezekial 36:26-28

The Grinch has always been a staple Christmas movie for me. Every time that I watch it, I am reminded of the joy that only God's love brings me. At the beginning of the movie, the Grinch starts out grouchy, mean, and convinced that Christmas doesn't matter. The story then turns around when the Grinch sees a joy that doesn't depend on presents under the tree, decorations, food, or perfection. The Whos in Whoville still hold hands, sing, and celebrate the love they have for each other even though the Grinch took everything away. Seeing that genuine joy slowly changed the Grinch's heart and made it grow three sizes bigger, because he finally understood the meaning of Christmas.



Ezekial 36:26-28 says, "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow me and be careful to keep my laws. Then you will live in the land I gave your ancestors; you will be my people and I will be your God."

For us, Advent can sometimes feel like how the Grinch did in the beginning. We often enter the month of December carrying a lot of stress from the year we've been through, because maybe it didn't go how we expected it to or we wish we would have accomplished more of our goals. But these verses remind us that joy isn't dependent on our circumstances. It isn't just in our lives in the happy moments, then absent when we go through something hard. The Bible tells us that joy is a constant fruit that comes from a deep-rooted peace and trust that comes from having a relationship with God. Once we recognize this and become thankful for the many ways that God is working in our lives, our hearts will be transformed and filled with God's love.

Lord, soften my heart and fill me with the joy that only Your presence can bring. Help me to recognize Your love at work in every part of my life, and help me to see your goodness in every situation.



December 10: The Miracles of Advent, by Garren Shipley

There are miracles all over Advent if you take the time to think about them. Many of them aren't rooted in the divinity of Jesus. Rather, they're found in the basic humanity of Mary, Joseph, and all those around them making the choice to love.

For starters, for Mary to be betrothed and with child would have been a big no-no. Yet she chose to continue with the pregnancy and believe the Angel's message. She knew what would be said and the shame that would come, but she trusted God.

Meanwhile, Joseph has this young woman come to him and tells him she's pregnant with the son of God. I can imagine his reaction: "She really expects me to believe that? I was born at night but not last night." Then an angel comes to him in a dream and tells him the same thing that Mary was told. This fantastic story was true. He stood by Mary, and that is a miracle of faith.

Christmas Eve brings us more miracles. Mary and Joseph make the trip to Nazareth to Bethlehem. It's about 90 miles, then a slow, grueling trip by foot or on a donkey, and

she's very pregnant. They make the trip and there's not a room left to be had. The innkeeper says they can stay in the back with the animals, not unlike being told you can sleep in the parking lot. And there tiny Yeshua is born. After that, the world changed.

Love that came as a demonstration of the love our creator has for creation.

I have no clerical training, nor do I profess any sort of profound insights into the world, but I do think that what brings those outside of faith into faith isn't words, it's action. What brings people to God is not a sermon. It's not a thoughtful reflection on apologetics. It's love. God's love. Love your neighbor as yourself. We love, because God first loved us.

Why did these people set up this free school? Why did these people set up the kitchen and start feeding people? Why did these people bring all this equipment and start treating illnesses, even when they may be in danger themselves?

This is the message of all these miracles: God loves us so much that God came to us and sacrificed himself for us. Every single human walking the face of the Earth is made in the image of God. Jesus said that when we do for the least of these, we do so for Christ. Mary had faith, and acted on her love of God. Joseph had faith, and acted on his love of God. My favorite part of asking the blessing on a meal is telling God why we're asking for it. "To be the light and hands of your son, Jesus Christ."

That's it. That's what we're supposed to do. Love one another, and be God's light in the world. Not ask others to be the light, or force others to be the light, but a personal commandment to each of us: you. No, you. Go out. Love all. Help them. Show them my love. The love of Jesus is for everyone. Full stop. No qualifiers needed.

God uses us mere mortals to share his love. It's the miracle of Advent, and it's the miracle of everyday life, if we live it.

God, help us to be the light and hands of your son, Jesus Christ. Amen.

December 11: Devotion by the fourth and fifth grade Sunday School class

Psalm 121:8

The Lord will watch over your coming and going both now and forevermore.

As we prepare for the birth of Jesus, let's make a list of ways the Lord touches our hearts; to share, participate, sing or however you are led. Yes, God is watching over us as He promised to guide us this joyful season.

Use a Advent calendar and come to church for Christmas service also give things to people who can't afford it.

Read the Bible, and come to church, sharing things that some people can't afford to get.

Bella willitts



Sydney McKelvey

- going to church
- lighting up tree
- advent calendar

They way I get ready for Jesus is setting up an advent calendar.

- Bronwyn

Addie Pitcher

1. Read the Bible

2. Singing Christmas carols

3. Going to see Christmas lights

4. Decorating for Christmas

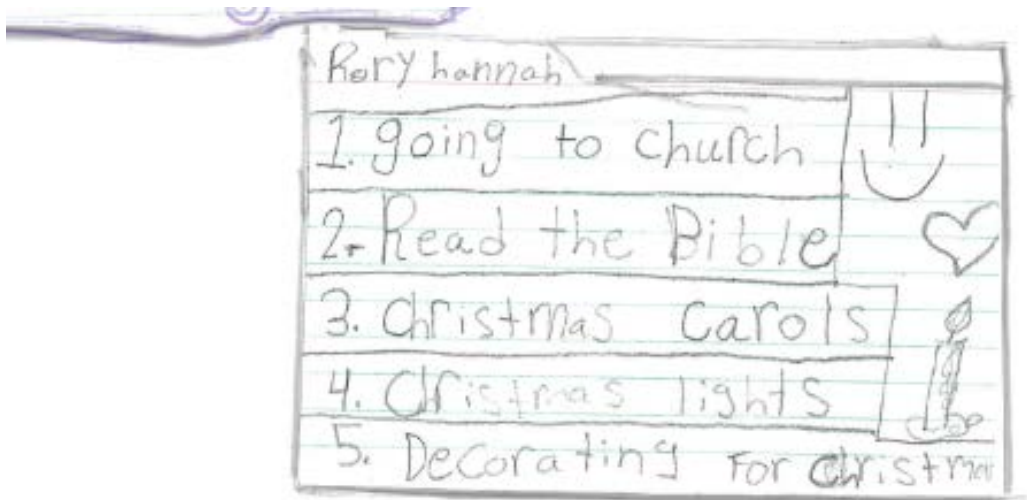
Elizabeth

advent calendar.
going to church to worship God.

Christmas Carol.

COCO yummy!





Dear God, thank You for how you
have blessed us and thank you for
providing for us and thank you for
sending your son to save us, Amen.

from fourth and
fifth grade class

Dear God, thank you for how you have blessed us and thank you for providing for us,
and thank you for sending your son to save us. Amen.



December 12: Peace, by Doug Dwyer

Isaiah 9:2-6

Matthew 24:6-8

Jesus stated that there would be wars and rumors of wars. Still, it is so sad that wars seem to start, and then they are very difficult to end. It would be nice if people could just be satisfied with what they have and not try to take someone else's land or property. I remember a television program that showed how two citizens of another fictitious country went to war with each other because one group was black on the right side of their body and the other group was black on the left side. This is still all too common in our world. Why can't we just accept people who are different and not become so angry just because they look, or talk, or have a different culture?

Jesus is the Prince of Peace. To follow Jesus is to bring peace to the lives of our family, friends and our neighbors, whether they are like us or not—not to become angry just because they may be different. Let us reach out our hand to the others in fellowship and friendship. Peace is better than anger and war. How can you extend that olive branch to those around you?

May the peace of God delight to dwell with you and to bless you. Amen.



December 13: Community at Christmas and Beyond, by David Guion

Luke 2:8-20 (shepherds)

Matthew 2:1-20 (wise men)

John 19:38-42 (Sanhedrin and the wealthy)

The Holdovers is one of my new favorite Christmas-time movies. It's set at an elite New England boarding school in the early 1970's over Christmas break. Without giving too much away (in case you haven't seen it): the main characters are stuck together at the boarding school over the break either against their will or due to lack of resources. Over the course of the film, we see community and connection form between a teacher, a student whose parents choose other plans over spending Christmas with him, and a cafeteria worker. I really appreciated how they bonded over their shared humanity and eventual vulnerability. When Mary Elder wrote that we were going to use Christmas films as a vehicle for this Advent and preparation for Christmas, this movie jumped to my mind.

When there's trouble and strife in the world, as there is now and has been throughout our history, one thing that gives me hope and peace is community in the Church. We are not alone, and we can connect with folks in similar environments as ours as well as folks whose circumstance and station would otherwise keep us apart. Sometimes that connection comes in person and sometimes through shared prayers and resources, etc.

As Darcey has mentioned in service, I like to think about Christians gathering throughout the world and praying and trying to live out the Lord's Prayer. While the shepherds of low social status, respected wise men, and wealthy and connected Jewish followers of Christ like Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus did not necessarily "hang out", we see all of them follow God's prompting toward Christ. In the early church, as recorded in Acts, we also see rich Christians hanging out with Christians in material need and sharing with them. Christmas brings me hope via Christ's invitation with the Spirit to live in a new kind of community that bonds over our shared need of Christ and our desire to live out his call to make disciples and love God and neighbor as self.

Lord God, when we feel stressed by strife and dissension in the world, help us to see the hope that comes from the love and connection of Christian community. Help us also invite and welcome others into that community. Amen.

December 14: It's a Wonderful Life, by Becky Roberts

Acts 17:26-27

Matthew 5:13-16

Growing up, there were about 3 years in a row when we watched *It's a Wonderful Life* at Christmas. I confess that I haven't seen it in its entirety since I was a child, and much of the story is fuzzy in my memory. What I do remember has stuck with me: a person who feels his life has become stale and mediocre, who feels things have gotten outside his control and are now tedious and frustrating, and who (when given exactly what he asks for to try and 'fix' his problem) realizes that each part of his life, good and bad, have formed not only who he is but what his family and community looks like. Growing up overseas in a communal culture, this movie reinforced what I already knew: no person is an island. Every choice you make matter, and will shape who you are and influence the people around you. What makes life wonderful isn't having good luck or being smart or well off; it's the people you have and the choice to make the most of every situation.

Growing up, I also very often mixed up and confused the titles of the two movies: *It's a Wonderful Life* and *Life is Beautiful*. These movies are really nothing alike, but the similarities in title would catch me, so (illogical though it is) the two are firmly connected in my mind. If you haven't seen *Life is Beautiful* yet, I highly recommend it. It's an Italian film set during the time of the Nazi rise to power and the Holocaust. Whereas George Bailey (*It's a Wonderful Life*) spends most of the film bemoaning his existence and the situations, whether in or out of his control, that have brought him to this point, Guido Orefice (*Life is Beautiful*) spends every onscreen moment choosing to take the situations handed to him and make them beautiful—even within the horrors of a concentration camp.

There are an interesting few verses in the book of Acts where Paul is speaking to the people of Athens. He tells them that God "allotted the times of [peoples'] existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps find [God]". I believe both these movies can be viewed as a valuable reminder of what Paul is saying—that we are here for a purpose, and that purpose is the furthering of God's Kingdom. The 'where' and 'when' of my existence may be frustrating or even painful for me at times, *and* God has made it so, so that I will search for God, to look for the good, to see the beauty and the wonder that is creation and that can be my life and my circumstances.

The lesson that George learns comes almost too late—he receives the miracle of a second chance and, therefore, is able to learn the lesson. His life doesn't change; his perspective and motivation does – he begins to choose to see the light. Guido, on the other hand, reminds us that if we *start* with the right attitude, with a desire to make every day beautiful regardless of what comes our way, we get to be the light. We can foster joy daily and stave off the temptation into despair and depression—not only for ourselves, but for everyone around us. We don't have to simply “make the most” of a bad situation, but rather we can take a bad situation and *turn* it into good for the Glory of God. For those of us who have already found God in our time and place, we are then that “city on a hill” for everyone to see, drawing others to God in the time in which they have also been placed.

God, guide us through our seasons of darkness and despair. Help us to turn to you to lead us and help us be beacons of hope and love even in hard times. Amen.



December 15: Joy to the World, by Susan Alexander Jenkins

James 1:2 NIV

Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds,

With so much going on during the Christmas season, it is important to remember to choose joy. One definition of joy states that joy is "a deep and lasting sense of happiness and contentment rooted in spiritual realities and the presence of God, rather than being solely dependent on external circumstances." We often get so wrapped up in the busyness of the holidays and our happiness wanes as we become tired and disillusioned.

In the movie, "Elf", Buddy finds happiness in the simplicities of life in New York during Christmas. But what if he represents the need for all of us to seek out joy each day, in all circumstances? The world teaches us we need material things in order to be happy, but the Bible teaches us we can choose joy, despite our circumstances, because we are children of God. God's love conquers all and is all we need to have joy in our lives. So, when life seems too busy, too hectic, too heavy to bear, stop and take a moment to retrain your thoughts on the joy that comes from the Father. Wishing you a Christmas holiday filled with joy.

Dear heavenly Father, keep me focused on the joy that came into the world through the birth of your son, Jesus. Help me to choose joy in all circumstances in life as you are with me through all things. Amen



December 16: The Holy Spirit in Us, by John Elza

Luke 2:1-20

The movie *Elf* is by far one of my favorite Christmas movies. It is hilarious, heart-touching, and an amazing movie to watch with family. My family has a tradition where we always make sure to watch it together each year (sometimes multiple times!!!). My favorite part of the movie, however, is the scene in Central Park. Buddy was sent to New York by Santa and has had an extremely rough time trying to fit in with not only the people of New York City, but also his new family he has found. The conflicts that have arisen from his father due to this have weighed heavy in his mind, and after a recent argument he is deep in his emotions. After seeing Santa hung up in the park, however, he immediately stops thinking and rushes to help him, even continuing after a very unkind welcome. What Santa says in this scene resonates with me—there is little Christmas spirit in the modern world, but the fact that Buddy still believes is inspiring.

In the real world outside of the cinema, I feel like this is something we should each take to heart. Just like the Christmas spirit, the Holy Spirit is in each of us, and, especially at Christmastime, it is essential to remind ourselves of that fact. In Luke, the shepherds were in the field tending to their sheep, similar to the scene in the movie. Suddenly, many angels come down and start singing songs of praise, and while the shepherds are originally terrified, they realize the beauty of God in this moment and run to spread the miracle with others. In this year's holiday season, I hope each one of us can remember both the theme from *Elf* and the shepherds in Luke. While we don't have to reenact what they did, we can still do small things, such as serving in our community during the holidays, or welcoming people who don't have a place to go during Christmas. Small things like this can really make a difference, and in the season of giving and celebration, it is up to us as Christians to spread the love of Jesus.

Dear Lord, during this holiday season I pray for you to give us more opportunities to serve you. This is the season of giving, and Lord I pray we are able to do your work by making others happy, and strengthening our bond with you while we do it. Give us the gift of worship and service, and allow us to enjoy this Christmas season with family and friends, possibly new ones we make during this time. In your name I pray. Amen.

December 17: Joy, by Doug Dwyer

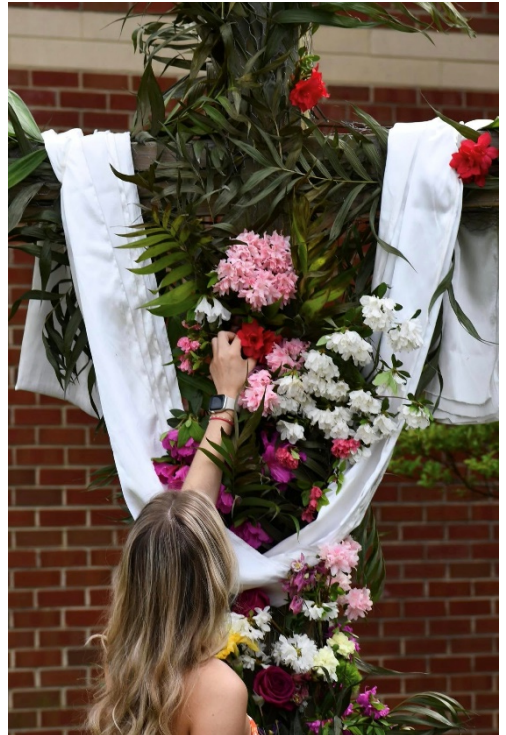
Philippians 4:4

The third Sunday in advent is Joy Sunday. In some circles it is referred to as the Pink Sunday because many churches use a rose-colored candle on that Sunday instead of purple. The color purple for Advent has a connection with the other purple season of the church calendar, Lent. Both are seasons for reflection, repentance, and preparing ourselves. The church felt that during the middle of Lent and Advent there should be a Sunday for a reprieve from the dispirited time so they allowed a Joy Sunday to be placed during both seasons.

The Joy that is to be a Christian is a major consideration in our lives. We think how God loved us so much to bring Jesus the Christ into the world to give us true joy in living. I know there are times when people cannot bring themselves to that state of joy in living. Their life seems hopeless to them and they see nothing but darkness in their future. However, there are times that we can also come to have a born-again experience. The darkness fades away and joy comes in to replace it. I think of the old spiritual song "Oh Happy Day, oh happy day, when Jesus washed my sins away."

In these days when it is hard to find true joy in our lives, we need to try to find a way to the joy of being a part of the household of the faithful, seek out and find that joy of loving God, and place God number one in our lives. Oh, happy is the day when we become truly connected to God and our sins are washed away.

Dear God, Thank you for the joy that we find in you. Amen.



December 18: Reflections on Christmas adapted from Eleanor Eckel

Daniel 6:19-22

Do you have a favorite Christmas movie?

The Nightmare before Christmas with Jack Skellington, but I haven't seen the whole thing (because it is too scary).

What is the reason we celebrate Christmas?

It helps us remember when Jesus was born! And Jesus is God's son and has the powers of God.

What have you learned recently about God?

We read about Daniel in the lion's den, and the book was called *The Scary Sleepover*. Daniel was in the den and there were lions there, but they didn't hurt him. And an angel came to protect Daniel so he wasn't so scared.

Describing a story about Daniel

There's a special moment with the golden lion, and the lions [in the den] point us to Jesus. People wanted to get Daniel in trouble for praying to God, sort of like people wanted to make Jesus get in trouble and die on the cross. We call it a Jesus moment—when someone did something and Jesus is there, or when someone does something like what Jesus would do.

Dear Jesus, help us remember you are with us when we are scared, and to look for you when we are feeling sad. Thank you for loving us and being with us. Amen.

Is there anything we do at Christmas time that really reminds you of God's love?

Cupcake Wars!

Does that remind you of God's love?

Not really... It reminds me of my love of cupcakes!



December 19: Joy, It's a Wonderful Life

Ephesians 2: 8-10

While rewatching pieces of *It's a Wonderful Life*, I am struck by how George's joy and meaning in life come from being a helper, friend, and ally to those who are struggling. So much so, that when he has truly lost all sense of joy and hope, his own reasoning is that his life does not have purpose to those he loves. Then, when he is saved from those deepest depths, Clarence the angel has gotten George to almost immediately tap back into his nature as we see George guiding Clarence through the city with a gentle hand on his back, defending Mr. Gower, and being a personable and compassionate friend.

This movie has stood the test of time, in part, because so many people can understand that experience of having no joy, even when we may feel like we should. In this season, with its early dark nights, overwhelming demands on our time, money, and energy, and often freshly felt grief as we go through holidays, it can be easy to lose our sense of joy and purpose. We may intellectually "know" that we have innumerable blessings, or *want* to have the faith that God's love is carrying us through the seasons of pain. Yet if the hard days, the loneliness and longing, the financial struggles, the self-doubt, and the exhaustion creep in and make that difficult— you are not alone.

That doesn't change that God has a purpose for you. You are created to do good things, and while you aren't perfect, you are already enough. Each act of kindness, generosity, and love for others can be a micro-source of joy and purpose. You have already done good, and served God in countless ways you don't even know or remember. So, ask yourself what small things you can do to spread goodness and to continue living into the joyful, abundant life God has invited us to.

God, you are a compassionate creator. When we lose our hope and joy, we thank you that you are still with us, loving us and guiding us. Be with us in our doubt, and comfort those in places of despair and longing, as only you can. Amen.



December 20: Memories of the Enterprise, by Garren Shipley

Mark 12:41-44

I got a lesson recently from a treasured memory from 1983. On the whole, things were getting better that Christmas. The bitter recession of the early 1980s was coming to an end, and unemployment was starting to drop for the first time in a long time. But not everywhere. At the foot of the mountains in East Tennessee, unemployment was still over 10 percent, and paychecks hadn't caught up to the last few years of inflation just yet. A trip to the grocery store hurt, especially for a young mother and father raising two kids on roughly the equivalent of \$21,000 a year today.

The weather was doing its best to make things miserable too. A bitter cold front brought some of the coldest weather East Tennessee had endured, with a wind chill down to 21 below zero at times. Our old two-story farmhouse did its best to keep the wind out, but Mom and Dad decided that despite having bedrooms upstairs, we would live on the first floor of the house, closer to the wood stove and the kerosene heater.

Times were tight. We didn't even get a white Christmas for our misery. Just cold and dark. Mom and Dad could only afford a few presents for us kids, and so when we ran to the tree that morning, there wasn't a whole lot to open.

Yet, what I found under the tree that morning was magic. A die-cast replica of the new Space Shuttle Enterprise, with retractable landing gear, opening cargo bay doors, and an orbital lab in the payload bay. Looking back, I now realize just how expensive this toy was—\$5 or so in 1983 money, or nearly two hours of hard work for my father.

Joy didn't begin to cover how I felt. The Shuttle and I, which I called Columbia (because everyone knows that Columbia was the best orbiter ever and Enterprise didn't even go to space. Come on, are you kidding me?), flew missions to distant planets in the backyard, carried R2-D2 into deep space, and crash landed on mysterious desert worlds near the swing set.

A toy well-loved is a toy that wears out quickly, and I recall my beloved Columbia falling victim to several "rough landings" at the hands of a six-year old. First the main engines went missing, then one payload bay door, then the other.

I don't know what became of the original. But this week, I found one on Ebay. It was reasonably priced, and God has blessed me such that the small cost, which would have been far beyond the reach of Mom and Dad in 1983, was trivial.

The replacement will be arriving here in Mechanicsville shortly after Thanksgiving, where it will hold a place of honor, and keep that light of Christmas joy burning all year long, for the rest of my life. When I told Dad about my find, he said he didn't remember that Christmas or the shuttle he and mom got me. I did.

"I loved it. You and mom were tore all to pieces that you couldn't get us more for Christmas" I told him. "But I tell you, this brought me *joy*. I loved it. I know \$5 wasn't easy to come by. Y'all did a lot of stuff for us kids. Most of it you don't remember. But we do. And it means the world."

We do things for our kids all the time—big things, small things. Most of them we will never remember in the bustle of our day to day lives. The time our children spend in our homes is short, and we live for quite a while once they're out on their own. But when we forget, they remember. The smallest acts of kindness and love that fade from our minds live on in theirs, lighting their souls with hope, love, and joy that give them the strength to get through the coldest and darkest of winters.

So as we go through the season of Advent and prepare our hearts for the coming of our Savior, remember that the tiny things we do to share love and joy may not be small things for those who receive them. Even in the darkest and coldest of winters.

God, thank you for the blessings in our lives, big and small. Help us to share those with others, however small and insignificant they may feel, and keep your light and love the strength that carries us through the season. Amen.



December 21: A Childhood Hope, by Mary Elder

Luke 2:1-20

If you grew up with the Charlie Brown comic strip or shows, you know that it has quite the cast of characters. We know the lovable but insecure Charlie Brown; opinionated Lucy; Peppermint Patty who struggles in school; Marcie who is unathletic; Pigpen, whose name speaks for itself; Sally, a sensitive little sister; and slightly delusional Linus, among others.

In the Christmas movie, they are facing their usual cartoon levels of flawed-ness, typical childhood and sibling bullying, messiness, uncertainty, and disappointment. They hurt one another and have to learn from their mistakes. Not unlike the cast of characters in the Christmas story, or the cast of characters in our own lives and world, they make messes that they don't know exactly how to fix.

It's a good reminder to us when our world and lives also feel broken, our culture feels vastly divided, when the hurt people have caused feels too hard to move past, and maybe we don't feel like we are able to do it on our own. As these friends learned, it's never too late to give what we have, and to come back together with love and hope.

Linus says "I never thought it was such a bad little tree, it's not bad at all really, maybe it just needs a little love." And that's what they give it, coming back together as a community to forgive and share with others through their Christmas play.

We are fortunate to already have that little love we need— that "Love came down at Christmas", and that God is already there waiting to spruce us up and guide us into being a light to others.

God, thank you for loving us first. Help us to choose love, to choose community, and to find ways past our own frustration and mistakes. Amen.





December 22: Children of God, adapted from a Youth Sunday sermon by Caroline Arbogast

1 John 3: 1-2

As believers, the concept of being a child of God is exciting. Over the years of learning about God, I know that God is my father who looks out for me and also a friend who I can bring my concerns to and will listen. God knows our innermost thoughts and intentions as well as the plans God has for us (Jeremiah 29:11).

Because we are made in God's image, we have characteristics of God, like creativity, justice, and love, which we show through our actions and relationships. We have inherent value and purpose to God, and are able to be loved and seen by God. Before we were even created, God laid his hands on and blessed us, which gives confidence that we get to worship a loving and living God. In difficult times, God still strengthens us with love, patience, and kindness.

Heavenly Creator, thank you for coming to earth as one of us, to show us what it means to be made in your image and be your child. Thank you for being a parent, friend, and guide to us all, and help us find our worth in you. Amen.

December 23: Love, by Doug Dwyer

Mark 12:30-31

This week our candle on the wreath is the Love candle. Powerful love was shown by God becoming human and walking among us and talking with us and showing us a new and better way of life. What God is asking for us to do in return is to love God and in the same way, love God's creation. It has been stated so many times that it is the greatest love story ever known to humanity. The greatest story that ever has been or ever will be.

Here we are at the end of another year. It is so surprising how time passes so fast. As New Year's Day brings on a new calendar year, Advent ushers in a new church year. May we pause to look at the year that just passed us by. Have we done what we promised to do? Or did we not set aside enough time to really serve God and our less fortunate neighbors as we should?

In our beginning of our membership with the church that Christ founded, we as members promised to participate by our prayers, our presence, our gifts and our service. So let us take a look back at our year we have completed and ask this important question: "could we have done more for our church and to love others?" A new year is upon us and there is a new opportunity for God's love to shine anew through us. Maybe through the Holy Spirit reaching out to us and helping us along we can accept the new year with the strength we need to fulfill our promise.



Day by day, dear Lord I pray,
to see thee more clearly, love
thee more dearly, follow thee
more nearly, serve thee more
fully. These lives we live, day
by day. Amen.

December 24: Come and Taste the Love of God, by Gerry Burkholder

There are two memories holding special meaning from my time at Duke. One is when a guest British preacher transitioned into a Communion service with the invitation, “Come and taste the love of God!” I thought, “What a wonderful way to think of the Communion experience.” The second memory is the tradition of singing the hymn with the chorus, “Through it all, through it all, I’ve learned to trust in Jesus, I’ve learned to trust in God”. They are words I have repeated to myself on many occasions.

Over two thousand years ago, Mary and Joseph first held the “Love of God” in their arms and they named Him Jesus. Like all new parents there was exhaustion, excitement, anxiety. Despite all they had gone through, I can see one tenderly smiling at the other and hear them say words to the effect of “Through it all, I’ve learned to trust in God”. And I see the other reflectively shake their head in agreement and reply something to the effect of “It’s a Wonderful Life”.

As we partake in the bread dipped into the cup this Christmas Eve, as we taste the Love of God, may we at least for a few moments, in our mind’s eye, see Mary and Joseph holding Jesus. May we reflect and find needed hope, peace, joy, and love to say “Through it all, I’ve learned to trust in Jesus, I’ve learned to trust in God. It’s a Wonderful Life!”

Almighty God, thank you for your gift of Love, Jesus. Thank you for the gift of wonders of life! Help us remember trusting you is always the best answer when facing life’s challenges. In Jesus’ name, Amen.





December 25: Christmas Day!

Matthew 1:18-25 The Birth of Jesus Christ

This is how the birth of Jesus Christ took place. When Mary his mother was engaged to Joseph, before they were married, she became pregnant by the Holy Spirit. Joseph her husband was a righteous man. Because he didn't want to humiliate her, he decided to call off their engagement quietly. As he was thinking about this, an angel from the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, don't be afraid to take Mary as your wife, because the child she carries was conceived by the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you will call him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." Now all of this took place so that what the Lord had spoken through the prophet would be fulfilled:

Look! A virgin will become pregnant and give birth to a son,

And they will call him, Emmanuel.

(Emmanuel means "God with us.")

When Joseph woke up, he did just as an angel from God commanded and took Mary as his wife. But he didn't have relations with her until she gave birth to a son. Joseph called him Jesus.

God is with us! Praise be to God!

