**Advent Worship and Special Event Schedule**

***Advent Sermon Series: Waiting on Jesus***

Sunday mornings, December 2-23

***Advent Week 1: Hanging of the Greens***

December 2, 10 a.m.

***Parsonage Christmas Party***

December 8, 3-5 p.m.

***Advent Week 2: Peace***

December 9, 10 a.m.

***Advent Week 3: Service of Lessons and Carols***

December 16, 10 a.m.

***Christmas Dinner***

December 16, 11:15 a.m.

***Advent Week 4: Love***

December 23, 10 a.m.

***Christmas at the Barn***

December 24, 3 p.m.

Location: 2250 Highway 1272 Princeton, KY

Special Offering: Hope & Cope Center, Water 4

**2018 Advent Devotional**



**Reflections for the Season**

by Rev. Shannon Blosser



***Waiting for Jesus: A Series Explainer***

Growing up my brother and I had a hard time waiting to unwrap our Christmas presents. I’m fairly certain that by 9 a.m., we had opened all the gifts at our home, my grandparents’, and my great-grandmother’s. We would rush to find out what we got and had the audacity to claim we were “bored” by midafternoon.

I wonder how often we struggle with waiting? If you think about it, our entire lives seem to be rushed from one thing to the next. We rarely sit. We’re overscheduled. We’re impatient at times. As a result, we often become frustrated while waiting on people, especially when “our time” is affected.

Put yourself in the shoes of our spiritual ancestors. They anticipated the coming of the Lord. They knew the promises of God for a Messiah who would save and redeem the people. They waited for hundreds of years for Jesus to come.

Could you wait that long for Jesus to fulfill a promise to you? Advent is about waiting with anticipation for the actions of Christ in the world, especially as we await the Lord’s return. It is not just about preparing for Christmas, it also teaches us how to live as the people who wait on the Lord throughout the year.

This Advent season, I invite you to join us as we reflect on what it means to wait on Jesus. I’m excited about Advent and sharing these devotions with you. I pray they will offer you the blessing of hope as we await the celebrations to come.

May God bless you!

Rev. Shannon

Advent, 2018

***Ways to Give***

Christmas is more than the gifts under the tree. It is also about reflecting the love of Christ by giving back to our community and others. Here are some great ways to give back to others this Advent and Christmas season:

**Christmas Eve Offering**

This year, our Christmas Eve Offering will support two important organizations that seek to provide food and water to those in need. The Hope and Cope Center, through Feeding God’s Children, provides backpacks filled with food for needy children in our area. Water4 is an international organization that enables access to clean water in places where there is limited access to water. We will collect a special offering for these important missions during our Christmas at the Barn service.

**Christmas Catalog**

The Kentucky Annual Conference’s Christmas Catalog provides information on ministry financial needs through our camps, college ministries, and urban ministry centers. You can find the catalog and learn about how you can support these financial needs by visiting kyumc.org.

**Kentucky United Methodist Children’s Home**

The Kentucky United Methodist Children’s Home currently serves more than 1,000 children and youth. Their work seeks to give hope to children of abuse and neglect. You can donate to the Children’s Home by visit kyumh.org.

**December 2: Jeremiah 33:14-16(CEB)**

*The time is coming, declares the Lord, when I will fulfill my gracious promise with the people of Israel and Judah. In those days and at that time, I will raise up a righteous branch from David’s line, who will do what is just and right in the land. In those days, Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is what he will be called: The Lord is Our Righteousness.*

Advent is a time of claiming hope in darkness. Jeremiah writes about holding onto hope in God’s promises during a difficult period for Israel. Jerusalem had been destroyed by the Babylonians, and many of those who remained were sent into exile. This wasn’t a time where hope seemed possible.

Yet, it was exactly the time they needed this reminder of God’s promises. Jeremiah, not one known for his Messianic promises, offers a word of hope for the people. The hope was how God would restore the Davidic line and a new king would come. This king would come to bring justice and righteousness to the world. We know that king to be Jesus, who brought true justice and hope to the world.

Jeremiah’s words are a reminder that even when things seem bleak, there is hope to claim. In the darkest moments for Israel, God gave a promise of Jesus’ coming. In our darkest moments, God reminds us of his love and hope. God’s promises are always there, even when life seems dark.

**Reflection**

Spend time reflecting on where you have seen God’s hope during difficult moments in your life. Give thanks to God for these moments of hope.

**December 3: Luke 21:29-33 (CEB)**

*Jesus told them a parable: “Look at the fig tree and all the trees. When they sprout leaves, you can see for yourselves and know that summer is near. In the same way, when you see these things happening, you know that God’s kingdom is near. I assure you that this generation won’t pass away until everything has happened. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will certainly not pass away.*

During Jesus’ final trip to Jerusalem for the Passover, some of his final teaching moments centered on the temple. The Second Temple was not finished during Jesus’ earthly ministry. Herod and his family were still completing this massive structure that stood close to the original site of Solomon’s temple. The temple was the center of worshiping life for the people of Israel.

Jesus’ words foretold its destruction. Now, imagine how that message was received? The temple was everything, and Jesus announced that its importance would be short lived. This didn’t win him too many friends. (For the record, the temple was destroyed in 70 AD by the Romans.)

Even though Jesus argued that the temple would not survive, he said that his words would survive. The message of God’s redeeming hope and grace would stand the test of time. Buildings will fall. Communities may struggle. The church may forget its mission. What is constant is the word of God revealed in Jesus Christ. That gives us all … hope.

**Reflection**

Take some time to contemplate upon the consistency of God’s message of hope. What does the never-ending word of God mean for you?

**December 4: 1 Thessalonians 3:9-10 (CEB)**

*How can we thank God enough for you, given all the joy we have because of you before our God? Night and day, we pray more than ever to see all of you in person and to complete whatever you still need for your faith.*

When we approach the month of December, it is easy to spend our time preparing for a special Christmas celebration. We run through all the usual questions to help us in this work. Have we bought all the right gifts? Are all the decorations hung with care? Are the cookies baked to perfection?

It’s important to prepare for Christmas, but Advent is not about getting ready just for a one-day celebration. It is about preparing our hearts to live with anticipatory hope, both now and forever.

One of the ways that we prepare our hearts is by giving thanks to God for the moments of joy that we have experienced. This is important for our spiritual lives. Too often we run through our lives only focusing on the negatives or struggles. This can wear us down and cripple our faith.

Giving thanks to God for the places where we see the Lord’s joy helps us recognize that there is more hope and joy in the world than we often see. God is always around us and working in our lives and community. Pausing to reflect upon these places leads us to the proper response, which is to give thanks and live with joy.

**Reflection**

Take time each day during Advent to reflect upon where you have seen the joy of the Lord. Give thanks to God for these moments.

**December 5: Psalm 25:4-5 (CEB)**

*Make your ways known to me, Lord, teach me your paths. Lead me in your truth – teach it to me – because you are the God who saves me. I put my hope in you all day long.*

One of the lost skills in the Information Age is the ability to read a map. We will just get on our phones and say, “Siri, how do I get to” and say our destination. Before we know it, we have ready-made, easy-to-use directions to our destination.

The Psalmist writes about their desire for something similar from God. The desire is for the pathway to God’s love to be clearly made known.

That pathway is discipleship that points us toward a deeper relationship with Jesus. When we are in a discipleship-focused relationship with other believers, we learn together about the God who saves us and how we can put our trust in the Lord. We are also growing in our relationship with other believers and can encourage each other to be a witness of God’s love.

It’s tempting in Advent to put aside the practices that can lead to deeper discipleship. We’ll claim we are too busy for small groups, Bible studies, or even worship. The truth is that we make the time for what we value as important and meaningful.

What would it look like if during Advent we made discipleship and growing in relationship with God and other believers as important and meaningful?

**Reflection**

Make a commitment to be in worship every Sunday during Advent and the Christmas seasons.

**December 6: Isaiah 2:5 (CEB)**

*Come, house of Jacob, let’s walk by the Lord’s light.*

One of our favorite traditions before Christmas is to travel to a drive-through light display. We love to sit in the car, listen to Christmas music, and look at the lights along the way. Our favorite is at the Kentucky Horse Park in Lexington, which has Noah’s favorite model train displays and a miniature train you can ride in around the Visitor’s Center.

What fascinates me about these light displays is how the lights are not just decorations that display Santa Claus or the 12 Days of Christmas, but they also point the way forward. On a dimly lit and narrow roadway, the lights from these displays illuminate the road and help you to stay on the right path.

Scripture tells us that Christ came as a light that shines in the midst of darkness. A light of hope that points us to the Father’s love through the power of the Holy Spirit.

We are called to allow the light of Christ’s love and hope to be what guides our actions. That is what Isaiah means when he calls us to “walk by the Lord’s light.” Our very words and actions in the world are to be a reflection of our hope in Christ.

Can we say that is truly the case for us? Often, we are guided by political leaders or advertisers. True discipleship comes when what truly points us to the path of God’s love and life.

**Reflection**

Take some time to think about what motivates your actions and decisions. Name the things that can keep you from following God’s light.

**December 7: Isaiah 64:8-9 (CEB)**

*But now, Lord, you are our father. We are the clay, you are our potter. All of us are the work of your hand. Don’t rage so fiercely, Lord; don’t hold our sin against us forever, but gaze not on your people, all of us.*

Advent is one of the two seasons of preparation in the Christian calendar. The other is Lent. We often think of Lent as the time to reflect on our sin and the nature of our heart, but Advent is just as appropriate.

In Advent, we prepare our hearts to receive the Incarnation of Christ. The Word of God came to earth in Jesus to give of his life, so that we may experience hope and freedom from sin. Jesus came to redeem us and offer us hope through his life.

So, think of it like this … in Advent, we are preparing our hearts to remember that Christ came as a child to bring us to the joy of the Father. A Father who created us out of love. A Father whose love is always present in our lives. A Father whose love for us never weakens due to our acts of disobedience.

Just as we prepare our homes with Christmas decorations, we must also prepare our hearts to receive the great hope and joy of Christ’s birth once again. We do so by reflecting upon the places where we are not living a Christ-like life, and also to ask God to bring us closer to the Lord’s love once again. There is no better time to do that than now in this season of Advent.

**Reflection**

Where is your life not in alignment with God’s desires? Ask for God to forgive you so that God may guide you to a deeper way of hope and joy.

**December 8: Psalm 80:3-7 (CEB)**

*Restore us, God! Make your face shine so that we can be saved! Lord God of heavenly forces, how long will you fume against your people’s prayer? You’ve fed them bread made of tears; you’ve given them tears to drink three times over! You’ve put us at odds with our neighbors; our enemies make fun of us. Restore us, God of heavenly forces! Make your face shines so that we can be saved!*

It’s easy to get discouraged during December. The sun sets earlier and earlier. Even the days seem darker at times. I don’t know about you, but it is not hard to find yourself focusing on the negatives and then believing that all hope is lost.

There are moments when the Psalms read like someone who is going through a time of discouragement. The Psalms are our prayer book, offering both words of praise and reflections on discouragement and despair. These laments are important, because they allow us to express what we are feeling.

Laments also allow us to cry out for God’s hope. In this Psalm, the writer expresses their desire for God to restore them. The Palmist desires God to bring them back to a deeper faith and to remove the things that separate them from God’s hope.

In your places of discouragement and disappointment, where do you need to see God restore you? In a relationship? At the church? At your job? Where do you need God to restore you to a deeper sense of faith?

**Reflections**

Spend time reflecting on where there are places of discouragement in your life and ask God to show you where the Lord is present in those moments.

**December 9: Malachi 3:1 (CEB)**

*Look, I am sending my messenger who will clear the path before me; suddenly the Lord whom you are seeking will come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you take delight is coming, says the Lord of heavenly forces.*

Each Advent season, we are reintroduced to an odd person. His name is John the Baptist. Each of the gospel writers tell us he was unique. He ate wild locus and honey. His clothes were made of camel hair. He was eccentric and had no problems telling the religious leaders that a new hope was coming.

John’s work was to clear the path, so the people could receive the message of Christ. His was an important mission that guided people to see their need of God and set the stage for something bigger to come. Because of his preaching and ministry, some thought he was the Messiah. John was quick to point out he was only the forerunner.

When I think about John, I can’t help but think of the people who have made a difference in our faith journeys. We often think of the moment when we accepted Jesus or when it all began to make more sense. Before that specific moment, though, there were people who were making clear the path for us so we could receive Jesus’ love. Pastors, parents, teachers, church members, and so many others who helped us to see a bit of God’s truth. There is never one moment that leads us to faith.

Thank God for the people God used to clear the paths for us, so we could see Jesus.

**Reflections**

Think back on your journey of faith. Who were the people that cleared the way for you to love Jesus?

**December 10: Luke 3:2-3 (CEB)**

*During the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas – God’s word came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. John went throughout the region of the Jordan River, calling for people to be baptized to show that they were changing their hearts and lives and wanted God to forgive their sins.*

“Do you know what you want to be when you grow up?” That question always bothered me. How was I to know in the 3rd grade what career I felt led to enter? I had a lot of different answers: Game show host, astronaut, police office, pro wrestler (just kidding). It wasn’t until middle school that I knew I wanted to be a journalist. I was well into my career before I felt God’s call to ministry.

Part of the answer to that question is knowing our purpose. John the Baptist knew his purpose. His life was to point people to Jesus and to help them to see their need of grace. John’s was a unique calling in that he didn’t limit this call to just the Gentiles, as the religious leaders were prone to do. He said all people were in need of redemption through Jesus Christ.

John knew his purpose, lived it out, and remained committed to it even when it was hard and difficult. What about you? We often wrestle with the questions of why we are here. God has a purpose for your life beyond merely existing. Our lives are to be a living representation of Jesus and point people to the Lord’s love through our gifts and talents.

What is your purpose in God’s love?

**Reflection**

Take time to think about where God is leading you to share Jesus’ love.

**December 11: Philippians 1:3-6 (CEB)**

*I thank my God every time I mention you in my prayers. I’m thankful for all of you every time I pray, and it’s always a prayer full of joy. I’m glad because of the way you have been my partners in the ministry of the gospel from the time you first believed it until now. I’m sure about this: the one who started a good work in you will stay with you to complete the job by the day of Christ Jesus.*

I blame H.B. Thomas for not believing in Santa Claus. You don’t know “Coach” Thomas, but he was a gentle giant back home. He coached track and was an athletic director for various high schools, but also played various pranks on my grandmother, who was one of his close friends.

One day, Coach Thomas dressed up as Santa Claus. It was the last Christmas my great-grandmother was alive for and all the children were in. It was a full house. We all went to sit on Santa’s lap and tell him what we wanted, but I wasn’t fooled. I knew it was Coach Thomas and pulled off his beard to prove it. Yes, I was in a lot of trouble.

Sometimes we view God as Santa Claus in our prayers. We go to God with our list of wants and expect Jesus to fulfill our every wish. Prayer doesn’t work like that. Prayer is not about treating God as a wish fulfiller, but about a deep communion with the Lord of Holy Love. In prayer, we express our deepest concerns, but also express our thanksgiving for the people around us. Deep prayer begins not with our own needs, but in giving thanks to God for the Lord’s love and the blessings of those around us.

**Reflection**

Offer thanks to God for your family, friends, church, and community.

**December 12: Isaiah 11:1-3 (CEB)**

*A shoot will grow up from the stump of Jesse; a branch will sprout from his roots. The Lord’s spirit will rest upon him, a spirit of wisdom and understanding, a spirit of planning and strength, a spirit of knowledge and fear of the Lord. He will delight in fearing the Lord. He won’t judge by appearances, nor decide by hearsay.*

Do you have any expectations? When we think of an expectation, we are thinking of what we believe will take place regarding an event or situation. We can all have expectations about various things, whether it involves our families, careers, or how the world should work.

What about God? Do you have any expectations of God? The people of Israel did. They expected God would fulfill the promises of a Messiah who would come from the branch of Jesse, a reference to the Davidic line, and bring forth hope and justice. They waited through trials, false messiahs, and moments of hopelessness for God to fulfill this expectation and promise in Jesus.

Sometimes, one of our expectations is that God will act in the immediacy of the moment. It doesn’t always work like that. God is patient in fulfilling his promises. God’s timing is never our own, but God always acts in ways that are perfect and holy. Advent reminds us to wait upon the Lord to fulfill the expectations and promises of our heart, even if it means we wait a little longer on our expectations than we would like.

**Reflection**

Where are you waiting on God to fulfill an expected promise in your life? Offer that promise to God as a prayer today.

**December 14: Isaiah 40:3-5 (CEB)**

*A voice is crying out: “Clear the Lord’s way in the desert! Make a level highway in the wilderness for our God! Every valley will be raised up, and every mountain and hill will be flattened. Uneven ground will become level, and rough terrain a valley plain. The Lord’s glory will appear, and all humanity will see it together; the Lord’s mount has commanded it.”*

Every Sunday, I offer a prayer before we begin the sermon. The prayer is intended to center our thoughts and hearts to receive the proclamation of God’s holy word for the day. Have you ever noticed a phrase that I try to express with each of the prayer?

*Tune out the distractions of our lives.*

When we think of distractions, we are thinking of things that prevent us from focusing on God. We have a lot of distractions in our lives. These mountains and hills that prevent us from hearing from God and receiving the Lord’s love.

Many of our potential distractors are not bad things: jobs, family, social responsibilities, and more. We need those things, but what often happens is that we place more of our attention upon them to the detriment of our walk in Christ. Our jobs take a priority to our discipleship. We will overschedule our families to where we are exhausted for worship. We have a hard time saying no to the world.

If we truly desire to grow in our relationship with the Lord, then we have to reprioritize our lives. That way our path is made clear to receive the hope of Christ in a new and deeper way.

**Reflection**

What is distracting you from discipleship?

**December 15: Romans 15:7-9a (CEB)**

*So welcome each other, in the same way that Christ also welcomed you, for God’s glory. I am saying that Christ became a servant of those who are circumcised for the sake of God’s truth, in order to confirm the promises given to the ancestors, and so that the Gentiles could glorify God for his mercy.*

How do you make someone feel welcome? Many of us might respond that you make someone feel welcome by talking with them or giving them a warm embrace. Another person may say that we welcome someone by making their favorite food.

These are all great ways that we welcome someone, but what if our ways of welcoming were deeper? Paul writes that we are called to welcome others as Christ has welcomed us. What he means is that we are to include people in our conversations and make space for them in our lives.

This goes beyond merely just doing a few acts of hospitality, but it is about making intentional choices which include the needs of others in our conversations. We share God’s unconditional love through acts of welcome that recognize their needs are as important as our own.

When we purposely make room for people, we are telling them they matter and are a child of God and a person of worth. The same attitude and perspective we have received from Christ, we are called to share with others. Making room may be costly and it could mean major changes, but in welcoming others we express the love of Christ in a powerful way.

**Reflection**

What group of people in Princeton need to feel welcome by the church? How can we make room for them?

**December 16: Psalm 72:18-19 (CEB)**

*Bless the Lord God, the God of Israel – the only one who does wondrous things! Bless God’s glorious name forever; let his glory fill all the earth! Amen and Amen!*

Most of the time when we pray, we end it with this one simple word: Amen. We see this practice in the prayers of the psalm, as well as in Jesus’ own prayer life.

What does the word “Amen” mean?

Amen has its root meaning in the Hebrew language. Its basic definition means “so be it.” When we close our prayers with “Amen,” we are asking for God to enact our prayers, whether it is for God’s name to be made known or to meet a basic need for help or hope in our world.

I wonder how we might live out the “Amen.” In our passage for today, the psalmist writes for God’s name to be blessed and known for ever. This prayer, and others like it, are enacted through us being a vessel of God’s blessings. God uses our words, actions, and thoughts to bring into life the very things we are praying.

So, when we pray “Amen,” remember that you are asking God to not just make it so, but to use you to fulfill the prayers of our hearts. Because God desires to use you to bring the Amen of our prayers into reality.

**Reflection**

Take some time to think about your prayer life. How would your prayers change if you were asked to be the answer to your prayers? What changes in your prayers would you need to make for that to take place in your life?

**December 16: Zephaniah 3:19-20 (CEB)**

*Watch what I am about to do to all your oppressors at that time. I will deliver the lame; I will gather the outcast. I will change their shame into praise and fame throughout the earth. At that time, I will bring all of you back, at the time when I gather you. I will give you fame and praise among all the neighboring peoples when I restore your possessions and you can see them – says the Lord.*

The prophets of the Old Testament wrote in a time of despair. They all wrote either anticipating Exile or talking about what life would be like when they came out of that experience. Even in Jesus’ time, the people were facing oppression regarding their treatment from the Roman Empire.

They were looking for a deliverer who would do for them what God had done in the past through Moses. God brought redemption for the people of Israel when the Lord called Moses to lead them to the Promised Land. The expectation was for a Messiah to do that work again, and this time to bring hope to the poor, the forgotten, and lost.

Jesus’ role was to turn the world upside down by welcoming those who were oppressed and forgotten into his fellowship. Beyond that, he met them at their point of deepest need. As followers of Christ, we are called to shine the light of the One who came to bring hope to the world by being a voice for the voiceless and hopeless. We are called not to sit on the sidelines and wait for someone else to do the work. God calls us, through our faith in Christ, to get right into the middle of it and bring deliverance and hope for those who are oppressed.

**Reflection**

Where is God calling you to bring hope to the oppressed today?

**December 17: Isaiah 12:2 (CEB)**

*God is indeed my salvation; I will trust and won’t be afraid. Yah, the Lord, is my strength and my shield; he has become my salvation.*

When we think of the word “trust,” we are saying we have confidence in something. We believe something or someone will live out its promises.

Isaiah says that since God is the source of true salvation, we can place our confidences upon the Lord. We can have hope that is God real and will never let us down. By having trust in God, we are able to live out our lives based upon God’s hopes and desires for us.

Sometimes, though, we live as if we place more trust in the things of the world than God. I think many of us can struggle with the idea of trusting God, because we can physically see our jobs, families, politicians, sports, and so many other things that we can give priority in our lives over God. It takes more faith to trust God than it does the promises of a boss or family member.

Here’s the thing, though: we can trust God fully because though we may not be able to “physically” see God, we have seen the Lord’s work all around us. Scripture gives us moment after moment of God’s promises being realized. We stand upon the shoulders of others who have placed their confidences in God before those of the world. These moments give us hope when we struggle with trusting God, because it reminds us that God is present and active in the world. That gives us something we can all trust in today.

**Reflection**

Where do you need to trust God more in your life?

**December 18: Isaiah 35:8-9 (CEB)**

*A highway will be there. It will be called The Holy Way. The unclean won’t travel on it, but it will be for those walking on that way. Even fools won’t get lost on it; no lion will be there, and no predator will go up on it. None of these will be there; only the redeemed will walk on it.*

The early Christian movement was called “The Way.” It wasn’t until the church in Antioch was formed that believers were called “Christians.” Christian is an identity marker. I wonder if we miss something by not using The Way in our descriptions.

Isaiah remarks how The Way is a path laid by God. It is a highway that points to a specific destination – the image of God.

That imagery takes our mind to a journey. When we get in our cars and hit the open road, we are on a journey to a specific destination, whether it is to our jobs, an errand, or a vacation. We know that journey will come with challenges (other drivers), and potential difficulties (running out of gas), but we still traverse the road.

The Christian faith is a journey. It is not a one-moment acceptance of faith. It is like being on a highway that points us to a life growing in God’s love and image. It is a road paved by the life of Christ and will be filled with challenges (wanting to live for the world) and difficulties (priorities of time, money, self that overtake our faith). Yet the more we commit ourselves to this journey, the more we will see that though the road may be hard and challenging, growing in God’s love is worth it.

**Reflection**

Take some time to think about how you see your faith. Are you willing to be on a journey to grow in Christ?

**December 19: Isaiah 61:1-2a (CEB)**

*The Lord God’s Spirit is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me. He has sent me to bring good news to the poor, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim release for captives, and liberation for prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s and a day of vindication for our God.*

Do you believe you are sent into Princeton to share the love of God? Do you see your life as being sent?

Often times when we think of someone being “sent,” we are thinking of appointed pastors who are sent to a specific community to minister and lead a church. They are called by God to go into a community to proclaim hope, redemption, and life for all people.

It’s not just pastors who are sent. To be sent means you are called by God to go into a community to share the love of Christ. To be sent means you are part of a mission to share good news to the poor, hurting, and lost of our community.

Jesus believed that it wasn’t just him who was sent by God to share good news. He believed his disciples and those who followed him were also sent to be a witness of hope to a community in the name of God’s love.

Every day,+ you are sent into Princeton to share the love of Christ, to proclaim hope to the hopeless, and life to the broken. God has sent you to this community and gifted you to be the hands and feet of Christ to share good news with all people.

**Reflection**

What would be different about your life if you lived as if you were sent by God into Princeton?

**December 20: Matthew 11:4-6 (CEB)**

*Jesus responded, “Go report to John what you hear and see. Those who were blind are able to see. Those who were crippled are walking. People with skin diseases are cleansed. Those who were deaf now hear. Those who dead are raised up. The poor have good news proclaimed to them. Happy are those who don’t stumble and fall because of me.”*

Word was getting around about Jesus. Anticipation was at a fever pitch that Jesus could be the long-expected Messiah. Even then, though, there was some nervousness. The people had seen people come and go who claimed to be the Messiah, only to be recognized as false. So we can’t fault John, Jesus’ own cousin, for sending some of his followers to Jesus with questions to see if he really was the Messiah.

Jesus told them to report what they have seen. He told them to focus on the fruit of the ministry before them. That fruit of ministry was that there were lives being transformed through the life of Jesus Christ. He wanted them to focus on where they were seeing the kingdom of God breaking into the world.

It’s often too easy to focus on what is not right in the world, especially in the church. Sometimes we search for things that are wrong to justify our own frustrations, whatever they may be. Jesus invites us to see things differently. Instead of looking for things that are wrong, he asks us to look for places where we see the reign of God making a difference in the world. Further, he calls us to not just to notice them but participate in them as well.

**Reflection**

Where are you seeing examples of the work of Jesus Christ at Ogden and in our community? How can you participate in that work?

**December 21: Isaiah 10:16-17 (CEB)**

*Therefore, the Lord God of heavenly forces will make the well-fed people waste away; and among his officials, a blaze will burn like scorching fire. The light of Israel will become a fire, its holy one a flame, which will burn and devour its thorns and thistles in a single day.*

Isaiah wrote during a time of conflict for the people of Israel. The Assyrians were pressing their might upon the people. It wouldn’t be long before they were taken into captivity.

If you were living in that time, it would be understandable to believe that all hope was lost. That perhaps God had given up on them and they would never experience hope again.

Maybe we don’t have to think too hard to imagine what that time was like. The church in the United States is struggling. People are hungry. There is more division than ever before. It seems like everything is lost or going wrong. Should we give up?

What Isaiah reminds the people and proclaims to the Assyrians is this: God is still in control. While it might seem like the powers of this world are victorious, God will win out and his kingdom will come. Nothing will ever defeat or put out the love of God and mission of God’s people.

Isaiah is a reminder to never give up on believing in God or what is at work in the world. Even when everything seems hopeless, God is still working and sharing hope with the world.

**Reflection**

When you think about how you see the world, are you tempted to give up? Where do you need to reclaim a sense of God’s hope?

**December 22: Hebrews 10:8-10 (CEB)**

*He says above, “You didn’t want and you weren’t pleased with a sacrifice or an offering or with entirely burned offerings or a purification offering,” which are offered because the Law requires them. Then he said, “Look, I’ve come to do your will.” He puts an end to the first to establish the second. We have been made holy by God’s will through the offering of Jesus Christ’s body once for all.*

The priests in Jesus’ time were responsible for the sacrifices that would atone for the people’s sin. Leviticus lays out specific requirements for what sacrifices were to be made and how the priests were to conduct them. This was part of the Law, but it was insufficient. The sacrifices always had to be repeated.

Jesus’ birth signals an end to the sacrificial practices and the beginning of a new way to respond to God’s love. Jesus came to be the purest sacrifice, because he gave his entire life for us. He gave witness to a life lived in obedience to God’s will. Everything that Jesus did – from his teachings to his death and resurrection – was in accordance with God’s will.

What God desires from us more than anything else is obedience. Obedience is more than just saying we believe in Jesus. It comes in knowing God’s desires and making them be what guides are words, actions, and thoughts. It is to be completely defined by God so that everything about us is seen through our actions in following God’s will.

Are you obedient to God?

**Reflection**

Take time to contemplate upon what aspects of your life can hold you back from being obedient to God.

**December 23: Micah 5:2-5a (CEB)**

*As for you, Bethlehem of Ephrathah, through you are the least significant of Judah’s forces, one who is to be a ruler in Israel on my behalf will come out from you. His origin is from remote times, from ancient days. Therefore, he will give them up until the time when she who is labor gives birth. The rest of his kin will return to the people of Israel. He will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. They will dwell secure, because he will surely become great throughout the earth; he will become one of peace.*

Bethlehem is located less than 10 miles from Jerusalem in the West Bank. The city is heavily populated now and is a tourist destination, especially this time of year as thousands flock to Nativity Square to celebrate Jesus’ birth.

In Jesus’ time, Bethlehem was a small shepherd community. Its primary significance was that it was David’s hometown. Because of its lack of purpose, it was easy to be overlooked as a place where God would do something that would change the world.

Micah calls the people to anticipate God breaking in where it is least expected. God would do something in Bethlehem that would bring true peace to the world. We know that came about through Jesus’ birth in a Bethlehem manger.

Sometimes we miss out on God’s action in the world, because we are not looking for it in the right places. God doesn’t always act in the places where we expect, but he often acts in small unnoticeable ways that can change the world in mighty ways.

**Reflection**

Where are some unnoticed places where God is acting today?

**December 24: Luke 2:1-7 (CEB)**

*In those days Caesar Augustus declared that everyone throughout the empire should be enrolled in the tax lists. This first enrollment occurred when Quirinius governed Syria. Everyone went to their own cities to be enrolled. Since Joseph belonged to David’s house and family line, he went up from the city of Nazareth in Galilee to David’s city, called Bethlehem, in Judea. He went to be enrolled together with Mary, who was promised to him in marriage and who was pregnant. While they were there, the time came for Mary to have her baby. She gave birth to her firstborn child, a son, wrapped him snugly, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the guestroom.*

It’s easy for Christmas to get lost. We’ll rush from one family member’s home to another. We’ll unwrap gifts. We’ll devour our meal. Before we know it, Christmas is over.

Perhaps we’ve become too accustomed to the story that it has lost its meaning for us. Perhaps we’ve become too familiar with the world that we’ve turned away from Mary and Joseph.

On this day, I can’t help but think how easy it can be for me to tell Mary and Joseph that I have no room for them. I’m too busy getting ready for Christmas. I’m too busy with life. I’m too busy.

And there is our struggle with Christmas. When we become too busy to celebrate, we become too busy for Mary and Joseph, and the Christ child. On this day, we need to slow down and make sure we truly have space for the baby Jesus and his family.

**Reflection**

On this Christmas Eve, how can you make room for the Christmas message in your life?

**Notes and Personal Reflections from the Season**