



**Holy Trinity
Presbyterian Church
&
Sunset Hills United Presbyterian Church**

The Journey to Bethlehem

The Rev.'s Dr. Clinton Cottrell and Laura Cottrell Strauss

Journeys. Just the word usually brings warm feelings as we remember or anticipate a vacation, perhaps a journey to Hawaii or a cruise. For some, we look back at a pilgrimage to the Holy Lands or pray for one to come. If you have ever been to EPCOT at Disney World you may think of a journey through your imagination. One thing is a given, a journey involves leaving one place and going to another.

Advent is about a journey, and the place we are headed is at the foot of the manger in Bethlehem. Our journey doesn't begin in Matthew 1, as the birth of the Messiah is part of a journey that began at the dawn of creation. So, we will look at a series of Biblical journeys, each in its own way ultimately leading to Bethlehem.

This journey to Bethlehem is about more than a trip through the Bible or a geographical walk from the Garden of Eden to the City of David, it is also about our Christian journey. Our trip out of darkness into the light, our odyssey from sin to forgiveness, death into true life.

When we go to Bethlehem to accept the Messiah born in the manger our Advent journey may be over BUT there is more to come! The rest of the journey continues to Easter, the resurrection and new life, but for now we focus on the all-important Advent walk. Join us as we travel through the Bible toward Bethlehem and the birth of the Christ child.

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Sunday, November 28
The First Sunday of Advent

Scripture Reading: Genesis 3:1-7, 22-24

The Journey Out of the Garden

Reflection: Serpents symbolize adversaries in much of the Ancient Near East. We see this in everything from the Sumerian Epic of Gilgamesh to the Etana Myth from Mesopotamia. It's no surprise therefore that the evil one takes the form of a serpent in Genesis, tempting the first humans toward control and power.

Perhaps the longest journey of our lives is the journey away from the evil one's temptations. Many of us, like the first humans, struggle to take steps away from our foundational temptation toward control and power. Temptation looks different for others. When and how do you experience temptation? What steps are you taking in your journey away from those temptations?

Prayer: Creator God, you created us to be near you, yet the temptations of the world constantly pull us away from you. As we journey through Advent toward Christmas and beyond, may our steps always be toward you and never away. Help us to identify the dangerous temptations in our lives (including at Christmastide) and then choose to focus on you and the true meaning of Christmas through your Son. Amen.

Monday, November 29
The First Monday of Advent

Scripture Reading: Genesis 6:9-22, 7:17-24

The Journey Over the Sea

Reflection: The book *Pilgrimage of a Soul* defines struggle as an essential part of pilgrimage. It is certainly an essential part of Noah's experience on the ark. He has unwittingly become a meteorologist, zookeeper, and sailor all within one humble, "yes, Lord." More than once, Noah must have wondered what he'd been thinking when he agreed to all this.

Isn't this how our journey with the Lord sometimes goes? We say yes to God's call to serve on Session, lead the junior high retreat, or answer the calls for the prayer chain. Then, it becomes more of a struggle than we'd anticipated. Like Noah, our call is to trust the God who called us. Trust the Lord has qualified us for the task at hand and follow through.

Prayer: God of the ark and of the flood, thank you for your call on our lives. Our minds understand that you don't choose the qualified but qualify the chosen, yet we often feel incapable or even overwhelmed in the work we are called to do. Through your Spirit grant us an Advent peace to fill our hearts, mind and soul so that we may calmly and faithfully fulfill your call on our lives this season and beyond. Allow us to feel no struggle but only a joy and presence of you through your Son. Amen.

Tuesday, November 30
The First Tuesday of Advent

Scripture Reading: Genesis 11:1-9

The Journey Out of Babel

Reflection: Babel is reminiscent of Mesopotamian temples, known as ziggurats, with a square at the base and sloping, stepping sides upward. They were intended as staircases from Earth to heaven. The sheer hubris it takes to think one can manipulate God's heavenly kingdom is unthinkable!

Our God is not a God who can be reached by human might and striving. Rather, the only way we are able to journey to God is by God's grace – grace in the form of the Holy Spirit creating a humble, repentant heart within us. Our humility and repentance before the Holy One opens the gateway to our walk with the Lord.

Prayer: Divine Word, you spoke creation into being with just that, a word. Forgive us mortals as we sometimes think that we can compete with you simply by the works of our hands or the words of our mouths. Instead of attempting the impossible, open our hearts to what is possible, your Spirit reaching down to us this Advent. May our time of Christmas preparation be filled with your amazing love and presence, and may that love remain with us all of our days. Amen.

Wednesday, December 1
The First Wednesday of Advent

Scripture Reading: Genesis 12:1-9

The Journey from Haran

Reflection: Abram, who is not yet Abraham, is blessed to be a blessing. That is the goal of his journey! Indeed, going at a normal caravan pace of 20 miles per day, the trip from Haran to Canaan would have taken the better part of a month. This is an extensive road trip with the goal of blessing Abram, as well as all peoples on earth.

This changes the way we look at our blessings. Everything good in our possession is given as a blessing in order for us to bless others. God in Christ not only provides for our needs, but calls us to use what God has given us to provide for the needs of others.

Prayer: Blessed Trinity, mystically three in one, thank you for the blessings you have given us in our lives, our health, our family and friends, our homes and more. May our life journey this season and beyond not simply reflect how you have blessed us, but may we be a blessing to all that are around us. And out of those blessings, may others find their own life journeys strengthened through your Son. Amen.

Thursday, December 2
The First Thursday of Advent

Scripture Reading: Genesis 37:12-28

The Journey Into Egypt

Reflection: Joseph doesn't want to go on this journey. To say he misses his father is an understatement. To say that he has been mistreated is an understatement. To say that his life is about to get harder is an understatement. Kidnapped by the Midianites and Ishmaelites, his own second and third cousins, Joseph experiences ultimate heartache in his exile to Egypt.

This reminds us that journeys are sometimes devastating. We are sent where we do not want to go. Our loved ones are sent to places we would rather they not be sent. As it was heartbreaking for Joseph, so it is for us. The hope is that, just as God never abandons Joseph in his struggle, nor does our God ever abandon us.

Prayer: Mysterious Lord, there are times where we feel like Joseph, totally confused by what has happened in our lives. Forgive us God because there are times when we question your presence and wisdom. Lord, help us to see that even in our darkest hours, you are there, just as you were for Joseph. And just as you used those dark hours to put Joseph into a place where he saved his family and nation, use our dark hours for a greater good, seen and unseen. May others be strengthened by our faith that in good times and bad, we firmly know that you are there. In the name of Immanuel, we pray. Amen.

Friday, December 3
The First Friday of Advent

Scripture Reading: Exodus 12:31-42

The Journey Out of Egypt

Reflection: Hundreds of years after Joseph, the Israelites are finally leaving Egypt! God has redeemed their centuries of suffering! Using 1 Kings 6:1 as a guide, this passage would have taken place around 1445 B.C., though some scholars date the exodus to approximately 1260 B.C. Whichever date is accurate, it is clear that the Israelites were in Egypt for a long time.

Journeys are sometimes a long time coming. We wait for soldiers to journey home, for death to take a suffering loved one home, for a bus during a torrential downpour. In all of our waiting, God is at work behind the scenes, making a way where we see no way and opening doors where we only see walls.

Prayer: Lord of parting seas, forgive us for being like the Israelites that could only see what was impossible not what was possible with you, the Almighty. Over 3,000 years ago the Jews could not imagine that you would part the sea, just as even today people still choose to not believe that a virgin could give birth to a Messiah in occupied Palestine. God, we believe, help our unbelief this Advent season. Help us to simply have faith, first believing in the unbelievable, a baby born in a manger who would become a Messiah. In the name of Christmas miracle, amen.

Saturday, December 4
The First Saturday of Advent

Scripture Reading: Exodus 19:1-9

The Journey Up Mt. Sinai

Reflection: Mt. Sinai is Moses and God's "place." It is where Moses journeys when he needs to talk with the Lord, escape the Israelites, and dwell with the Most High. Mt. Sinai is Moses's safe space, where it seems Moses is most fully able to be his authentic, vulnerable self. Life is truly simpler for him up there on the mountain, away from his day-to-day struggles.

Where is your place with God? Is it a particular chair in your home? A sanctuary? A trail? Where do you journey when you need some time with the holy one? This journey can be physical. It can also be a special time of day, a journaling practice, a prayer ritual.

Prayer: Sanctuary God, as we look back to our childhoods for many of us, Advent and Christmas can be a sanctuary where we would like to return. As a child we had no worries about bills, fixing the car, illnesses of old age or even what to make for dinner. We would go to sleep on Christmas eve, perhaps listening for the sound of reindeer, and wake up to the miracle of Christmas day. Many of us still long for that sanctuary. Lord, help us to find true sanctuary in our lives, not one that lasts for but a minute but one that lasts a lifetime. Amen.

Sunday, December 5
The Second Sunday of Advent

Scripture Reading: Exodus 34:29-35

The Journey Down Mt. Sinai

Reflection: Original translations of this passage read that Moses had horns on his face. Google Michelangelo's statue of Moses and you'll see! More recent scholarship has unearthed the reality: Moses was glowing like a sun lamp. He was literally radiant because of his encounter with the Lord.

Journeys with God have a way of changing all of us, even if we don't grow horns or start to glow. These holy journeys change our character, speech, countenance, and lifestyle. How has your Christian journey changed you over the years?

Prayer: Eternal God, you have watched as we have journeyed from our mother's womb to who we are today. Through that journey so much has changed and we continue to change as we travel with you. Thank you for this journey that we call life. Please help us, like Moses, to be able to see your presence in our lives and may others see the glow of your love on our face this Advent and beyond. Amen.

Monday, December 6
The Second Monday of Advent

Scripture Reading: Joshua 3:1-17

Journey into the Land of Promise

Reflection: God demonstrates God's claim over the land by stopping the River Jordan from flowing, creating a passage for the Israelites. In this way, the Israelites are reminded that they are not in charge of this journey into their new land: God alone is their journey's coordinator, director, and captain.

God likewise lays claim upon our lives and our journeys. As the Psalmist tells us, 'the earth is the Lord's and all that is in it,' and that includes us! We can be comforted this day knowing that we, and our journeys, belong to God in Christ.

Prayer: Miraculous Lord, you not only parted the Red Sea but the Jordan River as well, making a way for your people as they traveled to your promised land. During this Advent season, part all of the barriers in our lives that keep us from knowing you through your son. Miraculously pull back the waters that prevent us from being true Christians be it materialism, entertaining, commercialism or anything else so that this Advent and Christmas we may fully enter into the promised land which is the love of your son, born in a manger. Amen.

Tuesday, December 7
The Second Tuesday of Advent

Scripture Reading: Judges 6:11-16

Journey into Battle

Reflection: This story is something of a David and Goliath. The underdog clan of Manasseh, led by Gideon, is commanded to go into battle against the big, bad Midianites. Gideon is shaking in his boots and, if we know our Biblical history, so are we. And yet...the weakest clan of Manasseh has untold strength because the weakest clan of Manasseh has the LORD.

The Lord our God is our strength, as well, especially when we feel weak. We do not need to be more than God created us to be.

Prayer: Almighty God, all around us we are bombarded with messages that bigger is better and that small is weak and insignificant. We see it in big box stores, in global companies, even where most of us buy our food. Help us to realize that what we see as bigger and better is not necessarily what you see. Thank you for taking a landless couple with no room for a bed to give birth to a son who by all earthly measures was weak but who would show the strength and fortitude to save all who would believe.

When we find ourselves weak and powerless, may we never lose hope for just as you gave the Midianites into the hand of Manasseh, in our own life challenges we are confident that with you all things are possible. We pray in the name of the Son who on Easter morning did the truly impossible. Amen.

Wednesday, December 8
The Second Wednesday of Advent

Scripture: Ruth 1:1-18

Journey to Bethlehem from Moab

Reflection: Ruth is one of only four women mentioned in the genealogy of Jesus in Matthew's gospel, and she is a foreigner. Like her husband, who was a foreigner in Moab, she becomes a foreigner in Bethlehem. This reminds us of the myriad of ways God works across national boundaries.

When we encounter migrants, it is good for us to see Naomi and Ruth reflected in their faces. Every one of us is from somewhere other than here, and this includes Jesus's ancestors.

Prayer: God of all nations, for millennia your followers have constantly been on the move be it from Canaan to Egypt to the promised land to Moab and millennia later, across the sea to America. Even now your people are still on the move. Help us to be compassionate with our love toward the migrants that we meet, just as two young Moabite women were to Naomi and the men who journeyed to escape hunger.

We also ask you to open our eyes to see that even in the midst of droughts, illness, and death you were able to work a miracle in the likes of Naomi and Ruth who would not only become ancestors of King David but of Jesus himself. God, only you know the incredible mischief you may have in store for our lives and in the lives of those that we leave behind. In the name of the Messiah born of the line of Naomi and Ruth, amen.

Thursday, December 9
The Second Thursday of Advent

Scripture: 1 Kings 10:1-13

Journey of a Queen

Reflection: How far would you go to know God better? Sheba was located at the southwestern tip of the Arabian Peninsula, in modern Yemen. It was the best-watered and most fertile area in Arabia, and was a center for global trade. But that wasn't enough for their queen: she wanted God's wisdom.

Where do you travel to gain wisdom? Your Bible? Your church? Bible Study? Have you literally traveled for retreats, pilgrimages, or study trips to the Holy Land? Where would you go to know God better and to gain holy wisdom?

Prayer: Wondrous Lord, you showered Solomon with wisdom such that others journeyed long distances just to see what YOU had done. God, like Solomon, grant us the wisdom and courage for the facing of each day so that our wills would be so knit together with yours that the two would be indiscernible.

But also grant us the ability to be like the Queen of Sheba who was drawn to know you and your works better, not to be jealous of others for their talents but rather to be able to give thanks for you, the creator of all good gifts. In the name of Jesus, amen.

Friday, December 10
The Second Friday of Advent

Scripture: 1 Kings 17:7-24

Journey to Zarephath

Reflection: Like Jesus traveling to Bethany to raise Lazarus, Elijah travels to Zarephath to raise a young boy from the dead. There is a poignancy in Elijah's action, for at the shrine to the goddess Tanit in Zarephath, child sacrifices were made. Elijah lifts up the importance of children's lives, showing God's love and care for the youngest among us.

God's care for young children continues in our time. In baptism, we make promises as a congregation to raise children in the love of Jesus Christ. We demonstrate God's love and care for those who cannot provide for themselves.

Prayer: God of resurrections, resurrect our lives as we traverse Advent toward Christmas. Renew our spirits, no matter our age, so that we may once again have that childlike amazement and wonder at all that Christmas offers for our lives. And in turn, may we help share the joy of resurrection with all we encounter this special season and beyond. In the name of the one whose resurrection ended the tyranny of death we pray. Amen.

Saturday, December 11
The Second Saturday of Advent

Scripture: 1 Kings 19:3-16

Journey to Mt. Horeb

Reflection: One of my (Laura's) favorite messages from this story is that God sometimes knows we need a good meal and a nap. The other message is the message of God's gentleness. Our God is not a God of the flashy akin to the Great and Powerful Oz. Rather, our God is a God who speaks in a still, small voice with words of encouragement, direction, and wisdom.

What do you think you'd hear God saying to you in this moment if you were to be still and to listen?

Prayer: God of all creation, in our life's journey we call out to you and look for you in places of our choosing. Like Elijah, we may be expecting you in the rush of the wind or some other power of nature. Perhaps we expect to see you in a miraculous healing or hear your voice in a powerful Sunday sermon. But yet, we often find ourselves wondering, where are you God?

Lord, help us to take time to hear your whisper be it in the cleft of a rock, in the small voice of a little child, or the sound of a babbling brook or calm waves at the shore. Like the Christmas song, *Do You Hear What I Hear*, may our lives be still enough this Advent to hear your voice speaking to us! In the name of the King born in a stable stall. Amen.

Sunday, December 12
The Third Sunday of Advent

Scripture: 2 Kings 2:1-12

Journey on a Whirlwind

Reflection: Inheritance laws of the Ancient Near East assigned a double portion of a father's possessions to the firstborn son, hence Elisha's request of Elijah. Elisha wants to carry on Elijah's ministry, much like a grown child carrying on the family business. Even so, even as Elisha has the presence of mind to make this request of Elijah, he is not ready for Elijah's journey home to heaven.

Sometimes it isn't us who are going on the journey, but someone we love. Elisha affirms our complicated feelings in those moments, providing the hope of God's continued presence.

Prayer: God of Eternity, thank you for the message about Elijah's final journey into heaven. As humans we recognize that our earthly life itself is a journey, ending when we close our eyes for the last time. But just as you provided a journey for Elijah into heaven, we give you thanks that through the Messiah whose birth we will soon celebrate, you promise not only a journey to heaven but a room that has been prepared for each believer.

Help us to live each and every day to its fullest, making the best of this earthly passage. But also help us to rest comfortably in the promise of a journey yet to come. Amen.

Monday, December 13
Third Monday of Advent

Scripture: 2 Kings 5:1-14

Journey of Naaman

Reflection: Naaman's ego almost costs him his life. He erroneously believes that, because of his station in life, he should be treated with special attention by the prophet and provided with a 'dinner and a show' to cure his illness. He believes himself too important to do such an ordinary act as bathing in a river of no note.

Ego has a way of costing people – costing them their joy, their hope, their peace, and their contentment. Of course, God is aware of this. God models the joy, hope, peace and contentment of humility in Naaman's antithesis: Jesus Christ.

Prayer: Great Healer, people still come to you for your healing hand and the promise of a new life. Sadly, we often come to you only when we need you, and what's more, we are like Naaman thinking that you must heal us on our terms, not yours. First, open us to come to you not just when we need you but every day of our lives. But Lord, guide us to seek healing on your terms and in your timing. And then God, lead us to accept however you choose to heal, sometimes with our bodies, sometimes with our minds, and sometimes with our spirit. Through whatever means you use, may our faith be strengthened in the name of the ultimate healer that was born on Christmas Day. Amen.

Tuesday, December 14
The Third Tuesday of Advent

Scripture: Jeremiah 39:1-10

Journey to Babylon

Reflection: Jeremiah is not living his best life now. Neither are his neighbors. The final Babylonian siege on Jerusalem began on January 15, 588 B.C., lasting over two and a half years. Can any of us imagine living under such violence, uncertainty, and fear? It almost sounds like the experience of living under a pandemic!

Life doesn't always go the way we planned. We are not the authors of our destinies, because our destinies are sometimes interrupted by unforeseeable events. Our comfort in this life is God's unfailing presence in these seasons.

Prayer: God of surprises, there are times in our lives where we experience an unplanned and unwanted journey. Much like the Jews being deported to Babylon, we sometimes find ourselves on journeys with illness, family struggles, financial woes and more. Like those in the deportation, at times our journey can seem very dark and frightening. Yet, even in the journey to Babylon you did not leave your people, and in the unwelcomed journeys of our lives, you do not leave us now. Thank you.

Dearest Immanuel, when we find ourselves in those dark journeys, fill us with your hope and promise. Lead us from darkness into the light of the Son whose light shined so brightly that even the darkness could not comprehend it. Amen.

Wednesday, December 15
The Third Wednesday of Advent

Scripture: Jonah 1:1-17

Journey Away from Nineveh

Reflection: The idea of Jonah running away from the Lord is almost comical. As the psalmist says, where can one hide from the Lord? Ain't no mountain high enough, ain't no valley low enough to keep God from getting to him! What in the WORLD is Jonah thinking?

And yet, Jonah is totally, completely, tragically relatable. In the words of Paul, we do the very things we know we ought not do. We craft corners of our hearts, thoughts, and minds that we somehow believe God doesn't access. We are as silly as Jonah.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, there are times where we feel like Jonah. We know what you ask of us, and we know what we should do, but for some reason we run the other way. Soften our hearts and our minds so that we don't need a storm or even a great fish to change our life's direction. Even if the path may be challenging, direct us this Advent and beyond so that we may fully live into the lives you have for us. In Christ's name we pray, amen.

Thursday, December 16
The Third Thursday of Advent

Scripture Reading: Jonah 3:1-10

Journey to Nineveh

Reflections: Jonah has the worst ending in the Bible. He runs away from God, gets eaten by a fish, is thrown up by the fish, travels to Nineveh, Nineveh repents, and the book ends with Jonah sulking under a tree. Jonah will not be happy unless God gives him what he wants, which blinds him to all the good God has given.

God has blessed us with a world of good. The struggle comes when that good doesn't look like what we'd expected, and we insist on seeing the world through a 'Jonah-lens.' How much happier are those who look for God's good, where God's will is being done!

Prayer: Lord God, we confess that at times we are not unlike Jonah as he walked across the city of Nineveh, seeing sin and godlessness all around us while not seeing our own shortcomings nor even your ability to forgive. Help us to not judge others but rather to see and confess our own failures. Just as you forgave Nineveh thanks to the message of Jonah and their repentance, help us to hear the message of repentance and forgiveness that comes from a baby born in a manger. And thank you for forgiving others, but most especially, for the mercy you have given us. Amen.

Friday, December 17
The Third Friday of Advent

Scripture Reading: Ezra 1:1-6

Journey Home to Jerusalem

Reflections: God uses Cyrus king of Persia for great good, even though Cyrus is a practicing Zoroastrian. While we don't know much about his religion, we know Cyrus was benevolent toward the myriad of religions practiced in his kingdom. He is remembered for his generosity to the Jewish people, as well as to the Babylonians and others.

Cyrus is reminiscent of the Magi, those who are not of the Jewish faith whom God blesses and uses for great good in this world. There are many both within and outside of our faith through whom we see the light of the Lord and God's grace.

Prayer: God of all people, thank you for the gift of diversity that surrounds us each and every day. Thank you for the chance (and perhaps predestined) encounters we have where we experience your presence in the most unlikely of ways. Help us in our life's journey to be open to hearing you at work in the world, even when it comes from someone who is very different than us. In the name of the Savior of all nations we pray. Amen.

Saturday, December 18
The Third Saturday of Advent

Scripture Reading: Luke 1:26-38

Journey of the Angel Gabriel

Reflections: Angel, *angelos* in Greek, means messenger – and what a lucky messenger we find in Gabriel! God sends Gabriel first to speak with Zechariah, and then to Mary. He brings unexpected, startling, uncomfortable, wonderful news to this ordinary family, and is quite a character in and of himself.

The journey of Gabriel isn't one we often think about, but his call parallels our own. Like us, Gabriel is sent to bring the good news of the Messiah to an ordinary world. Some receive the good news well, others question it, and still others, like Zechariah, downright bristle against it. Gabriel stays faithful to his call regardless.

Prayer: God of the Angel Armies, thank you for your servant Gabriel and the message he brought to the world. Lord, while we are certainly not angels, help us to be messengers in our way in this part of the world. As we walk our daily path may we bring the often unexpected, startling, good news of the Messiah, especially during Advent and Christmas. Amen.

Sunday, December 19
The Fourth Sunday of Advent

Scripture Reading: Luke 1:39-45

Journey to Elizabeth and Zechariah

Reflection: What would Mary have done without Elizabeth's support? We see Mary's need for a friend in the word, "hurried." Mary needed to surround herself with a sisterhood and FAST! Elizabeth provided, welcoming Mary into her arms and into her home.

This is who the church is to one another. We run to one another when the unexpected happens. We muster the courage to ask for help. We give hugs and encouraging words freely. We are a safe haven in life's bumpy, surprising journey.

Prayer: Our Father, that famous title Jesus used for you in his prayer, reminds us that we are a part of a very large family.

As part of your family, guide us to love and support one another, nudging us to leave our comfort zones when another part of our Christian family is in need. Nudge us to be like Elizabeth, providing a much needed welcome but also help us to be humble enough to be like Mary, knowing we need the help of Christian brothers and sisters. In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen.

Monday, December 20
The Fourth Monday of Advent

Scripture Reading: Luke 1:46-56

Journey Home for Mary

Reflection: “Mary, Mary, revolutionary, how does your overthrow go?” writes the Rev. Brian Snyder. If we look at Mary’s words without our image of a meek and mild young woman, we read one doozy of a poem today. Mary’s journey from Gabriel to the home of Elizabeth has clarified her sense of call, and the calling of the child she carries.

Mary’s song, the Magnificat, reveals an inherent gutsy-ness to the Christmas story. The Messiah’s coming overthrows the world’s way of being, cultivating a holy way defined by humility. Mary sings of this, absorbing strength from Elizabeth, and then boldly journeys home to her calling.

Prayer: Gracious Lord, thank you for choosing a previously unknown teenage girl to become the mother of our savior. And thank you Lord for Mary who became an example of humility, servitude, respect and faith to the entire world. While you may not have chosen of us for a divine birth, thank you for the gifts that you have endowed in us and may our souls glorify and rejoice in you, our Lord and our savior. Amen.

Tuesday, December 21
The Fourth Tuesday of Advent

Scripture Reading: Luke 2:1-7

Journey to Bethlehem

Reflection: This is the journey many of us think of when we think of the journey of Christmas. Poor Mary riding on a donkey on a road trip nobody wants to take, faithful Joseph leading the way. Jesus is then born, placed in a manger. We remember this journey for good reason: it is a harrowing journey to say the least!

When Christmas is stressful, full of drama, and overwhelming, it may be helpful to sit down with a cup of cocoa, take a deep breath, and remember Jesus’s parents’ Christmas. It wasn’t entirely unlike your own. This journey isn’t always easy. The good news is this: Jesus will come, no matter what!

Prayer: God of Christmas as well as Easter, we are told it is the most wonderful time of the year and for many of us, it is delightful. Thank you. But for some of us Lord, the journey to Christmas can be a bit blue as we remember a loved one who has passed away or as we are separated from our family and friends. For those of us that this time of year is delightful, help us to be compassionate and caring with those that are having a “blue Christmas.” And for those of us that are struggling, lift us up as we remember the challenges that Mary and Joseph had that first Christmas and how you provided for them, and will provide for us as well. Amen.

Wednesday, December 22
The Fourth Wednesday of Advent

Scripture Reading: Luke 2:8-20

Journey of the Shepherds

Reflection: The shepherds are in for the journey of their lives! For, even though their work is akin to the work of King David himself, their lives are lives of tedium. They watch for wolves and predators while the world sleeps. The sheep munch on grass, unaware of the future as a sacrifice at the temple. In short, it's a quiet, messy, boring job – and it is the exact place where God shouts, "I have an announcement!"

As our world seeks to add more glitter and money to the Christmas season, God comes into this season with a declaration into our ordinary lives: I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people! This is excitement no money can buy, and it is excitement for *everyone*.

Prayer: Dear Lord, our shepherd, we know that your rod and your staff comfort us. You are a most caring and forgiving shepherd and we can be a most fickle flock. Forgive us for focusing more on lights, tinsel, cookies and parties. If a Christmas star or angels were to appear over a field near our home, we would probably be too busy to even notice let alone step aside to see the wondrous birth. Help us to be like the shepherds traveling with their flocks that Christmas eve two millennia ago, taking time to look at the sky filled with a visit from the heavenly host. May our bodies, mind and spirits be welcoming to another holy visit, this time from your Spirit and then help us to run and share your Spirit with others. Amen.

Thursday, December 23
The Fourth Thursday of Advent

Scripture Reading: Luke 2:21-32

Journey to Jerusalem for Newborn Jesus

Reflection: Jesus goes on a road trip at the early age of a month and a half old, following his mother's 40 days of purification. This journey culminates with yet another affirmation of his calling: to provide salvation, a light of revelation for the Gentiles and glory to the people of Israel. It's a weighty expectation to place on an infant, but this is no ordinary baby.

Consider the many journeys this baby has already made – the journey to earth as Immanuel, God with us; the journey to Bethlehem within the womb; the journey to Jerusalem. These journeys will continue throughout his life, all the way to the cross, the empty tomb, the ascension, and finally to the day of his return.

Prayer: God of the hearth and the road, thank you for gift of travel. You have blessed us as we think nothing of traveling 20 miles down a street for a special meal, of using an Interstate to be transported to distant cities or even to fly halfway around the world. For Jesus and his family, travel was slow and arduous as most of it was on foot. Thank you for the blessing of fast and safe of travel that we often take for granted.

As we travel this holiday season, or as others travel to see us, help us to be mindful of the gift that you have given us. And just as Jesus used travel as way to love and serve us, may we use our travel as a way to better serve you through your son. Amen.

Friday, December 24
Christmas Eve

Scripture Reading: Matthew 2:1-12

Journey of the Magi from the East

Reflection: Scholars tell us this passage takes place when Jesus is a toddler, long after his visit to Jerusalem. The Magi have been journeying for an extended period of time from Persia or southern Arabia, following some sort of astronomical phenomenon. And, lo, Jesus is confirmed as a revelation to ALL peoples of the world.

Jesus's life is a life that fits within global cultures. Where cultures are as different as the characters we've met along Advent's journey, Jesus's life of love, mercy, grace, humility, and service are translatable for all of humanity.

Prayer: God of the Jews as well as the Magi, it is amazing how non-Jews were willing to travel for months or longer, probably on camel, simply to come to worship the king born in a manger. Forgive us when we make excuses about a little traffic, cold weather, rain, or busy schedules, allowing those excuses to keep us from worshipping the Christ child. Help us on this holy night to remember what is important in our lives and to take time to be drawn closer to you through your son. Amen.

Saturday, December 25
Christmas Day

Scripture Reading: Matthew 2:13-15

Journey of the Holy Family to Egypt

Reflection: And so, the journey brings us back to Egypt. Jesus's life parallels the life of Moses throughout Matthew's gospel. The New Testament fulfills the Old Testament and the story of God and God's people is connected like pearls on a string.

Our lives are one of those pearls. The journey of our lives connects us with Abraham, Sarah, Ruth, Jeremiah, and the Lord – we are all one family through God in Christ, journeying together until the day of Christ's return, celebrating the incarnation of our Savior.

Prayer: God of Christmas miracles, forgive us for frequently missing the full humanity of your son. We have no idea what was said to Jesus as they fled their Bethlehem home, but we can only imagine that it was anything but a silent night and perhaps if Jesus was old enough, hearing him say, "Are we there yet?" Forgive us for missing the very real human struggles that Mary, Joseph and Jesus experienced.

Help us in our lives to realize that thanks to the Christmas miracle with the birth of your son, you really, truly understand the joys and challenges of our life journey. And in understanding, you offer us not just your presence but a peace that surpasses all understanding. Please, share that peace with us this Christmas day and each and every day as we now begin the journey toward Jerusalem and Easter. In the name of the Prince of Peace we pray. Amen.