

Rev. Kimberly Berenotto
Longswamp UCC
Mertztown, PA

Rev. Linda Kozlowski
Good Shepherd UCC
Tuckerton, PA

Rev. Frances Chester
Falkner Swamp UCC
Gilbertsville, PA

Rev. Alan Miles
Zwingli UCC
Souderton, PA

Rev. Selina Hamilton
Rosedale UCC
Laureldale, PA

Rev. Nick Pence
Palm Schwenkfelder
Church
Palm, PA

Rev. Matthew Hoover
Pleasantville UCC
Chalfont, PA

Rev. Becky Sausser
St. John's UCC
Allentown, PA

Rev. Rebecca Hoover
One UCC
Kenhorst, PA

Rev. Dr. Kimberly Stryjak
St. Peter's UCC
West Lawn, PA

Rev. Nichole Jackson
Open Table UCC
Pottstown, PA

Rev. Mark Stryjak
Alleghenyville UCC
Mohnton, PA

Rev. Zack Jackson
Open Table UCC
Pottstown, PA

As we enter into the season of Advent, we have created this Advent at Home kit to help and encourage you to experience the Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love of this season every day.

Every day, beginning on December 1, you are invited to light candles and read the devotionals included in this booklet. Each week we add one more candle and finally light the Christ candle on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day.

the gift of one child birthed and placed in a manger, for the blessing of one child who came to bring more hope, more peace, more joy, more love into the world. We rejoice, we celebrate, and we shout these words: **“Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”**

These devotionals will also be posted on the Rosedale United Church of Christ Facebook Page every day throughout the season.

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Week 1: Hope: As you begin your devotionals this week, light one blue candle, the candle of Hope.

Sunday, December 1, 2024

Rev. Linda Kozlowski, Good Shepherd UCC, Tuckerton

Psalm 25:4-10 (New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition)

Make me to know your ways, O LORD, teach me your paths. Lead me in your truth and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all day long.

Be mindful of your mercy, O LORD, and of your steadfast love, for they have been from old. Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions; according to your steadfast love remember me, for the sake of your goodness, O LORD!

Good and upright is the LORD; therefore he instructs sinners in the way. He leads the humble in what is right and teaches the humble his way. All the paths of the LORD are steadfast love and faithfulness, for those who keep his covenant and his decrees.

Reflection: “All the paths of the LORD are steadfast love and faithfulness.” As we enter this season of Advent, may we breathe in this truth and allow the steadfast love and faithfulness of God to gently guide and transform our minds, our hearts, our lives.

With the Psalmist, we cry out to God seeking to go deeper in our faith, seeking grace for our past mistakes, seeking forgiveness for the times we have fallen short and the ways we have strayed from the path God’s Spirit reveals to us. And, God hears us, friends. God hears us and seeks to love us back to wholeness while inviting us to offer this same grace, forgiveness, and love to all of our neighbors. If we are to remain faithful to God, who is always faithful to us, we will live humbly, generously, and graciously. We will live in ways which bring more hope, more healing, more peace, more love into the world. As we wander and wonder through this season, may we follow the truths of our God. May we receive God’s mercy and steadfast love and then share it

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.” So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told to them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them, and Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, just as it had been told them.

Reflection:

Merry Christmas, beloved friends! On this day of rejoicing and celebration, may you receive these familiar words from Scripture in a new and wondrous way. May they bring forth memories of past Christmas pageants, Christmas Eve services, familiar hymns, lighting candles, and gathering with family and friends. May you rejoice with the shepherds, sing with the angels, treasure these words in your heart like Mary.

We’ve lived through a challenging year. Many have experienced struggles, sorrows, losses, uncertainty. And God is with us. God is with us today, tomorrow, and every day to come. God continues to bring us good news of joy and rejoicing, of wonder and wisdom, of healing and hope. Jesus remains by our side, always whispering, always nudging, always loving. May we take time to speak words of love to our family, our friends, our neighbors. May we take time to offer gestures of kindness, comfort, compassion to everyone we encounter on our journey. May our lives reveal all we have seen and heard and received from God. May we breathe deeply and remember how God is good all the time. Enjoy this day. Breathe deeply. Be hope, be peace, be joy, be love.

Prayer: Sacred One, thank you for coming to live among us, for loving us with a love that is steadfast and never-ending. Our hearts overflow with gratitude for the grace, the hope, the healing, the love you continually offer us. One this Christmas Day, we rejoice, we ponder, we give thanks for

What if we decided to be all there? What might we experience?

Tonight take a couple of moments to be as present as you can to Christmas Eve. During worship, intentionally notice who you can see, what you can touch, what you can hear, what you can smell. Allow time to slow down for a moment and take it all in. If your plans don't involve a worship service, step outside and take a few, clearing breaths. Look up at the sky, see the stars if you can, and imagine the night sky over Bethlehem long ago. Be mindful of all the Christmas Eves you have lived through, all the Christmas Eves the world has seen, and connect them with this night long ago. How might God's glory, the infinity of the Holy One's love be breaking into the world once again?

Prayer:

O Lord, help us to be present for your birth into the world. Help us to be aware of your goodness, your salvation, and your hope once more. Amen.

**Wednesday , December 25, 2024, Christmas Day
Rev. Linda Kozlowski, Good Shepherd UCC, Tuckerton**

Luke 2:8-20 (New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition)

Now in that same region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over the flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid, for see, I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God saying,

"Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"

with everyone we encounter as we journey forward. Who, in your life, needs to know they are deeply loved in this season? How will you share God's love with them?

Prayer: O Holy One, thank you for the lessons you continually seek to teach us. As we wait and wonder and wander through this Advent season, breathe your breath of life upon us afresh. Cleanse us with your precious gift of grace. Lead us forward and help us remain faithful to your Word and your Way. We pray all of this and so much more in the name of Jesus. Amen.

**Monday, December 02, 2024
Rev. Selina Hamilton, Rosedale UCC, Laureldale**

2 Peter 3: 13-15a (New Revised Standard Version)

But, in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home. Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish; and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation.

Reflection:

Advent is a season of waiting and preparation. We know this. We hear about it every year. In this season leading up to Christmas, we know that the good stuff isn't quite yet, but it's coming soon. We sing hymns like "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel," and "Come Thou Long Expected Jesus" while we wait to celebrate the birth of Jesus.

December is also a month when we will find ourselves waiting a lot. In lines, waiting for it to be our turn to buy these gifts or those groceries. At the gate, waiting for a flight to visit loved ones. On hold, waiting for someone in an understaffed call center or doctor's office to help us out. In restaurant lobbies, waiting for our table to be ready.

The question isn't what we'll do while we wait. At church, we'll sing and pray and share scriptures. Everywhere else, we'll mess around on our phones.

The question is how we'll be while we wait. Will we get frustrated and angry? Will we be anxious and on edge?

Or will we be at peace, patient and trusting that what is promised will come, whether we're waiting for our turn or our Savior?

Prayer:

God of the eternal promise, every day throughout the season ahead, give us an opportunity to practice waiting. Help us to be patient while we wait. Help us to trust in what will come. Help us to be found at peace when our turn finally arrives, in Jesus' name. Amen.

Tuesday, December 03, 2024

Rev. Frances Chester, Falkner Swamp UCC, Gilbertsville

Psalm 90:10a (Common English Bible)

We live at best to be seventy years old,
maybe eighty, if we're strong.

Reflection:

Early on the December morning after my grandmother's arrival from Texas the previous night, I crept down to the guestroom where she slept. I clutched a bottle of my older sister's perfume that I swiped from her vanity table. I wanted to wake Nana, but gently. She was old – 80 – ancient by my six-year-old standard. Surely smelling something lovely, like Love's Baby Soft, would tingle the olfactory senses and wake her to the new Ohio day.

The previous night, as Nana settled in, she informed me of her advanced age. She laughed as she added that the Good Lord could take her now, because she had made it! She repeated the Psalmist's words to me, v. 10a: **We live at best to be seventy years old, maybe eighty, if we're strong.**

Well, the Good Lord didn't take my grandmother then, nor three years hence in December of 1976, after my mother died and the rest of our family traveled down to Texas for the holy holiday.

In Advent we hear the call to "be alert" to "stay awake" and, from John the Baptizer, to ready ourselves for the one who is to come.

How many years do you think you have? One? Ten? Forty? Months? However long you think you have, pray you only have, or plead to have, may the call of Advent stir you awake

more relationally with nature and with my neighbor even when both of them are hard to deals with.

Prayer:

God of all love and connection, help me to feel the bonds that tie me to all creation. From the most unimaginably huge structures to the simplest relationships, may I see you in all things. Help me to love others as you love them and to be a unitive force for good. Amen.

Christmas Eve & Christmas Day: As you begin your devotionals this week, light all four candles of Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love, and the final Christ candle.

Tuesday, December 24, 2024

**Rev. Matthew Hoover
Hoover**

**Salem United Church of Christ
Church of Christ
Campbelltown, PA**

Rev. Rebecca

One United

Kenhorst, PA

Luke 2: 4-7 (New Revised Standard Version)

⁴ Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. ⁵ He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. ⁶ While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child.

Reflection:

Are we there yet?

In one sense, we are almost there. On Christmas Eve, we are cognizant that the time has come for Christ to be delivered into the world once again. Later tonight we will gather in our sanctuaries for worship full of familiar traditions and familiar carols, but will we be "there" or will we be somewhere else? Sure, our bodies will occupy that space, but where will our minds and souls be? Contemplating the things left to do, the meal that needs prepared, the present forgotten, the list of things undone?

If there is one fundamental truth to the universe, one law that applies everywhere, one characteristic that can be seen from the largest supercluster to the smallest quark, it is this: “I am because we are”. Often referred to as “Ubuntu”, this ancient southern African aphorism goes deeper than most people realize. On the impossibly largest scale, the universe looks like a spider web with strings made out of clusters of galaxies. They push and pull at each other in ways our little brains cannot comprehend, but those forces are the reason why our galaxy formed the way that it did, just as much as the swirling motion of the Milky Way Galaxy created the conditions that led to Earth’s formation. As life evolved on Earth, selfish species tended to destroy their own environments, leading to their extinction, while creatures which learned the virtue of mutuality thrived. The web of mutuality in nature is so interconnected that introducing a single invasive species or killing off a native species will cause huge effects across the whole system. I am because we are. But it goes deeper. If you weigh 200 pounds, that is 200 pounds of body parts which is 200 pounds of molecules which is 200 pounds of atoms, but where do those atoms get their weight? Each of the parts of an atom are made of quarks, but most of the weight of a quark doesn’t come from its mass. Close to 99% of the mass of a quark comes from the energy created by its interactions with other quarks. 99% of its mass comes from relationships between quarks. That means that fundamentally, you are more like an event than a thing. If 99% of your mass comes from the energy between quarks, then that means only 2 pounds of you is “stuff” and 198 pounds is a whirring, buzzing, emerging phenomenon.

I say all that to say this. If the universe was created by and through Christ, then it should share some of the same qualities of its creator. So it is no surprise that the universe should be founded upon relationality. God wanted so badly to be in relationship with us, that God became human and physically lived among us. That same God has sent the Spirit to dwell among us, constantly reaching out to us and speaking to us in ways that we can hear. God’s fingerprints are all over the cosmos, and truths like this help me to live

to the life before you. If it takes a certain scent to do that, may the Christmas fragrance of your choice waft near.

Prayer:

Holy God, “Teach us to number our days
so we can have a wise heart” (Psalm 90:12). Amen.

Wednesday, December 04, 2024

Rev. Nichole Jackson, Open Table UCC, Pottstown

Psalm 90:1-2 (Common English Bible)

Lord, you have been our help, generation after generation. Before the mountains were born, before you birthed the earth and the inhabited world—from forever in the past to forever in the future, you are God.

Reflection:

I’m really grateful for the rhythms of Advent, particularly in the practice of lighting candles, illuminating the darkness with more and more light each week until we reach Christmas Day. Most of Advent is spent in increasing darkness, yet we keep lighting more and more candles, providing more and more light to guide us until we greet the Christ child, Light of the World.

This first week we illuminate the dark with the least amount of light - we only light one of our five Advent candles each day - and the theme of that light is “Hope.” Here in the beginning, we consider the weight, the heaviness of the circumstances we find ourselves in - personally, locally, nationally, even globally - and we light the candle of hope because, well, we hold on to hope when things look the most bleak, don’t we? When things are going well, we don’t have a felt need for hope, but when it just doesn’t look like things are going to turn around, we grasp onto hope because that is all we have. As we light the candle of hope this week, we courageously bet that what is coming - God made known to us *as us*, or *Emmanuel, God with us* - is good, and that God’s coming might just save us from despair.

Here at the beginning of Advent, I invite you to consider the darkness you sense in and around you while also daring to hold up the light, even if it feels quite dim. Allow God to walk with you, knowing that God has been here since the beginning, has journeyed with many generations of faithful folk before, and will continue to do so in the days,

weeks, and even years to come. God is with us.

Prayer:

Accompanying One, be present to us as we navigate this early part of the Advent journey with only hope to illuminate the path. Help us to trust that you will not leave us to dwell in the dark alone, but will lead us to your very self, one step at a time. Amen.

December 5, 2024

Rev. Dr. Kimberly Stryjak, St. Peter's UCC, West Lawn

Luke 1:68-79 (New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition)

⁶⁸ "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
for he has looked favorably on^[a] his people and redeemed them.
⁶⁹ He has raised up a mighty savior^[b] for us
in the house of his child David,
⁷⁰ as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from
of old,
⁷¹ that we would be saved from our enemies and from the
hand of all who hate us.
⁷² Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors
and has remembered his holy covenant,
⁷³ the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham,
to grant us ⁷⁴ that we, being rescued from the hands of our
enemies,
might serve him without fear, ⁷⁵ in holiness and
righteousness
in his presence all our days.
⁷⁶ And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High,
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,
⁷⁷ to give his people knowledge of salvation
by the forgiveness of their sins.
⁷⁸ Because of the tender mercy of our God,
the dawn from on high will break^[c] upon^[d] us,
⁷⁹ to shine upon those who sit in darkness and in the shadow
of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace."

available lodging for a relative, or to avoid criticism from a nosy uncle, or maybe like some of us, just doesn't want to be stuck with family at Christmas time. Mary gives birth in a barn, and let's not over romanticize that scene folks because you all have likely been in a barn at some point in your life and know what it smells like. She pushes out Jesus, deals with shepherds and other uninvited guests, and then has to flee to Egypt. Raises this kid, knowing him to be Messiah, has to deal with the reality of his calling, grieves for him upon the cross, and if the sculptures and artist got it right with the Pieta, takes his dead body into her strong arms. Yes, Mary was a badass, and all because she was willing, because she said "Yes."

Today in this Advent Season, may we all aspire to say "Yes," to God, to be willing to answer the ancient and ever new call to live faithfully in Christ, and may we all strive to be badasses too!

Jan Richardson Poem: Blessed are you who bear the light

Blessed are you who bear the light in unbearable times,
who testify to its endurance amid the unendurable,
who bear witness to its persistence when everything seems
in shadow and grief.

Blessed are you in whom the light lives,
in whom the brightness blazes— your heart a chapel,
an altar where in the deepest night can be seen the fire
that shines forth in you in unaccountable faith,
in stubborn hope,
in love that illumines every broken thing it finds.

— Jan Richardson, from Circle of Grace: A Book of Blessings for the Seasons. www.janrichardson.com

Monday, December 23, 2024

Rev. Zack Jackson, Open Table UCC, Pottstown

Colossians 1:17 (CEB)

He existed before all things,
and all things are held together in him.

Reflection:

Reflection

The prophet Isaiah is foretelling a day when victory will come quickly for God's people. Because "Who has heard such things?" We haven't known God's kingdom to come instantly. We haven't seen the transformation that Christ brings occur immediately. We haven't experienced our own redemption from sin instantaneously. That's what Advent is all about. Waiting, anticipating, and even knowing that when Christ comes, he comes to us as a baby. The transformation Christ brings will take time, it will take effort, it will take growth, it will take us changing our hearts and our lives. Christ coming to earth isn't about one moment. It isn't about his birth, the baby in a manger, and that sparkly holy night. Christ coming to earth is about what happens after Christmas Day; what we do, and how we choose to live out Christ's birth in our lives and our communities.

Prayer

Ever-Present God, help us to be patient. Keep us from being caught up in the starry-eyed lights of Christmas, and instead know Christ's journey calls us to grow and work toward God's transformative power. Change our hearts so they wait for you; and ready our hearts to do the work of Christmas, once the holiday anticipation is over. Amen.

Week 4: Love: As you begin your devotionals this week, light all three blue candles, the candles of Hope, Peace, and Love, and the pink candle, the candle of Joy.

Sunday, December 22, 2024

Rev. Nick Pence, Palm Schwenkfelder Church, Palm

Luke 1:39-56

So let's just go ahead and admit it: Mary, is in fact, a badass! I know this is for an Advent devotional and I do apologize for the profanity, but it is just true. Mary is a badass! Engaged young woman, pregnant with a child who is not her fiancée's, goes to visit her cousin most likely to avoid scandal or potential death if someone accuses her of adultery. Goes all the way to Bethlehem because of Joseph's family, all of whom apparently either don't have

Reflection:

In Luke's gospel we get some "songs." We have Mary's song, the heavenly host after Jesus' birth, but first is Zechariah's song. His praise to the God who is, who has been, and who always will be working among God's people. His Spirit-inspired words capture the joy that Zechariah had as a believer in what God was doing. We learn through Zechariah's story, through his song that this is no distant God, but is a God who comes "to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death" (Luke 1:79). The promise celebrated long ago through the birth, naming, and circumcision of John are the same as the promise given today: God is active among God's people, here and now. Zechariah's song reminds us that God has been active from the beginning, and we too can bear witness to the ways that God is at work among us, telling our story as part of the larger story of God's people.

In this season of preparation for God's presence with us, how can we reflect Jesus' light, redemption and peace in our lives today? What stories can we tell to sing praises to God?

Prayer:

Jesus, may we experience the power of your presence, and help us be present to others so that your light may shine in the world. Amen

Friday, December 6, 2024

Rev. Mark Stryjak, Alleghenyville UCC, Mohnton, PA

Read: Luke 1:68-79; Malachi 3:13-18; Philippians 1:18b-26

Reflection:

Today's devotion with the selected scriptures from Luke, Malachi, and Philippians are responses to a conversation about a community who has come to question why they should follow God's commandments. Why? Where will it get us is sounds like the people are questioning. Through learning about our faith, hearing of God's promises and compassion, knowing that he did not abandon his only son

and through Him, all questions are answered as to why we should follow God.

In Luke, salvation from enemies and all who hate us is lifted up and knowledge of the past that provided mercy to our ancestors because God did remember his Holy Covenant. I feel in a world where results are needed almost instantly, like before we even start anything, hearing that God's deliverance of us from this world will occur in a time and space of His choosing, causes stress and anxiety to many. We long to be assured that what we do will pay off, but that is only in this life, in a business model and through insurance policies to prevent a loss. In our faith, however, the only insurance we have is through our faith, how we celebrate and work towards it each and every day, whether in good times or ill, is all part of the infamous journey we can take. Do you feel able to serve him without fear today, always?

Prayer:

Dear God, life is complex and far too intimidating where everything happens usually out of most of our control. In times of fear and anxiety and the striving to be loved and cared for without conditions, there is only one path to travel for that. We pray that we have the courage, the stamina, and the utmost belief in your Word today. May it be so, amen!

Saturday, December 7, 2024

Rev. Alan Miles, Zwingli UCC, Souderton

Luke 1:68-79 (New Revised Standard Version)

'Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them.
He has raised up a mighty savior for us
in the house of his servant David,
as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,
that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.
Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors,

their belief in Jesus Christ. In today's passage we see the author encouraging these folks to *endure*, because despite their suffering, they possess something better and more lasting! These folks have heard the incredible message of Jesus Christ, that through his resurrection there can be found the gift of eternal life! It is completely freely given and it can never be taken away! I'm a kid who grew up watching Sesame Street, and I still get choked up when big bird sings about keeping Christmas with you all through the year. As we enter our final week before the joy of Christmas morning, I invite you to remember this incredible rush of joy, hope, love, and peace even after we have put the Christmas trees away. And, like the author of Hebrew's says, "do not therefore abandoned that boldness of yours, it brings a great reward!

Prayer:

Creator, Son, and Spirit one, we joined together to praise your name! In your gift of salvation, we find eternal life with you in heaven, and in the fullness and joy of this promise, we find the strength to endure anything that life can throw at us. Help me to remember that nothing can separate me from your love, and make me bold so that I might share that love! Amen.

Saturday, December 21, 2024

Rev. Kimberly Berenotto, Longswamp United Church of Christ, Mertztown

Isaiah 66: 7-8 New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition

Before she was in labor
she gave birth;
before her pain came upon her
she delivered a son.
Who has heard of such a thing?
Who has seen such things?
Shall a land be born in one day?
Shall a nation be delivered in one moment?
Yet as soon as Zion was in labor
she delivered her children.

loving embrace. Help us to remember your faithfulness as we celebrate this Christmas Season.

Friday, December 20, 2024

Rev. Becky Sausser, St. John's UCC, Allentown

Hebrews 10:32-39 (New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition)

³² But recall those earlier days when, after you had been enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, ³³ sometimes being publicly exposed to insults and afflictions and sometimes becoming partners with those so treated. ³⁴ For you had compassion for those who were in prison, and you cheerfully accepted the plundering of your possessions, knowing that you yourselves possessed something better and more lasting. ³⁵ Do not, therefore, abandon that boldness of yours; it brings a great reward. ³⁶ For you need endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what was promised. ³⁷ For yet "in a very little while, the one who is coming will come and will not delay, ³⁸ but my righteous one will live by faith. My soul takes no pleasure in anyone who shrinks back." ³⁹ But we are not among those who shrink back and so are lost but among those who have faith and so preserve our souls.

Reflection

A husband comes down the stairs expecting a cup of coffee, and he finds his wife sitting at the table with a Bible. He asked her 'what's wrong', and she says, "look, I finally found proof that you have to make the coffee every morning, it says right here in the New Testament 'He-Brews'". I like to begin every single sermon with a joke, because I truly believe that God loves to laugh just as much as we do! Sometimes I wonder if God invented laughter because God knew that we would need something to release our tension when we were forced to endure. Our Bible says 'endure' over 90 times depending on which translation you use! I don't know about you, but I could use with a little bit less *enduring* these days, am I right? Take a look at the congregation in Hebrews, we know that this congregation was experiencing persecution and even being imprisoned for

and has remembered his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham, to grant us that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.'

Reflection:

Are we expecting great things? There is so much to do, so much to get ready for. There are parties to be attended and planned. There are gifts to buy. There is much to be done. But do we take time to ask ourselves if we truly believe in the miracle that is about to unfold, as Christ enters the world? Zechariah didn't believe the angel Gabriel when he was told of his coming son. It took Zechariah to be made mute, to watch and wait for him to see all that was unfolding. And eventually he believed. When he did, he prophesied and remembered God's faithfulness to Her promises, that God's promise of Salvation indeed is coming, and the Peace of Christ is indeed on his way.

Prayer:

May we be filled with awe as we await on God's great promises. May we be filled with great expectation at the fulfilling of God's promises. Because, indeed great things are coming and have already come!

Week 2: Peace: As you begin your devotionals this week, light two blue candles, the candles of Hope and Peace.

Sunday, December 08, 2024

Rev. Becky Sausser, St. John's UCC, Allentown

Baruch 5:1-9 (New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition)

Take off the garment of your sorrow and affliction, O Jerusalem, and put on forever the beauty of the glory from God. ² Put on the robe of the righteousness that comes from God; put on your head the diadem of the glory of the Everlasting, ³ for God will show your splendor everywhere under heaven, ⁴ for God will give you evermore the name, "Righteous Peace, Godly Glory." ⁵ Arise, O Jerusalem, stand upon the height; look toward the east, and see your children gathered from west and east at the word of the Holy One, rejoicing that God has remembered them. ⁶ For they went out from you on foot, led away by their enemies, but God will bring them back to you, carried in glory, as on a royal throne. ⁷ For God has ordered that every high mountain and the everlasting hills be made low and the valleys filled up, to make level ground, so that Israel may walk safely in the glory of God. ⁸ The woods and every fragrant tree have shaded Israel at God's command. ⁹ For God will lead Israel with joy, in the light of his glory, with the mercy and righteousness that come from him.

Reflection:

Who is Baruch? Did she get that name right? I don't remember hearing about him in Sunday School. Baruch can be found in our Apocrypha, that's the section of the Bible between the Old Testament and the New Testament. Our Apocrypha doesn't get a lot of love, which is a shame because there are so many wonderful and incredible stories located in these pages. Baruch, for example, was the prophet Jeremiah's scribe. A scribe was somebody who was capable of drafting legal documents, but what makes Baruch so cool is the fact that he actually writes down everything that Jeremiah ever says, and assembles it like a patchwork quilt into what we know today as the book of Jeremiah. Baruch and Jeremiah were living during the time of the Babylonian exile... a time when the Israelites were taken from their homeland without any promise of ever being able

is easier to find but what happens on the other days when life is more chaotic and finding a rhythm seems elusive. When we are confused, and life is less than ideal we do well to remember that life wasn't guaranteed to be fair and filled with joy, but choosing to have a strong belief in the promises of God, the direction of Jesus, we find the way forward. The option to live into these words become the rhythm and is the balance our souls long for. In this advent season of waiting, can we find all we need to follow Jesus once again?

Thursday, December 19, 2024

Rev. Alan Miles, Zwingli UCC, Souderton

Jeremiah 31:31-34 (New Revised Standard Version)

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the Lord," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

Reflection:

As we draw nearer to the day of Jesus' birth, we are reminded of the faithfulness of God. The grace we receive is nothing of our doing, nothing of our faith, but all and wholly dependent on the faithfulness of God. There is nothing we can do to earn it, for God is faithful to his promises, both in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. Yes, this Christmas we are reminded of the faithfulness of God as we look at the face of the newborn child, Jesus and remember that God always has us safe and secure in his loving arms.

Prayer: Holy One, may we trust in your faithfulness, resting secure in the knowledge that we are forever safe in your

⁷ The cow and the bear shall graze;
their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.

⁸ The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's
den.

⁹ They will not hurt or destroy
on all my holy mountain,
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord
as the waters cover the sea.

Reflection:

Advent is a season where we carve out space to hope and space to long. I long for the world in which Isaiah describes. Isaiah uses such visual and striking language in this 11th chapter. He wants to help us imagine, in lavish terms, what a world might be like when the Messiah comes in his wisdom and strength. To put it simply, it will be unrecognizable. The patterns of violence which is so much a part of our world are completely shattered here. Fear is gone, there is no talk of victory or revenge, but a change of heart in every creature. This change of heart starts with the desire to change, to be transformed by God. In this advent season we are invited to think about the ways in which we as individuals and as church communities can begin to bring about such a peaceable kin-dom here and now. Let us give space this advent season to long for, hope and work for this world.

Prayer:

God, transform us so we that we can live into the vision you have for the world. Amen

Wednesday, December 18, 2024

Rev. Mark Strzyk, Alleghenyville UCC, Mohnton

Read Isaiah 11:1-9; Micah 4:8-13; Luke 7:31-35

Devotion:

We do not live in a perfect world and very little is guaranteed in this life. We naturally have concerns and seek to find a rhythm and balance to our lives. On good days that rhythm

to return! You want to talk about a people living in great darkness? Look no further! Much of the book of Lamentations is believed to have been written during the Babylonian exile. Yet even amidst this turmoil and destruction, all of the authors from this time kept writing about hope! It probably didn't feel like there was any evidence to have hope, yet these profits continue to fixate on the unquenchable hope that is found in the promises of God! I absolutely adore this opening line in Baruch chapter 5, "take off the garment of your sorrow and affliction, Jerusalem, and put on forever the beauty of the glory from God!" Even in times of mourning, when it feels like we can't go on, there will come a day when our sorrow will lessen and we will stand in the light of Jesus Christ!

Prayer:

Holy Lord Jesus, as we walk through this season when the daylight is shorter, and the night feels so long, we thank you for hope! Help us to feel the beautiful tension and excitement of the season as we wait for your sacred birth, and help us to remember that even on our darkest nights, that you are there. Amen.

Monday, December 09, 2024

Rev. Kimberly Berenotto, Longswamp United Church of Christ, Mertztown

Romans 8:22-25 New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition

²² We know that the whole creation has been groaning together as it suffers together the pains of labor, ²³ and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. ²⁴ For in ^[a] hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope, for who hopes for what one already sees? ²⁵ But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

Reflection

We sure to do love to groan. Whether it's big issues or small problems, complaining is a favorite past-time of many. It's

certainly biblical – we see it in today’s scripture as well as countless others. The disciples, the prophets, followers of God trying to figure out which way to turn...all while whining. Now, groaning and complaining too much can lead to an overall negative attitude; but complaining in small doses actually can make you feel better! Studies show when people complain in small groups or to close friends, they are more likely to come up with solutions or just allow what’s bothering them to be lifted off their chest. Today’s scripture pairs groaning with hope. We’re human, so we’re going to groan, but we are an Advent people, so we’ve got to hope too. We wait and hope for the renewing of creation, our redemption through Christ, for God’s kingdom to be a reality on earth...but it’s ok if we whine a little while we wait.

Prayer

God of our complaints, hold our groans in your hands. Hear our whining; and then lead us toward hope. Help us to be an Advent people who feel the stirring of anticipation and excitement of this season. Prepare our hearts, and, if necessary, help us tone down our complaints, for the coming of Jesus Christ. Amen.

Tuesday, December 10, 2024

**Rev. Nick Pence, Palm Schwenkfelder Church, Palm
Ascending Grace**

Psalm 126

A Harvest of Joy

A Song of Ascents.

¹ When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion,^[a]
we were like those who dream.

² Then our mouth was filled with laughter
and our tongue with shouts of joy;
then it was said among the nations,
“The LORD has done great things for them.”

³ The LORD has done great things for us,
and we rejoiced.

⁴ Restore our fortunes, O LORD,
like the watercourses in the Negeb.

⁵ May those who sow in tears

Witch and her army of animals and creatures (representing the evil magic). I was also struck by how central to the story the four Pevensie children were in defeating the witch and her schemes - four children with all of their wonder and innocence, not adults. Typically strong and powerful, even dangerous creatures working alongside vulnerable creatures to defeat the powers of evil, even to the point of laying down their lives for the greater good, is a powerful vision to be sure!

The author of the passage above too invites us to imagine such a scene - where the vulnerable and the powerful can co-exist, and even love and care for one another. Like the Pevensie children at first, such images cause me to initially shrink back in fear, but imagining a reality where the fierce lay down their weapons and their tendencies towards violence and the humble can let down their guard and have confidence to walk among those who once terrorized them, and maybe - just maybe - each could bring their gifts to work together for good like the Narnian army...well. Let’s imagine it. Let’s dare imagine it and do what we can to make it possible, depending on the grace of God.

In my Bible, Isaiah 11:1-9 is entitled, “The Peaceful Kingdom.” As we wait for this Peaceful Kingdom to be inaugurated by the coming Christ, let us dare hope for it, dream about it, and even work for it.

Prayer:

Come, Lord Jesus, come! May you grant us the audacity to hope for that which we don’t see yet, and the strength to be co-workers and co-creators in the labor. Amen.

December 17, 2024

**Rev. Dr. Kimberly Stryjak, St. Peter’s United Church of
Christ, West Lawn**

Isaiah 11: 6-9

⁶ The wolf shall live with the lamb;
the leopard shall lie down with the kid;
the calf and the lion will feed^[b] together,
and a little child shall lead them.

By the time you are reading this, who knows what will be occurring because of November's elections, how wars and regional conflagrations across the globe reveal human misery, or who is now affected by the devastating effects of climate change. In your home life, among your close circle, or within your church, you may be facing any number of hardships.

Simply put, it can feel wrong to rejoice when so much pains us. It's times such as these that it may help us most to recognize Scriptural authority and choose to believe it. Then act on it.

Christmas is coming in ten days. Not an occasion to panic over the to-do list, but an occasion to welcome the grace of God come down as one of us, for all of us, forever.

Prayer:

Gracious, gentle God, like the Taize chant sings, help us "Wait for the Lord, whose day is near.....be strong, take heart!" Amen.

Monday, December 16, 2024:

Rev. Nichole Jackson, Open Table UCC, Pottstown

Isaiah 11:6-9 (New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition)

⁶ The wolf shall live with the lamb; the leopard shall lie down with the kid; the calf and the lion will feed together, and a little child shall lead them. ⁷ The cow and the bear shall graze; their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. ⁸ The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. ⁹ They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

Reflection:

I recently introduced my oldest son to *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. We watched the most recent movie rendition of the story and I was so struck by the diversity of the animals and creatures that worked together in Aslan's army (representing the good magic) to defeat the White

reap with shouts of joy.

⁶ Those who go out weeping,
bearing the seed for sowing,
shall come home with shouts of joy,
carrying their sheaves.

Reflection:

John Lennon famously sang "You may say that I'm a dreamer, but I'm not the only one. I hope someday you'll join us, and the world will be as one." I know in our anxious, divided lives, nation and world, that line might get more than a few scoffs and sarcasm. Sadly, I admit that there are times when I don't want to have to dream, when I feel too tired to care, when I struggle to be joyful.

But in this Advent Season, like those Jerusalem pilgrims of old, we are all invited back into Psalm 126, to rise one more step, drawing us closer to the temple of God. On that stone step we remember, we dream, we pray. We beg, claw and scrap for restoration. **Together** we long to be in the midst of the joyful harvest, carrying the sheaves of love and grace, with our mouths filled with laughter. **Together** we ascend one more step, always drawn closer. **Together**, by God's grace in Jesus Christ our Savior, we rise.

Still I Rise

BY MAYA ANGELOU

You may write me down in history
With your bitter, twisted lies,
You may trod me in the very dirt
But still, like dust, I'll rise.

Does my sassiness upset you?
Why are you beset with gloom?
'Cause I walk like I've got oil wells
Pumping in my living room.

Just like moons and like suns,
With the certainty of tides,
Just like hopes springing high,
Still I'll rise.

Did you want to see me broken?
Bowed head and lowered eyes?
Shoulders falling down like teardrops,
Weakened by my soulful cries?

Does my haughtiness offend you?
Don't you take it awful hard
'Cause I laugh like I've got gold mines
Diggin' in my own backyard.

You may shoot me with your words,
You may cut me with your eyes,
You may kill me with your hatefulness,
But still, like air, I'll rise.

Does my sexiness upset you?
Does it come as a surprise
That I dance like I've got diamonds
At the meeting of my thighs?

Out of the huts of history's shame
I rise
Up from a past that's rooted in pain
I rise
I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,
Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.

Leaving behind nights of terror and fear
I rise
Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear
I rise
Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,
I am the dream and the hope of the slave.
I rise
I rise
I rise.

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seek and find joy, and to sing loudly of your glory to all who are willing to listen. Amen.

Week 3: Joy: As you begin your devotionals this week, light two blue candles, the candles of Hope and Peace, and the pink candle, the candle of Joy.

Sunday, December 15, 2024

Rev. Frances Chester, Falkner Swamp UCC, Gilbertsville

Philippians 4:4-7 (New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition)

Rejoice, the Lord is near

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Reflection:

The apostle Paul writes from prison to a church whose mutual ministry encourages him, though is not without strife. Harassment by legal authorities faces the house churches of Philippi. Just before this passage, Paul alludes to a disagreement between two leaders of the church. Still, joy infuses this letter. Paul's encouragement is heartfelt, a snippet of which we receive in 4:4-7.

Celebrate! Let gentleness win. Don't be anxious! Let God know of everything you need in prayer. *And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.* (v.7)

Today is the Sabbath, and the third Sunday of Advent. The Lectionary passages for today that many of us will hear in worship are replete with messages to be joyful and give thanks. They are spoken to faithful people even as they faced annihilation from warring enemies and judgment from within. In the midst, we, the people of God, are to rely on the relentless power of God who overcomes even death.

Advent and what a blessing that would be if we were to make it so.

Prayer:

Holy One, help us to be generous in love and in life. May your generosity inspire our generosity. May your love for the world inspire our love for the world. Amen.

Saturday, December 14, 2024

Rev. Selina Hamilton, Rosedale UCC, Laureldale

Isaiah 12:2-3 (New Revised Standard Version)

Surely God is my salvation;

I will trust, and will not be afraid,
for the Lord God is my strength and my might;
he has become my salvation.

With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.

Reflection:

A reminder that we hear so often in scripture is to not be afraid. Here, Isaiah is reminding us that because God is our salvation, our strength, and our might, we do not need to be afraid. We can trust God to be God. We can trust God to save us. We can trust God to be our strength. No matter what fears we have, no matter if they're founded or unfounded, no matter what we're afraid of, Isaiah reminds us that with God, we do not need to be afraid.

But if we're not afraid, what will we be instead?

Isaiah has an answer to that: we will be joyful.

We are invited to access joy. We are invited to joyfully draw water from the well of salvation. God saves us. God gives us strength. And God invites us into abundant joy. Joy that flows like mighty streams. Joy as reliable as a well we can return to every day for exactly what we need.

Notice joy today. Sing praises to God with joy in your voice.

Prayer:

God, our salvation, our strength, and our might, help us to not be afraid. Help us to trust you with our lives. Help us to

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Source: The Complete Collected Poems of Maya Angelou (1994)

Wednesday, December 11, 2024

Rev. Zack Jackson, Open Table UCC, Pottstown

Luke 7:20-23 (Common English Bible)

20 When they reached Jesus, they said, "John the Baptist sent us to you. He asks, 'Are you the one who is coming, or should we look for someone else?'"

21 Right then, Jesus healed many of their diseases, illnesses, and evil spirits, and he gave sight to a number of blind people. **22** Then he replied to John's disciples, "Go, report to John what you have seen and heard."

Reflection:

"Why do you stay Christian? Christianity is a mess, there are plenty of other ways to God, and everyone loves sleeping in on Sundays". I get asked some version of this question a lot these days. With the sum total of all of humanity's wisdom and spiritual teachings available in an instant, why would I tether myself to one religion, and why this one which has caused so much suffering? Some days, my answer is easier than others, but it's always some form of what Jesus told John's followers in this passage. He didn't answer them directly. He didn't say, "Yes. I am the guy. Stop searching, and let your boss know that he can chill now". He said, "Look at what happens when I am around, and make your own decision". That's what I tell people too. Why am I a Christian? Because stuff happens when Jesus is around. Sure, Christianity has its issues, but I've had personal experiences with Jesus that changed me, and that's why I stay. What about you? Why are you a Christian? What do you find so compelling?

Prayer:

Jesus, be with us today. Make yourself known in our lives in a way that we will find unmistakable. Help us to show up for

our neighbors the way that you do, and give us the strength to be your hands and feet. Amen.

Thursday December 12, 2024

Rev. Rebecca Hoover, One United Church of Christ, Kenhorst

Scripture: Isaiah 12:2-6 (New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition)

² Surely God is my salvation;

I will trust and will not be afraid,
for the Lord is my strength and my might;
he has become my salvation.”

³ With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation. ⁴ And you will say on that day:

“Give thanks to the Lord;
call on his name;
make known his deeds among the nations;
proclaim that his name is exalted.

⁵ Sing praises to the Lord, for he has done gloriously;
let this be known in all the earth.

⁶ Shout aloud and sing for joy, O royal Zion,
for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.”

Reflection:

What are we waiting for? As we are in the middle of this season of hustle and bustle, lights and gifts and longing, what are all our preparations for? Yes, we're awaiting the birth of baby Jesus, but even more, what does his birth mean for us? Typically in Advent, we're waiting for salvation, salvation that started long ago in Bethlehem and salvation that continues today. We often think of salvation as a singular event. However the imagery in Isaiah 12 is lovely—with joy we will draw water from the wells of salvation. A well is a source of refreshment, renewal, and life that we return to again and again. Thinking of salvation as a well, a source we can turn to repeatedly is powerful. When these December days weary us with their dreariness, with their busyness, with their uncertainty, we can turn to the well of salvation that

is Christ. We can be refreshed through his grace and be strengthened by his love.

Prayer:

Holy One, guide us to the wells of salvation. Help us to reach into their waters, to drink deeply, and to be renewed. Amen.

Friday, December 13, 2024

Rev. Matthew Hoover, Salem United Church of Christ, Campbelltown

2 Corinthians 9:6-9 (New Revised Standard Version)

⁶ The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. ⁷ Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not regretfully or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. ⁸ And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work. ⁹ As it is written,

“He scatters abroad; he gives to the poor; his righteousness endures forever.”

Reflection:

Are we generous? Not just do we give, but are we generous? Often, we look for tangible and easily definable markers for our giving like the amount we give or the percentage we give. Those things are a start on the journey towards faithful giving for sure, but the place that the Apostle Paul challenges the Corinthian Christians and us to end up is a place of generosity. Generosity is not just about an amount, but an attitude of giving and sharing. The practice of generosity challenges us to move beyond counting our gifts to freely “sowing” our gifts into the world. Those gifts are not just our money, but our whole selves. The Kingdom of God challenges us to invest ourselves and our lives for the betterment of the world; to be generous with our time, talent, and most of all to be generous in love like God was generous in love when we God became incarnate in Jesus Christ. Be generous in love! What a challenge for us this