



Sunset Hills United Presbyterian Church

*Songs of the Season:
A Devotional Journey Through the Hymns of Christmas*

The Rev. Laura Strauss

Sunday, November 27
The First Sunday of Advent

Hymn: *Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus*

Verse 4: By Thine own eternal Spirit

Rule in all our hearts alone;
By Thine all sufficient merit
Raise us to Thy glorious throne.

Reflection: The experience of Jesus in the season of Advent is the experience of the Holy Spirit. God's Spirit, who has eternally existed, preparing the world for Christ's coming, is the same Spirit who opens your heart to Jesus's birth. It is the same Spirit experienced by your ancestors who loved the Lord, by the disciples who proclaimed the gospels, and who worked in the hearts of our predecessors in the faith. This Spirit is at work in you at Advent, regardless of your awareness of this work. Therefore, open your heart. Look for what the Holy Spirit is doing within your being and within this world this Advent season.

Prayer: Come, Holy Spirit, come. Dwell in our hearts. Open our eyes to your presence within ourselves, and within this world. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Monday, November 28
The First Monday of Advent

Hymn: *Creator of the Stars of Night*

Verse 2: When this old world drew on toward night,
You came, but not in splendor bright,
Not as a monarch but the child
Of Mary, blameless mother mild.

Reflection: The night sky is so much a part of our lives that we have become accustomed To its' beauty. Even with astronomical advances, revealing to us the wonders existing above, the stars are something relegated to the ordinary. So it is with the coming of Jesus. Have we lost the wonder at God coming to dwell amongst us in the form of a child? That the literal Creator of the universe, of all the James Webb telescope discovers, was born to an ordinary woman living a life of hardship? If we were to sit with this truth for more than a moment, our wonder may return. We may realize the infant Christ is extraordinary.

Prayer: Strike us with awe, we pray. Strike us with night sky existing always above us. Strike us with awe at the Incarnation. Strike us with awe at the extraordinary that exists within the ordinary birth of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Tuesday, November 29
The First Tuesday of Advent

Hymn: *O Lord, How Shall I Meet You?*

Verse 2:

Love caused your incarnation; Love brought You down to me;
Your thirst for my salvation procured my liberty.
O love beyond all telling, that led You to embrace
In love all loves excelling our lost and fallen race.

Reflection: Love thirsts for others to be quenched. Love pulls the individual outside of themselves such that the self is no longer the fulcrum on which the world is balanced. Instead, in love, the self joins itself into the circle of humanity wherein every individual's well-being is essential to one's own well-being. This communal well-being cannot be achieved by one individual caring for all, but is achieved as more and more individuals step outside of themselves in love for others. This is what it means to be followers of Jesus.

Prayer: Teach us to love, Lord Jesus, as you have loved. Take us outside of ourselves, our agendas, and our egos. Join us into the circle of love that is your kingdom. Amen.

Wednesday, November 30
The First Wednesday of Advent

Hymn: *Savior of the Nations, Come*

Verse 4: Brightly does Your manger shine,
glorious in its light divine.
Let not sin o'er-cloud this light;
Ever be our faith thus bright.

Reflection: Humanity trends toward remembering the negative. Criticisms, the harsh words, and the bad news overshadow the cornucopia of beauty that is revealed in day-to-day existence. Letting go of the minds tendency to dwell on these negative occurrences is a discipline. Perhaps today is a day to try such a discipline. What would it look like to set an alarm for every hour, saying prayers of thanksgiving for the particularities of the hour that just passed? This may not be a practice to observe daily, but it may be a blessed practice in healthy positivity for today.

Prayer: Turn my mind toward your blessings, God of joy. Hear me now as I thank you for....

In Jesus's name. Amen.

Thursday, December 1
The First Thursday of Advent

Hymn: *Comfort, Comfort You My People*

Verse 1: Comfort, comfort you my people, tell of peace, thus says our God; Comfort those who sit in darkness bowed beneath oppression's load. Speak you to Jerusalem of the peace that waits for them; Tell them that their sins I cover, and their warfare now is over.

Reflection: The categorization of one's speech is an exercise in humility. I confess my speech falls too frequently into the categories of criticism, complaining, whining, and gossip. What categories do your words fall under? Today's hymn invites the Christian to use their words primarily for the purpose of comfort and peace. These words are in keeping with the words spoken by God through the angels in every angelic encounter within the Bible: "do not be afraid." This is the kind of speech our Lord values.

What would today look like for us if we primarily used our words in service of comfort and peace? Could this exercise transform not only the hearts of those who hear our words, but our hearts, as well?

Prayer: Comfort us, Lord, in our struggles. Speak to us words of peace so that we may speak peace to others. Wrap us in your love so that we may love. Bring an end to the warfare that exists within ourselves and the warfare that exists within this world. We pray this in Jesus' name.

Friday, December 2
The First Friday of Advent

Hymn: *Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silent*

Verse 4: At His feet the six-winged seraph; Cherubim, with sleepless eye, veil their faces to the presence, as with ceaseless voice they cry, "Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia, Lord Most High!"

Reflection: This world is more mysterious than we can know. It grows in its' mystery as we meditate on the seraphim and cherubim, heavenly beings who serve and worship Jesus Christ. What mortal could help but keep silent in the presence of such strange entities?!

The creatures lifted in this hymn invite us to hold Christmas with curiosity and wonder. There is more to our story than a donkey, a manger, and shepherds. There is an entire world beyond human comprehension, glorying in Christ's birth on a heavenly scale. A miracle of Christmas is the miracle of our joining them in this glory.

Prayer: Let heaven and nature sing to you, O God! We join our prayers with the songs of the seraphim and the cherubim. We keep silent in awe of their worship, and in awe of the mysterious world to which we have been born. In Jesus' name we pray, amen.

Saturday, December 3
The First Saturday of Advent

Hymn: Lift Up Your Heads, Ye Mighty Gates

Verse 3: Redeemer, come! I open wide my heart to Thee;
Here, Lord, abide. Let me Thy inner presence feel;
Thy grace and love in me reveal.

Reflection: It is both common and normal to not feel the Lord's presence. For some, they only feel God's presence once in their lives. Others feel the Divine with them always. Still, there are faithful Christians who never feel Jesus's Spirits' presence with them. These are all normal experiences. They are also mysterious. We do not know why some experience the Lord, and others do not.

We do know it is worthwhile to pray for Christ's presence. We pray this for ourselves, particularly in seasons when our hearts are enshrouded with grief, loneliness, or anger. We, likewise, pray the same for those experiencing those very feelings themselves.

Prayer: Redeemer, we pray you would create within us a feeling of your presence. We pray this same presence for those whom we love, particularly for.... We pray this presence for those who challenge our Christian virtues, particularly.... Lord, hear our prayer. Amen.

Sunday, December 4
The Second Sunday of Advent

Hymn: O Come, O Come, Emmanuel

Verse 1: O come, O come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel,
That mourns in lonely exile here until the Son of God appear.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel!

Reflection: There are more refugees in the world today than there have been at any point in the history of humanity. It is an overwhelming truth. We mourn for children who are now grown, having spent their entire life in a refugee camp. We mourn for those exiles from Afghanistan, Syria, and Ukraine who cannot foresee a day when they can go home. Our hearts break for them, even as God's heart breaks for them.

The church is a place where, 'lonely exiles' find a home. Just as Egypt made room for the Christ child when he was exiled, let us consider how we may help foreigners among us to feel at comfortable in this area.

Prayer: Holy God, there are no boundaries to your presence. Wherever we may go, you are there. And, still, home matters to us. We pray for those who are unable to go home. Give us a spirit of hospitality to the exile and the foreigner among us. Help us to welcome them as you have welcomed us. We ask this in Jesus' name.

Monday, December 5
The Second Monday of Advent

Hymn: *People, Look East*

Verse 4: Stars, keep the watch. When night is dim one more light the bowl shall brim, shining beyond the frosty weather, bright as sun and moon together. People, look east: Love the star is on the way!

Reflection: Night arrives sooner with every passing day. Rates of depression increase in this season of darkness. Seasonal affective disorder impacts countless individuals. How are we to cope with commutes taken in the dark both ways?

We cope with the light that shines brighter than any star: the light of Christ child. Like the Danish tradition of hygge (hoo-gah), we connect with loved ones over good food with houses covered in lights. We do all this in celebration of the light that shines in the darkness of our lives, Jesus Christ.

When you see Christmas lights on homes today, take a moment to think on the light of Christ. Where has he shone in the darker moments of your life?

Prayer: Light of the world, come. Shine within our hearts. Shine on our trees, on our homes, and in the sky as a reminder of the light we have in you, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Tuesday, December 6
The Second Tuesday of Advent

Hymn: *On Jordan's Bank the Baptist's Cry*

Verse 3: We hail You as our Savior, Lord, our Refuge, and our great Reward; O let Your face upon us shine and fill the world with love divine.

Reflection: The book of Numbers provides us the image of God's countenance shining upon us. This parallels the way Moses' face develops 'horns of light' (my translation) after seeing God's backside on Mt. Sinai. When God shines upon us, as God shone upon Moses, we shine in return.

This shining takes place when we witness God in the other. We look upon the face of another, see Christ reflected in that person, and we are transformed more in Christlikeness ourselves. Shining begets shining.

We grow in faithfulness and in discipleship when we seek God's light in the other. It is a wondrous process: the more we see God in others, the more God shines within us.

Prayer: Jesus Christ, make your face to shine upon us, and upon all those whom we love, as well as those we resent. Craft a never-ending chain of your light as we witness you shining in all the peoples of this earth. We ask this in your holy name. Amen.

Wednesday, December 7
The Second Wednesday of Advent

Hymn: Silent Night, Holy Night

Verse 1: Silent night, holy night! All is calm, all is bright, round yon virgin mother and child! Holy Infant, so tender and mild, sleep in heavenly peace, sleep in heavenly peace.

Reflection: This season can be downright cacophonous. In the laments of the Grinch, “And the noise! Noise, noise, noise!” If it isn’t the noise from outside, it is the noise from inside our heads: noise proclaiming all of our concerns, expectations, and stresses surrounding December. It can be overwhelming.

The gift of Jesus, given to us at Christmas, is the gift of calm in the midst of our noise. The newborn child offers us a peace that passes understanding in the form of unconditional love, unending mercy, and irresistible grace.

Take a moment to meditate on Jesus. On your inhale, take in the name of Jesus. On you exhale, breath out what is troubling you. Repeat, slowly and with intention. Be calm; have a minute of heavenly peace.

Prayer: Jesus, you were our Lord from the moment of Thy birth. Thank you for your calm, and thank you for your heavenly peace. Remind us to rest this day in your peace that passes all our human understanding. Amen.

Thursday, December 8
The Second Thursday of Advent

Hymn: O Little Town of Bethlehem

Verse 2: For Christ is born of Mary; and gathered all above, while mortals sleep, the angels keep their watch of wondering love. O morning stars, together proclaim the holy birth! And praises sing to God the King, and peace to all on earth.

Reflection: A common children’s prayer asks God, “Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take.” This prayer recognizes our mortality. It also affirms the Divine work that takes place while we are sleeping. The moon impacts the tides, bats rid our neighborhood of bugs, and owls soundlessly enjoy a nocturnal feast. God has crafted a whole world that happens during our sleeping hours!

The message in this is the message of God’s providing for us even as we mortals sleep. In Jewish tradition, each day begins at sundown. Therefore, the day begins with our closing our eyes in surrender to God’s work. We trust God with the beginning of the day every time we go to bed – trusting in God’s wondering love.

Prayer: O holy Child of Bethlehem, descend to us we pray. Cast out our sin and enter in, be born in us today. We hear the Christmas angels the great glad tidings tell. O come to us, abide with us, our Lord Emmanuel.

Friday, December 9
The Second Friday of Advent

Hymn: *Joy to the World!*

Verse 1: Joy to the world! The Lord is come. Let earth receive her King! Let every heart prepare Him room, and heaven and nature sing, and heaven and nature sing, and heaven and heaven and nature sing.

Reflection: What is taking up space within your heart? Perhaps it would be useful to write a list in the margins of this devotional, or to draw a heart filled with those who take up space. Do not judge yourself for whose names you write, though you may wish to be open to surprises. There may be people in your heart whom you had thought you had written off from your life. You may find yourself compelled to write the names of those you have struggled to forgive. Perhaps more surprising are those names you do not add. Again, do not judge yourself. Simply observe.

Now, ask yourself how you show love to these individuals. How do they show love to you?

Write Jesus's name. How has he made room for you in his heart, and how has he shown love for you? How do you show love for him? Take a moment to dwell on your answer.

Prayer: Loving God, in your heart are many rooms. This includes a room for us. We thank you for the love you have shown us in Jesus Christ, the Messiah. We ask you to open our hearts to him for the sake of your love. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Saturday, December 10
The Second Saturday of Advent

Hymn: *In the Bleak Midwinter*

Verse 2: Our God, heaven cannot hold Him, nor earth sustain; heaven and earth shall flee away when He comes to reign. In the bleak midwinter a stable place sufficed the Lord God incarnate, Jesus Christ.

Reflection: Nothing succeeds like excess. This is, for many, a season of excess. It has become a tradition to eat to excess, to decorate to excess, and to give children presents to excess. We can mostly all agree that it can all be a bit much.

Ironically, the season of Advent was historically a season of austerity. The church used this as a season of self-reflection in preparation for Christ's return. The end of that austerity was celebrated on Christmas with jubilation, feasts, etc. It was a lot like the celebration of Easter after a penitent Lent.

Perhaps it would not be wise to return to austerity during Advent. The dark evenings are difficult enough for many. But it may be worthwhile to cut back on our excess this year. Could we focus more on the sufficient stable of the Lord Jesus Christ if we were to let go of our expensive distractions along the Advent way? It is worth finding out.

Prayer: How do we rightly celebrate your Incarnation, Lord Jesus Christ? We ask you to open our eyes to opportunities for celebrating your birth, your bodily presence on earth, and your ongoing presence with us by the power of your Holy Spirit. Amen.

Sunday, December 11
The Third Sunday of Advent

Hymn: *What Child is This*

Verse 3: So, bring Him incense, gold, and myrrh; come, one and all, to own Him. The King of Kings salvation brings; let loving hearts enthroned Him. This, this is Christ the King, whom shepherds guard and angels sing; Haste, haste to bring Him laud, the Babe, the Son of Mary!

Reflection: It can be difficult to have a loving heart. We may find our hearts struggle, instead. Our hearts may struggle with judgment. We may find our hearts sometimes cynical. Sometimes our hearts may be guarded, and at other times our hearts may too easily make excuses for others. It is difficult to have a heart defined by one thing and one thing only: love.

The loving heart that enthrones Jesus is a heart that encapsulated in the words written to Corinth: patient, kind, trusting, truth-seeking, not self-serving, not quick to anger. As we allow the Holy Spirit to cultivate these qualities within our hearts, our hearts are more ready to enthrone Christ the King.

Prayer: Create in me a new heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Create in me a new heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Create in me a new heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. In Jesus' name I pray, amen.

Monday, December 12
Third Monday of Advent

Hymn: *'Twas in the Moon of Wintertime*

Verse 2: Within a lodge of broken bark the tender Babe was found; a ragged robe of rabbit skin enwrapped His beauty round. The chiefs from far before Him knelt with gifts of fox and beaver pelt: Jesus, your King, is born, Jesus is born. In excelsis gloria!

Reflection: This hymn is unknown to many of us. It comes from the Native American Huron tribe, and invites us to look at the Christmas story in a different way. We do not often think of Jesus wrapped in rabbit skin, nor of the wise men being chiefs. Thus, our hearing of Jesus' birth is expanded, opening us to another population of God's children and engaging our God-given imagination in a new way.

You are invited this day to do a Google search of different ways the Nativity is represented. You may want to look up Korean nativity scenes, Ethiopian nativity scenes, or a simple search of 'nativity scenes around the world.' It enriches our faith when we see the global community of faith we participate in, and when we experience new ways of understanding Jesus Christ as King.

Prayer: God of all peoples, we give you thanks for the ways you've revealed yourself in a variety of cultures. We pray that you would eliminate our prejudices. Open our eyes to your image in all humans, and to Christ's presence in the church around the world. We ask this in his holy name. Amen.

Tuesday, December 13
The Third Tuesday of Advent

Hymn: *O Come, All Ye Faithful*

Verse 3: Sing, choirs of angels, sing in exultation! Sing, all ye citizens of heaven above! Glory to God, all Glory in the highest! O come, let us adore Him! O come, let us adore Him! O come, let us adore Him, Christ, the Lord!

Reflection: How many explanation points can be placed in just one hymn? In the case of O Come, All Ye Faithful, there are A LOT of explanation points! This is a hymn of praise! A hymn of rejoicing! A hymn of exultation! You get the point.

Set aside today as a day of celebration. Make a discipline of rejoicing in Christ's birth this third Tuesday in Advent. This may look like playing Christmas music in your home. It may look like bringing a plate of cookies to a neighbor. You might celebrate today by playing on the piano for the first time in years. Whatever you do, do it with the spiritual discipline of celebration! It is your day for exclamation points –let us adore Him, Christ, the Lord!

Prayer: Sing, choirs of angels! Sing in exultation! Sing, all ye citizens of heaven above! Glory to God, all Glory in the highest! O come, let us adore Him! O come, let us adore Him! O come, let us adore Him, Christ, the Lord! Amen!

Wednesday, December 14
The Third Wednesday of Advent

Hymn: *Gentle Mary Laid Her Child*

Verse 3: Gentle Mary laid her child lowly in the manger; He is still the undefiled, but no more a stranger. Son of God, of humble birth, beautiful the story; Praise His name in all the earth, hail the King of glory!

Reflection: It is wise not to get too caught up in the infant Jesus in the manger. When one does so, it becomes all too easy to forget that this infant is the man who died on the cross, rose from the dead, and now sits at the right hand of God interceding for our sins. Focusing on his infancy is a little bit like focusing on a senior citizen's baby photos on their birthday. It is a warm, lovely exercise, but not the focus of the day.

For Christmas, we celebrate Christ's miraculous birth. But we also celebrate his life, his love, his humanity, his divinity, and his ongoing relationship with us by the power of his Holy Spirit. Jesus's birthday is a day to celebrate that Jesus is not a stranger, but our friend and savior.

Prayer:

What a friend we have in you, Lord Jesus. You bear our sins, our griefs, and give us peace. We celebrate you this Christmas for all that you are to us – savior, messiah, Lord, friend. We pray this all in your holy name. Amen.

Thursday, December 15
The Third Thursday of Advent

Hymn: Angels We Have Heard on High

Verse 3: Come to Bethlehem and see Him whose birth the angels sing. Come, adore on bended knee Christ, the Lord, the newborn King. Gloria in excelsis Deo; Gloria in excelsis Deo.

Reflections: Where do you go to feel close to God? Where are the places you find yourself most readily able to talk with Jesus? This hymn reveals a particular place in a particular moment in history when humanity could go to the little town of Bethlehem to see the infant Jesus, God incarnate. We do not have such a place in 2022.

We should not underestimate the importance of place in our life of faith. The Celtic Christians use the term ‘thin places’ to talk about locations where the veil between heaven and earth feels thin, where we feel God’s presence more acutely. Now is a good time to ponder on the physical places where you feel closest to Jesus. Perhaps it is also a good time to consider a spot in your house that you can make into a space for time with the Lord – where can you feel Christ’s closeness in your home?

Prayer: Jesus Christ, we adore you on bended knee and with humble heart. We thank you for your presence in our lives in the thin places of this world. Open our spirits to your presence in our homes and in the places we go. We ask this in your holy name. Amen.

Friday, December 16
The Third Friday of Advent

Hymn: Away in a Manger

Verse 3: Be near me, Lord Jesus; I ask Thee to stay close by me forever and love me, I pray. Bless all the dear children in Thy tender care, and fit us for heaven to live with Thee there.

Reflections: Martin Luther, the 16th-century Reformer, is believed to be the author of this hymn. If this is true, Luther is writing at a time when child mortality rates are beyond our modern comprehension. It is a time of strong devotion to Mary because Mary was relatable to parents who’d lost a child, she herself having lost her son. Thus, the prayer of this hymn, “bless all the dear children in Thy tender care,” carries a particular poignancy.

We do not struggle with such levels of child mortality in our context. But, there are children in need. They need the love of the church, expressed in older adults who take an interest in them, who pray for them, and who volunteer in the ministries that serve them. God continues to bless the dear children, and we are the hands and the feet God uses for those blessings.

Prayer: Bless the children of our church, Christ Jesus. Open our hearts to getting to know these children. Empower us to serve these children. Make the children a priority in our life as a church family. We ask this in your holy name. Amen.

Saturday, December 17
The Third Saturday of Advent

Hymn: *Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming*

Verse 1: Lo, how a rose e'er blooming from tender stem hath sprung, of Jesse's lineage coming, by faithful prophets sung. It came a floweret bright, amid the cold of winter, when half spent was the night.

Reflections: The birth of Jesus is the continuation of story begun in the beginning of the Bible in the book of Genesis. If we look at the first chapter of Matthew's gospel, we see Jesus's lineage through Joseph all the way back to the matriarchs and patriarchs of the earliest scriptures. Much as those who use ancestry.com find themselves to be part of a much larger story, Jesus is part of a story that reaches back to the very beginning of the age.

The good news of the gospel is that Jesus' story continues through this day. By the power of the Holy Spirit, each one of us is a part of Jesus's ongoing story as those he loves. Our stories carry meaning because our stories lead the church onward to the time of Christ's return.

Rejoice – your story is part of the church's story! Thanks be to God!

Prayer: We thank you for the prophets and all those who came before the birth of Jesus Christ. We ask that we would be faithful carriers of the Christ story going forward until he returns in glory. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Sunday, December 18
The Fourth Sunday of Advent

Hymn: *The First Nowell*

Verse 1: The first Nowell the angel did say was to certain poor shepherds in fields as they lay; in fields where they lay a-keeping their sheep, on a cold winter's night that was so deep. Nowell, Nowell, Nowell, Nowell, born is the King of Israel!

Reflection: Nowell, also spelled Noel, is an early English synonym for Christmas. It continues to mean, 'Christmas' in French, who proclaim, "Joyeaux Noel!" You hear a variation of noel in the proclamation of Spanish-speakers, "Feliz Navidad!" It is a word that comes from the Latin, *natalis*, meaning 'birthday.'

What this word teaches us is the reality of how much we have left to learn. Mysteries abound in the life of faith. What does 'hosanna' mean? What are the origins of the word 'hallelujah'? Where do we get the title Christ from, and what does it mean to be a Messiah? Who can translate 'Gloria In Excelsis Deo'? The more we learn, the less we know – and it is a joy to have so much to learn in our life with Jesus Christ!

Prayer: Give us a love of learning, Good Teacher. Spark the spirit of curiosity within us, a passion for knowing your world better. Humble us in our knowledge. Open a world of mystery before us, we pray, in Jesus' name. Amen.

Monday, December 20
The Fourth Monday of Advent

Hymn: We Three Kings of Orient Are

Verse 1: We three kings of Orient are bearing gifts we traverse afar, field and fountain, moor and mountain, following yonder star. O, star of wonder, star of night, star with royal beauty bright; westward leading, still proceeding, guide us to thy perfect light!

Reflection: Pilgrimages are journeys that change us. A pilgrimage is often a physical journey. The Middle Ages were full of faithful Christians walking on pilgrimage to the Vatican, the Church of Saint James, Canterbury, and more. The goal of the pilgrimage was to grow closer to God in Jesus Christ through simplicity and journey. The journey of the three kings is a pilgrimage.

For many of us, pilgrimage takes a more spiritual form. Our entire life may be a pilgrimage as we constantly seek to live more faithfully to Jesus Christ. What have been some milestones in your Christian journey? What moments stand out to you as ones where you found yourself drawn closer to the Lord?

Prayer: Holy Lord, you sent Abraham and Sarah on travels, you sent Noah on a journey, and these voyages continue onward throughout our New Testament. We give you thanks for the journey. Open our eyes to your presence every step along our Christian way. In Jesus' name we pray, amen.

Tuesday, December 20
The Fourth Tuesday of Advent

Hymn: Once in Royal David's City

Verse 1: Once in royal David's city stood a lowly cattle shed, where a mother laid her baby in a manger for his bed. Mary was that mother mild, Jesus Christ, her little child.

Reflection: Imagine you are on an evening walk. As you go past a house, you see the light shining from within the open garage. Inside the garage is an exhausted woman cradling a baby. The bodily fluids on the floor of the garage make evident this woman has just given birth. This gives us an idea of how strange it must have been to see a woman give birth in a, 'lowly cattle shed.' This kind of setting leads to assumptions about the mother: who is she? Why can't she afford a better place to give birth? What kind of background and life choices have led her HERE?!

The Scriptures invite us to seek the face of Mary in the face of every woman we meet who has fallen upon difficult circumstances. Mary, the one woman worthy to bear the Christ child, came upon a troubled situation. So do many good women today. Be merciful, as we would be merciful to Christ's mother.

Prayer: We pray for the women of our world who have been backed into horrible corners, Lord. We pray that, just as we honor Mary amid her difficulty, that we would honor the other women we meet in struggling circumstances. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Wednesday, December 21
The Fourth Wednesday of Advent

Hymn: *It Came Upon the Midnight Clear*

Verse 1: It came upon the midnight clear, that glorious sing of old, from angels bending near the earth, to touch their harps of gold: “Peace on the earth, goodwill to all, from heaven’s all-gracious King”: The world in solemn stillness lay, to hear the angels sing.

Reflection: The solemn stillness of tonight has little to do with angels. Rather, it is still because it is dark. It is the longest night of the year. For many, it is the most difficult night of the year. The night is particularly difficult for those who are grieving, lonely, or impacted by a myriad of struggles.

This hymn seeks to reframe the night for those of us who struggle at this time of year. Tonight is a good night to look upon the, ‘midnight clear,’ wondering at the Lord’s cosmos. If it is a clear night, it is a good night to seek out the stars, remembering the star of Bethlehem. It is a night that invites reflection on the Christmas night so long ago, and the promised love of Jesus Christ.

Prayer: Comfort the grieving, loving God. Be present to the lonely. Offer compassion to those who struggle this night. If we have it in us, stir our hearts to reach out to those in need for whom this time of year is most difficult. We ask this in Jesus’ name. Amen.

Thursday, December 22
The Fourth Thursday of Advent

Hymn: *Good Christian Friends, Rejoice*

Verse 1: Good Christian friends, rejoice with heart, and soul, and voice; Give ye heed of what we say: Jesus Christ is born today; Ox and ass before Him bow, and He is in the manger now. Christ is born today! Christ is born today!

Reflection: Older children and teenagers love this hymn. Why? Because they get to use the antiquated word for donkey: ass. Most adults are plenty mature enough to sing this song without a snicker. If we were to look around the sanctuary, however, we would see this is not the case for the young people. This hymn is absolutely hilarious to them.

On one hand, we can demand that our young people grow up. Ass is a word for donkey, gosh darn it! Or, we can take the opportunity this Christmas to laugh. There is silly joy all around us. Songs about Dominic the Donkey, commercials featuring M&M’s wondering if Santa is real, Kevin McAllister protecting his home from two robbers whilst Home Alone, and the list goes on. During this spiritual season with focus on Christly things, we are invited to have a good laugh now and then. Take joy in the small things of this season!

Prayer: We thank you for laughter, Joyful God, knowing that even Jesus liked to enjoy time with loved ones. Lighten our spirits, we pray. Give us the eyes to see and the heart that’s willing to chuckle, smile, and delight in the silliness sometimes found in this season. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

Friday, December 23
The Fourth Friday of Advent

Hymn: *Go, Tell It on the Mountain*

Verse 2: Go, tell it on the mountain, over the hills, and everywhere; Go, tell it on the mountain that Jesus Christ is born! The shepherds feared and trembled when lo! Above the earth, rang out the angel chorus that hailed our Savior's birth.

Reflection: This hymn holds meaning for people who live in mountainous, hilly places. It reminds Presbyterians of its ancestors who traveled from the hills of Scotland to western Pennsylvania, settling in the area because of its resemblance to home. The first settlers in this area founded Presbyterian churches on separate hilltops, proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ to those living in the valleys. We continue to see this pattern in the way the churches of Mt. Lebanon primarily sit upon the township's various hills.

Can you connect your faith to the faith of your ancestors? Where did your family's faith come from, and who passed it down to you? Who will you pass your faith onto in your family?

Prayer: Loving Savior, thank you for our ancestors in the faith. Thank you for those who took the time to study the Word, engage in prayer, and nurture us in the life of Christ's church. Give us the words to share the story of Jesus with future generations. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Saturday, December 24
Christmas Eve

Hymn: *Hark! The Herald Angels Sing*

Verse 1: Hark! The herald angels sing, "Glory to the newborn King. Peace on earth, and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled!" Joyful, all ye nations, rise, Join the triumph of the skies; With the angelic host proclaim, "Christ is born in Bethlehem!" Hark! The herald angels sing, "Glory to the newborn King!"

Reflection: This hymn comes to us from the great Methodist, Charles Wesley. It's theology has captivated pastors for ages. Wesley speaks of Jesus as 'veiled in flesh the Godhead see,' 'the incarnate Deity,' – lines that have sparked much joyous debate at clergy gatherings. But, beyond conversation fodder, Wesley offers us something more. He offers us an understanding of the meaning behind Jesus' birth.

Jesus is born to draw humanity and the Divine together. He is the communication of God's love for all people groups, nations, and cultures. The Lord is a cause for joy because of his resurrection, which will lead to our resurrection in the world that is to come. It's a hymn filled with rich theology that teaches us about Jesus, from birth to ascension, echoed in the angels' song.

Prayer: Hail the heaven born Prince of Peace! Hail the sun of righteousness! Light and life to all He brings, risen with healing in His wings. Mild He lays His glory by, born that we no more may die, born to raise us from the earth, born to give us second birth. Hark! The herald angels sing, "Glory to the newborn King!" Amen.